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Finding Consolation on Churchyards in Lutheran Denmark

HET VINDEN VAN TROOST OP LUTHERSE KERKHOVEN IN DENEMARKEN

Lutherse kerkhoven in Denemarken maken een sterk gesecculariseerde indruk door de opkomst van crematie en de modernisering die dit voortbracht. In dit artikel betoog ik echter dat deze kerkhoven in feite protestantse religieuze normen materialiseren, met inbegrip van voorgeschreven wijzen om troost te vinden in het aangezicht van de dood. Vervolgens laat ik zien dat deze normen in de daadwerkelijke praktijk door de rouwenden niet altijd als bevredigend begrepen en ervaren worden, zelfs niet door diegenen die behoren tot de Lutherse Kerk. Ik richt de aandacht op ondergrondse praktijken van geleefde religie op kerkhoven, die de officiële normen aanvechten. De Lutherse Kerk heeft een bijna-monopolie op begraafplaatsen in Denemarken en dient derhalve voor alle burgers een (urnen)graf te verschaffen, ongeacht de religieuze achtergrond. De alternatieve manieren waarop mensen troost trachten te vinden zijn van religieuze aard, hoewel zij tegen de esthetiek van de officiële religie indruisen. Hiermee zou rekening gehouden moeten worden in de toekomstige planning van kerkhoven om recht te doen aan de religiositeit van de betrokkenen.

To many visitors, Danish churchyards appear highly secularized, but in this article I will argue that they in fact materialize religious Protestant norms, especially norms about how to find consolation in the face of death.¹ Due to the character of Protestant material culture, however, we tend to overlook the Protestant norms of consolation that these graveyards embody. The appearance of the churchyards thus does not result from a lack of religion, but rather from a particular form of religion with a particular understanding of material culture and consolation. In this article, I will describe how this understanding came about at the time of the Reformation and how it was implemented in different ways in churchyards in Lutheran Denmark. I will further show that

¹ I use the words ‘churchyard’ and ‘graveyard’ interchangeably for the Danish word *kirkegård*. I avoid using the word ‘cemetery’ because no equivalent word exists in the Danish language (for a further explanation of this see below, note 2). The terms ‘burial grounds’ and ‘burial place’ are used as broader terms.

the advent of cremation and the changes in the structural design of Danish churchyards this brought about – though normally seen as features of secularization – strengthened Protestant norms. I thus argue that instead of a withdrawal of official religion, we find that the Lutheran Church has actually increased its grip on the graveyard.

Conflicts concerning the appearance of churchyards are regularly understood within a framework of aesthetics but should instead be considered as religiously based. Because the Protestant norms that the graveyards embody are overlooked, it is not fully recognized how they repress non-prescribed forms of religion and with them connected understandings of consolation. This repression can give rise to conflicts about the material culture. The Evangelical Lutheran Church has a near-monopoly on burial grounds in Denmark and therefore almost all Danes end up on a Lutheran churchyard,² whether they are members of the church or not. It is to be expected that the regulation of material culture and its implicit Protestant norms can make it difficult to find consolation for the 21 per cent of the population that are non-members. However, the same is also the case for many members of the Lutheran Church, as I will show in the last part of this article. As I will describe below, they find consolation in ways that testify to a discrepancy between what official religion prescribes and how they actually live their religion. This state of affairs raises also an important, practical question with regard to the future planning of churchyards: for whom will they be landscapes of consolation? I will address this question towards the end of the article, but first we need to understand how the material side of Protestant religion is manifest on Danish graveyards.

The seemingly secularized look of Danish churchyards

Religious practices at burial grounds in contemporary Europe have been under-researched. This is surprising since death is seen as fundamental to religion in several classical studies on religion and burial grounds therefore seem to be an obvious place to look for religion.³ One of the reasons for this

² The Lutheran Church possesses a little over 2100 churchyards. The few burial grounds that are not owned by the Lutheran Church belong to other religious groups (Christian, Jewish and Islamic). This explains why there is no close equivalent for the word ‘cemetery’ in the Danish language. In English the word ‘cemetery’ tends to refer to burial grounds owned by the municipality or private business. Such cemeteries do not exist in Denmark. In eleven of the biggest cities the municipalities (*kommune*), however, run the church-owned churchyards and are therefore termed *kommunale kirkegårde*. On the 60 churchyards of this type one regularly finds a more liberal attitude towards an ‘aberrant’ material culture.

³ See e.g. P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Garden City NY 1967.

neglect is probably the common expectation that a secularization of all burial grounds has taken place in Europe, with modernization.⁴ There have, however, been different routes to modernization, and the modernization of burial grounds in the last two centuries did not always imply institutional secularization. Denmark is a case in point. As I shall describe in more detail later, the Lutheran Church played an active role in the modernization of the outlay of graveyards and even embraced cremation. What is more, the Church not only controls the great majority of burial places but also most crematoria. Tony Walter has thus differentiated between a municipal, a commercial and a religious funeral model and places the Nordic countries, including Denmark, in the last category. But although not formally secularized on the institutional level, Walter nevertheless considers the Nordic churchyards to be *de facto* secularized – or ‘culturally secularized’ as he terms it – because of the lack of religious inscriptions and iconography on the gravestones.⁵

Actually, one can find stones with religious inscriptions on the more traditional sections of the churchyards that typically surround a church. These sections are characterized by rows of family grave plots framed by grids of pebble paths. Each grave plot is surrounded by low hedges and typically offers room for two to three east-west positioned coffins next to each other. Broadly speaking, however, the churchyards in Denmark have indeed been subject to a great deal of change in the twentieth century. The change in terms of material culture, admittedly, seems to suggest a process of secularization. Cremation did become very popular, and turned out to be a significant development affecting the structural design of the graveyards. One of the most prominent changes resulting from the increase of cremations has been that almost all Danish churchyards have been extended with new lawn sections with urn graves on which only small, flat gravestones of a uniform size are allowed.⁶

⁴ Another reason for the lack of interest in burial grounds as sites for religion could very well be that Protestant Churches since the time of the Reformation have tried to prevent any religious – meaning Catholic – practices to take place there, as I shall return to. This might indirectly have led religious scholars to the erroneous understanding that no religious practices were to be found at burial grounds.

⁵ Tony Walter, ‘Three Ways to Arrange a Funeral: Mortuary Variation in the Modern West’, *Mortality* 10/3 (2005), 173–192.

⁶ T.F. Sørensen, ‘A Saturated Void: Anticipating and Preparing Presence in Contemporary Danish Cemetery Culture’, in M. Bille, F. Hastrup, T. F. Sørensen (red.), *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*, New York 2010, 115–130.



Gauerslund Churchyard: A typical Danish churchyard with traditional grave plots surrounding the church and a new lawn section for urns.

Photo: Torben Bank Sørensen (detail)

The stones, in line with what Walter describes, have no religious inscriptions or symbols but only names and dates of birth and death. Furthermore, the fact that coffins have been replaced by urns implies an annihilation of the religious symbolism of the inhumed body facing east, awaiting the second coming of Christ.⁷

These aspects of ‘secularization’, however, cannot be taken at face value, due to the way Protestantism relates to material culture. In order to fully understand this we first have to look at how a new Protestant view on material culture emerged at the time of the Reformation, in opposition to the common practices of Catholics, which had become suspect.

The reformation of material culture

Protestantism distanced itself from the outset from the material side of religion and contested Roman Catholic material culture. Violent iconoclasm, and intense theological debates about the sacrament of the Holy Communion, all centred on the view that the only thing that could make God present was the word of God. This was the only contact point between humans and God,

⁷ P. Jupp, ‘Resurrection of the body’, in D.J. Davies, L.H. Mates (red.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, Aldershot 2005.

and the only way for humans to reach this point was through spiritual belief; no aspect of the material world could be used as intermediary. Yet this stance is hard to sustain, because in actual practice material expressions of religiosity are indispensable. As Arweck and Keenan point out, ‘The idea of religion is largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions’.⁸ An absent God must somehow be made present and accessible in this world, and material culture plays a vital role in this connection.

In other words, we are dealing with Protestant material religion after all. In addition, the conflicts about material culture, dating back to the Reformation, demonstrate that the Protestants, despite their professed split between matter and spirit, in fact attributed considerable importance to material stuff: how could Roman Catholic material culture be dangerous and misleading if it did not mean anything? To put it slightly differently, we need to make a distinction between Protestant *self-representations* that downplay the role of materiality on the one hand, and actual religious *practices* that cannot escape some kind of material expression on the other. Even the most orthodox Protestants attribute considerable importance to material stuff. A case in point is the ways in which orthodox Protestants handle their Bible.

The downplaying of the role of material religion – or ‘Protestantism’s dematerializing inclination’ as Birgit Meyer calls it – tends to render the material side of Protestantism almost invisible, even though it is still present, as I have pointed out above.⁹ Scholars of religion have privileged belief over ritual, and inward conviction over ‘mere’ outward action, by taking Protestant understandings for granted. Thus, we have been erroneously led to believe that Protestant ‘dematerialization’ of religion would be a sign of secularization. The related view, that the appearance of Danish churchyards would be solely a matter of aesthetics, having nothing to do with religion, is equally mistaken.

The displacement of consolation

Before the Reformation, the grave was a source of consolation. On this side of the grave, the living could interfere in what happened on the other side of the grave, and on the other side, the dead (saints) could interfere in what happened on this side. According to Roman Catholic theology the dead were

⁸ E. Arweck, W. Keenan, ‘Introduction: Material Varieties of Religious Expression’, in E. Arweck, W. Keenan (red.), *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*, Aldershot 2006, 2–3.

⁹ B. Meyer, D. Houtman ‘Introduction: Material Religion – How Things Matter’, in B. Meyer, D. Houtman (red.), *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, New York 2013, 15.

still present in the sense that the bonds between the dead and the living continued. The living could acquire indulgences, light candles, pray and have masses said for the souls of the dead to shorten their time in purgatory. Some venerated dead, the saints, could also interfere in the world of the living and help them out. Material objects, especially relics, played an important role in creating these bonds and in giving the absent dead a presence. Together with the shrines of saints they formed important contact points between the living and the dead.

With the Reformation, the world became much smaller, because the Protestant world only consisted of the living. The reformers not only contested the way in which the Roman Catholic Church made the absent God present in this world by means of mediators and material objects as was the case, for instance, in the conflict about the Holy Communion and the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. The presence of the dead was also an important issue in this religious conflict. As a matter of fact, discussions about the teachings concerning the purgatory triggered the conflict between Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Church, leading to his excommunication in 1521. As a consequence of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, it was God alone who dealt with the souls of the departed and no one else could intercede. To be dead meant to be sleeping in the hands of God until Judgment Day, no living person could reach out to the dead and vice versa.¹⁰

So while death in the Catholic context was a process in which the fate of the souls of the dead could be influenced by the Church and the bereaved, the living and the dead became fully separated in the Protestant context. In other words, death was a boundary that could not be crossed.¹¹ The relationship between the living and the dead henceforth remained confined to the memory of past lives and the eschatological hope of salvation.¹² Consolation had to be found in the belief in the word of God and His mercy. This meant that there was no longer any positive theological interest in the place of the dead in itself. Instead, the prime theological interest concerning graveyards was to keep them free from any ‘Catholic’ bonds between the living and the dead.

¹⁰ See also the contribution by Justin Kroesen in this issue.

¹¹ C.M. Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany*, London 2000; B. Gordon, P. Marshall, *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2000.

¹² On understandings of eschatological hope see also the contribution by Brenda Mathijssen in this volume.

Regulating consolation in Lutheran Denmark

While the bonds between the living and the dead had been theologically severed at the time of the Reformation, it subsequently had to be ascertained that they were broken in practice as well. No communication between the living and the dead was to take place anymore. The graves were only to be places of memory and eschatological hope – consolation had to be found in the right way.

One way to ascertain this, found within the ranks of more radical reformers inspired by Calvin and Zwingli, was simply to destroy the material culture that could manifest continued bonds between the living and the dead. Thus gravestones and bone-houses were smashed, graves were levelled, and candles placed on the graves were also removed.¹³ Reciprocity between the living and the dead was out of bounds. Marcel Mauss' essay on the gift illuminates the underlying law of reciprocity. When someone gives a gift, the receiver is obliged to donate something in return – just as a question expects an answer in reply.¹⁴ In the same way, placing things on graves can be seen as gift-giving to the dead. And since they are the postulated recipients, agency is attributed to the dead, based on the understanding that they might return the favour. The dead are somehow conceived of as partners in this exchange and dialogue with the bereaved donors. The grave with the deceased's remains happens to be a site for communication with the dead *par excellence*; the placing of things on the grave and/or talking to the dead makes it possible for the living to maintain continued bonds with the dead. These practices accord a presence to the absent dead (All Souls' Day being a prime example of this in the liturgical calendar). This sort of communication would of course be in conflict with Protestant beliefs, and it was in order to prevent this, that some radical reformers found the solution described above, in simply making the graves and/or the things placed on them disappear.

Luther's stance was more complex. He did not consider things in themselves a problem; they were soteriologically indifferent (*adiaphora*). For him the problem was instead the way in which people *related* to things, this was what had to be changed. This also applied to churchyards.¹⁵ Following Luther's theology, warnings about *how* to visit the grave properly were issued early on in Denmark. Peder Palladius, the first bishop on Zeeland after the

¹³ R. Sörries, *Ruhe sanft: Kulturgeschichte des Friedhofs*, Kevelaer 2011, 118.

¹⁴ M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London 1960 [orig. 1925].

¹⁵ Sörries, *Ruhe sanft*, 101; M. Illi, *Wohin die Toten gingen: Begräbnis und Kirchhof in der vorindustriellen Stadt*, Zürich 1992, 111.

Danish Reformation in 1536, describes how he inspected his diocese in the 1540s and warned people that they were not to visit the graves in order to pray for the dead, but only to remember that they themselves would die one day and that they would be judged too.¹⁶ The Lutheran way of ascertaining that communication between the living and the dead would not take place was thus less opposed to material culture than the stance of reformed Protestants. If material things were used to manifest memories or eschatological hope, they were acceptable.

More radical views on the material culture of the churchyard, however, became present in Denmark at a later stage. Having visited Moravians in the Dutch town of Zeist, the Danish king Christian VII allowed the Moravians in 1772 to build their own town in Denmark. It was to be named Christiansfeld and right from the start a churchyard, 'the God's Acre', was established.¹⁷ It became a true copy of the one of the mother colony in Herrnhut, in Saxony, that in turn looked very much the same as typical churchyards of reformed Protestants in Germany.¹⁸ All graves on the God's acre in Christiansfeld are placed in regular rows with a fixed distance to each other, and the graves are marked with identical flat stones, engraved with only a number, name, place and dates of birth and death, aiming to symbolize the equality of all humans in the eyes of God. And, very importantly: there was to be no other decoration. Today, restrictions have been eased a bit, and it is now allowed to plant flowers, but only one-season flowers that will disappear quickly.¹⁹ Clearly, clear-cut restrictions were placed on the material culture of this churchyard, to prevent it from materializing continuing bonds between the living and the dead – again, consolation was instead to be found in the word of God.

As I will show, it was the churchyard in Christiansfeld, with its specific Protestant norms of consolation, that was to become one of the main inspirations for the design of churchyards in Denmark in the twentieth century. But because the development of churchyards in this period was highly influenced by the advent of cremation, we will first have closer a look at this development and see how Protestant material religion played a role here and how the Lutheran Church joined forces with what was regarded as progress and modernization.

¹⁶ P. Palladius, *En visitatsbog: Udgivet på nudansk med indledning og noter af Martin Schwarz Lausten*, København 2003, 31–32.

¹⁷ J. Bøytler, J.T. Jessen, *Christiansfeld: Livet og husene*, Søborg 2005, 24–27, 177–189.

¹⁸ Sörries, *Ruhe sanft*, 119, 124–126.

¹⁹ J. Bøytler, 'Gudsageren Christiansfeld', *Kirkegårdskultur* (2001), 29–34.

Cremation and the Protestant heritage

Modern cremation became technically possible as late as the second half of the 1870s, but already in 1881 the first cremation society was founded in Denmark. By 1886, it had built the first Danish crematorium in Copenhagen and the first cremation was conducted. This placed Denmark among the very first countries to make use of this new technology of bodily disposal.²⁰ The authorities, however, reacted strongly against it: a police ban was issued against the use of the crematorium. It was upheld by two court decisions until 1892, when cremation was finally legalized by the government.²¹ There were also strong reactions against cremation from the public, especially some currents within the church fiercely opposed it. But the church was divided and never formed a united opposition.²² It turned out to be difficult to find substantial theological arguments against cremation from a Lutheran point of view, and over time the part of the church that had no problem with cremation got the upper hand.

In the same year when the first cremation took place in Denmark, cremation was banned by the Roman Catholic Church. The ban was ended in 1963, as part of larger reforms at the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). What made cremation more easily acceptable for (many) Protestants than for Roman Catholics was the previously described Reformation split between matter and spirit. This split had become even more accentuated within Protestantism with the rise of natural science and the materialist critique of religion; it made Protestant theology retreat even more from the material world to the inner world of the spirit.²³ The challenges to the belief in a bodily resurrection offered by the natural sciences made it increasingly attractive and common for Protestants to ‘spiritualize’ their afterlife beliefs in the nineteenth century. Belief in the immortality of the soul came to have a much more prominent role, at the expense of the belief in a bodily resurrection.²⁴ With this, the dead body lost its religious importance more and more and the symbolic placing of the body facing east, awaiting the second coming of Christ became empty. The dead body became more like a disposable thing

²⁰ Until then modern cremation had only taken place in crematoria in Italy (since 1876), Germany (since 1878) and the United Kingdom (since 1885). Cf. ‘Cremation Statistics’, in Davies, Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, 431–456.

²¹ C. Larsen, ‘Købehavns første ligbrænding’, *Siden Saxo* 13/3 (1996), 31–36.

²² A.S. Møller, ‘Brænde eller begrades?’, *Fortid og nutid* 2 (2007), 83–102, 158.

²³ B. Meyer, D. Houtman, ‘Introduction’, 6.

²⁴ P. Badham, ‘Soul’, in Davies, Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation*.

and as such it could be cremated.²⁵ Whether burial or cremation was chosen was considered religiously indifferent, since for Lutherans salvation did not depend on outer forms.²⁶

The transformation of the dead into ashes made it possible to place the remains of the dead in new ways without causing hygienic problems. The ashes could be placed above the earth as well as be interred; the ashes did not have to be placed on a churchyard but could just as well be placed somewhere else; and finally cremation also made it possible to divide or spread the ashes. In the earliest history of cremation in Denmark, however, ashes were disposed of in one way: ashes were put into urns, and the urns in columbaria.²⁷ This was also mainly the case in e.g. England and Germany – an interesting feature of the early development of modern cremation:²⁸ cremationists saw themselves as modernizers who put reason above tradition. In this vein typical arguments in favour of cremation were that it was hygienic and efficient, in the sense that cremation freed space that the living could make better use of. However, at the same time the cremationists clearly re-invented the old Roman tradition of the columbarium to legitimize the new disposal technique. The same re-invention of old Roman tradition is also visible in the use of a classical style in many of the early crematoria.²⁹

However, the crematoria built in Denmark from 1926 onwards had a new appearance and came to look like small chapels. And in fact they were. While the early crematoria had initially been built by the cremation society and later on by local municipalities, the church now began to get involved. The new involvement of the church resulted in a genuine building boom. While only three crematoria had been built between 1886 and 1925, sixteen so-called chapel-crematoria were built in the next fifteen years.³⁰ This was a very

²⁵ A.K. Markussen, 'Over the Limit: Religious Culture as a Hidden Factor in Negative Decisions on Organ Donation in the Protestant Nordic Countries', in Michael Hviid Jacobsen (red.), *Deconstructing Death: Changing Cultures of Death, Dying, Bereavement and Care in the Nordic Countries*, Odense 2013, 138–140.

²⁶ N.J. Rald, 'Kirken og Ligbrændingen', *Dansk Ligbrændingsforenings Aarsskrift* (1936).

²⁷ A. Andersen, 'Forandring i jordfæstelsesskikke statistisk belyst', *Vore kirkegårde* 24/3 (1972), 17–28.

²⁸ H. Grainger, 'Columbaria', in Davies, Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation*; N. Fischer, 'Aschengrabmäbler und Ashenanlagen der modernen Feuerbestattung im späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert', in R. Sörries (red.), *Grabkultur in Deutschland*, Berlin 2009, 151–161.

²⁹ J. F. Jensen, *Vest for paradís: Begravelsespladsernes natur*, Viborg 2002, 173–179; B. Kragh, *Til jord skal du blive: Dødens og begravelsens kulturhistorie i Danmark 1780–1990* (Skrifter Museumsrådet for Sønderjyllands Amt 9), Aaberaa 2003, 224.

³⁰ A. Markussen, 'Da Sønderjylland fik et krematorium: kremeringens fremvækst i samfil med kirke, kristendom og velværdstat', *Sønderjysk Månedsskrift* 1 (2011), 3–12.

visible sign that the Lutheran Church in many places by now not only accepted cremation, but embraced it. Full equality of burials and cremations, however, was only reached as late as 1975. Previously, individual priests could refuse to take part in a funeral service that would be followed by cremation if it would be against their conscience.³¹

In the process that led to the rapid increase in the building of crematoria, the cremationists also changed signals. An anti-clerical wing did exist within the cremation society that united members of both bourgeois and social democratic background. This wing had strong connections with the Labour movement and had its origins in the fight that led to the legalization of civil funerals back in 1907.³² But there were other goals for them to consider, than just fighting the church. A certain number of cremations was needed to keep the crematoria in operation, since otherwise cremations would remain very costly, and this clearly went against the Social Democratic ambition of making cremation available to all citizens. The cremation society, therefore, *had* to recruit more members, and with a near-monopoly of the Lutheran church, this was only possible by recruiting church members.³³

In consequence, the cremation society ended up being careful not to take an atheist-materialist stance that could offend Christians and underlined instead that cremation was religiously neutral.³⁴ It was merely an outer form and it did not in any way exclude or affect a religious understanding of death. With overlapping views on materiality as *adiaphora*, church and cremation society could join forces. In Denmark it was henceforth possible to feel both modern-*cum*-rational and Christian, while these stances became opposites in many other countries. Today the Lutheran Church thus owns two thirds of Danish crematoria, whereas crematoria are seen as features of secularization elsewhere. The Danish development therewith exemplifies that modernization did not always exclude the church.

The incorporation of the new cremation technology into the Christian tradition was visible in the disposal of ashes, even earlier than in the style of the crematoria. Whereas ashes were placed in columbaria in the early history of cremation, in 1910 it became legal to inter ashes in churchyards, and over time various ways of disposal were developed that became much more

³¹ Kragh, *Til jord skal du blive*, 224.

³² Kragh, *Til jord skal du blive*, 222–223.

³³ Rald, 'Kirken og Ligbrændingen'.

³⁴ K. Secher, *Ligbrænding i Danmark* (Dansk Ligbrændingsforening), København 1956, 76.

popular than the columbarium.³⁵ During the twentieth century, these new forms changed the material culture and appearance of Danish churchyards dramatically, because cremation in Denmark not only became legal and possible but, as mentioned above, also very popular. Denmark was the first Western European country after the United Kingdom to reach a cremation rate of 50 per cent in 1976,³⁶ and according to the latest cremation statistics from 2012, Denmark today has a staggering cremation rate of 78 per cent.³⁷ Rather than seeing this growth in the number of cremations as being caused by secularization and religious norms becoming less influential, it must be understood as the opposite: as a result of the Protestant split between matter and spirit resting on a denial of the significance of the material world to get into contact with God. Seen from that angle it comes as no surprise that modernization and cremation were embraced in Denmark, a society so much imbued with Protestantism.

The new old deathscape and the strengthened church

One of the most important changes that followed in the wake of the rapid growth of cremation, was that most Danish churchyards have now been extended with lawn-sections with urn-graves, as described in the beginning of this article. And it is especially on these lawn-sections that the influence from the Moravian churchyard in Christiansfeld is most visible. The identical flat gravestones placed in rows, with the same distance to each other and engraved with only name and dates mirrors the Moravian churchyards strikingly. And that is no coincidence. When such a lawn section was designed for the first time in 1945–1950 by G.N Brandt on the famous Mariebjerg Kirkegård in Gentofte, it was in fact done with explicit inspiration from Christiansfeld.³⁸ What looks like a secularized churchyard to Tony Walter thus turns out to bring along a heavy Protestant heritage. So does another new feature that developed in twentieth-century churchyards in Denmark: regulations of what – or rather what not – to place on the graves. This feature we have also already met on the Moravian churchyard in Christiansfeld. And again it was the architect G.N. Brandt who introduced it. Already in 1922 he had argued for an extended use of statutes and put his views into practice when he began developing Mariebjerg Kirkegård from 1925 onwards. He considered the use

³⁵ Andersen, 'Forandring i jordfæstelseskikke', 17–28.

³⁶ 'Cremation Statistics', in Davies, Mates, *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, 431–456.

³⁷ The homepage of Danske Krematoriers Landsforening: <http://www.dkl.dk/Info/statistik.php>.

³⁸ A. Sommer, *De dodes haver: Den moderne storbykirkegård*, Odense 2003, 240–241.

of statutes necessary to be able to strike an aesthetic balance between individual and collective interests.³⁹

G.N. Brandt together with his colleague J. Exner became key-figures in churchyard-landscaping in Denmark in the twentieth century. J. Exner also saw the churchyard in Christiansfeld as the ideal and echoed Brandt's view on the need to introduce statutes for aesthetic reasons.⁴⁰ The God's Acre's theological accent on equality was of course also politically attractive in the context of a Social Democratic welfare state. As a result, Danish churchyards today, besides having a widespread use of lawn sections, are extremely regulated. Different areas of the churchyards have different rules about what one is allowed to place there. In newer sections people are often formally forbidden to place things on the graves, with the exception of fresh-cut flowers. Sometimes the statutes can even be very specific in mentioning things that are forbidden to be put on the graves: figurines of animals, gnomes and santas, benches, electric light and sometimes even candles. On the traditional grave plots people are normally still relatively free to place what they want within the boundaries of not disturbing the order and peace of the churchyard, but what is deemed befitting in this respect is up to the local parish council to decide.⁴¹

The fact that the rules are stricter on the newer parts of the churchyards than on the older parts shows that over time the Lutheran Church has assumed much more control over the appearance of the graves. This has happened at the expense of the family. That the family has lost control over the dead forms part of a general process of the professionalization in dealing with death, meaning that doctors came to take care of the dying, undertakers of the funeral, and new professionals employed on the churchyards for digging and maintaining the graves instead of family, friends and neighbours.⁴² Because the secularization of churchyards in modern times is taken for granted, it has been generally overlooked that this modernization process could also include the church, namely in countries with a religious funeral model. Due to the Lutheran Church's increased control of the graves it in fact seems more apt to talk about a *sacralisation* than a *secularization* of Danish churchyards in the 20th century.

³⁹ M. Falmer-Nielsen, 'Servitutter – pro et contra', *Kirkegårdskultur* (2002), 34–40.

⁴⁰ J. Exner, *Den danske kirkegård og dens problemer*, 1961, 35–43, 56b.

⁴¹ *Kirkegårdsvedtægter: en vejledning for menighedsråd, kirkegårdsbestyrelser og provstiuvalg*, Kirkeministeriet 1996.

⁴² T. Walter, *The Eclipse of Eternity: A Sociology of the Afterlife*, London 1996, 79–102.

The Lutheran Church got a particularly strong grip on disposal due to its near-monopoly on burial grounds. This near-monopoly could easily have been broken with the advance of cremation. As mentioned, the ashes could be placed anywhere without causing hygienic problems. But as in Germany, the ashes still have to be disposed of in churchyards. It can be imagined that the grief-theory prevailing in the twentieth century, focusing on the need for detachment between the living and the dead, might have been important to keep up what Germans call *die Bestattungspflicht*. The only exception from this duty is that it is possible to spread the ashes. But this can only be done in open sea, and previous to a revision of the burial legislation in 2008, official permission from the Church Ministry was required. Today a written statement from the deceased will do.

Contesting Protestant norms of consolation

Just as radical Protestant reformers made unwanted things disappear from the graves in the sixteenth century, so have the formal statutes introduced on the Danish churchyards during the twentieth century, and efficiently implemented by the new churchyard-professionals, been capable of making religiously unwanted things disappear. What is considered to be the ‘right’ aesthetical balance between collective and individual interests is far from religiously neutral. The present material culture of the Danish churchyards is very uniform and there are not many material items to be found on the graves compared with other countries. Admittedly, this has been achieved in a less violent way than at the time of the Reformation, but at stake, I argue, is still the same distinctive Protestant notion of consolation. Along with this comes a strong suppression of material culture of non-prescribed forms of religiosity and consolation, although covered up in aesthetic arguments resulting from the Protestant downplaying of the material side of religion. It is this overlooked repression to which I will turn in the remaining part of this article.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been a rise in conflicts about what items of material culture are to be considered proper in churchyards – the latest conflict was about a figurine of a digging dog that a local parish council did not find acceptable as a grave decoration.⁴³ Fully in line with G.N. Brandt and J. Exner these conflicts are mainly understood in terms of individual taste *versus* interests of the collective. Underneath the varnish these conflicts are, however, about much more than different views on

⁴³ Personal communication, D. Pinnerup, Viborg Diocese.

aesthetics. They are fundamentally triggered by different theologies of death and express other views on consolation than the official Lutheran standpoint does. It is the silencing of these other views that is the real kernel of the conflicts, as the following case makes clear.

The archetypical conflict dates back to 2001 and ushered in a series of similar conflicts. The conflict began when, around Christmas time, a mother placed a cross, decorated with fir branches and an electric light chain, on the grave of her recently deceased teenage daughter. This act, however, soon turned into a conflict with the local parish council in Grenaa, which did not find electric light to be appropriate on the churchyard. The council ordered the mother to remove the electric light chain and stated that if she were not willing to do so, the council would have it removed. The mother complained about the decision of the parish council, and the conflict was addressed on both the level of diocese and government and received a lot public attention before it was settled in 2005. The mother was given a dispensation by the parish council to have a light chain on the grave, but only between the 23th and the 30th of December, solely on one cross and with a maximum height of 40 cm (instead of 150 cm).⁴⁴

When the parish council forbade the mother to place an electric light chain on the grave of her daughter, it motivated the decision with aesthetic reasons. In a letter from the parish council to the diocese, the council explicitly declared that they considered this decoration to be inappropriate and further explained that they were afraid it would turn the churchyard into a ‘Tivoli’ (referring to the famous amusement park and pleasure garden in Copenhagen) and would distress other visitors on the churchyard because it was not part of tradition of the material culture on Danish churchyards.⁴⁵ But that there was something more at stake than aesthetics became clear from the parish council’s letter seeking to explain why electric lights on graves were problematic, while candles were not: the council wrote that candles suited the remembering a dead person and that the same was not the case for electric light. It thus seems that the real problem behind the rhetoric of aesthetics was that the mother did not relate to the electric light chain in the right way. When visiting the grave she apparently was doing something other than just remembering her dead daughter.

⁴⁴ I have been given access to the casefiles of Aarhus Diocese and my discription in this section is based on these documents and related newspaper articles.

⁴⁵ Dated 21 October 2002.

That the heart of the matter was about how one should relate to grave decorations and about the right religious way of finding consolation, becomes clear when looking at the explanations the mother gave in the media about why it was so important for her to have this electric light on the grave: 'I can buy toys and clothes to my other children. But the only thing I can give my daughter is a light in the darkness.'⁴⁶ To this mother her dead daughter obviously was not a memory of the past as prescribed by Lutheran theology. On the contrary, the deceased daughter was someone with whom the mother could still interact and to whom she could give things. The mother's continuing bonds with her daughter were made manifest in a material way by placing a Christmas decoration on the grave.

Official religion versus lived religion

Despite the rising number of public conflicts and contestations of the Protestant norms of consolation permeating the Danish churchyards, they are still relatively rare. However, publicized conflicts are only the tip of the iceberg. Most conflicts are managed on local churchyards without attracting attention. When statutes explicitly mention specific objects like the figurines of animals, gnomes and santas, benches and electric lights, it testifies to the fact that the placement of such objects has caused conflicts. But the practice of maintaining continuing bonds with the dead, I would argue, might be even more widespread than indicated by these regulations. A silent subaltern existence is another solution to repression, instead of open conflict. In this respect it is remarkable that the head of the churchyard committee of the parish council in Grenaa gave the following comment to a newspaper: 'Why not just do it at home [putting up an electric light chain]. It does not have to be demonstrated that publicly.'⁴⁷ The comment suggests that this key member of the Grenaa parish council knows full well that interactions between the living and the dead are a fact of Danish culture, but prefers them to take place outside the churchyards, in a non-public setting.

That this is in fact the case is demonstrated by the Danish Internet memorial *mindet.dk*. Text messages left on its pages testify to an ongoing communication with the dead, since people not only write about their memories of the dead person in question but also directly address the dead

⁴⁶ The newspaper *B.T.* of 28 September 2002.

⁴⁷ *B.T.*, 28 September 2002.

person. This is also known from other research.⁴⁸ However, it is overlooked that Internet memorials also describe practices on churchyards. Users upload pictures that document the grave in its various stages, freshly made and covered with flowers, the headstone and ornaments placed, and so forth. They also document grave visits and often write about their visits and their practices at the grave. There are many photos of grave visits on special days, such as the dead person's birthday, the wedding anniversary, Christmas and Easter. These are the days when the whole family normally would meet if the dead person would still have been alive, and they still do meet, but now in the churchyard. A good example shows the scene of a typical Danish birthday celebration, complete with the Danish flag, coffee and the favourite cake of the birthday-‘child’, only that this celebration takes place at the graveside and is photographed by the widow. The caption reads: ‘Some of your children, children-in-law and your grandchild congratulate you [with your birthday]’. Clearly, the dead person is addressed.⁴⁹ The mother from the Grenaa-case is in no way alone in maintaining continuing bonds with a dead loved one manifested through things placed on the grave. *Mindet.dk* in this way gives clear evidence that non-public interaction between the living and the dead is not something that solely takes place outside churchyards, as the mentioned remark from the head of the parish council seemed to suggest. It also regularly takes place on the churchyards.

That the grave site is an important source of consolation, at odds with Protestant theology, is thus a widespread phenomenon, also for Lutherans. For instance, the mother in the Grenaa-case was a member of the Lutheran Church. And since *mindet.dk* is owned by the only Christian newspaper in Denmark, it must also be assumed that most of the people contributing to the website are affiliated with the Lutheran Church. To explain the discrepancy between the theologically prescribed relations between the living and the dead on the one hand, and what is practised on the other hand, an apparently attractive conclusion would be that the Lutheran Church has lost authority. People maintaining continuing bonds with the dead cannot be counted as ‘genuine’ Lutherans, even though formally being members of the Lutheran Church. This conclusion would be in line with researchers such as sociologist Phil Zuckerman (2008). In his book *Society without God* he describes

⁴⁸ See e.g. P. Roberts, ‘The living and the dead: community in the virtual cemetery’, *Omega* 49/1 (2004), 57–76; E. Kasket, ‘Continuing bonds in the age of social networking: Facebook as a modern-day medium’, *Bereavement Care* 31/2 (2012), 62–69.

⁴⁹ <http://www.mindet.dk>, posting on 8 November 2008.

Denmark as one of the most secularized countries in the world, while attributing a membership rate of the Church as high as seventy-nine per cent to mere tradition.

That this seemingly attractive conclusion is inadequate, is exemplified by the Grenaa-case. The mother in point considered herself to be a good Christian in spite of having a relationship with her dead daughter, at odds with Lutheran theology. And as she later was elected as a member of the parish council, it is clear that others also considered her a good Lutheran.⁵⁰ We have to be aware that religion is always lived and different from what is prescribed, even when it comes to committed Christians.⁵¹ Textbook religion does not exist in real life. Religiously highly committed Lutherans might well find consolation in what must be described as decidedly non-standard ways, when interpreted against the background of a textbook of Lutheran dogmatic. With this in mind the rising level of conflict between what is theologically prescribed and how things actually take place is better explained as a result of how the Church has expanded its grip on the churchyard and left less space for family-members to find consolation in divergent ways.

Conflicts about what one is allowed to place on graves are not just about aesthetics, they are also about people fighting to practise their religion within the framework of the Church, in ways that make sense with regard to their own life and that offer consolation. What is meaningful to people might not be so much dogmas and beliefs, as one is led to believe by Protestantism, but the rituals and practices.⁵² In this connection it is interesting that photos depicting baptism are repeatedly found amongst the photos uploaded on *mindet.dk*. It seems that to these people the shared ritual of baptism is what establishes the possibility of having continuing bonds with the dead. So while the Protestant theological rejection of continuing bonds between the living and the dead is deemed not to be religiously meaningful, the ritual of baptism clearly is.

Planning for future consolation

It is to be expected that the regulation of material graveyard culture and its implicit Protestant norms can make it difficult to find consolation for non-members of the Lutheran Church. This group has been growing, mainly due to immigrants and refugees coming to Denmark. Before the 1960s, Denmark was a more or less mono-cultural and mono-confessional country. Therefore,

⁵⁰ *Kristelig Dagblad*, 11 November 2004.

⁵¹ M.D. Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*, London 2008, viii.

⁵² M. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Oxford 2008, 19–44.

discussions, legislation and planning of churchyards have mainly centred around how to include atheists and people with other religious backgrounds. The Church Ministry, for instance, published a new guideline, entitled *Kirkegården – begravelsesplads for alle* (The churchyard – burial ground for everyone), in 1996, urging parish councils to show a special openness and responsiveness to these groups, given the near-monopoly of the Lutheran Church on burial grounds.

That the churchyards' immanent Protestant norms of consolation can be problematic is thus recognized. However, it has not been problematized that Lutherans can also have problems with finding consolation in the prescribed way, as I have shown here. If the churchyards are to be for everyone, should they then also be places where everyone can find consolation, including Lutherans who find consolation in non-dogmatic ways? Would it be appropriate if discussions, legislation and planning of future churchyards took into account the needs of these church members too?

Many people – also Lutherans – find consolation in maintaining continuing bonds with their dead by placing things on the grave. Not only for aesthetic but also for normative religious reasons, graveyard regulations appear to present obstacles. The statutes are often violated and based on this experience parish councils have been urged to explicitly inform about statutes when families are choosing graves to avoid future conflicts about grave decorations.⁵³ If these conflicts were just about aesthetics, more information might be a good answer. But as I have shown here the conflicts are also about different theologies of death and consolation. A planning based on what is practised would give less reason for conflict and would result in churchyards being more satisfying places to find consolation for Lutherans and non-Lutherans alike, no matter how they live their religion.

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⁵³ Falmer-Nielsen, 'Servitutter', 34–40.