

Urban cemeteries' potential as sites for cultural encounters

This is the post print version and changes are done in the final version.

ABSTRACT

Population increase has drawn attention to the need in cities for easily accessible and attractive public spaces that will promote interaction regardless of gender, age, ethnicity and religious belief. This paper focuses on the role urban cemeteries play in a culturally and religiously diverse society. Norway is described as an increasingly secularised society. Immigration and transmigration, on the other hand, have brought a revived interest in religion and interreligious interaction. We explore two questions that relate to the cemetery as a public shared urban space: The first concerns the need for communities of all faiths and none to access burial space that meets their need. The second relates to the appropriateness of using cemetery as amenity space in a multi-cultural context. Diverse qualitative methods have been used; a focus group interview with participants from different religious and life-philosophy communities, interviews with key informants representing various religious communities and with visitors in two cemeteries in Oslo in 2014. The findings imply that there is a commonality that bridges differences: sharing human compassion. These sites have a potential in stimulating intercultural and interreligious encounters. Their special character as open shared urban sites can increase understanding and acceptance of each other's difference and hereby render strangeness and differences harmless.

Key words: diversity; encounters; cemeteries; secularism; urbanity; interreligiousity; Norway

INTRODUCTION

Urban cemeteries today are more than burial grounds since they house a series of functions. Due to a strong connection between the nation state and the Lutheran Protestant church (The Church of Norway), most Norwegian cemeteries after the Reformation have been established in accordance with Protestant tradition and are still managed by the Church of Norway. The Norwegian Funeral Act establishes that all burials shall take place with respect for the deceased's religion or belief. It further states that 'all deceased are entitled to be buried in a special adapted grave situated in a public cemetery or a cemetery founded by a registered religious - life philosophy community' (Chapter 1, Basic regulations, our translations)ⁱ.

To perceive such sites as purely religious is not so unquestionable any more, partly due to general societal changes in the twentieth and twenty-first century that Norway, along with many other European countries, has undergone. Norway is described as an increasingly secularised society, and it is claimed that religion has lost its tight grip on society. Although religion is less present than before in public life, religiosity today seems to appear in other ways than participation in religious activity, reflecting more individual ways of believing (Rosen 2009). 'The religious trends towards the end of the twentieth century in Norway can be characterised as increasing religious diversity and weaker ties to the religious institutions, combined with a burgeoning private religiosity' (Botvar 2010:14; Botvar & Schmidt 2010).

In policy and planning documents cemeteries are considered public accessible green areas, but with a special character that affects the general use. Research indicates that urban cemeteries may have changed their role from being secluded, secret area due to their special function as burial grounds, to become more inter-religious spaces and also multifunctional spaces for recreation and contemplation (Francis et al. 2000, Woodthorpe 2011, Hviid-Jacobsen 2013; McClymont 2016)ⁱⁱ.

In this article we discuss cemeteries as located in the intersection between two societal tendencies: a tendency towards secularism meaning that people are paying more attention to personal desires, including recreational needs. On the other hand a renewed interest in personal religion and life-philosophies has appeared, partly brought forward by immigrant groups settling in the cities and with other values and needs. As a site basically defined as public, the official management policy has to balance two partly diverging interests. We

examine how these two different tendencies are expressed in different population groups' attitudes towards the use of cemeteries in the city. The article aims at problematizing factors that can encourage urban public spaces to be perceived as attractive sites accessible for all citizens, irrespective of religious belonging and life philosophy.

The research questions raised are:

- What expectations do people belonging to different religious and life-philosophy communities have, concerning access to burial grounds that meets their need?
- Do urban public cemeteries facilitate interaction across cultural and religious differences?

We start by clarifying how we demarcate and use the broad concept secularism and religion. Rather than consider them as oppositions, we view them as aspects that in various ways are materially expressed in the cemeteries' lay-out and use. The qualitative methods used in the study (one focus group interview, interviews on site) are presented, along with a short description of the two cemeteries selected as study areas. Data from the focus group conversation is used to discuss how cemeteries can accommodate differences across different beliefs, religions and life-philosophies. Based on interviews from a broad group of visitors to the two cemeteries the second part of the results presents examples of interaction that takes place across cultural and religious differences, in view of the character they have of being both a secular site for recreation and spiritual, religious space. In the discussion attention is paid to ways these sites can be made more easily accessible to everyone, independent of cultural or religious background. It is discussed in view of the capacity cemeteries have to promote religious tolerance through emotional empathy.

BETWEEN SECULARISATION AND RELIGIOUS DEVOTION

Cities today hold an increasingly diverse population with different cultural and religious backgrounds. While some are devoted believers, others are dedicated atheists. Our starting point is that the way cemeteries are perceived and understood by visitors will be influenced by their own experiences, perspectives, i.e. their life-worlds. We need first to clarify how we demarcate and use broad concepts such as secularism and religion, and start with religion.

Religion as part of the broader spectrum of life philosophies

Immigration and transmigration have brought a revived interest in religion and interreligious interaction. The population is increasingly diverse (see Table 1), and 33 per cent of the citizens of Oslo in 2017 have an immigrant background (Statistics Norway 2017a). Although by far the largest group of immigrants today comes from Poland, there are also a considerable number of people from countries outside Europe, for instance Somalia and Pakistan. In total there are people living in Norway that have emigrated from 221 different countries (Statistics Norway 2017a). Contemporary urban life is in other words characterised by cultural and religious diversity. Despite the fact that fewer people attend church (Statistics Norway 2017b), Table 2 indicates that the current religious society is diverse and plays an important societal role.

<Table 1> <Table 2>

People's religious belonging changes character when they migrate and settle in a new context. They will often need to revise their perspectives. Migration can present new options and create opportunities for innovation concerning religious identity and practice (Knott 2016:1).

How should we approach religion? One definition presented by Enzo Pace, states that religion is 'a system of belief capable of organising the life worlds of entire social groups' (2005:113). Identifying religion mainly as a system can however confine the full spectrum of nuances in practice that we as researchers observe through field work. Instead of aiming at an accurate definition or limitation of the concept of religion, we find a pragmatic approach relevant, following Rosen (2009). She maintains that operating with an inclusive conception is the best choice. Her argument is that any definition will 'draw a line somewhere, and by that they predetermine what will be accepted as religious, and what will not' (2009, 18–19).

Immigration and increased contact across national boundaries have changed the religious landscape in Norway (Tveit 2007). Besides strengthening their religious faith, religious communities offer social arenas where people of similar cultural and national belonging can meet, exchange information, provide help and gain support etc. Faith can function as an integrating factor among immigrant groups and helps immigrants to establish belonging in a new country. The church can be a space where people of the same nationality or from the same ethnic group gather together to maintain their cultural traits along with their religious tradition (Synnes 2012; Dawn Norge 2010). The part the religious communities play is, in

other words, not necessarily purely of theological nature, but just as much social, economic and practical in character (Loga 2012:62, 63).

Secularism as a form of presence

While secularism is often seen as an increased amount of non-believers, Calhoun (2010) points out a need to rethink such commonly accepted comprehensions of secularism. He opposes the general understanding of secularism, which is often seen as a decline in religion. People have left religion for the benefit of a more neutral, worldly approach to life. Operating within a dichotomy is however a simplification, ‘a sharp binary of secularism vs religion is problematic – it obscures important ways social life is organised’ (2010:1). Calhoun refers to this general comprehension as a sort of absenceⁱⁱⁱ. His main point of departure is that interpreting secularism as absence is misleading – it is necessary to see it as a presence. He guides the reader on an interesting journey of the origin of the concept, where he points out its roots and highlights some of the major political institutions that were established when religion was separated from politics.

There are two main points in his work that we will use as premises in this study. First that it is a general misconception that religion is on the decline. Religion is still vigorous; it has just changed forms. Calhoun refers to the processes that have taken place as a form of ‘compartmentalization’ of religion (2010:3, see also Rosen 2009). It is dealt with as separate sphere and separated from politics and economy. The second point in Calhoun’s argumentation that we have paid special attention to is his thoughts about what he calls ‘secular transcendence’ (2010:16). We read his text as a suggested answer to fill the absence with a presence that enlightens the uncertainties and the inexplicable aspects of life. As he says: ‘my main point is to urge us to think of both experiences of and commitments to transcendence in this worldly, temporal life’ (2010:20). Religion as belief can be seen in various ways as a bridge between the individual and the future and help to ease the fear of death. When people turn their back on formalised religion there are still situations they have to relate to and fill with meaning. Meaning can be sought in the presence of friendship, safety, belonging, care, freedom of speech, beauty, memory sites, places of importance and an endless number of other values. Even to ardent non-believers such meanings can in certain contexts be interpreted as part of a ‘secular transcendence’.

Calhoun is ascribing both ‘presence’ and ‘transcendence’ importance when he analyses processes that form contemporary society. We will use his reflections further in this study of urban cemeteries’ potential as sites for cultural encounters, independent of religious or life-philosophy belonging. Non-believers may also perceive cemeteries as sites for mourning, i. e. emotional landscapes (Rugg, 2000; Hunter, 2016; Madrell, 2016). It can be recorded through fieldwork and is mirrored in the way visitors to these sites experience them and how they behave. The sites have an atmosphere that seems to appeal to many visitors independent of religious or life-philosophy belonging.

Profane or sacred sites – sites for social encounters

We also discuss whether urban cemeteries are perceived as profane or religious, sacred sites. According to Knott (2013), what is considered profane should not be identified with the secular, any more than the sacred should be considered synonymous with religion. She maintains that *the sacred has never disappeared* (Knott 2013:145). What has happened is rather that within the secular context the sacred has remained ‘unnoticed, unremarked or misunderstood’ (2013:146). An important point in her argumentation is that there exists an interrelationship between the secular and the sacred. She uses the work of Durkheim (1912), *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912/1976) as her starting point, where he states the observation that ‘nothing is inherently sacred, but that everything has the potential to be designated as such’ (Durkheim, cited in Knott 2013:147, 148). She opposes the frequent tendency for ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ to be viewed as polarities, and maintains instead that the sacred can be studied just as well within the secular as the religious context. ‘The “sacred” is a meaningful concept that transcends the boundary between them and indeed has the potential to overturn or subvert it’ (2013:152). We find clear connections between the reflections about ‘the secular sacred’ (Knott 2013) and the ‘secular transcendence’ introduced by Calhoun (2010) and we will use these works as a starting point to later discuss the nuances of meanings people representing diverse life philosophies attach to the character that urban cemeteries have.

METHODS

This article is based on two data sources. The first source is a focus group meeting that took place in Oslo 6th of April 2017 and enable us to approach our first research question (the various needs for access to burial grounds that meet special requirements). The second source

includes interviews with key informants representing various religious communities and with visitors in the two cemeteries in Oslo in 2014. The interviews broaden the knowledge on the second research question (cemeteries ability to facilitate interaction across differences).

The focus group

The focus group was arranged as a social encounter between potential users of cemeteries with a connection to organisations representing different religions and philosophies of life. The participants of the focus group only represent a very small section religious and life-philosophy communities registered in Norway. However, the group had enough participants from different organisations to discuss views and customs related to the use of cemeteries. This choice of method was based on the strong awareness that a focus group is not an interview *with* several people, but intended as a conversation *between* people to produce reflections on a subject, based on participants' contributions in the conversation. In this way, knowledge from a focus group would differ from, for example, the sum of interview data given by these participants as individuals. Participants in a research conversation, as in other conversations, influence each other and are involved in knowledge development (Fog 2009), but the focus group also brings about the possibility of selecting certain issues and neglecting others (Knight 2002).

The main objective of the focus group was to gain knowledge about how the cemeteries as urban spaces are ascribed meaning, valued and approached by the participants, and further which expectations they may have to facilitate the cemeteries as good places to visit and to feel accepted in. The list of the religious and life-philosophy communities receiving national funding is long and the number various between counties. The composition of the focus group was therefore not obvious. Points of special importance were that it should not be too large and thus prevent a good conversation. We used the member list from the Cooperation Council for Religious and Denominational Societies (STL) when we recruited participants for the focus group. STL is an umbrella organization of 14 different religious and belief communities, or combinations of these^{iv}.

Participants in the appropriate organisations were first contacted by phone, when we asked for persons with an interest in cemeteries and related issues. After the first inquiry, the persons in question received an email where the current issues of the meeting were included (see Table 3). It was time consuming and somewhat challenging to clarify who would participate in the

focus group (the Mosaic Religious Community, the Buddhist Association, the Catholic Church and the Islamic Council were invited, but were prevented from participating, due to other commitments etc.). The participants came from the Human Ethical Society (HES), the Church Dialogue Centre (CDC), the Norwegian Cemetery Association/Church G(NCA), the Hindu Society (HIS), a Muslim funeral agency (MFA) and the Holistic Society (HOS). The age and gender balance was ensured; three of the participants were female, four men and aged between 40 and 65.

<Table 3>

'The good conversation' as a way to in-depth knowledge

The meeting was held in the premises of the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage research. To classify religious communities can, according to Rosen, hinder alternative perspectives and result in 'particular windows of insight' (Rosen 2009:27). To ensure that the participants felt free to voice their views independent of institutional differences and belonging, we asked the various participants to express themselves as individuals. We informed the participants that this was not envisaged as a formal meeting, but a more informal *conversation* between the participants. To achieve this in practice, we started with some small talk as the participants turned up. To set the theme of the meeting, photos of cemeteries were continuously shown on the end wall of the meeting venue. These motifs were referred to several times during the meeting. After the participants had presented themselves, we started the meeting with a tasty lunch, aimed to satisfy different needs and diets. During the lunch, we asked all the participants to say something about why and how cemeteries are important for them. Through small-talking, looking at photos, eating together and being given the opportunity to share something you think is important with others, we believe that we formed the basis for an open and good conversation between the participants. The participants commented on others' input through the entire meeting, or were stimulated to do so by the two researchers. Although some of the participants dominated more than others, we did not feel that this was negative for the total conversation. We found that most of the questions we wanted to ask to the group were brought up spontaneously in the conversation between participants, which reduced the need to intervening the conversation.

The interaction between the participants gave reflections and knowledge we do not believe we would have achieved by interviewing the participants individually. The conversation was

recorded and transcribed. Then, text was gone through inspired by the method of Giorgi for coalescing of meaning (Giorgi 2009). The themes that appeared in the text were marked manually and consistently through the text, to be summarised in thematic blocks, and followed by repeated reviews of the text and discussions among the researchers.

Criticism of focus groups as a method is much the same as objections to qualitative interviews in general and concerns representativeness and generalisation (Knight 2002; Kvale 2009). We find the in-depth data gained from this focus group illuminating by itself, but strengthened in combination with other data sources.

Interviews

Short presentation of the two cemeteries

Two cemeteries in eastern Oslo, one with a Muslim graveyard included and the other with an adjoining Jewish graveyard have been selected as study areas. The criteria for choice of sites were that they both should be situated in a central and well-established area of inner city, that they were surrounded by a mix of residential and office buildings, and with a varied demographic structure concerning both age and ethnicity. In addition we wanted cemeteries that mirrored various religious denominations. The oldest part of Gamlebyen Cemetery (the Old Town Cemetery) was belonging to Gamlebyen church and the graveyard from Oslo Hospital stems from around 1550. The modern part was established in 1874. The chapel (1877) is today used as church for an Ethiopian Coptic congregation. The Muslim burial ground was established in 1972 (see figure 1). In 2016 the number of coffin burials were 27, and 10 of these took place at Muslim section of the cemetery. The numbers of urn internments were 51 (information acquired on request from The Funeral Agency, Oslo) Municipality).

< *Figure 1* >

Østre Gravlund (the Eastern Cemetery) opened in 1892, when the municipality took possession of a large farm and established the cemeteries on the outfields. The burial ground has been extended several times. A part of the cemetery has no headstones and is today used as a memory park, of which a section is assigned children's graves. In 1912 approx. 44 acres were set apart for use as a cemetery for the Mosaic religious community (The Jewish community in Oslo is named the Mosaic community) where the graves are situated in

direction of Jerusalem (see figure 2). The total number of coffin burials in 2016 were 52 and 4 of these took place at the Mosaic Cemetery. The numbers of urn internments were 305^v.

< *Figure 2* >

Pronounced use of religious symbols rarely occurs at these two cemeteries. Apart from the design of the gate into the Mosaic section, the religious symbols are primarily used on the headstones, but generally in a fairly inconspicuous form.

Interviews in combination with other field techniques

In the case study we employed a combination of various field techniques (observations, short conversations on site, in depth interviews with key informants). The length of the conversations varied, from 5 – 60 minutes (a semi-structured interview guide was prepared and was adjusted according to the context where they took place)^{vi}. They include mainly interviews with people without affiliation to organised religious or life-philosophy communities.

In the Old Town Cemetery 59 interviews were carried out with visitors to the Old Town Cemetery in Oslo (GG) and 24 visitors to the Eastern Cemetery (ØG) (Evensen et al. 2017, Skår et al. accepted). In addition to the visitors' interviews, short interviews with 59 persons passing outside the cemeteries are included in this study. These people were asked questions about why they did not pass through the cemetery and their opinions on the cemetery. In-depth interviews with key informants include two employees from the City of Oslo's Burial Department, the leader of the Mosaic Religious Congregation (a Mosaic burial section can be found at the Eastern Cemetery) and the leader of the Ethiopian Coptic Congregation (they use a locale as chapel at the Old Town Cemetery)

Representativeness has never been the aim in this study. It does not pretend to represent the diversity of religious and life-philosophy standpoints constituting the population of potential cemetery users. Still, the focus group and the other data sources provide relevant *examples* of standpoints and expectations of how cemeteries can function as good places for spending time and feeling included. The following chapter will present some of the key themes that were discussed in the focus group.

ACCESS TO BURIAL SPACE THAT MEETS DIFFERENT NEEDS

Expectations related to various religious and life philosophy communities

At the beginning of modern immigration (early 1980s), large immigrant groups from Pakistan and Sri Lanka followed their dead (or the ashes of the dead) back to their home countries for burial or the scattering of ashes. Gradually, more and more immigrants have chosen to bury their dead in Norway. The reasons may be several: that some immigrant communities consider central needs have been addressed, and a certain adaptation to Norwegian burial customs and legislation (for other studies analysing changing burial practices in various religious communities, see Reimers 1999, Kadrouch-Outmany 2013, Venhorst 2013, Hunter 2016a, 2016b, Hunter & Ammann 2016).

The Muslims in Norway have long argued for their own burial grounds in order to preserve their traditions, mainly to turn the tombs facing Mecca. Traditionally, all graves in Norway have faced the sunset, but this is now changing with a more pragmatic attitude. In Oslo, there are today established Muslim burial grounds in four places (Gamlebyen, Klemetsrud, Alfaset and Høybråten). An adaptation from the Muslim side to the Norwegian burial rituals is to use headstones, according to the representative of the Muslim funeral agency (MFA). Stepping on the grave is considered very disrespectful. In the absence of other markings on lawn-covered burial sites (for instance elevated or walled burial sites), the headstones help to highlight the graves. Not stepping on the grave is a custom also practised in a 'Norwegian' context, but maybe in a more pragmatic way.

Keeping one's own customs is also important. In the focus group conversation, the question of cremation highlighted diverse points of view: When the Human Ethical Society (HES) asked if there was a possibility of Muslims wanting to be cremated, MFA underlined that this was not an option:

'There is no one that can ... take away from me the right ... to say that the day I die, I'm going to be cremated. But, then, they may start to wonder and question my beliefs. For in my faith nobody is going to be cremated. All through life I ask God to spare me the fire. And then I should wish at the same time to go into the fire? It's like two. ... AK is then interrupted by GF, who asks if that would be like hell? And he answers: 'Yes it is hell. Yes fire is hell.' He then continues: 'So in Islam. For if I pray all the time that God spare me hell and fire, and then wish to be cremated? It doesn't belong together. If I want to be cremated, then others will think I'm not a Muslim, I mean. It goes against doctrine in Islam' (MFA).

Large groups that primarily use cremation are Hindus and Sikhs. This accords with their belief in reincarnation, as they imagine that the soul will leave the body faster through cremation than through a coffin burial. In Buddhism there is no doctrinal decision with regard to funeral form, but cremation is mandatory (Buddhistforbundet 2011). For the Hindus, the ashes should be spread in running and preferably holy water (the representative from the Hindu Society HIS). The use of memory sites for urns is probably another example of adaptation. At the cemeteries one find individual burial places with urns beside anonymous and non-anonymous memorial places.

In Norway in general, about 40% of all deceased are cremated, with a slight increase in recent years (Norsk forening for gravplasskultur 2017). Scattering of ashes has so far been subject to strict restrictions in Norway, although new regulations now give such opportunities, but only after application. Just a small minority choose this alternative. Media report discussions of the new rules, i.e. about how the rules are interpreted and practiced differently across the country (Klassekampen 10 May 2017).

Not all customs or expectations are related to religions. The Holistic Society (HOS) explains how their philosophy of life is closely tied to nature and ecology, and therefore expresses a wish to be able to carry out ecological funerals. HOS has no declared views on what happens after death, nor do they associate believing with belonging to any religious society. HOS also seems unconcerned about religious symbols at the cemeteries. ‘What I could wish for is that a tree is planted at my own grave when I die’ (HOS). Accommodating this rather simple wish would require an intricate processing of an application and most likely be turned down according to The Funeral Act^{vii}.

Perceived accessibility according to religion or life philosophy

Different burial customs are obviously linked to use of cemeteries, although the degree of use is also affected by many other factors and motivations. But some religious communities attach more weight to grief rituals in the first period after a death. For example, the Mosaic religious community ends a series of rituals related to the deaths after eleven months. It is therefore not common to see decorations in Jewish (Mosaic) cemeteries (ØG 92) (see figure 3). Spending time at cemeteries is important for Muslims according to the Quran (MFA); ‘The Prophet says that when you visit a cemetery, you are at the same time stimulated to think about your own death. When you think about this repeatedly, it will help you to keep on the right way by further reading of the Quran. This will again to help the deceased to have their sins washed

away'. MFA points out that this justifies the importance of proximity to the cemetery (see figure 4).

<Figure 3> <Figure 4>

HIS suggest that people who associate themselves with Hinduism use cemeteries less than others. This is confirmed by observations.

'In fact we very rarely use the cemetery. We only bury children under 12, or women who die with child. We cremate all our dead. All the ceremonies therefore take place at Alfaset^{viii}. We keep our ceremonies and rituals in the cemetery, in the chapel. Otherwise we do not use the cemetery in normal everyday life' (HIS). When asked if they consider a cemetery a different place, and potentially a place they do not want to pass through, HIS answers: A difficult question. We do not need a cemetery if no one in the family is buried there. So then we don't need to go there.'

Although current cemeteries is barely related to Hindu funeral practices, it is possible to appreciate them for their functions as green urban spaces with potential for recreation, contemplation, cultural encounters, mourning and grief. This aspects was however not elaborated on by HIS.

Acceptable versus non-acceptable activities

When the participants in the focus group were asked what value Norwegian urban cemeteries have for them, they put forward many of the same views as the interviewees: qualities associated with calm, contemplation and down-stressing and cultural history (for a more in-depth presentation of these qualities of urban cemeteries, see Swensen et al. 2016; Nordh et al. 2017; Skår et al. 2018). Cemeteries as sites to commemorate the deceased were mentioned in several contexts, and also with references to cemeteries as they know them from their home countries.

They were also asked about what they see as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in cemeteries. The participants in the group shared the acceptance of calm activities as strolling on the paths and sitting on benches. There was a general agreement in the group that a pathway signals that is it acceptable to stroll and pass through, whether you bring a bicycle or a dog, as long as you observe the general instructions for such sites. 'The problems arise when people start walking outside these pathways' (MFA).

Aspects of importance concerning design

Today some cemeteries have particular sections that attend to the burial needs of religious communities other than Christian. We asked the participants in the focus group to dwell on whether different sections in a cemetery may contribute to creating distance between different cultures. In the focus group, HES was concerned with equality:

‘How nice it would be if the various religions and cultures had been buried next to each other! I said this at a meeting of the Norwegian Association for Graveyard Culture once, that as a humanist, I have nothing against lying next to a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist. When we are dead, we are alike’ (HES).

But how similar are we actually at the cemetery? A comment from MFA points to *disparities* linked to belonging to different religions, and that this will be prominent the moment you relate to death through the funeral:

‘It was said earlier here ... That when you die, you are alike. I’d rather turn that round to say that ... you die in the same way. Just the same way as when you are born. But *the tradition* related to it is very different. From culture to culture. And from tradition to tradition. So if it’s a Muslim who dies, or a Christian who dies, the traditions, they will be very different. And everyone, when they are in the grave, they are as equal, but my experience is that one is much more religious, and will do the right things in terms of religion, at a burial ceremony. Then, one has become more religious. That is my experience’ (MFA).

In the extension of HES’s egalitarian line of thought, HES argues for a universal and neutral design of cemeteries, avoiding, for example, religious symbols at the entrances and in the public areas.

‘Cemeteries should show respect and diversity, that is, opportunities, a diversity of options for all different religious and denominational affiliations. But with the understanding that it is difficult to get to 70 different sections [refers to a statement earlier about the number of different congregations in a municipality]. [...] The least common denominator is what becomes common, which means not lifting anyone above others. And then, there is the universal and neutral expression that applies’ (HES).

As religion generally is tightly linked to use of symbols of various kind, this subject was instigating reflections among the participants in the group. HES’s input resulted in an important discussion in the focus group about taking into account central and different needs. Especially the Church Dialogue Centre (CDC) expressed scepticism about HES’s egalitarian way of thinking about the cemetery:

‘There are so many considerations to show which is very important for whom it concerns. It means not stepping on the grave, consecrated ground, non-consecrated ground, or... To show consideration could be deeply contradictory, and I think that we cannot only make it neutral, and so we should have resolved this. [...] But, when you meet other ways of thinking about burial sites, you will have to take that conversation. So, I have an expectation that the requirements of the different religious communities, and non-religious, for that matter, that they can have an open conversation about what should be safeguarded. Then you must have

some solutions without compromising the very basic needs. That's difficult dilemmas in a multi-religious society' (CDC).

MFA summarises his standpoint to aspire for a middle way, based on the idea of human compassion.

'If you have 70 different religious communities [to take into consideration] and whether all will come with their desires, then it is perhaps hard to accommodate all together. But then one should try to aspire for a middle ground. By taking most of them into account. Some things relate specifically to one religion, but then there are things that deal with what we share – human compassion. And I don't think anyone would like if their grandfather's grave is not respected. So it is the element of human compassion that should be safeguarded in the first place. When you have done that, then the religious aspect will come almost by itself' (MFA).

MFA here reflects on some of the most essential aspects of life and humanity and hereby touches on one of the distinctive features that separate a cemetery from any other amenity space.

A theme that was brought up for discussion in the focus group was practising funeral traditions. The member of HES commented that there is a lack of knowledge among many Norwegians today about the practical aspects of death and burial. People feel paralysed in such situations and leave it to the funeral professionals to take care of the process. The question was raised whether we can learn something from minority groups where these traditions are still alive, for example, when the family is still involved in caring for the dead. In Norway, the public authorities are engaged in dealing with most of these aspects of life. Professionalising death can be viewed as part of the secularisation of society that has taken place. It is a deflection of processes that Calhoun, referred to earlier, describes as 'compartmentalization' of religion (Calhoun 2010:3). Many of the rituals connected to transitional phases of life, to birth and death that were handled by the church before, are now transferred to professionals and institutions. Alternatively they are left for non-believers to deal with in their own ways, hereby creating situations marked by a certain sense of helplessness, conf. the member of HES description of many feeling paralysed when dealing with the practicalities related to death.

Another, more fundamental question related to these issues concerns acceptance of differences or demands for neutrality. This is a discussion positioned in the common polarisation between secularism and religious devotion. From MFA's point of view as leader of a Muslim burial agency, people become 'more religious and will do the right things in terms of religion, at a burial ceremony.' Differences between different cultures and religions

appear more clearly in the matter of burial customs. As the various statements quoted in this article show, differences are appreciated at such sites, as they add to the character the sites have as spaces for reflection and contemplation.

Despite marked differences in funeral rituals in religious and life-philosophy communities, this study indicates a commonality bridging differences across religious belonging and life philosophy: *sharing human compassion*. This was one of the most central points that were underlined in the focus group. To be able to attend to different expectations to the need for burial grounds, there are a series of issues that will appear if the intention is to turn a cemetery into a common site of cultural and religious encounters. The table below indicates a series of adjustments in management and design that could be proposed to facilitate and build bridges between needs held by people of various life philosophies (see Table 4)

< Table 4 >

CEMETERIES AS AMENITY SPACE IN A MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT

The multiple voices and views expressed in the focus group show that religious community belonging will influence the perception and interpretation of the character urban cemeteries have – or should have – as easily accessible public sites in the city. ‘Even if the discourse about democracy persuades us that all places are open for everyone, reality does not provide evidence ... Some areas will be avoided or only accessed for very specific purposes. Only a few ... are truly open public places’ (Bergmann 2012: 84). The quote directs our attention to the various means that – directly or indirectly – can be interpreted as hindrances to free access.

To be able to understand the reasons people had for *not* using such sites as amenity space we asked people right outside the fence of the two cemeteries included in the study why they had chosen to walk outside instead of inside. As both cemeteries in question are situated rather close to stops for public transportation and provide a network of pathways, it is possible to pass through the cemetery (Evensen et al. 2017, Skår et al. accepted). The material from the ‘outside-the-fence survey’ included 59 informants, of whom 11 were not Norwegian speakers. While a majority of the Norwegians stated that they use the cemeteries on other occasions, and also with other purposes than visiting graves, the majority of the immigrants said they did

not. The reasons they gave were that they did not like being there or that they did not have a grave to visit. Only one of the immigrants strolled through it sometimes with her baby in the pram. Although this material is too small and limited to draw any conclusions from, it is interesting to reflect on some of the spontaneous statements from the immigrants. These two examples illustrate that some of the reasons are clearly based on the informants' life philosophy of not intruding on the dead; 'People from Asia have more respect for the dead' (no. 29). 'As Buddhist you have to show respect towards the dead' (ØG25). In the interviews on site, people born abroad were asked to compare Norwegian cemeteries to those they knew from their home country. In some countries cemeteries are more closed and fenced in than in Norway, i.e. there are no traditions of going there without visiting the graves. The interview material seems to support such a hypothesis. A female in her twenties from Peru (GG76), mentioned that she was not used to a situation where you can walk through a cemetery. She is used to guards placed at the entrance. They are there to ensure that people will not disturb the dead (not primarily to stop vandalism, she confirmed when asked). Her view was confirmed by other interviewees from Poland and Spain (GG77, ØG24). The answers suggest that in other countries using cemeteries as amenity space might be considered insensitive. Another reasons might be that recent immigrants to Norway may simply not know the unspoken 'rules' about how cemeteries might be used, and so might be acting in a way that they regard as respectful. Even though the amount of funerals taking place in the two cemeteries is moderate, it may all the same affect some visitors and make them feel that they intrude on a private situation. We can also ask if the role of the cemetery as public shared space is too implicitly notified. Although the cemetery management always ensure that the rules and regulations are sufficiently visible at the main entrances, none of them are provided in English. They are also formulated in a prohibiting way, such as for instance 'Cycling is not allowed', more than a welcoming and inviting style, such as for instance 'Feel free to visit the cemetery even if you have no grave to maintain'. If the intention is to strengthen an urban cemetery as a site for cultural encounters, a more including approach has to be adapted. This point will be elaborated in the Discussion.

Strangely enough, it was rather seldom religion and religious faith popped up as a spontaneous topic in the conversations we had with Norwegian visitors to the two cemeteries. When asked directly, most people actually answered that they did not have much of a relationship to religion. When asked about the atmosphere however, the tranquillity and quietness of the place was often described at length. 'It is somehow a place to go for people

who grieve for something and who have nowhere to go' (GG3, GG10). This is in accordance with Bergmann (2012), who states that: 'An atmosphere surrounds something. Obviously humans cannot create atmospheres but they can create artefacts which themselves are capable of producing and mediating atmospheres' (Bergmann 2012:79–80). The design, the headstones, the cultural landscape and the historic context all work towards mediating a special atmosphere of such sites. The rituals that are performed here, whether they have the official status of funerals or are of a more private character, such as placing flowers on the grave of a friend etc., contribute to giving these sites the floating character of being something in-between the profane and the sacred.

A main result of the large study shows how green urban cemeteries emerge as unique places for reflection and contemplation in the city. To be reminded about death in beautiful and peaceful surroundings provides space 'for the long thoughts', and to show respect for others is also expressed as an important part of visiting cemeteries (Swensen et al. 2016, Nordh et al. 2017, Skår et al. accepted). Many stated that they are positive about seeing other cultures represented at the cemetery, reflecting the diversity in the community. Qualities related to contemplation, recreation and heritage are expressed across age, gender and cultural background, and can thus be interpreted as affective experiences associated with cemeteries common to all mankind. They are truly multifunctional spaces, which is in accordance with findings in other studies (Francis et al. 2000, Woodthorpe 2011, McClymont 2016). In addition to filling their prime function as burial sites, they also fill a spectrum of secondary purposes (recreation, promenading, walking the dog, reading, contemplation, and to some extent also cycling, jogging etc.) (see figure 5, figure 6). They are however 'more than a park' (Skår et al. accepted), the appreciation of the character of such sites regulates how freely people act and the respect they show through their actual behaviour.

<Figure 5> <Figure 6>

DISCUSSION

We will now return to the two research questions by approaching them from two angles. First we will view the results in light of a need that exists for balancing different requirements by ensuring that *boundary-reducing practices* permeate the management of cemeteries. In a literal sense a boundary is generally set up to ensure that the passing across can be controlled

and to prevent unwanted trespassers. Reimers (1999) uses the term ‘boundary-maintaining’ and boundary-reducing’ practices when she examines funeral rituals among immigrants as a means of identity marker. It is however possible to apply the term in relation to the cemetery as a physical site and amenity space. Fences, hedges, gates, walkways, religious symbols can appear intimidating versus appealing dependent on form and lay-out. The Muslim section in the cemetery in Gamlebyen is well suited as illustration. A pathway links this section naturally to the rest of the cemetery and it is fully visible from most angles of the cemetery. Free access among various sections demarcating burial requirement of different religious- and life philosophy communities is a physical statement of boundary-reducing practices – a character the Muslim section holds. In Østre Gravlund a hedge of large old spruces borders the two sections, resulting in the Jewish cemetery being hidden behind a tall green wall – and somehow forgotten. Even people, who visited the main cemetery regularly, did not know about the Jewish cemetery. Boundary-reducing practices can also refer to structural issues, such as ensuring that decision-making authority and distribution of responsibility are transparent, truly public and democratic. The question of how Norway best can deal with religious and life-philosophy diversity has been approached from different angles. As an answering to a commission from the Ministry of Culture and Church (KKD), Plesner & Døving (2009) and Huuse & Døving (2009) gave some recommendations (concerning feasible changes in practice, in rules and regulations, accessible localities and economic funding). To meet initiatives about inclusion, e. g. § 23 in the Norwegian Funeral Directive now states that every municipality has to arrange an annual meeting with representatives of a series of recognised religious and life-philosophy communities^{ix}. § 6 states that burials specifically adapted to accommodate the religion and life philosophy of minorities should be covered by Kirkelig Fellestråd^x in the home municipality if such graves are not provided for there. This shall ensure the special needs concerning various religious and life-philosophy communities. A White Paper from 2013 recommended a more fundamental change involving transfer of responsibility from the Church of Norway to the local municipalities (NOU 2013:226). However, major changes have failed to appear since 2013, and the Church of Norway does still have the responsibility for maintenance of cemeteries all over Norway except four places. In Oslo, the responsibility for the daily maintenance of the city’s cemeteries has been debated for a long time but is today considered to lie with the municipality, while the main policies are still considered part of the responsibilities of the Church of Norway. The claimed right of the Church of Norway to be the official management agent is questioned by several politicians and others, and part of the argumentation is how this

ownership may influence on how one deals with religious and life-philosophy diversity. The formal separation between the state and the Church of Norway took place in 2012. Without going into depth in these issues here, a matter of discussion of relevance to the international context should be whether a ‘religious-associated’ ownership and management responsibility of the cemeteries is appropriate to an urban space representing *all* citizens. It is a complex issue where a set of difficult questions are involved: a long historic connection exists around the ownership to land; many cemeteries both inside and outside the cities in Norway are located right beside a church; and not least: it is a hot political and moral topic. This should however not hinder a free discussion around what kind of management structure that will benefit the urban cemeteries in the future.

Our second approach concerns the importance of acknowledging the cemeteries’ dual functions as a secular and spiritual space, hereby promoting religious tolerance through emotional empathy. It can be enhanced by paying particular attention to the role they play as sites for cultural encounters. International researchers have approached cemeteries as ‘deathcapes’ (Madrell et al. 2010, Hunter 2016b) defined as ‘material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death’ (Teather, cited in Hunter 2016a:3), or seen as an emotional landscape, conceived of as ‘places of tranquillity and transcendent beauty’ (Hunter 2016a:188). Rugg (2000) refers to ‘sacredness’ as an important characteristic of a cemetery, but she underlines that cemeteries are ‘principally secular institutions that aim to serve the whole community’ (Rugg 2000: 264). She does not purely define ‘the sacred’ in religious terms, but include its permanence and ability to enable pilgrimage in her description; not to forget its ability to ‘act as a context for grief’ (Rugg 2000:261). Her reflections relate to the interconnection between the sacred and the secular that Knott (2013) also discusses. The polarities that often are set up between ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ do not necessarily reflect how people sense and experience a cemetery:

‘We all need spiritual space. Even if I am an atheist. In other words, it is not the Christian-religious that attracts me. But it is the nearest I come to nature, when I am in the city. So it is my cathedral, I suppose...’ (GG29).

It has been argued that urban studies have disregarded religion for too long. By considering it to be a decreasing phenomenon in urban contexts, its transforming dimension in contemporary cities has been overlooked (Cancellieri 2016:80, Hagen & Ebaugh 2003:1145). When immigration is profiled, most of the time it is the problematic effects of social or

economic exclusion that are discussed. Far too few countries view immigration as a positive factor in social development (Wood & Landry 2008, Balbo 2016:25). Cultural and religious diversity have however become a matter of fact in urban life. It is a societal force that is ‘providing an added value to the attractiveness of cities’ (Balbo 2016:26, 37). Although proximity alone is not necessarily enough to bring about social transformation and break down prejudice (Valentine 2016:154; Wessel 2009), it seems to have an effect in creating a space for interactions and encounters to occur.

Agrawal and Barratt (2014:573) argue that scholars over the years have tended to overlook the importance that mundane, everyday encounters have for strengthening communication and understanding between people. As underlined by several of the participants in the focus group, cemeteries are generally viewed primarily as sites to commemorate the deceased, and this was substantiated by examples from their homeland. The changing status urban cemeteries in Norway are experiencing today as amenity places for all citizens, is therefore not as obvious to immigrants as it is for Norwegians. Some quotes from interviews done outside the cemetery fence show that strolling through a cemetery by some are considered an act that will disturb the dead. Barriers can take many forms: while some might be of a more private character (fear, anxiety, concern of doing the right thing), others have a signalling effect (physical barriers interpreted as ‘do not trespass’, such as pillars, too few and sometimes closed gates, tall fences, lack of information signs etc.). To be able to reach people who belong to religious and life-philosophy communities with funeral traditions that rarely involve cemeteries as burial grounds (for instance Hinduism) it is important to pay attention to various ways to mediate the role cemeteries have as easy accessible green urban space. Agrawal and Barratt state that ‘interfaith dialogue is an overly ambitious undertaking – a project that may overshadow the achievements that arise out of mundane or fleeting encounters between individuals of differing faiths within a social space’ (Agrawal & Barratt 2014:569). There is a need to replace an abstract objective of interfaith work in favour of recognising existing encounters that, while mundane in nature, seem to produce results and offer more obvious benefits. This ‘provides opportunities to develop favourable attitudes and create a space in which individuals can “demystify” the religious other’ (Agrawal & Barratt 2014:584). They underline how such everyday encounters, often unintentional, sporadic and unpretentious, can gradually increase understanding, acceptance, and render strangeness and differences harmless. Our findings confirm this, and several statements from Norwegians verify that people find it engaging to observe different cultural and religious practices.

According to Bagwell et al. (2012:7) access, usage and planning of urban open space seldom reflects the needs or aspirations of migrant and other ethnic minority communities. If we intend that public spaces shall function as sites for cultural encounters that brings together diverse visitors such spaces need to be inclusive: in the sense that nobody encounters an actual (e.g. physical barriers as well as availability of key amenities) or perceived (e.g. fear of discrimination, safety) barrier to use shared spaces (Bagwell et al. 2012:25).

CONCLUSION

There are experiences, occurrences, events in life that have certain common features independent of gender, age, ethnicity, social belonging and religious belief. Death and bereavement is one of these experiences. It can occur unexpectedly and is seldom welcome. A key issue and starting point in this article has been the assertion commonly made about the increasing secularisation of western societies, including Norway. Instead of viewing the secularisation process as an absence, we have followed Calhoun (2010) in looking for the new – or other – dimension that is present and has partly replaced the anchorage of unquestionable faith. With the urban cemeteries as a focal point of the study, we look closer at the effect this process has had on urban cemeteries.

We find that people attach special qualities to such sites. Although often used for everyday purposes, such as strolling, meeting friends, walking the dog, their character of green urban spaces lends them a touch of atmosphere that is appreciated in a busy urban life. The tranquillity found here encourages reflection. The Norwegian concept of urban cemeteries as public sites, free and accessible to all, does not always accord with views that immigrants know from cemeteries in their homeland. This can partly prevent them from wanting to use such sites freely. There are, however, examples of people with immigrant background who see the special qualities of such sites and have learned to appreciate them. Density has put the focus on the need in cities for easily accessible and attractive public spaces open to everybody. When we in this article have looked more closely at the expectations and needs put forward by members of various different religious and life philosophy communities concerning such sites, we recognise a need to pay more attention to their ability to facilitate interaction across cultural and religious differences. As the discussion in the focus group revealed, many of the needs expressed are not in opposition. What is required is awareness and accept of difference. Solutions can be reached if there is a shared understanding that some

basic needs cannot be compromised. The ability such sites hold to increase understanding and acceptance of each other's difference can render strangeness and difference harmless. Visitors to these sites find it engaging to observe different cultural and religious practices. We have something to learn from immigrants in an increasingly secularised society about building a natural relationship to death and mourning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

NOTES

ⁱ To comply with different religious needs, § 6 was changed in 2011 and states that if a satisfactory burial ground is not available in the local municipality of the deceased, the burial will take place in another municipality where the facilities exist, and paid from the home municipality (The Norwegian Funeral Act, § 6, our translation).

ⁱⁱ The results presented in this article are part of a larger interdisciplinary research project on green urban cemeteries in a multi-cultural context (see Acknowledgement).

ⁱⁱⁱ Other researchers, for instance Madrell (2013) also refers to absence-presence, but then in relation to the mourning process and dealing with loss of people closely akin.

^{iv} <http://www.trooglivssyn.no/>

^v There are 21 cemeteries in the municipality of Oslo. Key data show that the total of burials in 2016 was 3670 (both coffins and urns), which means that the average for each cemetery was 177 burials that year (Oslo kommune, Gravferdsetaten, Årsberetning 2016). When comparing the average with the number of burials at each cemetery, we see the activity was reasonably lower in the Old Town Cemetery and considerably higher at the Eastern Cemetery.

^{vi} For further description of methods for the secondary sources of data (see Evensen et al. 2017, Nordh et al. 2017, Skår et al. accepted).

^{vii} According to The Funeral Act other monuments than a headstone are only allowed on application, and trees cannot be more than 1.5 m tall.

^{viii} Alfaset opened as cemetery in the eastern part of Oslo in 1972, and is managed by the Municipality of Oslo on behalf of Church of Norway. It has sections for Romani and Muslims, and a new crematorium was built in 2009 to meet increased needs for cremation.

^{ix} <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1996-06-07-32>

^x Kirkelig Fellestråd is a council that was established in 1996 to enable cooperation between the municipality and its religious congregations and is regulated by law for all municipalities with more than one congregation. Among its responsibilities is the running and managing of churches and cemeteries.

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