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Dying without God — The Absence of Belief at Life's End

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Journalist Franz-Olivier Giesbert spent untold hours with the late French President Francois Mitterand, and many of these hours were devoted to discussions about death. After serving two seven-year terms as the French President, Mitterand revealed that he had been fighting prostate cancer throughout his years in the Elysee Palace.



Born into a Roman Catholic family, Mitterand became an ardent agnostic. In *Dying without God: Francois Mitterand's Meditations on Living and Dying*, Giesbert sheds considerable light on Mitterand's understanding of what it meant to die without any belief in God.

Giesbert describes Mitterand as “a Nietzschean until his dying day.” He described himself as a mystic with the mind of a rationalist. He did not deny that a form of transcendence might exist, but he described the idea that his spirit might survive his death as “embarrassing.” He was fond of paraphrasing Celine: “Eternity must be very long, especially toward the end.”

Mitterand lived by a moral code that matched his worldview. Giesbert described Mitterand's hands as made to strangle men and to seduce women. At his funeral, his mistress and their daughter sat close to Mitterand's wife and their children. As a Nietzschean, he was committed above all to the acquisition and retention of power.

In the end, he died, as he had lived, without God.

Mitterand's secular view of life and death represented an entire generation of European intellectuals and political figures. Deeply committed to atheism, agnosticism, existentialism, or Marxism, these intellectuals simply left no place for God in their worldview. They died without fear of God and without faith in God.

Death forces the most significant questions of life. To consider death — particularly one's own death — is to face the question of God, of the meaning of life, the question of life after death.

Even as America has grown increasingly secular over the last seven decades, death has been accompanied and marked, in the main, by some form of religious ritual or ceremony. If at no other stage of life, death prompts some reference to God. That may be changing.

The [American Religious Identification Survey \[ARIS\]](#), just updated, reveals that over a quarter of all Americans expect no religious ceremony to mark their death. According to [the report](#), 27% of Americans expect a secular funeral.

The report describes this phenomenon as “probably the most revealing of social trends today.” In the words of the researchers:

Funerals and interments are important if one has personal concerns about salvation and the immortality of the soul.

It appears that over one-fourth of contemporary Americans are unconcerned with such religious ideas.

The researchers are surely right to see this trend as related to a decline in “personal concerns about salvation.” If anyone needed proof that many Americans now operate out of a secular worldview, this single data point should suffice. There can be little doubt that when 27% of Americans “do not expect a religious funeral at their death,” this does indicate an absence of religious concern at the point of death. Millions of Americans expect to die without God.

Of course, the power of cultural Christianity explains why so many others expect a Christian funeral even as they show no evidence of Christian commitment. The disappearance of this expectation marks the erosion of cultural Christianity.

Authentic Christianity sets the issues in bold relief. The Good Friday service in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* famously includes this prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living; pardon and rest to the dead; to your holy Church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“Now and in the hour of our death.” To be human is to contemplate death. To think of death without thinking of God is to inhabit an almost purely secular world of meaning. The fact that 27% of Americans expect a secular funeral should tell us that millions of Americans are distanced from Christianity by a huge gap of understanding and meaning.

To die without belief in God is to die without fear of judgment and without hope of resurrection. To die without God is to die utterly alone. To die without even the expectation of a religious funeral of any form is to die in the stark admission of unbelief.

Perhaps this new phenomenon will remind the believing church of just what is at stake in this matter. When cultural Christianity recedes, the mission field comes into a much clearer and more honest focus.

