

“We are not ghosts in waiting”: How atheists cope with death

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Abstract:

Death is not only experienced on a personal and psychological level, but it is also experienced as a rift in social life. Robert Hertz (1960) found that funerals, burials, and mourning made death the “object of a collective representation” (pg. 28). When looking at these aspects of death, anthropologists have studied them through the lenses of specific religions, as it is through religion that people have found social support, spiritual guidance, and answers to questions about an afterlife. However, there is a growing number of people that are not religiously affiliated, including people who identify as atheists, and these people's death related beliefs and practices have not been studied anthropologically. In this study I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with self-identified atheists to explore how atheists cope with death. I focused on three aspects related to death: funerals, coping with loss, and afterlife beliefs. I found that my participants favoured personalized, unstructured, and celebratory funerals. Talking about the deceased person and sharing happy memories were not only considered to be important aspects of the services, but also helpful in coping with the loss more generally. As well, none of my participants believed in an afterlife, and many used science as a means to provide institutional backup to their lack of belief in gods, deities, or souls. This provides a starting point to begin understanding atheist relationships to death.

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Introduction: Beginning with “the end”

Religion is important in helping people to cope with death by providing rituals, community support, and an understanding about what happens when a person dies (Kaufman & Morgan, 2005). Since religion helps people cope with their own deaths and the deaths of those close to them, I want to know how people without the institutional support that religion provides deal with death. Anthropologists of religion have studied the ways different religions deal with aspects of mortality and dying, but there has been little work done on people who specifically reject religion (in this case atheists) and what their beliefs and practices are. I want to know what atheists do when someone dies, how they deal with their grief, and what they think about their own death. Therefore, my research question is, how do atheists cope with death?

To answer this I will explore how atheists deal with both the metaphysical and practical aspects of death. I will explore whether atheists who make use of certain funeral rituals, even non-religious rituals, cope better with the death of a loved one than atheists who do not. This idea comes from the ubiquity of rituals surrounding death in religions (Garces-Foley, Ed. 2006) and the use of religious rituals to express more than just religiosity (Reimers, 1999). I also will be looking at the social support available to a person when a loved one dies and see how this affects their ability to cope. This draws on research by Horning et al (2011), who compared how atheists, agnostics, and religious older adults cope with difficulties, and found that while atheists have fewer members in their social groups who support them when compared to their religious peers, they still relied on social support. I will also be looking at whether atheists who have a belief in some form of afterlife cope better with the idea of their own deaths than those who do not, which is investigated in psychology literature (Heflick, & Goldenberg, 2012).

To begin, I defined an atheist as someone who does not believe in any gods or deities (Cliteur, 2009) This simple definition allowed a broad range of participants, and I asked them to

define atheism for themselves as well. I conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured in depth interviews with atheists of various ages across Canada. My participants' ages ranged from 20 to 60 years; five of them were women and twelve were men. My questions were organized around three aspects of death: funerals, coping with the death of a loved one, and their ideas about their own death and possibility of an afterlife.

When beginning my research I was unable to find any current anthropological research conducted on atheist perspectives on death. Although there is research being conducted on the changing world of funerals and memorials, these are broad and often have some basis in the study of a particular religion, in relation to some official religion, or on all types of religions in a given area. Therefore a look specifically at atheists will be useful in this regard. As well, whatever studies there are on atheists are based on general well-being (Zuckerman, 2009) or on the process of becoming an atheist (Smith, 2010). While these subjects were touched on in my research, they were not the main focus so while my research is informed by these topics, the focus is different.

I was raised in a Jewish household of sorts. My mother was not Jewish but my father was, so I had to be converted, and I went to a Jewish elementary school and had a bat-mitzvah and all of that. I realized early on, maybe in grade three, that I did not believe the stories that I was being taught and so after my bat-mitzvah I stopped going to synagogue. I have considered myself an agnostic atheist (or ap-atheist, according to my participants) ever since. This means that I not only am not completely sure that there definitely is no god or deities, but also that I am not concerned with finding out if there are, and just live my life as if there is no god. I am interested in learning about people for whom the answer to this question is important, as I am

curious why people want to know something that is to me unknowable. To begin this journey then, I look to the current literature on funerals and the theological spectrum in Canada.

Literature Review: Any final words on death?

Cross cultural perspectives:

Older anthropological ideas about death and dying saw death as creating a rift in the social order and saw rituals as existing to repair and continue the life of the group (Hertz, 1960). It seems that the same cannot be said for modern western societies, which generally move along without apparent problems when members of the group die (Exler, 2004). The problems that arise when a person dies now are more individual (Exler, 2004), and funerals often reflect this, with an emphasis on individuality and aiding the grief of those left behind (Emke, 2002). That being said, the social aspect of death is still important for many groups (Barley, 1997). The performative and social aspects of grief and mourning are important to maintain the group's functioning and maintain ties between both the living and the dead as well as between the various mourners (Barley, 1997). There is a variety of reactions, emotional reactions, proper actions, and proper mourning practices, from somber sobriety to laughter and joking (Barley, 1997). For example, various forms of Hinduism have the dead and the living intertwined in the same world, and they do not fear death but laugh about it (Garces-Foley, Ed. 2006). The variety of appropriate behaviours extends to the proper way to deal with the mourners who are closer to the dead person, and whether they should be treated respectfully or cheered up (Barley, 1997).

Death has been a subject of interest for sociologists and anthropologists from the inceptions of the disciplines. Robert Hertz, a student of Durkheim, studied writings on the death rituals of Polynesian societies to uncover the social significance of death (1960). What he found was that funerals, burials, and mourning were related to the social rift caused by the loss of a

member of their society and that, “death has a specific meaning for the social consciousness; it is the object of a collective representation” (Hertz, 1960 pg. 28). He found that in Polynesian funerals the double burial practices (i.e. when a body is given a temporary burial, then exhumed and given a final burial) are used as extended periods of mourning and taboo for the people who were closest to the deceased, and in that way their social exclusion mirrors the physical exclusion of the actual dead person. The body is in a kind of liminal stage after it dies but before it is buried for a second time, and the lives of the relatives reflect this same kind of liminality. In this way, the death is experienced socially, and only through the final ritual sending the soul of the dead to its destination that the group is healed (Hertz, 1960).

Different religious perspectives:

In the social science approach to death, there has always been a focus on religion and how it affects the ways people deal with it. While it is not feasible to delve into great detail about the myriad of world religions, I would like to outline some of the variability that exists in different religions' conception of and dealings with death and funerals, as well as some broad similarities. One concept that exists in most religions is that of a soul which exists in a different way than that body (Kramer, 1988). What happens to the soul when a person dies and where the soul goes (if indeed it goes anywhere at all) are where the differences come from (Bendann, 1930; Garces-Foley, Ed. 2006; Kramer, 1988). One of the main ways of distinguishing broader religious traditions is in the distinction often made between eastern and western religions in how they see death and afterlife. Eastern religions tend to look at life and death more cyclically, as death and rebirth continuously recycling until an enlightenment is reached and the cycle is finally put to rest. In comparison, western religions tend to believe that there is a single birth, death and rebirth before the final judgement (Kramer, 1988).

The psychological perspective: Terror Management Theory:

Why are some people religious? Terror Management Theory (TMT) is used in psychology, which states that because humans know that they are going to die, their lives are conducted differently than if they did not have this knowledge (Maxfield & Pyszczynski, 2010). This knowledge of death is used to explain why people are religious and believe in gods or supernatural beings (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2012; Jong, Halberstadt, & Bluemke, 2012). The theory suggests that religion will then be positively correlated with a lower fear of death, and in many cases it is (Horning et al 2011). Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke studied belief in deities or supernatural beings and the difference between explicit and implicit beliefs (2012). They found that people explicitly defended their beliefs (atheist, Christian, etc. and the accompanied belief or lack of in God) when primed with death by imagining what will happen to them physically and writing about it, the belief in “supernatural entities” measured implicitly increased when the participants were primed death regardless of their religious beliefs (Jong, Halberstadt, & Bluemke, 2012). This idea complements the findings in Heflick and Goldenberg's study on belief in afterlife as a means of reducing fear of death, which held to be true even for atheists (2012).

However, there is some evidence that shows that while the very religious have the least fear of death, atheists have less fear than those who are only moderately religious, which suggests that the importance is in conviction of belief rather than the substance of the belief itself (Horning, et al 2011; Grainger, 1998). In a study conducted by Horning et. al looking specifically at older adults, the well-being and coping abilities of people who were religious were compared to non-religious (atheist and agnostic) people (2011). They found many similarities in how the different groups dealt with general difficulties, such as reliance on support from social networks,

and found that the levels of overall wellbeing were the same for the religious and non-religious participants.

Statistics on no religious affiliation/atheism:

The number of atheists is generally hard to determine based on the available data. The problem is that sometimes the only non-religious option is “no religious affiliation” (National household survey, 2011) or “none” (Zuckerman, 2009), and these categories can include not only atheists, but agnostics and people who identify as spiritual rather than religious. Canada-wide, people claiming no religious affiliation represent about 23.90% of the population, according to the National Household Survey from 2011. There is a slight gender gap among the non-religious in Canada, with 26.14 % of males and 21.72% of females claiming no affiliation (National household survey, 2011). Globally the gender difference often disappears (WIN Gallup 2012), though in Canada and the United States, there is a distinction with males identifying as atheist, or having no religious affiliation, more often than females (Zuckerman, 2009 & National household survey, 2011).

International polls are a better way of finding numbers on true “convinced atheists” as opposed to those who are only “not religious” which in these surveys are separate categories. According to the 2012 Global Index of religion and atheism about 9% of Canadians are “convinced atheists” while 40% are “not religious” when answering whether they consider themselves to be a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist (WIN Gallup). So according to this we have 49% of Canadians that are either not religious or convinced atheists, which compared to the National Household Survey seems high. Looking elsewhere, according to the World Values Survey conducted between 2005 and 2008, in Canada 6.4% of Canadians are “convinced atheists” while 26% are “not a religious person”. At the very least,

looking at these data sets it is clear that there are many people in Canada who have moved away from traditional religion.

Secularization theory:

The idea that our modern world is becoming more secular and rational is one that has been debated in the social sciences for a while now, with the seeds of the idea starting with people like Durkheim, Marx, and Freud, and the questioning of its truth coming from Rodney Stark in the 1980s (Bibby, 2011). The broad idea, that a move towards atheism and lack of religion is inevitable, does not hold for many people, but the idea that religion has become less important in our daily lives does still ring true (Pina-Cabral, 2001). While there is declining attendance of churches in Canada, this does not mean a move toward atheism and away from religion all together (Emke, 2002). In fact, it has been noted that in Canada, what we are seeing is rather more polarization in religious belief, that is more people who are either religious or atheist, and fewer people in the middle (Bibby, 2011).

Secularized rituals:

Much research has been done on the role of rituals in a society. Often they are connected to transition points at certain phases of biological development, like death, in which case they are known as lifecycle rituals (Gusfield & Michalowicz, 1984). If we are to understand these rituals, we must understand their symbolic significance, such as how “funerals and graveyards function as communicative symbolic practices” (Reimers, 1999 pg. 147). In a study of immigrant graves and funerals in Göteborg Sweden, Reimers found that religious funerals were commonly used as a way of marking identity and ethnicity, rather than specifically focusing on the deceased person's religious belief (1999). In these cases, choosing to have a Catholic service rather than one through the Church of Sweden marked the deceased person's identity as an immigrant from a

Catholic majority country. Conversely choosing to have a funeral through the Church of Sweden signalled a blending of their identities to incorporate both where the person came from and where they made their lives (Reimers, 1999).

Emke, in his study on funerals in Newfoundland, surveyed funeral directors and clergy for their opinions on the changes in funerals and their roles in bringing them about (2002). It was found that both of these groups disliked the lessening of ritual in modern funerals and claiming that this showed a lack of respect for the dead or that it meant the people were losing an important aspect to help them deal with their grief (Emke, 2002). In studying how people deal with loss in a south London neighbourhood, Miller and Parrott found that people negotiated their relationships with their dead loved ones in complex ways through “material substitution” (2009). Through careful divestment from the possessions that remind them of their loved ones, or negotiating what items of memory are displayed and even trying to control what items will be held onto by successive generations, people mediated their loss (Miller & Parrott, 2009). In a study of 46 funerals across northeastern England, Holloway et al found that despite the differences in religiosity or secularity of the ceremonies, the central focus of all funerals was the funeral address which centred on the life of the deceased (2013). Through the process of having the funerals, both the relationships of the people to each other and the deceased and the meaning of death and its relationship to life were negotiated by the mourners. Of note, they found that very few conceptualizations of death were wholly religious or wholly secular, and concluded that regardless of the form of the funeral (such as religious or British Humanist) there was always a spiritual element to the funerals and people's conception of death (Holloway et al, 2013).

Thus there are a few generalizations that can be made about modern funerals as opposed to traditional religious funerals: a loss of formal ritualization and standards for funerals and

memorial services (Miller & Parrott, 2009; Emke, 2002; Holloway et al 2013); a move toward more secular rituals and funerals and away from religious services (Miller & Parrott, 2009; Emke, 2002; Holloway et al 2013); a move toward personalization of services and practices as a reaction against the cold uniformity of earlier funeral models (Emke, 2002; Holloway et al 2013; Reimers, 1999). Discussions of afterlife are thought of in terms of helping the bereaved come to terms with the death and deal with their grief (Emke, 2002; Holloway et al 2013). Celebration of the life of the person becomes the focus of the ceremony rather than the soul of the dead person returning to God (Emke, 2002).

My study explores the tensions outlined in the literature and see how self-identified atheists negotiate their options for their own death as well as coping with the loss of loved ones. Does a lack of belief in God(s) or deities mean a lack of belief in an afterlife? Where do the funerals they have attended, or plan to have for themselves, fit on a continuum of religious vs. secular, and why was that option chosen? Are these decisions ideological, practical, or made out of concern for those that are left behind?

Methods: Death-talk

To collect the data I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Because this is an exploratory study and there is a range of possible responses to the topics I am engaging, I wanted to leave as much room open as possible for the participants to tell me about their thoughts and experiences. Interviewing allows for participants to highlight what is important to them and provides a window into a topic that has not been explored in this way (Bouma et. al. 2012).

To recruit my participants, I reached out to two groups on Facebook for atheists (see Appendix A): Atheists and Humanists of Atlantic Canada, and Centre for Inquiry Nova Scotia. I had an announcement ready for them to copy and paste into their emails or a Facebook post,

explaining my research and forwarding my contact information to anyone interested in participating. My recruitment announcement was posted and after a few replies, I had offers to post my paragraph elsewhere, and it was posted on The Halifax Sunday Assembly, and Canadian Atheist, and Humanist Association of Toronto.

I received emails from 58 people across the country, and conducted interviews with seventeen people. The interviews were conducted either in person in quiet coffee shops, over Skype, or over the phone, and they lasted from about half an hour to an hour and a half. I also interviewed one person who spontaneously expressed interest in participating when the subject of my thesis was brought up in conversation. I emailed this person to see if he was still interested (see Appendix B) and interviewed him as well. All of the interviews were recorded using a digital audio recording device. Interview questions focused on the participants' thoughts on atheism, their experiences with funerals and memorial services, their loss of loved ones and the support they received during their grieving, as well as their thoughts on death and the possibility of an afterlife (see Appendix C).

I chose to talk to any adult who self-identified as an atheist. I spoke to people whose ages ranged from 20 to 60 years. Five of my participants were women and twelve of them were men. As previously stated there is a gap between the genders of non-believers (Zuckerman, 2009 & National household survey, 2011), with there being more men than women who identify somewhere in the non-belief section of theology. This slight gap however does not account for the difference that was found in the responses to my recruitment posts, where only about one quarter of the replies came from women. This was likely due to my recruitment strategy, where I went to internet atheist groups to find people. There have been several articles written over the last few years on the problem that the atheist movement has with women, and the misogyny of

several of the “New Atheism” leaders (see for example Marcotte, 2014). While on-line atheism groups exist to bring together atheists, share articles about religion, atheism, and science, and connect with like-minded people which can be especially important for people who live in very religious settings and are not “out” as atheists in their daily lives, women can feel unwelcome or attacked in these spaces and this likely was related to the large gap in responses I received from women and men.

Before the interviews began, the participants were given the consent form (see Appendix D) to read over. They were then asked to sign it, if the interview was being conducted in person or they were able to upload a copy of the scanned document on the computer, otherwise they wrote to me in an email stating that they had read the form and consent to participate. The participants were asked before the interview began if they had any questions for me, and were reminded that they may pause or stop the interview at any time. They were given my email address to contact me if they wished to withdraw some or all of what they have said, until 1 March 2015. I also made them aware that all data was to be anonymized.

Discussing death can be difficult for people, both when discussing their own death or the deaths of loved ones. I was aware that certain subjects that I was exploring could be sensitive for my participants to speak about, especially in cases where they had lost someone very recently. For this reason I was sensitive to changes in either the person's body language or tone of voice to make sure that my participants were not overly distressed. In the rare occasions where someone did become upset, I offered to give the participant a break or change the topic, however they insisted that they were alright and we continued the interview. Had the need arose, I had information for counselling services available for my participants. However, this was not necessary. So while death can be a sensitive subject, the questions I asked would have caused no

more distress than thinking about death in their everyday lives would, so my research was still minimal-risk.

The data was analyzed using top-down and bottom up strategies. What I looked for were patterns in responses to my three broad categories of funerals, coping, and afterlife, with special attention being paid to the themes that came out of the literature. I looked for comparisons being made between religious and secular funerals, for specifics on how my participants coped with losing a loved one, and the details about their beliefs related to an afterlife or spirituality, however they defined those terms. With the nature of exploratory research, I remained open to whatever information may have come out of the interviews. This was crucial in certain areas where there was little to no research to start from, such as atheist conceptions of an afterlife. In doing this, I was able to be surprised by my findings, which I was several times.

Findings: Answering the death question

Becoming an atheist:

To understand the context of my participants' atheism, I will explain a little about the beliefs that they grew up in or turned to before they became “convinced atheists”. Most of my participants were either raised in some sort of religion, or were active members of a religion at some point in their lives. One of my participants was formerly part of some neo-pagan, and another was raised by one Muslim parent and one Christian parent. Interestingly, four of my participants were not raised in any religion, but three of them still chose to explore different religions to see if there was one that they could believe in. On actually becoming an atheist, most of my participants simply stated that for various reasons, they could not believe in some crucial

aspect of the religion they were a part of at the time. For Allan, this was coming to the realization that he could not believe in an afterlife, saying:

“..it was really thinking about death that really finally crystallized atheism for me as... my viewpoint. And the reason I say that is because I... came to a realization one day that I just could not reconcile... You know, heaven and hell and good and bad and evil and good and these just were concepts that I just could not understand or relate to anymore. And one day I woke up and I realized that there was just absolutely nothing wrong in having... been born, having lived my life, and then dying. And that that in and of itself was such a holistic, such a whole wonderful place to be... And that it just felt like ego to me, just complete ego and fear... That in the past had given me some motivation or some urge to see something outside of the materialistic or the humanistic world. I just thought it, there was nothing wrong with the idea that you were born, you lived this incredible life, and then you died.”

I will note now that the concept that there is no afterlife was crucial for all of my participants' understanding of atheism. Two of my participants stated that while they were technically raised as Christians, they never actually believed in the teachings of their church so they felt that they were never actually religious. For Bill, it was thinking about the death of his uncle, who was a gay man, that helped him become an atheist. He told me that:

“Even though... my parents were very liberal as opposed to some more conservative... branches of Christianity um I still had a hard time reconciling, especially at the point how somebody who was very very loving and very caring could end up in a position of eternal damnation just for the way he felt about somebody... And my parents were very very supportive of him sort of thing and it was never an issue that he was gay. But it was still one of those things where I didn't... It still would have been a main teaching in the church especially at that point”

This becomes more important when talking about the specific beliefs that my participants talk about in relation to conceptions of an afterlife, but for now it is necessary to note that most of my participants went through a process of deciding that they did not believe in the teachings of the religion they were being raised in. This realization came because there was some aspect of the teachings that did not fit with their worldview, such as Bill's moral beliefs or Allan's understanding of the material world as holistic and complete in and of itself. One of my participants, Chris, stated that while he thinks he always had doubts about the veracity of the

claims of the church, learning about science and evolution in particular was what made him an atheist.

Funerals:

When talking about funerals, my participants expressed positive ideas about the types of changes in funerals that echoed discussions in the literature, though many wanted to see more of it. Some of them had never been to any purely secular services, and people especially pointed to the idea of less formal ritual and more personal services as positives that should be seen more of.

Regarding personalization, that is, the degree to which the service is tailored to the person's personality and interests, participants spoke of remembering the person in a way that the person would have liked, with some even talking about how the person would have liked to have been there. They found this to be more meaningful than a standardized ritual. Bill gave an example of this from his uncle's funeral where:

the service had run a little... long. Like it was just at a funeral chapel. And he was... very big musically, like blues, Jazz, opera as well. But always maintained that his first and only true love was ABBA. So his brother... had done up a CD which was... a lot of music that he really liked. So it was like a lot of opera and baroque and very classical and then at the end, more for the family, he put Dancing Queen as a joke. However it got started late or something, so when they were carrying his ashes out, Dancing Queen started playing. And there's really no more appropriate thing, nothing he'd find more appropriate than that.

And he smiled as he told the story, showing that the personal, and funny, way of conducting the funeral helped create a positive way to remember his uncle.

Funerals are about the people who are still here was key to my participants' understandings about what makes a good funeral. This change from older religious ideas has been documented in the literature previously discussed, and is seen as an obvious answer by the respondents I spoke with. Given the total lack of belief in an after-life expressed by all of the participant, this was unquestioningly a part of our discussions on funerals, though there were some subtle differences in their responses. One participant, Sven, stated that the purpose of a

funeral was to “remember and honour” the deceased person's life. Remembrance of the person was a key part of the service that the participants said they needed to help the people left behind cope, as it is through remembering that people were able to feel that they maintained a connection to the deceased person.

When I asked my participants why we even have funerals at all many of them talked about the importance of having an actual ritual to help people cope. One participant spoke of remembering to close a chapter. That is, you remember the person and the part of your life that they were a part of, but then accept that it is over and you will begin a new chapter of your life without them. This flows nicely into the idea that funerals help you cope, or at least are a part of what helps you cope. The importance of “closure” was discussed by many of my participants, and funerals are tasked with helping mourners meet that end. It's not that funerals are expected to help people find closure entirely, rather that they are one possible step towards reaching that end. One reason is that they bring many people together, and the togetherness helps with getting closure. Ben stated the importance of this coming together aspect of the funeral, talking about a family pet that died, and they had a memorial one year after the dog had died, where everyone got together to talk about it and finally face it and remember it as a family, and everybody cried. When people mentioned the importance of the ritual aspect of funerals, they were referring to the idea of having a ritual of some sort, not necessarily a specific or prescribed ritual like one sees in religious funerals.

As death is something that changes your life when you lose someone close to you, it is unsurprising that people want a ritual of sorts to mark it. People have been marking major life changes with rituals, and this desire does not go away even when the religious aspect is removed. What the respondents were talking about is a way to still have a ritual while removing the

religious aspect. This makes funerals still a salient subject for the atheists I interviewed, although when it comes to their own, very few actually cared about the funeral itself. Many stated that because they will be dead (and with no afterlife, there is no way for them to know what happens) they do not care what will happen at their funeral. Still, when asked most of them said that they definitely would not want or be comfortable with having a religious service for their own funerals. For some this was because they do not believe that religious services do any good for anybody so there would be no point. Others said they feel uncomfortable at religious services generally and therefore would not want one done for them. To me, what this speaks to is the tension between what people say, or even feel they should say, and what they actually feel. Because all of my participants say that they do not believe in an afterlife most of them answered quickly that they do not care about their own funeral, like it should be obvious. It was as if they felt they *should not* care about what kind of service will happen for them, in spite of the fact that clearly most of them did, at least to the extent that they did not want a religious service. Only two of my respondents had planned their funerals in detail. With the emphasis that funerals ought to help remember the person in a way they would have liked, to me this resistance towards religious services speaks to a desire to be remembered in a way that they want.

Only two of the respondents that were asked truly said that they do not care if their friends or family have a religious service for them. One respondent, Kathleen, said that it would be “weird” if her family told her that they wanted to have a religious service for her, but she would be ok with it (or rather, she would be dead and would no longer be in a position to care). The other participant who would not mind having a religious funeral, Ryan, was very adamant about the idea that funerals are for the living, and that whatever his loved ones needed to do to get through it was fine by him. While all of my participants agree on the idea that funerals are for

the living, the belief that my participants had that religion is not useful or that they strongly disagree with religion in some way (or many) made them uncomfortable with the idea of a religious service being held for them.

Sharing stories was very important to a lot of people who were discussing the idea that funerals help people get closure. Sharing good times and good stories specifically, was what my participants were referring to when they talked about story telling. Sharing memories is important to my participants to help people through the process of grief. Many people who had been to funerals where this was a key focus of the service liked it and some expressed a desire for it at their own funerals. A few talked about liking the idea of an “open mic” style funeral, where anyone can come up and talk and share stories. This familiar but structured approach would allow those who are grieving to follow a functioning format while still having a lot of room for individuality. This will provide the openness for people to do what they need to get through it according to their needs, be it talking, listening, or something else. Story telling allows for a remembrance that is personal and by sharing them it helps with what many of my participants said was important which is to live on in the memories of others.

Often the preferences for personalized, unstructured services combined with a statement that funerals should be happier. The ideal in this case is that a funeral should be a celebration of life, and not a mourning of death. While most of my participants agreed that there is bound to be sadness at funerals, they often spoke of the inevitability of death as a reason not to be too sad. The rational is that because everyone dies and there is nothing that can be done about it, being too sad is pointless. One of my participants, Pam, took this idea quite far, saying that:

“you go to a funeral and... it's so heavy. And... why should you be crying? Shouldn't you be happy that you knew this person? That you spent 5 minutes in their presence? Or 5 years, or 50 years with them? You know... shouldn't a funeral be happy? You know, like, why focus on the one shitty aspect of this entire person's life: the end, and celebrate everything else that was in there right up until that point?”

What Pam points to is that despite the sadness of losing someone, there are likely many happy memories of the deceased person that people attending the funeral could draw on and think of to create a more positive atmosphere. The desire to refocus the ceremony to celebrate the life of the deceased person was common among my participants, and echoes the types of changes already documented in the literature on funerals (for example: Emke, 2002).

At the same time as they wanted to see more celebration, there was an emphasis among about half of my participants on the importance of understanding that death is really the end. Accordingly, to them, the only way to achieve any type of closure is to accept that once someone dies and you will never see them again. For my respondents, this was a key understanding of the world for them, and shaped their ideas around funerals, and religion generally. Because there is no afterlife, the funeral is necessarily about those left behind, and helping them to deal with the loss. So the only possible benefit a religious service could have is to offer the comfort of an afterlife to those grieving

Having said that, the problems my participants spoke of with religious funerals were sometimes linked with the idea that the person will be going to an afterlife. This was not seen as problematic by all of my participants, however, as several of them acknowledged that it can be of comfort to people who are grieving to think that the deceased person has moved on to an after life and that they may see them again. A few of my participants had more specific concerns with religious funerals they had attended. Two of my respondents discussed bad times with priests saying terrible things at the funeral that were very upsetting, which were generally of the “fire and brimstone” variety. One priest claimed that the dementia that a respondent's mother in law had gone through was a punishment or cleansing from god to rid her of her sins. He was upset by it, and so was his wife, but the religious family members that were there were not bothered, and

in fact found it “completely appropriate”. To him, this did nothing but hurt the people who were missing their loved one, and it also was disrespectful to her memory. He cried when talking about this. Another respondent talked about feeling guilty for not speaking up at a funeral he attended to support a friend, where the priest was talking about sin and upsetting the people who were grieving. The concern that both of these men had was for the wellbeing of the people left behind, and felt that the priests should have been more concerned with that than proselytizing.

Coping with loss:

When I asked the participants how they coped with the loss of someone they were close to, the responses I received were vague and varied. If there was any consensus, it was that it will always be very personal. For example, Pam said that in her family “we all support each other in... whatever way that the other person needs.” For her mother, this meant allowing her to talk about the afterlife and not question her about it, while for Pam and her brother it meant being allowed to find the humour in the situation because that is what helps them with their pain. Liz talked about how important it was for her to be alone with her feelings and deal with it that way. She had a problem with her in-laws who seemed to think that she was not grieving properly. Although she was unsure as to how they thought she should have been grieving, she expected that since they were religious that they thought that that was what was missing.

While very few people mentioned getting substantial help from other people, and stated that mostly it is up to the individual to help themselves, two participants did mention the importance of having family around while they were grieving. Luke talked about his family coming together and celebrating his grandmother's birthday a year after she died. He said that this offered a final closure for many members of the family, and that several of them had been unable to attend the funeral itself. These were not cases of heavily relying on one or two people

that the participants were close to, but rather a coming together of people to collectively work through their grief. This was one of the few places where I was given positive answers about religion or religious people, in that there are people/a community there to help. Kathleen specifically said that this is one place where the church is very good, and she talked about the church she grew up with and how when somebody died there were always people around helping and making sure that the family was fed and taken care of.

As was discussed in the section on funerals, talking about the deceased person was also pointed to as something that helped several of my participants cope with the loss of a loved one. One participant, Jack, brings up the importance of conversation in regards to the last two funerals he attended. He did not have people he could talk to about the person because there were not enough “overlapping circles of friends” and that made it more difficult for him to deal with his grief. Thus he was missing an important outlet for his feelings about these deaths, and it made it more difficult for him to cope. Often what my participants were referring to was not just any talk, but specifically sharing happy memories and stories.

Similarly but not entirely the same, about half of my participants said that remembering the person was what helped them the most. Kathleen said she felt it was important to not just remember the person, but to honour their memory. She said that she did this by keeping the person as “a voice in the back of the head” where she would think of how a person would react to a situation or to what she was doing. Kathleen said that this helped her to move on because she could still think of them and imagine what they would be saying or doing if they were still alive. Several of my participants were more specific, saying that they would specifically think about fond memories or happy times to help them cope with their loss. Once again, a focus on the

positive was seen as more useful to helping people cope, because thinking of happy memories will make them feel happy as opposed to focusing on the sadness of the person being gone.

A few of my participants said that focusing on practical tasks or thinking pragmatically about what they had done helped them cope. John talked about volunteering at the hospice centre where his father spent his last days. He specifically said that doing tasks that were simple but necessary, such as changing lightbulbs or fixing squeaky doors, helped him feel like he was doing something useful for people. Rose echoed this idea, saying that while her parents were alive but sick, she had always been there when she was needed and that was a comfort to her. She said that this meant she did not feel guilty about not having done enough to help, which she compares to what she hears from religious people who say that they are praying for someone, saying that “two hands helping accomplish more than a thousand clasped in prayer”.

Another participant Ben, talked about helping others to deal with their own grief as a means to help his own. He said that being able to help someone else was more important to him than feeling badly himself. This shows that for several of my participants being useful and feeling like they were doing something concrete was how they were able to continue on in spite of their loss.

The last way that a few of my participants were able to cope with the death of a loved one was acceptance of the inevitability of death. Liz stated that she does not get too concerned with death and while she is sad when someone dies she is not distraught because “it's an expected part of life”. The idea that because we are all going to die and there is nothing that can be done about it was spoken of often by my participants throughout the interviews. This is interesting in relation to terror management theory, because for them knowing that they are going to die is a reason not to be sad or worried about it, rather than a reason to be fearful of death.

My participants also talked about what does not help them cope with a loss. The one thing that my participants all said was not helpful was well meaning people saying some version of “[your loved one] is in a better place”. Words like “bullshit” and “crap” were used often by my participants when derisively talking about people trying to comfort someone in this way. While many of my participants acknowledged that this can be comforting to people who believe in an afterlife, as discussed previously, they all said that for them it was a “meaningless platitude” and a few people even went so far as to say that this idea harms people who do believe this idea. Many of my participants compared the practical help that they offer with people saying that they are praying for you. Several of my participants were frustrated or even angry when discussing this, saying that praying does not actually do anything, that it just helps the person who says it feel better. This was an area where distinguishing themselves from what religious people will do was important to my participants' ideas about how best to help a person who is grieving.

Afterlife-less Atheists:

All of them were certain, as much as they said you can be certain about something like this, that there is no after-life or reincarnation. They cite lack of evidence, and this was where the scientific worldview that they all seemed to share came out the most. Many of my respondents talked about how who we as individuals are, so our personality and memories, is just a product of our brain function. The idea then is that when our brain stops functioning, as it does when we die, then there is nothing left, and they rejected the idea of a soul that exists as separate from the body. Possibly this could be because almost all of my participants came from active atheist groups, so the results may have been different if I had recruited participants via snowball sampling as I had originally intended.

Interestingly, not only did my participants say that they do not believe in any kind of afterlife, but several of them stated that the idea of one is not comforting to them, but rather sounds miserable, regardless of ending up in heaven or hell. When I asked John if he had any final thoughts to add at the end of the interview, he told me about another conversation he had, saying...

"I consider us as corporeal beings, as material beings. We're not, and I used this phrase and she loved it, I said, "We're not ghosts in waiting" We are as we are... as you see us, and I think that's wonderfully liberating. Good news... There's no sense of having some sort of supernatural entity looking over your shoulder at everything you do, everything you say, everything you think, everything you are, you're free to live your life as you see fit. Without having those kinds of threats you know, threats of hell or promises of the blissful... God it sounds boring. Heaven you know, doesn't it sound just interminably boring?"

Several other participants talked about the idea of heaven being an unpleasant place when they think carefully about it. These were generally jokes about having to see a bunch of dead relatives that they never wanted to talk to or about how unpleasant it would be to just be praising god all day and that the only fun they could have would be to watch the damned souls being tortured in hell. What this shows is that these participants thought that the idea of an afterlife is so absurd that they could only talk about it in joking terms, as though they could not understand how people could find the idea appealing or plausible.

Most of the respondents claimed not to fear death, saying that because it is inevitable there is no point in worrying, although they don't look forward to it. This is interesting in light of Terror Management Theory which suggests that my participants lack of belief in an afterlife should make them fear death more. However, this was not the case for the majority of my participants, and once again they cited the inevitability of death as a reason not to be scared because nothing can be done to stop it anyway. John stated that he did not fear being dead, but that he was afraid of the process of dying itself. His father had died of cancer, and having seen what his father had gone through made John fearful of the potential pain that he could go through

at the end. Jack was the only person that I spoke to who said that knowing that there is no afterlife might be a bad thing, and while he did not say outright that he was afraid of death, he did say that he might not live as happy or fulfilling of a life knowing what he knows, and that the lie (that is, that there is an afterlife and death is not the end) might have been better in this case.

My participants looked to science for answers rather than looking to god. They often described people using religion to understand what has yet to be explained by science, but contrasted themselves by saying they feel no need to “god in the gaps” as Bill said. While my participants acknowledge that science does not answer all of their questions, there was a confidence in the idea that eventually it will be able to answer their questions. There was also the idea that science makes things better, again tied to the idea of action rather than prayer as the way to help people. Things are better now not because of god but because of science. Rose explains her feelings on the subject of god helping compared to science helping when talking about the changes in prenatal care compared to when her mother was having children:

“My mother, my parents had two - not one, but two - babies who were carried to term and then stillborn...in my mother's keepsakes, I found...letters that people wrote to her after she had a baby who was stillborn. Ah, and they had all that kind of shit in them about, you know, we don't understand god's will and then heaven needed another angel. That is bullshit. There is no way that you can justify to a young couple, to have a perfect baby that's dead. There's no god that can account for that. In my mind. And, it was, it was in the days before ultrasound and stuff like that... In one case the cord was wrapped around the baby's neck and - you know, that would have been - these days that would have been treated, like she - my mom would have had a C-section and the baby would have been fine... what I'm saying is there was nothing with the fetus. It was the labour, it was something else, right, and it would have been treatable. What, what have changed in fifty years? Science. The technology has changed. The, the kind of things that my parents suffered fifty years ago wouldn't happen now. So that's what makes the difference. Not god working in mysterious ways and we don't - because his ways are not our ways...”

Here Rose takes the idea that religious people try to find meaning in tragedy to help them cope and outright rejects it. She instead finds comfort in the idea of progress, that the problems that her parents had would not happen today because of advancements in science and technology.

Without looking for reasons as to why bad things happen, she instead looked for ways to stop more bad things from happening in the future.

When talking about their lack of belief in an afterlife, many of the participants spoke about it in scientific terms as well. They often spoke about lack of evidence or proof that there is an afterlife, saying that if heaven existed we would be able to see it in space by now, or claiming that weighing bodies after the person had died and the fact that there was no change in the weight of the person proved that there was no soul that had left the body. What I found was that while most of my participants spoke about science and the need for proof to believe in something like religion, when they talked about being an atheist it was not lack of proof that made them disbelieve, it was just that they could not believe it. To me this suggests that the use of science and its language of proof and evidence was used as a way of legitimizing the basic fact that these people could not believe in god, even though most of them were raised in a religion of some sort.

Many of my participants spoke about living in a “theistic society” and the feeling that they were surrounded by religious people, with a few claiming to be living in a sort of bible belt. The language of science gives their outsider beliefs a credence or validity that is necessary when dissenting from the major view points of the society one lives in. With the large acceptance of church doctrine, one needs back up from another institution with its own doctrine and values, and for many atheists science can fill that need. This is not to say that these people's interest in science is disingenuous or that they are not compelled by science (in fact, several of my participants stated that they volunteered to be part of this research because they believe in science and want to help further knowledge), but rather that it provides institutional backup for their beliefs.

Even the participants who were very religious at one point used science to re-interpret their past to bring a different understanding to their lives. A few of my participants reported having once had a religious or spiritual experience, which at the time they believed was real but have since reinterpreted it in a scientific way. Allan joked that he had experienced “a spiritual event where I felt quite overwhelmed by what to me seemed like something outside myself... for me it was the presence of God... and I fell to my knees and was quite overwhelmed by the whole thing. And yeah, it still didn't take”. Ryan, who was a former pagan, talked about formerly being possessed and that now he thinks that:

“I have to accept that I made the best judgment of what was going on at the time, with the information that was available to me at the time... but I think it's self-delusional, it was my own creation. I don't mean self-delusional in a bad way, it was a creation of my own psyche. It was something I did with the environment. And, and perhaps I expected to feel that, or to undergo that. So you know, there's logical, psychological and perhaps even physiological reasons for why these things happen. Not that don't, have an effect, like uh, like a possession by a deity, but that's not actual possession by a deity.”

This shows how participants re-evaluated their previous experiences to fit their current worldview. While they had previously believed in various forms of spirituality they no longer do, and so they needed to reinterpret previous life events to create a cohesive understanding of their lives.

As an acknowledgement that there are still events that people are unable to give a satisfactory explanation for, my participants spoke of a comfort with the idea that some things are just a matter of coincidence. For example, here is a story by Liz about a blue heron:

“After my daughter was born, stillborn, I used to see.... a blue heron. All the time. I would walk my dog, by the beach, and there would be this blue heron. And... it was something I'd started to look for. I would see it, often enough, that I sort of knew it would be there, and... that would sort of be a comforting thing... It was, you know, just something that reminded me that there were beautiful things, even in a time when it didn't feel like there were... And then... [my husband and I] agreed to go on vacation together. So, I got ready to go to Malta, and driving... down airport rd into Toronto, near Toronto airport, this blue heron swooped in the front of the car. And this would be in the city and no where near the water. So I thought "that's a weird... nice coincidence, reminds me, you know." I'm going to meet my husband near her due date, so it was gonna be a bit sad. But that's a nice sign. Don't believe in signs exactly, but that's a nice sign... And then we went to Malta, and... we were walking on the rooftops, and there's all these big open roofs and you can see out over the ocean and whatnot. And, I went to the edge of one, for no particular reason, and I looked down

into the next building. And there was a building down there with lots of little windows, and in one of the windows, just perfectly framed by this window, there was a blue heron. And I think... "that is another weird coincidence". And I said "can we go see, what that is?" And it was a museum, sort of natural history of Malta... And so there was this room that had this display of birds... And that happened to be the one that you could see from the window. And I've always thought about... And I'll still see them every now... And this is 10 years ago nearly, and and I... Every time I see them I think of her, and I think "oh. That, you know, that's nice." And I say that reminds me. It's easy... I don't want to say forget but it's easy to not think about that very often. And so, I've often thought about the idea that I think a lot of people who are religious or more spiritual than I would consider myself would say that those are signs from the afterlife and that she's ok and whatnot. But I've always taken it more as a sign of the power of coincidence and the idea that we find what we want to find. I wanted to look for something that was comforting, I chose something that I knew I would see on a regular basis, because I'd seen it before. It wasn't the first time when I started looking for it. And it was something that I already appreciated, I already liked... And I think when you look for comfort or you look for a sign you find it. It... happened to be that there was something more surprising that... I saw it in places that I wouldn't have expected to, but, I never... put it down to... some sort of sign from beyond. It's just a lucky coincidence that brought comfort in some way. And I think... that's kind of a shame. But I think that what I take from it is that, if you look for comfort out there, you will find it somewhere."

What Liz does is take a series of events, some of which are unusual or surprising, and she consciously creates meaning for them. She thinks through the various sightings of the blue heron, and chalks it up to the power of coincidence, and an unconscious search for something that would comfort her in a trying time. She also compares her interpretation to how someone who is religious or spiritual might understand what happened, and acknowledges how that way of thinking can help people, even if she does not believe it herself.

Conclusion: Death is just the beginning

I began with the question that if religion is usually the means by which people deal with death, then what do people without that institutional support do when someone dies? This was how I got to my research question: how do atheists cope with death? The increased secularization of funerals and memorials is seen to be a positive change according to the people I spoke to, who favour personalized, unstructured and celebratory services where there is room for story telling and sharing of memories. There needs to be an allowance for people to grieve in their own ways, but remembering and talking about the person that they lost were some themes that emerged in coping strategies. None of my participants believed in an afterlife, and they often used scientific

language to explain why they thought an afterlife was impossible and there could be no such thing as a soul.

This study begins to offer a glimpse into the views of atheists around death, though it has some limitations. Because all of my participants responded to my post on atheist websites, they are all more active in their atheism, and so I was not able to talk to more moderate atheists. This is especially interesting because the statistics suggest that there should be atheists who do not rule out the possibility of an afterlife like the ones I spoke to do (Bibby, 2011), and this is a perspective that is missing from my research. It would also be interesting to speak to more people who were raised in an atheist household and never were religious, which only a small number of my participants were, and compare their responses to people who were raised in a religion. Other research could further explore atheists' use of science as means of supporting their beliefs, which was something that I did not expect going into this research.

I have also learned through my discussions with my participants that people want to talk about death but often do not feel that they have an way of broaching the subject. This is evident in the rising popularity of death cafes, which were first described to me by one of my participants, Liz. Death cafes are informal groups where people who may not know each other will meet for tea and cake and talk about death. This was started to break the silence around the taboo of death “to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives” (death cafes, n.d.). My research then also offers both my participants and my readers a space to think and talk about death.

Finally, as this is a subject that to my knowledge has not been studied by anthropologists, this study offers a starting point for further exploration of a growing portion of the Canadian religious landscape.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: recruitment email to atheist groups

Hello, my name is Miriam Karrel and I am doing a research project for my honours degree in anthropology at Dalhousie this year. I have chosen to research how atheists or non-believers cope with death. To conduct my research, I would like to interview people who identify as atheists, to find out more about their practical ways of dealing with death and their beliefs about and experiences of death. If it is possible, I would really like to reach out to members of your group to see if they would like to participate in my research. If you think this is something that may be of interest to them, please pass along the passage in the post script of this email. If you have a mailing list that receives regular emails or a Facebook page that you can post this on that would be great. If anyone has any questions, I can be reached by email at mr394666@dal.ca.

Thank you for your time,

Miriam Karrel

P.S. Here is the paragraph to post:

Are you an atheist, and would you like to discuss death? My name is Miriam Karrel, and I am currently researching how atheists or non-believers cope with death as part of my honours degree in anthropology at Dalhousie. I would like to interview self-identified atheists or non-believers to find out more about their practical ways of dealing with death, their thoughts about death and experiences of death. This would involve a one-to-one interview of about an hour, conducted in a location of your choice. If this is something you are interested in, please contact me at mr394666@dal for more information.

Appendix B: Email to individuals who have already expressed interest in participating

Hi (person's name),

I hope all is well. A while ago, we were talking about my honour's project on how atheists cope with death, and you said that you would like to be interviewed. Well, the time has finally come for me to start interviewing people, and I was wondering if this is still something you are interested in? Keep in mind that this is completely voluntary, so just because you said you wanted to talk about this before in no way means that you have to now if you have changed your mind. If that is the case, just let me know. If you are still interested in participating, please let me know what days and times work for you, and we can set up a meeting.

Best,

Miriam Karrel

Appendix C: Interview questions

1. What does atheism mean to you?
2. Have you always been atheist?
- 2a. (if not) How long have you been atheist, and what made you decide that this is what you are?
3. Was there anything in particular that made you want to participate in this study?
4. Have you been to any funerals or memorial services?

Probing Questions:

- Can you tell me about the service that had the greatest impact on you?
- What about it was so memorable/meaningful/emotional (depending on the answer)?
- Was/were the funeral(s)/memorial(s) religious, secular, or have you been to both?
- What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of both secular and religious services?

5. Have you lost someone who was close to you at some point?

Probing questions:

- What helped you cope with your loss?
- What role did your friends and family play during this time?
- Was there any particular person (or persons) who was especially helpful to you?

What did they do or say that was so helpful?

6. What do you think is the purpose of a funeral or memorial service?
- 6a. Do they succeed in their task?
7. What have you thought about your own funeral or memorial, if you plan to have one?
8. Have you thought about your own death?
9. What are your thoughts on the possibility of an afterlife or reincarnation?

10. Have you ever had what you might call a spiritual experience?

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about funerals, memorials, death itself, or anything else we have discussed?

12. Demographic questions (age, gender, employment status, education level, social roles)

APPENDIX D- Consent form – see overleaf

CONSENT FORM

The Atheist Way of Death

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Miriam Karrel, an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology, as part of my honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to understand how atheists or non-believers cope with death. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in the research you will be asked to participate in an interview about your experiences with and ideas about death. The interview should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet and comfortable location that is convenient to both of us. The interview will be audio-recorded and I will take a few notes. Any quotes used in the thesis or presentation of the work will not have your name, but rather a pseudonym, and any identifiable details will be removed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until March 1. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only the honours class supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will keep the anonymized information so that I can learn from it as I continue my studies.

The risks associated with this study are minimal, but include sadness at memories of lost friends or family, as well as fear of thinking about your own death. If our discussion becomes too emotional or uncomfortable for you, we can take a break or stop the interview altogether. I also have information available for counselling services if you feel that you need to talk to someone about your experiences.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on atheists' experiences of and thoughts about death. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is mr394666@dal.ca. You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University on (902) 494-6747, or email martha.radice@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board

Ethics Review for Continuing Research Involving Human Participants

Annual / Final Report of the Investigator

Please complete the following information and return to:

Research Ethics c/o Dalhousie Research Services
Dalhousie University
6299 South Street, Suite 231
Halifax, NS , B3H 4H6
ethics@dal.ca

Principal Investigator (name):	Miriam Karrel
Department:	Sociology and Social Anthropology
REB file #:	2014-3440
Project title:	The Atheist Way of Death
Effective date of original ethics approval:	December 08, 2014

Please answer Question 1, 2 or 3 below (as applicable) and Question 4:

1. STUDY HAS NOT COMMENCED

Anticipated Start Date: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Study Cancelled: [Click here to enter text.](#)

If cancelled, why? [Click here to enter text.](#)

2. STUDY HAS COMMENCED AND REMAINS ACTIVE

Number of participants recruited to date: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Anticipated or expected end date of the study: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Please attach a copy of the most recent version of the consent form or letter of information, and any recruitment materials / advertisements used for this study (**required to complete the report**) (if applicable).

3. STUDY COMPLETED

If the project has been completed (analysis of data is complete), please submit a brief report (maximum 4 pages) stating the conclusions reached during the duration of this project (abstract or publication will be acceptable).

Abstract:

Death is not only experienced on a personal and psychological level, but it is also experienced as a rift in social life. Robert Hertz (1960) found that funerals, burials, and mourning made death the “object of a collective representation” (pg. 28). When looking at these aspects of death, anthropologists have studied them through the lenses of specific religions, as it is through religion that people have found social support, spiritual guidance, and answers to questions about an afterlife. However, there is a growing number of people that are not religiously affiliated, including people who identify as atheists, and these people's death related beliefs and practices have not been studied anthropologically. In this study I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with self-identified atheists to explore how atheists cope with death. I focused on three aspects related to death: funerals, coping with loss, and afterlife beliefs. I found that my participants favoured personalized, unstructured, and celebratory funerals. Talking about the deceased person and sharing happy memories were not only considered to be important aspects of the services, but also helpful in coping with the loss more generally. As well, none of my participants believed in an afterlife, and many used science as a means to provide institutional backup to their lack of belief in gods, deities, or souls. This provides a starting point to begin understanding atheist relationships to death.

When did the study end? March 30, 2015

How many participants participated? 17

4. **PROJECT HISTORY**

i. Have you experienced any problems in carrying out this project?

Yes

No

If yes, please elaborate (attach additional pages as necessary).

ii. Have participants experienced any harm as a result of their participation in the study?

Yes No

If yes, please elaborate (attach additional pages as necessary).

iii. Has any study participant expressed complaints, or experienced any difficulties in relation to their participation in the study?

Yes No

If yes, please elaborate (attach additional pages as necessary).

iv. Since the original approval, have there been any new reports in the literature that would suggest a change in the nature or likelihood of risks or benefits resulting from participation in this study?

Yes No

If yes, please elaborate (attach additional pages as necessary).

I certify that the above is true and accurately portrays the status of my project with respect to ethical review.

Signature (Principal Investigator)

Miriam Karrel
Print Name

April 20, 2015
Date

For University Research Ethics Office Use Only	
[] Consent Form verified (no changes) [] Consent Form not applicable	
[] Approved for further 12 months	
[] Clarification required (see attached). Approval pending.	
Signature:	Date: