

# Funerals in the north of Europe

## Similarities and differences

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.126858>

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The current issue of *Approaching Religion* is based on a roundtable seminar arranged in Åbo/Turku, Finland, in April 2022, with the theme “‘Death comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes?’ Funerals in the north of Europe – similarities and differences’. The event was organized jointly by the Swedish funerals research network (Begravningar som ett socialt fenomen i nutid och i historien), based at the Centre for Multidisciplinary Research on Religion and Society (CRS), Uppsala University, and the Donner Institute for Research in Religion and Culture in Åbo/Turku, Finland.

THE ROUNDTABLE EXPLORED similarities and differences in funerals in the Nordic countries, with comparisons also made with the UK. Focus was placed on funerals as a social phenomenon, including both ritual developments and the broader issues of the place and understanding of funerals. The conversations concentrated mainly on the contemporary situation, while bringing in historical perspectives as an important element. A central aim of the seminar was to bring together researchers who have recently conducted studies in the Nordic countries highlighting changes to funerals during recent times, not least due to the pandemic. The focus of the roundtable was, however, broader than this, seeking to set the recent developments in a longer perspective.

Among the themes discussed at the roundtable were developments in secular funerals, multi-religious families and ritual change in funerals and space, place and the digital in relation to funerals. This broad and interdisciplinary approach is also visible in the current special issue, presenting articles that have been developed based on presentations given at roundtable. Among the contributing authors are researchers in the study of religions, sociology of religion, theology, anthropology, gender studies and landscape architecture, resulting in a vivid and colourful conversation across disciplines.

The articles in this issue are chronologically structured, starting with questions that arises before death (article 1), following with issues regarding the funerals (articles 2 to 6) and questions related to the construction and upholding of cemeteries (article 7 and 8). The issue ends with an article focusing on epistemological issues related to funerals. We have tried to keep articles exploring the same Nordic country close to each other.

The issue opens with **Maija Butters**'s ethnographic article, which explores how contemporary Finnish hospice patients talk or refrain from talking about their own approaching death. Butters analyses the

imageries relating to death and the possible afterlife in her material and maintains that such imageries at times become a vital element empowering the dying to encounter their situation and to achieve resolution. This is followed by **Auli Vähäkangas's** article, which applies the spatial lens to death studies and the concept of deathscapes to elucidate the spaces used in Finnish funerals during the Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative analysis builds on forty-five letters, collected for the research in 2020–21, offering important real-time insights into how funeral spaces and burial places were experienced during this exceptional time. The Covid-19 pandemic is central also to **Carsten Schuerhoff's** article, which focuses on the Norwegian context. Schuerhoff's study builds on interviews with clergy and funeral professionals, reflecting on the challenges and changes brought about by the pandemic, both theological and practical. The analysis uses Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance as its central conceptual tool.

Remaining within the Norwegian context, **Ida Marie Høeg** explores ash scattering and how this practice relates to the governance of deathscape and religion/worldview in the public space. She argues that ash scattering is establishing itself as a spatial ritual institution, which is deregulated *vis-à-vis* organised religion/worldview. This, she argues, paves the way for a privatisation of death and provides ideals of individuality, privacy and discretion, not in the private but rather in the public space. A similar theme, albeit in Denmark, is dealt with by **Margit Warburg**, who looks at the ways in which so-called forest burials, that is, religiously unaffiliated ash burials, have come into being and developed in Denmark. Using rich ethnographic material, Warburg argues that contrary to how these burials were first introduced and

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The roundtable conference 'Death comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes? Funerals in the North of Europe similarities and differences' gathered participants from Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the UK. From above: Jakob Wirén, Ruth Illman, Roger Marjavaara, Carsten Schuerhoff, Karin Jarnkvist, Wilhelm Kardemark, Auli Vähäkangas, Martha Middlemiss Lé Mon, Margit Warburg, Ida Marie Høeg, Maija Butters, Henrik Christensen, Magdalena Nordin, and Måns Broo.

marketed, what is central for those picking this option is generally not their religiously unaffiliated nature, but rather the ways in which forests are seen by many Danes today. Flowers are a ubiquitous yet invisible element in Danish funerals, **Henrik Christensen** argues in the following article. Drawing on fieldnotes, interviews and survey data on funeral practices in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark as well as theories of ritualization, meaning-making and practices, he shows that flowers are not only a *sine qua non* in the funerals but are also used to make them more personal and to produce and reproduce social relations. Furthermore, the article discusses flowers as material objects acquiring a social meaning in the right ceremonial context.

**Helena Nordh** and **Carola Wingren** approach the theme of burials from the perspective of landscape architecture. They have focused on St Eskil's cemetery in Eskilstuna, Sweden, and how those from minority backgrounds experience diversity in both design and multi-cultural and individual expressions at this site, but also how they construe this cemetery as typically 'Swedish' in many ways. The article by **Jakob Wirén** explores cemeteries in Sweden through semi-structured interviews with religious representatives partaking in cemetery issues, from an interfaith and no-faith perspective, showing that the motives for cohabiting (or not) in death is closely related to relationships in the here and now.

In the final article of this issue, **Karin Jarnkvist** applies critical feminist studies to research on funerals in order to contribute to a more complex understanding of ritualization and how it can be explored. Jarnkvist discusses central issues within critical feminist theory in relation to previous studies of funerals

in Sweden. Among the theoretical approaches she introduces as complements to contemporary funeral studies are intersectionality, queer phenomenology and ritual practice theory. The aim of this article is to provide complex knowledge of funerals, essential for understanding their functions for individuals and societies in times of ritual change.

The roundtable offered a fruitful opportunity for the participants to develop emerging research networks on funerals and funeral rites in the Nordic countries and served as a meeting place for knowledge exchange in the field, enabling theory development and new research insights. We hope you will enjoy reading and engaging with this rich and diverse issue. ■

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