

The Deritualization of Death: Toward a Practical Theology of Caregiving for the Bereaved

Charles Lynn Gibson

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*The Deritualization of Death:
Toward a Practical Theology of Caregiving for the Bereaved*

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Irvine, California • Boca Raton, Florida • USA
2019

ISBN: 978-1-61233-471-4 (pbk.)

ISBN: 978-1-61233-472-1 (ebk.)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gibson, Charles Lynn, 1970- author.

Title: The deritualization of death : toward a practical theology of
caregiving for the bereaved / Charles Lynn Gibson.

Description: Irvine : Dissertation.com, [2019] | Includes bibliographical
references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019036796 (print) | LCCN 2019036797 (ebook) | ISBN
9781612334714 (paperback) | ISBN 9781612334721 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Church work with the bereaved. | Grief--Religious
aspects--Christianity. | Pastoral care.

Classification: LCC BV4330 .G53 2019 (print) | LCC BV4330 (ebook) | DDC
259/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019036796>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019036797>

Epigraph

“To live grief can become an act of human dignity.”

- Daniël Louw

Abstract (English Version)

The problematic field of investigation for the dissertation was a focused concern for the pastoral care of bereaved human beings in the context of significant cultural shifts now shaping the twenty-first century. Deritualization was identified as a significant interdisciplinary concern for bereavement care practitioners. The objective of the research was the development of a practical theology of compassionate caregiving for the bereaved with deference to the problem of deritualization. The theoretical framework was guided by the Oxford Interdisciplinary Research model and the Loyola Institute of Ministries model of practical theology. The study was designed for applied research for funeral directors and vocational pastors utilizing qualitative research methods. Hermeneutical and empirical components addressed six research questions through two domains of inquiry: disciplinary perspectives and educational dynamics of bereavement caregiving. Using the method of hermeneutics to critically evaluate the first two research questions, three disciplinary fields of knowledge were examined and integrated from the perspective of pastoral care: funeral service, bereavement psychology, and practical theology. Each discipline individually converged upon meaningful caregiving, meaning-reconstruction, and meaning-reframing as significant modes of bereavement care. Using ethnographic semi-structured interviews to critically evaluate the remaining four research questions, data were collected from a Christian university and a mortuary college. The interview questionnaire included twenty-five main questions organized in four parts: Philosophy of Education, Hermeneutics of Bereaved Families, Care of Bereaved Families, and Encounter of Bereaved Families. The study utilized two cycles of qualitative coding techniques to report the findings of each participating school. A hybrid form of in vivo and holistic

coding as well as a second cycle of pattern coding distilled the interview responses into actionable statements that reinforced bereavement caregiving. By synthesizing all of the findings, a compelling case was made for a paradigm of comforting presence supported by principles from a Louwian perspective of practical theology, including theological anthropology, promissiotherapy, bipolarity, and hermeneutics. The study connected a philosophy of meaning-reframing and a paradigm of comforting presence to a meta-theoretical framework within a narrative approach to care. The research elucidated an interdisciplinary understanding that contributed toward a compassionate practical theology of caregiving for the bereaved.

Abstrak

Die deritualisering van dood.

Ontwerp vir 'n praktiese teologie van rouSMARTpastoraat aan treurendes

Die agtergrond van die navorsing is die kulturele skuif binne die Amerikaanse samelewing, naamlik 'n toenemende deritualisering van dood, veral tydens die fase van die begrafnis en die tref van reëlins deur die familie en die begrafnisondernemer. Die navorsing poog om te verstaan hoe pastoraat in rouSMART aan treurendes en lydendes, troos en hoop kan gee, veral aan naasbestaendes wat worstel met die afskeidskrisis na die dood en sterwe van 'n geliefde.

Die navorsingsvraag is die volgende: wat is die moontlike impak van deritualisering op die interaktiewe verband tussen verlies, treurwerk en die spirituele dimensie van singewende hanteringsmeganismes? (Onder andere, veral die worsteling met die vraagstuk van sin en die internalisering van verlies binne die eksistensiële realiteite van die lewe).

Deritualisering is geïdentifiseer as 'n beduidende interdisiplinêre vraagstuk vir professionele pastorale sorg en alle ander partye/professies betrokke by die proses van treur en rouSMART.

Die *Oxford Interdisiplinêre Navorsingsmodel* asook *Loyola Instituut se Bedieningsmodel vir Praktiese Teologie* is gekies as die teoretiese raamwerk vir die navorsingsprojek. Die studie-ontwerp fokus op toegepaste navorsing met die oog op die professionele werk van begrafnisondernemers/direkteure en gemeentelike pastors. Vir dié doel is gebruik gemaak van 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetodologie wat ruimte laat vir beide 'n hermeneutiese sowel as empiriese navorsingskomponent.

Binne die raamwerk van 'n hermeneutiese metodologie, word drie dissiplinêre kenvelde vanuit die perspektief van pastorale sorg ondersoek: die diens van die tradisionele begrafnisondernemer, die insigte van treurwerk vanuit 'n psigologiese perspektief, en die dissipline van praktiese teologie. Die basiese aanname is dat al

drie hierdie velde op een of ander wyse betrokke is by die sinvraagstuk, naamlik (a) sinvolle sorg, (b) rekonstruksie van sinvelde en (c) paradigmatische herkonstruksie van sin-raamwerke. Al drie word beskou as beduidende modi van rouSMARTpastoraat.

Die navorsing is vooraf gegaan deur 'n piloot-studie. Navorsingsdata is daarna versamel by 'n Christelike universiteit asook 'n kollege vir die opleiding van begrafnisondernemers en lykbesorgers. Daar is gebruik gemaak van etnografiese, semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude. Die vraelys vir die ondehoude het vyf-en-twintig vrae ingesluit. Dit is in vier afdelings georganiseer: filosofie van opvoedkunde; hermeneutiek van families wat treur as gevolg van die verlies van 'n geliefde; gesinspastoraat aan treurendes; en die ontmoetingsgesprek met gesinslede tydens die fase van afsterwe.

Die studie het gebruik gemaak van twee sirkels van kwalitatiewe koderingstegnieke ten einde die bevindings van elke deelnemende groep te rapporteer. 'n Hibriede vorm van in vivo en holistiese kodering, asook 'n tweede siklus van patroon-kodering is gevolg ten einde die onderhoudsresponse te verfyn en te verwerk met die oog op aksie-gerigte stellings wat die prosesse van treurpastoraat en sinverwerking kan versterk.

Deur middel van 'n proses van sintetisering is die volgende bevinding gemaak: die noodsaak van 'n vertroostende teenwoordigheid. Hierdie vorm van daar-wees-pastoraat moet ondersteun word deur 'n prakties-teologiese model van teologiese antropologie, bipolêre epistemologie en hermeneutiese metodologie soos voorgestel in D. J. Louw se promisioterapeutiese model vir hooppastoraat en 'n teologiese hermeneutiek van heling in lyding.

Ten einde die vraagstuk van deritualisering en reritualisering aan te spreek, verbind die studie die paradigma van vertroostende teenwoordigheid, en die filosofie van die herstrukturering van paradigmas vir singewing en sinneming, aan 'n meta-teoretiese raamwerk wat ruimte laat vir 'n narratiewe benadering tot pastorale sorg.

Die bydrae van die navorsingsprojek lê op die vlak van Christelike spiritualiteit binne 'n interdisiplinêre verstaan van rouSMARTpastoraat aan treurendes en die professie van pastorale sorg as afdeling van die dissipline: praktiese teologie.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals without which this research would not have been possible.

- Reverend Glenn Grubb – for being a key source of inspiration.
“What’s wrong with me?” Nothing, dear man – we all live, love, and grieve.
- Dr. David Ward – for modeling faith-learning integration and interdisciplinary research at Oxford Graduate School/ACRSS.
I am grateful to have such a dear soul-friend.
- The Staff who represent Smith Life & Legacy – my real-world mission field.
I stand amazed at the constant work of your hands each day toward the common good of our community in East Tennessee. Keep sharing our stories!
- My Business Partners, Lisa, Jason, and Justin – for endless support.
How blessed I am to have supportive partners in the journey of our common vocational calling in life.
- Professors Daniël Louw and Christo Thesnaar – for welcoming my research.
I remain thankful for Stellenbosch University – truly a global exemplar of practical theology. Being cradled in a natural lush beauty of the countryside, Stellenbosch stirred my deepest affections for pastoral care and cura vitae.
- Dr. Jason Troyer, Maryville College & Mt. Hope Grief Services – for scholarship and guidance through the field of grief and bereavement psychology.
Interdisciplinary minds make for great friendships...and lunches.
- Becky Gabehart – for much research assistance and a listening ear.
I am delighted to participate in the training of an emerging funeral service professional who has a true heart for the art of pastoral care.
- My wife, Angelia and our children, Will, Owen, Nate, Netsa – for your love and understanding that allow me to pursue my passion and scholarly abstractions.
My family truly means the world to me – they are indeed my legacy, my story.

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Chapter 1

Problem Identification

1.1 Introduction and Background Information

The problematic field of investigation for the current research is a focused concern for the pastoral care of bereaved human beings in the context of significant cultural shifts now shaping the twenty-first century.¹ The study is principally undergirded by a pastoral impulse to assist the bereaved in affirming life and hope in the wake of death and acute loss. The dissertation seeks a deeper understanding for how bereavement caregivers may assuage human suffering and provide wholeness in hope among care seekers who are facing the death of a loved one (Louw 2015).² Bereavement

¹ The operationalization of three (3) specific terms utilized in the study are notably significant: pastoral, caregiving, and bereaved. First, the term “pastoral” is operationalized in the study to reflect a broad intercultural framework for faith-based caregivers who are guided by Christian compassion. The term “pastoral” is not used in a formal clerical sense that limits pastoral care exclusively to ordained clergy, preachers, or other formalized sectarian ministries (Farley 1983). Instead, pastoral care is more broadly understood as “a mode of hospitable outreach to all human beings irrespective of race, gender, and cultural diversity” (Louw 2014:24). Second, the term “caregiving” is utilized in the dissertation to describe the activity of nurturing care before, during, and after the experience of a loss of a significant other to death. Caregiving seeks to establish an “inclusive public space for doing pastoral care” framed in terms of relational and inter-relational networking (Louw 2014:24). Third, the term “bereaved” is operationalized as a person or persons to whom the experience of loss has affected. Bereavement is understood as the existential experience of being “torn apart” or “having special needs” with regards to a significant personal loss to death (Wolfelt 2013:1; Wolfelt 2006:29).

² Louw explains that even in the “chaosmos” of daily life, “it should be possible to link all the fragments and splinters in our daily experience together in such a way that hope is instilled and a sense of wholeness sets in” (2015:119). “Chaosmos” is an insightful term for pastoral care to describe how ordinary life in the world is not simply constructed by order and design, but partly by disorder and chaos as well (Louw 2015:163). In this way, bereavement caregivers traffic in the chaosmos that often exists at the margins of life and death.

caregiving, recognized as an essential element in the art of pastoral care, is the subject matter of the current study.

At a fundamental level, the dissertation explores the interplay between the more formalized industry of the caretaker (i.e. the funeral service industry), the local pastoral caregiving of the ministerial praxis (i.e. vocational pastors), and the impact on theory formation, namely on a pastoral theology of compassion in bereavement care. During an initial impact phase of acute grief, when a bereaved family needs to make important decisions regarding the funeral, the question regarding different forms of rituals comes into play. Even within secularized approaches to ritualization, the question about the spiritual realm of death surfaces: should death be regarded as merely the ending of biological life? Or could death challenge human beings to reflect anew on issues like destiny, life fulfilment, and the realm of the transcendent? How do the bereaved experience comfort, wholeness, and hope in suffering?

Bereavement in post-mortem ritualization implies thus more than how to get rid of a deceased physical body; it awakens questions about an integrative approach to human embodiment and ensoulment.³ In an integral and ‘wholistic’ approach to death and dying, a fundamental question surfaces: how are we going to deal with a ‘spirituality of death and dying’ within rituals facilitated by both funeral caretaking (as a profession) and funeral caregiving (as a ministry)? This dissertation argues principally that deritualization could hamper sound processes of mourning.⁴ Deritualization is operationalized in the study as a key term to broadly denote the growing trend in the United States of a public openness to revise, replace, minimize the significance of, and even eliminate/avoid long-held traditional funerary rituals to

³ Louw, Ito, and Elsdörfer (2012:86) suggest that “a healthy body is due to the inhabitation of the Spirit (in) an embodied soul and ensouled body.”

⁴ Deritualization describes a breakdown, disruption, or loss of ritualized activities in daily life, but does not necessitate a total collapse of all ritualized forms (Sarabia and Knottnerus 2009; Thornburg et al. 2007). The Latin prefix *de* does not require negation, but points to a removal, separation, or privation (i.e. lacking usual comforts or necessities). The term deritualization does not suggest the loss of a particular prescribed ritual form, but is useful to describe current cultural shifts affecting the context of bereavement care. The deritualization of traditional forms does not preclude a re-ritualization of new and creative symbolic forms (Cann 2016).

assist in the adaptation of loss. In a description of high impact issues facing professional funeral service caregiving, Long and Lynch describe “the curious downsizing of funeral rituals” and “the increasing number of people who specify ‘no service’ to mark their deaths” (2013:157). If these new tendencies reported by the funeral industry proliferate and point to less formal modes of ‘saying goodbye’, how should bereavement liturgy in the pastoral ministry respond if traditional forms are becoming outdated? On the other hand, how should the funeral service industry respond? If funeral caretaking implies more than being a business (i.e. merely doing a job for monetary compensation), how should it put into practice the notion of a ‘spirituality of death and dying’ and cooperate with local communities of faith and the ministerial practice of a liturgy of bereavement in order to foster ‘wholeness’ and spiritual healing in processes of mourning?⁵

The dissertation is purposely motivated by a particular posture toward bereavement care. In specific terms, the study embraces a Christian faith-based approach to caring for bereaved people. The basis for choosing a Christian perspective is the ubiquitous need for comfort, hope, and wholeness in deference to how death disturbs the horizon of future orientation and meaning.⁶ There is an important connection between the core issues in the Christian faith, namely the connection between the grief and compassion of Christ in the gospels, as well as the interplay between the cross and death in the narrative of salvation and the human quest for hope and meaning. Moreover, there is also a connection between the Christian tradition of the care and cure of souls (i.e. *cura animarum*) and the phenomenon of vulnerability that families experience during

⁵ The phrase, ‘a spirituality of death and dying’, is operationalized as a ubiquitous human need for comfort, wholeness, and hope within the processes of suffering and the adaptation of loss. ‘Spiritual’ in this sense is connected to the idea of a transcendent source or means not confined by the mundane. In other words, a ‘spirituality of death and dying’ relates to the internalization of loss within the existential realities of life.

⁶ A Christian perspective is also the framework wherein the researcher operates as a caretaker. Working within the parameters of a Judean-Christian philosophy of life regarding the human predicament of suffering, the researcher recognizes the challenge of how to integrate faith with the realm of death and loss. Within the current American context and ubiquitous human need for comfort in loss, the role of the Christian faith significantly shapes the researcher’s profession as a caretaker within the praxis of bereavement.

times of emotional suffering incurred in the tumultuous liminal space of acute grief. Kelly explains: “Bereavement care shared within the Christian community, where the Christian metanarrative is the main resource utilized to aid reflection on, and reinterpretation of, the deceased’s story and the survivor’s grief is pastoral care” (2008:44).⁷ In support of a Christian metanarrative, the dissertation suggests that vital to faith-based bereavement care is the relational role of compassion.⁸ As a mode of hospitable outreach, Christian compassion is nuanced in a literal sense – *cum passio* – where “caregivers suffer with care seekers” (Doehring 2015:xvi). In this way, a compassionate response to human grief and suffering from a hopeful Christian perspective governs the thinking throughout the research.

The basic presupposition of the current study is that within a religious approach that is sensitive to the dimension of meaning and human dignity, a Christian understanding of compassion could enhance the caring skills of two (2) primary professions associated within the problematic field: funeral directors and vocational pastors. Each of these caregiving professions traditionally work together in a mutual collaboration of care (i.e. a team approach) for bereaved families and individuals. Yet, the current study suggests that in a very secularized environment like the United States of America,⁹ there seems to be a paucity of research that fully recognizes the pastoral

⁷ A Western Christian metanarrative is often described by terms that represent movement through key biblical themes, such as Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation (Garber 2005). Though beyond the scope of the current study, it is recognized that an Eastern Christian metanarrative might utilize different terms to emphasize other aspects of the Christian faith, such as Creation, Incarnation, and Re-creation. Where a Western approach may accent the role and significance of individual sin in life, an Eastern (or Byzantine) approach may place more emphasis on the corporate need to deal with principalities and powers (Webber 2008:169; Meyendorff 1999.). The former concentrates on the sacrificial response of Christ (e.g. the Penal-Substitutional view of the atonement); the latter concentrates more on the triumph of Christ over sin, evil, and death (e.g. the Christus Victor view of the atonement). For the current study however, both perspectives are useful paradigms that support the pastoral impulse to care for bereaved individuals, families, and communities.

⁸ In Chapter 2: Literature Review, the dissertation discusses the challenges of how a Christian perspective functions in a postmodern Western context (see 2.5 Part II: How the World Should Be According to Practical Theology).

⁹ Taylor’s masterwork (2007) identifies three senses of secularization, including the retreat of religion from the public spaces, the decline of religious belief and practice, and conditions of belief. Volf argues that the first two aspects of the secularization thesis cannot be fully supported globally today with empirical data (2015:79).

role of funeral directors as key gatekeepers in bereavement care (Van Beck 2016; Hoy 2013; Weeks 2012; Kelly 2008; Gibson 2005; Fowler 2004:1).

To be sure, though some bereaved families have the benefit of turning to a vocational pastor or to a local church for support during times of loss, nevertheless and perhaps to a greater extent, most all families utilize some form of caregiving services provided by a funeral director when faced with the loss of a loved one.¹⁰ Though the current study focuses on both professions (i.e. vocational pastors and funeral directors), the role funeral directors have in bereavement caregiving will be emphasized in order to advance their inclusion in a multi-disciplinary network of care providers integrating spirituality within the liminal space between death and grief (Beardsley 2009:239; Bregman 2010). To provide a vital example, the study recognizes the fact that licensed funeral directors and embalmers touch deceased bodies and prepare deceased bodies for the last event of farewell. In this way, touching, washing, embalming, and dressing a deceased body needs to be thus reconsidered as a spiritual act of caregiving and part of the rituals regarding death and dying. Is the body merely a corpse or does the body indeed represent the whole of human life (Van Beck 2015)?¹¹

¹⁰ The study notes that even the small percentage of families who choose to conduct their funerary rituals without the assistance of a licensed funeral director often hire a funeral establishment to assist with the final disposition of the deceased body as well as to complete key administrative tasks, such as the processing of certified death certificates by State authorities and obituary notices for local and national newspapers. Nevertheless, there are groups, such as the National Home Funeral Alliance, that advocate for a complete “do it yourself” approach to funerals and body disposition (Kaleem 2013).

¹¹ Dignifying a dead human body through rituals of preparation is a deeply spiritual function of deathcare professionals and caregivers. While the term “spiritual” or “spirituality” sometimes functions as a vague synonym for religion, or is even used in opposition to organized public religion, spirituality can also imply a sense of “essential humanness...capable of universal application, and an almost infinite range of meaning” (Beardsley 2009:233). In this way, spirituality offers a flexible term that may “facilitate conversation and communication between specialists of different disciplines” (Beardsley 2009:233). While spirituality is a contested term, many prefer it to the term religion in certain contexts. Volf explains that when ordinary people say they are spiritual, they typically mean that “their relationship to God or to the transcendent realm matters to them but that they don’t care much for religious institutions, dogmas, and rituals” (2015:208). Given the ubiquity of death, the current study is interested in the human proclivity to relate to a transcendent realm when faced with human mortality. Spirituality in this sense suggests a comprehensive quest in life for comfort, wholeness, and hope amid “the existential realities of daily experiences and the demands posed by happenstances and different encounters within the reality of suffering and death” (Louw 2013:1).

In order to maintain a pastoral approach that is sensitive to both the spiritual dimension of meaning and the anthropological dimension of human dignity, the study suggests that a team approach to bereavement caregiving is paramount. In this regard, the researcher wants to revisit the role of the funeral director in order to propose a paradigm shift, namely from the materialistic perspective aimed at business and industry goals (Doody 1995) to the perspective of 'spiritual service' and compassionate caregiving. In short, the research wants to probe into the theological dimension of comfort in pastoral care (i.e. a theological paradigm for compassionate caregiving).

As an important note of personal disclosure, the researcher is a licensed funeral director with over fifteen years of professional experience in working with vocational pastors in caring for bereaved families and individuals through funerary services and ceremonies. As such, the researcher is a participatory observer within the problematic field. Subsequently, based upon years of accumulated anecdotal evidence, the foreground of the research underpins a robust control belief that funeral rituals are indeed one significant means to achieve effective ministry of caring for the bereaved (Fowler 2004:1).¹² At the same time, what needs to be made clear is that the current research is not aimed at a nostalgic attempt to return to a fixed or static paradigm of

¹² The researcher is a second generation licensed funeral director and Certified Funeral Service Practitioner (CFSP) committed to providing his community with a culture of care when facing a loss and honoring life. Independently owned and operated funeral homes in the United States of America are often managed by family members. In this way, a second generation funeral director indicates that a prior family member worked within a given firm. In this case, the researcher's father, C. Don Gibson, was a first generation funeral director who began his practice in 1958. The researcher is also a part owner of two licensed funeral establishments in the State of Tennessee. Smith Funeral & Cremation Service, in operation since 1962, is a full-service funeral establishment located in Maryville, Tennessee that is aimed at honoring the life and legacy of families through meaningful rituals, ceremonies, and personal experiences. A second funeral establishment was opened in September 2012 – Cremation by Grandview. This licensed establishment is located just one mile from the Smith campus in Maryville, Tennessee, and is designed to address a distinctly different family need. While both business entities assist families living in Blount County, Tennessee (population 127,000) who are facing the death of a loved one, Cremation by Grandview is aimed at reaching a different demographic – a segment of the population who desire or opt for direct cremations with minimal or no formal services or rituals provided by the funeral home. The number of bereaved families served each year by the researcher's two firms may convey a degree of expertise that substantiates the current study's emphasis on the importance of pastoral caregiving for bereaved families. In specific terms, the researcher's two funeral homes on average assist about 500 families per year with bereavement care (approximately 400 families by Smith Funeral & Cremation Service and 100 families by Cremation by Grandview).

traditional funeral rituals, nor is the study entrenched in a personal quest to save the funeral industry from necessary change amid significant cultural shifts. Instead, the dissertation is fundamentally about the role of pastoral care to aid bereaved individuals and families in the adaptation of loss and thus to revisit the interplay between pastoral caregiving and the professional dimension of funeral caretaker.

Background Information Regarding Cultural Shifts of Ritualization

Turning now to the present context of bereavement support extant in the United States, many caregivers are alarmed with a current growing trend towards deritualizing death (Irion 1991; Wolfelt 2005; Taylor 2011a). Increasingly, many people in America are choosing to have their deceased loved ones removed from the place of their death and cremated with minimal or no ceremonies, or buried without any traditional funeral services that accompany the dead (Light Bulbs 2013). Taylor opines: “the elimination of the funeral by more Americans every day suggests that public confidence in their efficacy is lacking” (2011b:3). In fact, the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) reported that only 42% of respondents now feel that having a religious service is very important to cope with death (Gillespie and Defort 2015:64), marking a steady 7% decline in just the past three years (see Figure 1). Indeed, the cultural trend away from meaningful religious ceremonies as a means to cope with loss is a growing concern for bereavement care typically provided by a caregiving team of funeral directors and vocational pastors.

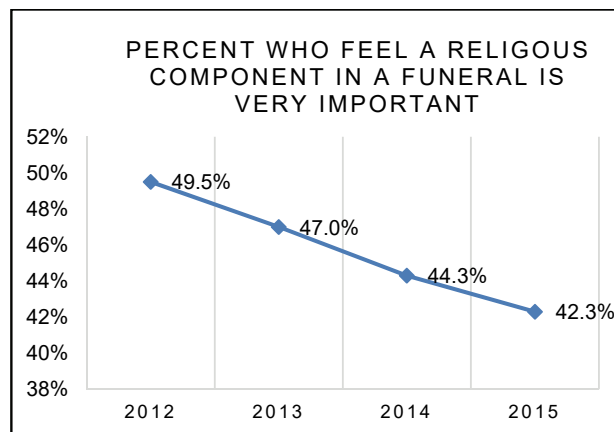


Figure 1: The Deritualization of Religious Services

Conversely, closely related to the trend of ritualistic downsizing is the growing preference toward simple cremation with no ceremony rather than traditional burial with ceremony. One industry report states that the U.S. cremation rate grew rapidly from 26.2% in 2000 to 38.6% in 2010 and will continue rising by an average of 4.0% per year through year 2015 (State of the Industry 2011:9). In another report compiled by the NFDA, the cremation rate is predicted to eclipse the burial rate for the first time in the history of the United States in 2015 (NFDA Stats 2015:8).¹³ According to the report, the cremation rate will be 48.5% and the burial rate will be 45.6%, with the trend expecting to continue through 2035 (see Figure 2).¹⁴

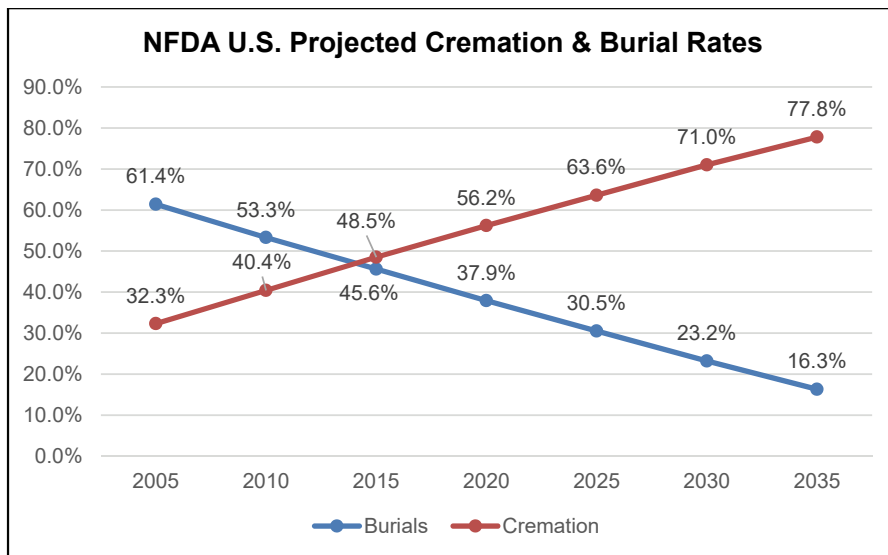


Figure 2: Projected Cremation and Burial Trends

¹³ The statistical projections of the NFDA report did not designate the possible number of families who may choose both cremation and burial for their deceased loved ones. In fact, there was some movement within contemporary funeral service practice to think of cremation as just another mode of final disposition of a deceased body. In these cases, cremation of the deceased body could have occurred either before or after the funeral ceremonies, depending upon the family's wishes.

¹⁴ The 2015 NFDA data is consistent with a prior 2014 report stating that the projected burial rate for 2015 will be 45.8% and the projected cremation rate will be 48.2% (The NFDA Cremation Report 2014:2). Further, the 2014 report projects that by 2030, the national United States burial rate will be 23.2% as compared to the cremation rate of 70.6%.

The Cremation Association of North America (CANA 2011) reports similar findings and estimates. According to a CANA report, the cremation rate in the U.S. will indeed exceed 46% by the end of 2015, demonstrating a sharp increase in cremation preferences as a mode of disposition of human remains for United States citizens (see Figure 3).

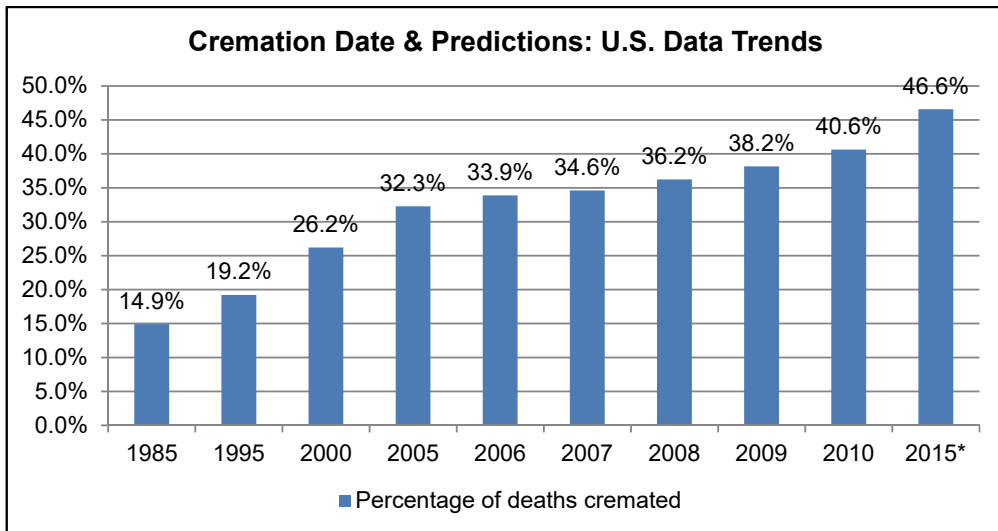


Figure 3: U.S. Cremation Projections by CANA

Of course, just because a family chooses cremation does not mean that they cannot have meaningful funeral services, or even a ground burial (Starks 2014). In fact, some families who choose cremation today still have the deceased body of their loved one embalmed and prepared for a private farewell viewing in a cremation-oriented casket, and then placed in a quiet funeral chapel or slumber room before going to the crematory. Moreover, some families who choose cremation still have a visitation period or a time for receiving friends in order to mobilize their community of support. Further, those families who choose cremation may also decide to have a traditional funeral ceremony with the deceased body present before going to the crematory, or even a memorial service without the deceased body present. There are indeed a variety of final disposition options for cremated human remains that are placed in urns, including being interred just like traditional caskets in the burial grounds of a cemetery, being entombed in an above ground mausoleum or columbarium niche, and even

being scattered with a ceremony in a cemetery's nature garden or other meaningful location.¹⁵

To be clear, cremation does not preclude traditional funeral or burial ritual (Beck and Metrick 2009).¹⁶ At the same time, regardless of the numerous options available for families choosing cremation, many are increasingly choosing to opt for a simple or direct cremation with minimal or no funeral ritual at all.¹⁷ A direct cremation typically includes a funeral establishment picking up the deceased body from a nursing home, hospital, or personal residence, attaining the necessary documentation and authorizations, taking the body to a crematory in a rigid cardboard container, completing the cremation, and shipping the cremated remains to the family – all without body preparation, ceremony, or funeral ritual of any kind. The NFDA reports that a direct cremation (i.e. cremation without a final viewing of the deceased and without formal ceremonies) currently accounts for 35% of all cremations in the U.S. with no signs of decline (NFDA Stats 2015:8; The NFDA Cremation Report: 2014:7).

To meet the changing demands of consumer preferences regarding simplified cremations, some state legislatures are issuing new guidelines. For example, the Florida Senate (2011) developed a minimal licensing process in 1979 for deritualized specialists to legally operate in the State of Florida – the direct disposer license. As a result, families living in Florida who chose direct cremations with no funeral ritual or

¹⁵ A columbarium was a term that described an above ground physical structure with recessed chambers, called niches, designed especially to house cremated remains. In addition to simply retaining cremated remains in urns or other keepsakes at one's home, some chose scattering options by sea or air (e.g. using boats, balloons, aircraft, pyrotechnic displays). Cremated remains were also made into jewelry, trees, or structures that create a marine water reef.

¹⁶ In funeral service vernacular, a memorial service was regarded as a ceremony without a deceased body present. Some families who opted for cremation also chose to re-ritualize with a memorial service in order to honor their deceased loved one (i.e. to step outside of a traditional paradigm of a funeral ceremony with the deceased body present followed by a burial in a cemetery) (Sewell 2011).

¹⁷ Alkaline hydrolysis was an ongoing debatable issue regarding a water and chemical based process of cremation in lieu of the traditional fire-based method (Alkaline 2015). Some argue that alkaline hydrolysis (also known as Resomation® or biocremation) used less energy and created less pollutants than traditional fire-based cremation. Currently, alkaline hydrolysis has not been approved by all states.

burial services captured nearly 20.0% of the cremation market by year 1999 (Chevalier 2011:11). Florida is an important state to consider as it represents a state where cremation is the preferred choice of disposition. In fact, Florida currently cremates more deceased bodies per year than any other state, except for California (CANA 2011:5). Other states who have higher cremation rates than the national average, include Nevada at 73%, Washington 69%, Hawaii at 68%, Oregon at 67%, and Montana at 64% (CANA 2011:5).

The rapid growth in consumer preferences toward direct “no-frills” cremations without funeral or burial services is surprising some funeral directors (Clary 1985), though this trend appears to be consistent with what is happening in the United Kingdom and Canada (Cann 2016:133). For example, the cremation rate in Canada was 58% in 2010 with a projection of 62% by year 2015; similarly, the cremation rate in the United Kingdom was already at 73% in 2010 (CANA 2011:13, 20).¹⁸

A Brief History of Burial Ritual

What is important to the current research is to recognize that the trend toward deritualization stands in sharp contrast to the ubiquitous practice of funeral ceremony and ritualistic burial occurring throughout antiquity. Acclaimed poet and licensed funeral director Thomas Lynch (1997:24) explains:

The track record was pretty good on this. We'd been doing – the species, not the undertakers¹⁹ – more or less the same thing for millennia: looking

¹⁸ Though cremation was first discussed in America in the late 19th century (Eassie 1875; Cobb 1892), as late as 1965, the US Cremation Rate was still less than 4%. Currently, some countries have much higher cremation rates than the United States, such as Japan (99.9%), Hong Kong (89.9%), and Sweden (78.6%) (The NFDA Cremation Report 2014). Other countries still have very low cremation rates, such as South Africa (3-6%) (International Cremation Statistics 2011).

¹⁹ The term “undertaker” was now both a colloquial and antiquated term once used to designate individuals who had given themselves to the vocation of funeral service. Today, given the professionalization of funeral service, the more accepted term used to identify a funeral professional was “licensed funeral director.” In the United States, the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) was the sole accrediting agency recognized by the US Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Licensed funeral directors were governed by individual state laws and regulations. The ABFSE and the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards maintained the National Board Exam recognized by all states and necessary for licensure.