

# Until death do us part?

## Swedish cemeteries from an inter-faith and no-faith perspective

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In life, identity is based on many things. In death, people tend to be identified more on the basis of religion: separate cemeteries for Jews, Buddhists and the Plymouth Brethren, separate quarters for Muslims, Yezidis, Bahá'í and Orthodox Christians. However, it is not true that cemeteries are only a place for religious division. They are also public spaces and, as such, places where people from all walks of life go. Cemeteries are places where religious preferences and customs are negotiated in a very special way.

In this article, practical and theological aspects of cemeteries are discussed from an inter-religious point of view. What areas of conflict are there? How do people of different faiths reflect on each other and the option of cohabiting in death? To what extent are the preferences of different religious groups met in Swedish cemeteries? To some extent, these practical and theological questions pertaining to cemeteries may serve as a lens that sharpens our eyes to challenges of religious freedom and our chance to live (and die) together.

### Introduction

In the multi-religious Sweden of the 2020s, people of different faiths live next door to each other, they work together, their children attend the same schools and play in the same football team. Against this background it may appear strange that we cannot continue as neighbours in death. The work of social cohesion with people of different faiths seems to be replaced by separation in cemeteries. In life, identity is based on many

things, such as relationships, profession, nationality, religion and political views. In death, people tend to be identified more on the basis of religion: separate cemeteries for Jews, Buddhists and the Plymouth Brethren, separate quarters for Muslims, Yezidis, Bahá'í and Orthodox Christians. As is sometimes stated: nowhere is religious identity and belonging more visible than when it comes to feast and death.

Is this a failure indicating that the sense of cohesion and belonging in multi-faith societies are not very deeply rooted, after all? Or is it a natural occurrence, just as people of different faiths tend to celebrate their religious holidays and religious services discretely within their own communities? Opinions may differ, but for the those managing the cemetery and for society as a whole, it is important to meet the requests from different religious communities and to understand the underlying rationale. And, arguably, it is important for society to understand how matters of death and mourning for many people relate to the sense of belonging in society.

In this article, I shall explore the cemetery from an interfaith and no-faith perspective. What do the motives for cohabiting (or not) in death look like? In what way can such preferences have any

bearing on the relationships in the here and now? What kind of questions arise when faith and no-faith perspectives meet at the cemetery?

The present article is based on twenty-five semi-structured interviews with representatives involved in funerary and cemetery issues from different faith traditions in Sweden.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were made in 2021–2. Some of the representatives are professionals, while others work on a voluntary basis, but all of them have years of experience when it comes to funerals and cemeteries, and they are in contact with members of their own faith communities.<sup>2</sup> Among the representatives interviewed, nine are vicars in the Church of Sweden, which means they are assigned by the authorities to be responsible for managing the cemeteries in their geographical area (Swedish funeral legislation 1990:1144). When the interviewees reflect on practices and traditions they speak from their own interpretation of their faith and from their own experiences in Sweden and elsewhere. However, as coordinators of cemetery issues, they are regularly in contact with members of their faith community as well as with other actors in society. In other words, their role as coordinators gives them a somewhat wider perspective. In addition to the interviews, newspaper articles that describe interfaith aspects of

- 1 Representatives from Christian (9), Muslim (7), Jewish (2), Buddhist (2), Humanist (2), Yezidi (2) and Plymouth Brethren (1) communities.
- 2 The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated by the author. The informants were selected based on their capacity as coordinators for cemetery issues on behalf of their faith community in Sweden. The article is part of an ongoing project entitled 'Death and Cemeteries in an Interfaith Perspective'.

local cemeteries and studies from other countries are used.

### Separate or together?

When the first Jews came to Sweden in the eighteenth century, they bought a piece of land and established a Jewish cemetery and a Chevra Kadisha, an organization of Jewish men and women who see to it that the bodies of deceased Jews are prepared for burial according to Jewish tradition. This was even before the establishment of a religious community or the building of a synagogue. As the former chief rabbi Morton Narrowe remarks, this shows the profound significance of burying the dead within the Jewish tradition. The desire to establish a Jewish cemetery also reveals the need for a permanent, defined and delimited area for one's own community (Narrowe 1998: 2f.). The long Jewish experience of living as an exposed minority in Christian countries is likely to play a role, but it is also to do with the desire to care for and honour the dead in accordance with the Jewish tradition. Judging by the former chief rabbi and my interviews with Jewish representatives, this desire seems to be as strong today, three centuries later and after a period of solid legislation for religious freedom (Narrowe 1998 and Interview A1). In fact, it is not despite, but thanks to the Freedom of Religion Act (Religionsfrihetslag 1951:680) that cemeteries and grave quarters for certain religious communities are established. Jews are not alone in this way of reasoning. As the migration scholar Allan Amanik states, relating to an American context, the desire to be buried separately, together with one's own community, is strong in many minorities (Amanik and Fletcher 2020: vii).

A human being obviously has several identities and belongings. Is it self-evident that precisely the religious identity should

govern the place of burial? It is often an important part of a person's life, but not necessarily the most important one. An example of when separation on the basis of religion may seem less relevant is in families with two or more faith traditions. For example, when two spouses, a Jew and a secular Christian, want to be buried together the question arises. At the individual level this usually finds its solution, but it requires one party to compromise with his or her religious or secular identity. A Jewish representative working with funeral matters explains how she plans grave lots for a deceased member of the community:

Next to his parents was a place, so I put him there. Then, I know he has a non-Jewish wife. I thought that then she ... if she wants there will be room. We have a non-kosher cemetery. Usually, it is stricter. In other countries there are more ... one must be a Jew [to be buried at the Jewish cemetery]. But here we have so many mixed marriages. (Interview A1: 2)

Rather than risking Jews choosing the public cemetery to be buried together, preparations are made for them both at the Jewish cemetery. It is not according to a strict interpretation of the Jewish law, but it may still be defensible given the situation in Sweden, according to the Jewish representative.

The connection between religion and funeral is strong and a reason for the defining and separating nature of questions that arise when taking care of the dead. Still, other aspects of a human life may be as important. In Berlin, there is a cemetery for lesbian women. One of the initiators explains the reason behind this:

We have created the place with elder lesbian women in mind. We have lived together, comforted each other, worked with each other and when we die, we want to be with our friends. (Nilsson 2014: 34)

Even though separate grave quarters are created on the basis of religious identity, other aspects, such as culture, language and ethnicity, can be as important. Still, it is usually religious identity that shapes the different quarters of the cemetery.

### Reasons for separate cemeteries

What are the reasons for people belonging to a certain faith tradition seeking their own cemetery or cemetery quarter? Motives differ from theological or practical to emotional and safety-related. How important it is also varies. An imam states that a separate cemetery is a prerequisite within the Muslim tradition, but only if it is possible to carry it out. In other words, if, for some reason it is not possible in a particular country, there is a pragmatic understanding within the tradition itself: 'Islam does not require anything that is impossible. God forces no one', according to the imam. He then explains the appropriateness of separate quarters or cemeteries: 'I think that there are benefits with having a separate place for Muslims. It feels good for other faith communities as well, I think' (Interview A3: 2). Nevertheless, he is not wholly against burying together, saying that:

We live in a society together. Why shouldn't we be buried together? There are countries where this is the case. I come originally from Albania. In big cities, for instance there is no separation. Everyone is buried at the same place. No one complains. One

acts according to what the possibilities are. (Interview A3: 2)

In other words, he identifies theological reasons with reference to the Islamic tradition and emotional reasons related to a sense of ease for both Muslims and non-Muslims, but the issue as such is not of utmost importance.

Another Muslim representative notes:

I think like this: as an individual, I have lived as a Muslim all my life, to the best of my capacity. Then, I want to finish my life here in a Muslim way. I feel that I want to be buried in a Muslim way. That would be a good end in this life. Therefore, I want this Muslim graveyard. I have lived as a Muslim, I will die as a Muslim, I will be buried in a Muslim way. Then, I move on to the next life. That is actually very important. (Interview A2: 2)

For this woman, it is an important issue that is both practical and emotional. Proceeding in her reasoning, she refers to the safety of knowing that everything happens in a Muslim way, that the deceased's body is turned against Kaaba, is being buried in virgin soil and that the cemetery is treated with the kind of dignity and respect it deserves. Even though the customs she mentions may be theologically motivated, she does not argue theologically for the separation as such, but on the basis of it being practical and safe. In the long run she would not mind an entire Muslim cemetery where the possibility of performing ritual cleansing and Muslim funeral prayer at the graveyard are integrated into the overall design. A Muslim cemetery would be more practical and purposeful, she argues. Some of the Muslim representatives that I talk to raise the fact that it would also feel safer.

The sense of safety seems to apply both to the fact that Muslim rituals are practised in accordance with tradition, but also to the experience as a minority of not being fully accepted when practising one's faith.

Other practical reasons for why separation may be preferred have to do with the usage of a cemetery. For many Yezidis, the cemetery is a public ritual space. One representative stresses the central role of the cemetery and the desire to build a small temple at the cemetery in Borlänge (Interview A11: 2). His emphasis does not lie on separation, but on the desire to establish a temple and to use the cemetery for public Yezidi gatherings. However, the desire to use the cemetery for this purpose suggests some kind of autonomous place; if nothing else, at least for practical reasons.

For some faith communities, the issue of perpetual interment rights is important for theological reasons. This is often mentioned by Jews and Muslims, but also by some Christian communities. A Jewish representative explains the reasons for having their own cemetery:

We have perpetual interment rights. Therefore, we want to own the cemetery. We do not trust people when it comes to eternal agreements. Those buried with us shall remain here forever. Or until the Messiah comes. Ownership and perpetual rights are important. (Interview A1: 1)

Thus, in some cases it is the issue of permanence, rather than separation, that is the main rationale for having one's own cemetery or grave quarter.

In a study from Senegal, two provinces with comparable portions of Christians in the otherwise Muslim majority population are compared. In one of the regions, there are separate cemeteries for Muslims and

Christians. In the other Muslims and Christians are buried at the same cemetery. The author of the study, Ato Kwamena Onoma, shows that Christians and Muslims in both regions refer to theological convictions when arguing for the respective praxis. He quotes a Christian woman from the region with separate cemeteries:

When we die, we will be buried at different cemeteries. When I die, I want to be buried at Cimetière Belair, which is for Catholics only. My husband can be buried at a Muslim cemetery somewhere. The fact that we have lived together in marriage throughout life does not imply that we also must go to the next world together. (Onoma 2019: 30)

Onoma's conclusion is that the ambiguity of faith traditions and their theological texts makes it possible to justify the local funeral praxis that one is used to. On the one hand, one could say that the theological reasoning is foundational, and on the other hand, that the lived praxis is primary and governs the interpretation of one's own tradition. In the two provinces, the line of difference is not between Christians and Muslims, but between those who live in the one province and those who live in the other. There is a strong connection between where people live, what they are used to, and what their preferences are like. This reminds us of the interplay between faith convictions and religious praxis, and that the chain of cause and effect can go in both directions.

We have seen that the reasons for opting for separate cemeteries or grave quarters vary. Some of these reasons are theological and rooted in a certain interpretation of one's own tradition. Some are grounded in practical matters of being able to perform

rituals according to one's tradition or securing eternal grave rights, where the promised twenty-five years according to Swedish legislation is far from enough. Some are more emotional, such as a sense of safety through being surrounded by people from one's own community. Obviously, there are no clear-cut lines between these motives – something can be theological and emotional – and reasons rarely belong to one category only.

### **Separation in death and life**

To what extent does the question of whether people of different faiths cohabit in death have any bearing on the relationships in the here and now? There is more than one answer to such a question. Given the notion of the cemetery as a public arena, the way this arena is shaped obviously has an impact on how people move at the cemetery and to what degree they meet each other and experience religious plurality.

But eschatological convictions can also influence how people view each other. An imam explains why he thinks separate quarters for Muslims are necessary:

These are the faithful who belong to the blooming of paradise. They experience joy of various sorts. They could be affected by the condition of non-Muslims in nearby graves. When non-Muslims suffer punishment or other pains in the grave, that suffering may have an impact on the condition of the faithful and their experience in the grave. Both how the living act at the graveyard, but also the dead people's condition in afterlife. If the dead are in an unhappy state, it may have an impact on the believers in the afterlife. Some theologians argue that it is not even permitted for Muslims to enter non-Muslim cemeteries. (Interview A4: 2)

The detailed description of how non-Muslims suffer in their graves, to the extent that their sufferings interrupt the peaceful state of their Muslim neighbours, is notable. It is probably unusual that representatives of different faith communities have such theological conversations, but one could easily understand that this kind of argument and conviction would influence human relationships in the here and now. Another example of how the notions about who one wants to be buried next to may have implications for relationships in the here and now presents itself in an interview with a vicar from the Church of Sweden:

We have had conversations with the Humanists. The big thing for me is that it is an association who claim not to believe. And they can sit down and have a coffee with me and talk to me and socialize with me, but they cannot lie totally dead next to me, because then they think something happens. To me, that is a dilemma. (Interview K3: 3)

When interviewing representatives from different faith communities, vicars in the Church of Sweden and cemetery managers, I often find a general acceptance and understanding of why separate cemeteries and grave quarters are established. Nevertheless, the underlying reasons for why such quarters must be established may prove challenging in personal relationships.

The small village Börringe, some 30 km south-east of Malmö, exemplifies how political dimensions shape how we remember and care for the dead. It reminds us that it is not only faith communities that have an opinion about who one wants to be buried alongside. There are also opinions about who are allowed to be buried at the cemetery.

When the Malmö parish ran out of places for burial, they cancelled the agreements with several neighbouring countryside parishes who had used the Muslim cemetery in Malmö for their citizens in need of a Muslim cemetery. The parish in Svedala outside Malmö realized that their role of responsibility for the cemeteries in the area required them to establish their own cemetery with a Muslim grave quarter:

We found a big lawn close to our own churchyard in Börringe. It is close to the airport of Sturup. Well, we started to plan. We contacted the Islamic Centre in Malmö and representatives came and looked at the area. There are Muslims in Svedala of course, but no community. So it was natural to contact the Islamic Centre. (Interview K1: 3)

The vicar describes the process and states that the parish, the regional government and the Muslim representatives all thought that the choice of location was suitable. Börringe has a rather big cemetery, hilly and with old trees. There is an empty lawn long since drained and prepared for cemetery use, but it has not been used. The place is situated in one of the corners, a little secluded. There is room for at least sixty graves, but the place will not be arranged all at once, but a little at a time. The paths, for instance, will be arranged when there is a need for more infrastructure. The vicar again:

We asked the imam how often, during his twelve years, he has buried someone from Svedala and he responded possibly once or twice. We think there won't be a rush for this place. (Interview K1: 4)



When it became publicly known that a Muslim quarter was being established in Börringe, petitions were made, and protest meetings were held. The kind of critique that is often voiced when something changes or is built nearby is combined with islamophobic and racist views. The vicar describes how upset members of the parish suggested that the cemetery should rather be established in another part of the parish, outside the churchyard of Svedala. When the vicar explained that that piece of land was too damp for a cemetery, they responded that this is actually a good thing 'because then they will rot faster'.

- But we are talking about other human beings?!
  - No, we are talking about Muslims.
  - Yes, other human beings.
  - No, we are talking about Muslims.
- (Interview K1: 6)

A few weeks after my interview with the vicar, the local newspaper *Sydsvenskan* published an interview with a few people opposed to Muslim cemeteries, in Börringe and in other parts of Skåne. The arguments vary:

There would have been room for more Christian graves. Muslims occupy a lot of space, since they do not cremate their bodies. Liquid from the dead bodies will spill out in the ponds where children are playing. (Abbas 2021)

Another critic was worried about the traffic situation and the increase of criminality that the additional graves were supposed to cause:

The traffic situation will be untenable when more people are coming here

by car. Then, of course, we have read about how loud and untidy the churchyards in Malmö are in general, with drug trade and prostitution. (Abbas 2021)

The initiator of the appeal in Börringe, Göran Cajhagen, is explicit about who he is against: 'We do not want Muslims and their perception of women here' (Abbas 2021).

The vicar of the parish insisted and explained that this is an assignment given to the church from the administrative authorities: 'We are obliged to prepare places for burial for all people ... everyone in Sweden pays a funeral fee, not only members of the Church of Sweden.' She emphasizes that Muslims are sisters and brothers and that 'we must meet and respect each other as human beings' (Abbas 2021).

The imam that the vicar invited to an information meeting told me in an interview:

The guy in the article, he was a bit old. He has his pride in Börringe. I see that. He has lived all his life there and he thinks that they will destroy the entire village. I told him: I understand you are prejudiced. It might be from our side that some of us are prejudiced too. That may be the case. I have explained that he does not have to be afraid. At least, no one can come out of the grave and haunt them at night. I can guarantee that much. You can sleep well at night. (Interview A3: 4)

The Börringe case is one of the more obvious examples of racism and islamophobia that I came across related to cemeteries, but it is far from the only instance of resistance to establishing cemeteries for other faith communities. The critique is

usually more sophisticated and focused on why it is less suitable to establish a certain cemetery precisely here, but the tendency is the same: we are not equal, not even when taking care of our dead ones. When Malmö parish was planning for a Muslim grave quarter in Bunkeflo, it was criticized with reference to the climate crisis:

We do not understand why one should have a ceremony in the mosque and then come here for the funeral. It feels foolish, both for the climate and for infrastructure. (Abbas 2021)

We have seen a few examples of how members of the majority population do not want people from minority backgrounds being buried nearby. This certainly touches on deep existential questions. Not being certain that there is room at a cemetery or not feeling welcome at that cemetery increases the sense of alienation in society. Simon Sorgenfrei is right in his remark that concern about whether one's self or someone close will have a proper and dignified funeral according to one's tradition is an offence detrimental to the relationship between the majority society and religious minorities (Sorgenfrei 2021: 41).

### Neutral cemeteries

Cemeteries are potential meeting places not only for people of different faiths, but also for those of no faith. In the field of inter-religious studies and theology of religions, the relationship to secular perspectives is arguably underdeveloped (see e.g. Hedges 2017 and Wirén 2021). In the present section, I shall explore secular humanist perspectives in relation to the cemetery. Then, in the following section, I shall discuss the issue of the inauguration of cemeteries. As we shall see, inauguration

brings together religious and secular perspectives in a way that is relevant to secular humanist perspectives as well as the question of cohabitation at the cemetery.

In May 2016, a neutral cemetery was established in Borlänge. The event made it to the headlines all over Sweden and the cemetery was described as the first of its kind. The neutral cemetery is located on the outskirts of Stora Tuna churchyard in Borlänge, and it is supposed to be free of any kind of religious symbols. One of the initiators was interviewed in the magazine *Kyrkogården*: 'A lot of people do not belong to any of the great religions. Not only among Swedes, but also among new immigrants. I wanted there to be a place for them too' (Möller 2016: 18–20). The chosen place has never been consecrated by the Church of Sweden, something that was referred to as an important circumstance. The established neutral cemetery was described as a milestone for the multi-religious society. A local resident with roots in Kurdistan explains:

It is fantastic. Borlänge has become like the place where I was born. A lot of people and groups of different religions and philosophies living together. It feels like my childhood neighbourhoods, albeit in Sweden. (Möller 2016: 20)

The separate and neutral cemetery is seen as an expression of how different groups can live together. Five years later, the local radio station P4 Dalarna followed up on their story. It turned out that only one person had been buried at the neutral cemetery during these years. P4 Dalarna described this as a failure, and the new vicar states that obviously, the need for a neutral cemetery was not strong. According to the vicar, it poses no problem



to be buried on other parts of the cemetery: 'It is independent of what your beliefs are [you can be buried] ... also on the common places [of the cemetery]. The only difference is that here, no religious symbols are allowed on the graves' (Sveriges radio 2021).

The Borlänge case raises questions regarding religious pluralism and religious freedom. It also touches on philosophical questions of religious neutrality. As already mentioned, it concerns a field within theology of religions that has not received much attention: the relation to atheist and secular views of life.

In the following, I shall explore some of the cemetery-related concerns raised by people of no faith. In this context, vicars of the Church of Sweden play an important role as responsible for many local cemeteries. Some of the vicars that I interviewed told me that they have regular conversations with humanist representatives. Others explained that it is difficult to maintain such a dialogue:

I find it interesting. On behalf of the local municipality, I went to an EU meeting on prejudice against people of faith. It was in Spain where the humanists are quite strong. So, when I came home, I asked the public official: do you include the humanists? She just replied: no. (Interview K2: 10f.)

The vicar's experience is that for the local municipality, dialogue with the humanists was not a priority. Even though there are no formal reasons to let the approach of the municipality govern the priorities of the Church of Sweden parish, it is likely to have a normative informal influence. Another vicar stated that there are regular meetings with representatives from the humanists on funeral and cemetery

matters. He recognized them as one association among others, but found it somewhat difficult to judge their numbers:

They have no electoral register. I don't know how many they represent. They are so eager to say: since 47 per cent belong to Church of Sweden, the other 53 per cent belong to us. But that is not the case. There are Syrian Orthodox, Copts, Pentecostals, Muslims, etc. (Interview K3: 6)

This tension between representing one's own members, in this case no more than 5000, and the significantly larger number of people who do not identify as religious, appears also in conversations with the humanists:

Primarily, I represent the members of the humanist organization. But I would say that we humanists reserve the right to some extent to represent anyone with some kind of secular humanistic life view. (Interview A5: 3)

Here one can sense tension in the relationship between the humanists and the religious communities. There are probably several reasons. First, since the humanists do not count as a faith community for Swedish authorities, they are not afforded a place in interfaith settings. The reluctance to put the humanists on an equal footing with other faith communities can be found on both sides. Second, so far, the humanists in Sweden have adopted a rather confrontational and religiously hostile approach in the public sphere. From the perspective of the humanists, the rationale has been to challenge unscientific religious views and the Church of Sweden's historically rooted privileges in society. Irrespective of where one stands on these

issues, it is easy to see that this approach is part of a mutual suspicion between the parties. Third, the secular life view that the humanists represent is widely acknowledged throughout society and is thus not unique to the humanists. In this respect, the 'dialogue' between secular and religious perspectives is not limited to dialogues where the humanists participate. Fourth, the humanist organization is a relatively small association and as such it is not represented locally everywhere.

The above can explain why the dialogue is limited, but it does not provide reasons for any of the parties to refrain from dialogue – on the contrary. For parishes responsible for the cemeteries, there are reasons to relate to the humanists as an organization with a particular view of life and to be sensitive to their preferences and perspectives. Additionally, there are reasons to work with secular perspectives on a more general level. Here, there are methods and approaches from the field of inter-religious encounters that the relationship between secular and religious perspectives would benefit from (Wirén 2021; Race and Hedges 2009). This implies that a secular perspective would not be treated as a 'neutral' position, but as one view of life among others. Internationally, there are examples of the polemics and the warfare being replaced by constructive dialogue and cooperation (see e.g. Hedges 2017).

Representatives of the humanists tell me that the organization of funerals and cemeteries work quite well and that their objections are of a more fundamental kind. They also confirm the picture that the inter-religious relationships are more developed than the ones with the humanists:

When Muslims have voiced their desires, it seems that they are taken more seriously ... when one realized

that places were needed for ritual cleansing and shrouding, then that was dealt with at once: aha, we'll try to fix that. (Interview A5: 2)

The humanist's experience was that his and his organization's views are not acknowledged to the same extent as when Muslims or Buddhists voice their concerns. Still, he stated that they had been respected and given what they asked for. For instance, he describes how Christian hymn books have been on display in the funeral chapel by default and that as a civil-funeral celebrant he had to ask for them to be removed:

I found that ... well, one should be careful with words. Perhaps it was not offensive but lacking in respect towards civil funerals. (Interview A5: 1)

Having made this remark, the procedure had been changed and the hymn books were no longer on display by default. 'On a single occasion, a crucifix was visible, but that was more of a mistake', according to the civil-funeral celebrant (Interview A5: 1).

Other areas mentioned by representatives from the humanists are Christian names and references in society. For instance, the fact that many people still call cemeteries churchyards, even when there is no church on site. Or, when chapels built for serving several faith communities are given Christian names: 'One of the chapels is named Master Olof's chapel. I find that ... somehow disrespectful' (Interview A5: 1). The 'Olof' in question is Olaus Petri and the chapel is in Örebro, Olaus Petri's hometown. Thus, there is a strong cultural and historic connection to Olaus Petri, who contributed much in sixteenth century Sweden as a reformer, bible translator,

humanist, political advisor and historian. Together with his brother, Laurentius Petri, he is without doubt a significant historical personage and part of the city's fame. He is closely tied to the reformation and to Swedish history. In Örebro, he is honoured by a big statue, and the main church bears his name, as does one of the schools. Here, then, there are several aspects to ponder. First, the line between what is religious and what are historic or cultural references is not easily drawn. To reject the name Olof as a Christian reference and thereby not suitable runs the risk of being unhistorical and insensitive to the fact that almost any famous Swede from the sixteenth century had church connections. Second, in some cases, even the possibility of an association with Christianity is deemed unsuitable. One could compare naming one of the major halls in parliament 'Palme hall'. Olof Palme was an important person during the twentieth century, and he was certainly more than a representative of the Swedish Social Democratic Party. Yet, it would be unwise to honour his memory precisely in the parliament hall if prominent persons from other parties were not shown the same honour. In concrete cases, such as naming a chapel 'Master Olof's chapel', one could reach one conclusion or the other, but for local municipalities and for Church of Sweden parishes, there are reasons to take seriously these kinds of questions of principle.

### **Inaugurating cemeteries**

What makes a cemetery a cemetery? What does the law say and what are the different faith communities' views? These questions apply to the theme of religious freedom and include the right to religious expressions and the right to escape those expressions. When the neutral cemetery in Borlänge was inaugurated, the fact

that no religious rituals took place was an important factor.

The Swedish funeral legislation (Begravningslag 1990: 1144) prescribes that cemeteries are 'areas or places that are legally arranged for hosting the remains of the deceased and have been used for this purpose'. Legally, no ritual or special kind of inauguration is needed. According to the Church of Sweden constitution, 'A new cemetery for members of the Church of Sweden is to be inaugurated. This applies also to the expansion of cemeteries' (Svenska kyrkan 2022: KO 27 chap. 4§). For this purpose, there is a ritual comprised of a reading from the bible, a prayer and the announcement that the cemetery is now inaugurated. In other words, it is a rather simple ritual, and it applies to cemeteries designated for members of the Church of Sweden. A representative from the humanists explained why he would not want to be buried in such a place:

There are people in Sweden today who consider it an awful thing to have their remains in consecrated ground, who really see it as a major abuse. Of course, I envision a bishop walking back and forth, mumbling some spells, and sprinkling some holy water. (Interview A5: 4)

There are reasons for the parishes responsible for managing the cemeteries to respect such a view and to honour it in the name of religious freedom. Yet, the quotation also serves as a reminder that the dialogue between the Church of Sweden and the humanist organization is limited and undeveloped. The notion that the soil is transformed through the sprinkling of water and the reading of religious spells, and thus turned into something that it was not before, is not in accordance with

the Church of Sweden view. Regarding the consecration of churches, the constitution says that it is 'set apart ... as a holy place' (Svenska kyrkan 2022: KO 27 chap. intr.). Nothing similar is said about the cemetery. It is 'a resting place for the dead ... and a space for devotion and reflection for the living' (*ibid.*). The inauguration of a cemetery means that from now on it is to be used for this particular purpose, not that the area as such is changed in any other way. From a Christian theological perspective, it is part of God's creation before as well as after the inauguration. This view is repeated in my interviews with vicars in the Church of Sweden:

It's not that one blesses the soil or anything. The readings are from the Old Testament, and they are more general and humanistic in their message. Here, people will have their final rest. There is something human about [it] ... all cultures in the world have taken care of their dead ones in one way or the other. (Interview K3: 7)

Neither the Church of Sweden constitution nor the vicars I interviewed support the idea that the ground before inauguration is profane and that it is turned holy through some kind of blessing. Rather, the inauguration serves the purpose of explaining that this piece of land is from now on dedicated to a particular purpose. A vicar in the Stockholm area emphasizes the pedagogical purpose of an inauguration:

What happens is that it becomes known to other people. When we performed this kind of ritual, it became publicly known. The papers wrote about it and people came here. That was what really happened: creating an awareness. (Interview K2: 8)

In this respect, the views of the different faith traditions seem to converge: the inauguration does not change the nature of the place in any way that resembles the humanist's portrayal. If anything changes the place, it is when the first dead body is laid in the ground. No religious ritual is necessary. This is true for the Plymouth Brethren as well as for the Buddhists, for Jews and for Christians, according to my interviews. As an imam puts it: from a theological perspective, in order to create a Muslim cemetery 'it is enough to start digging and bury a Muslim' (Interview A3: 1). This does not suggest that no kind of inauguration ever takes place, but it is not necessary for the establishment of a cemetery. Somewhat critically, a Jewish representative reminds herself of an inauguration of a Jewish part of a cemetery in Sweden:

People like ceremonies. I know that a place that used to be a meadow was inaugurated. That time, the gaffers ran a certain number of laps around the meadow and read a lot of prayers. But actually, this is not according to tradition. It is just nonsense. Nothing in the scriptures supports this. (Interview A1: 6)

The quotation illustrates the ambiguity of a religious tradition and the fact that new situations sometimes create new rituals.

In the study *Guds åker* (2016), Jan-Olof Aggedal investigates how inaugurations of cemeteries have been performed in Sweden between 2000 and 2012. He shows that almost three out of four new cemeteries or cemetery extensions consist of non-anonymous grave plots open to all. A majority of these have been inaugurated by a representative from the Church of Sweden, but about 25 per cent have not

been publicly inaugurated at all. In cases where the area is dedicated for other faith communities, representatives from these communities have been present. In legislation (Begravningsproposition 1990/91:10) it is particularly mentioned that people's preferences for being buried in consecrated or non-consecrated ground should be respected (Aggedal 2016: 104). On the basis of my interviews, one could question whether this formulation serves the needs of the faith communities: it is not the inauguration, but other practices related to the burial quarters that are of concern to them. However, this does not deviate from the fact that the question of inauguration needs to be broadened from the current standard options of inauguration in accordance with Church of Sweden ritual or no inauguration at all. As Aggedal shows, this is already taking place in many parishes. For the Church of Sweden, there are reasons to reflect on how a ritual could be formulated that give space for the rituals and texts from other faith traditions, without being syncretistic or confusing. Again, there are already experiences to draw from. One vicar related:

When we established the Muslim part, I did it [inaugurating] together with the imam. It was their suggestion. And I think that we said exactly the same thing. The text he read from the Qur'an and the one I read from our handbook. My speech was similar to his. Nothing fancy. I think these issues unite people regardless of faith or no faith. That it should be nice and with dignity. And respectful. (Interview K3: 7–8)

Another vicar who is about to establish a new cemetery with a Muslim quarter, a Christian Orthodox quarter and possibly

also a Catholic quarter, reflects on what the inauguration would look like:

I would like there to be representatives from the Catholic church, the Syrian Orthodox and the Muslim community. We will do it together. That's how I like to do it. (Interview K2: 8)

The vicar imagines a common inauguration where one walks from one quarter to the next and where each faith leader has a certain responsibility for his or her quarter.

In my conversation with the secular humanist who thought that the inauguration consisted of a priest sprinkling water and mumbling spells, I explained that this is not how it is done. He responded:

Obviously, one has not explained to us what inauguration is and what consecrated soil means. It's not easy for the rest of us to understand the Christians ... if it does not look like this, it is important to tell us. (Interview A5: 4)

The quotation illustrates the need for a continuous conversation and cooperation. In this case it does not matter who runs the cemeteries; co-existence requires a certain amount of knowledge of the other. In the relations between the Church of Sweden and the secular humanists, this seems to be rather undeveloped. The representative from the humanists argues that it is the Church of Sweden's responsibility to inform. Given the assignment from the authorities to run the cemeteries in most places in Sweden, it is reasonable that a particular responsibility lies with the Church of Sweden. However, in a pluralistic society, it could be argued that it is a common, mutual responsibility to listen and learn beyond the stereotypes and

caricatures. The humanist reflected on what an inauguration ought to look like:

To inaugurate a cemetery is not a Christian thing, in my view. It is not a Christian place. It is a place for all citizens. Therefore, no prayers should be read, no hymns sung. Then, of course, some kind of inauguration, but it should be aimed at all rather than just a religious thing. (Interview A5: 5)

An inauguration needs to be performed in a respectful way and in some cases, such as the inauguration of the neutral cemetery in Borlänge, it is reasonable that no prayers are read, and no hymns sung. In other cases, religious freedom is honoured when many religious and non-religious expressions are allowed.

## Conclusion

The cemetery is a public arena where interfaith encounters and religious differences are present in a particular way. As we have seen, views of the cemetery and related eschatological expectations have a bearing on relationships in the here and now. For a multi-cultural society, sensitivity to these questions is important. Such sensitivity requires knowledge in several areas and disciplines, including theology. By understanding motives for different communities' practices and preferences, one is more likely to respond in a way that respects the integrity of individuals, is informed by perspectives from different faith traditions, and works for society as a whole.

Is it a failure and a sign of lack of social cohesion when people choose to separate into different grave quarters and cemeteries depending on religious tradition? No, not necessarily, but it is also not a theological axiom that people of different faiths cannot cohabit in death. Sometimes, the reasons

have more to do with a sense of not feeling safe or respected in one's preferences. Thus, it is important to understand different rationales and thereby strengthen the sense of being included and listened to.

The relationship between people of faith and secular humanists is not very developed. This is true not only in Sweden but is a reality all over Europe. The cemeteries constitute a meeting place where this relationship comes to the fore. As we have seen, it is not necessarily easy, but it should be in the interest of authorities, people of faith and secular humanists alike to develop the dialogue and deepen the reflection of coexistence and mutual recognition. In this context, the experiences from inter-religious dialogue and interfaith cooperation could prove important resources.

The questions of death and burial discussed in this article have consequences for integration, social cohesion and one's sense of belonging in society. This should come as no surprise. After all, who wants to live in a society where one's expressions of being with the dead are not welcome? ■



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