

Forest burials in Denmark

Nature, non-religion and spirituality

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Burial in the forest is a recent, non-confessional alternative to the established cemeteries owned and run by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. Danish forest burials fulfil common criteria for non-religion and they are an example of institutionalized non-religion. Their non-confessional character is emphasized in the information material directed towards potential buyers of forest burial plots.

Forest burials appeal to both non-members and members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church; in fact, nearly two-thirds of those who had a forest burial by the end of 2021 were members of the church. I have participated in seven tours conducted at different forest burial sites, and I have interviewed nearly fifty participants about their motives for considering buying a forest burial plot. In my analyses, I structure the interviews along the three dimensions, *knowing*, *doing*, and *being*. I found that the motives for people to choose a forest burial reflected both non-religious and religious/spiritual considerations. Forest burials exemplify a religious complexity where nature, non-religion, religion, and spirituality intersect. In this complexity, I see the institution of forest burial as a non-religious vessel, which the buyers fill with their individual thoughts and acts.

BURIAL IN THE FOREST and not in a cemetery is a new practice in Denmark. In 2008, the Danish parliament debated some proposed amendments to the existing law on burial and cremation.¹ The amendments

1 'L75 Forslag til lov om ændring af lov om

were passed unanimously by parliament on 22 May 2008, and the amended law gave the legal foundation for carrying out forest burials in Denmark.² The debate in parliament clearly reflected how a significant motive for the proposed amendments was to allow forest burials as what they called a 'religiously neutral' and more nature-like alternative to the established cemeteries.

The amended law brought Denmark in line with a number of other European countries, where natural burial grounds are gaining a footing as part of an overall international trend away from traditional

begravelse og ligbrænding'. 1. behandling (First parliamentary debate on the proposed amendments to the law on burial and cremation), 28.2.2008. This and other legal material including parliamentary proceedings are retrievable through the governmental website <<https://www.retsinformation.dk/>>.

2 'Bekendtgørelse af lov om begravelse og ligbrænding'. 2008. No. 586 in *Lovtidende A*, 25.6.2008. The law permits burial of biodegradable urns with ashes from cremated bodies in a forest burial site. Coffin inhumation requires the presence of a chapel (or a church) on the burial site. The amended law also eased the procedure for allowing ash scattering in the sea.

cemeteries (Clayden and Dixon 2007; Balonier *et al.* 2019).³ In Britain, the first woodland burial ground opened in Carlisle in 1993, and by 2010, there were more than two hundred registered natural burial grounds in the UK (Clayden *et al.* 2015: 17–33). In the southern part of the Netherlands, a natural burial site opened in 2003 (Groote and Klaassens 2010). The British and Dutch natural burial practice is mostly to bury the whole body in a biodegradable coffin or shroud to be left for decomposition, but cremated ashes may also be interred (Clayden and Dixon 2007; Groote and Klaassens 2010; Rumble *et al.* 2014).

During the 1990s, Switzerland opened up the option to bury cremated ashes under a tree in a private wood, and the Swiss practice inspired the establishment of the first forest burial sites in Germany in 2001 (Assig 2007: 13–14). The concept and practices of the German forest burials under the aegis of Friedwald are described by Sylvie Assig (pp. 13–18) and in more detail by Stephanie Rüter (2011: 50–67).⁴

The Danish forest burials are modelled on the German examples, but they are not identical. As in Germany, only ashes from cremated bodies may be buried in the forest. Some of the German sites are marked with religious symbols, such as a

wooden cross, whereas religious symbols or any other monuments are not accepted at the Danish forest burial sites. Both in Germany and Denmark, the places where the urns are buried must not be decorated, temporarily or permanently. However, at most Danish burial sites, it is permitted to mark the spot on the ground with a small, standardized horizontal granite stone plaque with the name of the deceased.⁵

The strictly non-confessional character of the Danish forest burial sites is important and it was a key motivation for amending the existing law, as explained above. To fully understand this issue, it must be realized that there is an extraordinarily tight relation between the Danish state and the Evangelical Lutheran Church (*folkekirken*).⁶ This is also reflected in the legal framework for burials in Denmark, which is expounded below.

The legal frame for burials in Denmark

In Denmark, the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs is the national authority on all cases of disposal of human corpses, regardless of the deceased's religious adherence ('Bekendtgørelse af lov om begravelse og ligbrænding' 2020). In consequence of this, all burial places in Denmark (with no exception) must be authorized by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. This also applies to the forest burial sites and to the four cemeteries owned and run by denominations outside *folkekirken*.⁷

3 This is a development that can be traced back to the establishment of the Mount Auburn 'rural cemetery' in 1831 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The landscape architecture of Mount Auburn has served as a model for many later urban, park-like cemeteries in the United States and elsewhere (Sachs 2010). An example from the Nordic countries is Skogskyrkogården (the Woodland Cemetery) in Stockholm (Constant 1994).

4 A parallel organization is RuheForst (see their website).

5 The municipal forest burial sites in Odense and Randers only allow anonymous burials.

6 The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the national church of Denmark, and it has a special position in the constitution. By the end of the second quarter of 2022, it counted 72.3 per cent of the population as members.

7 These four cemeteries are the Reformed churchyard in Fredericia, the Jewish ceme-

The large majority of the more than two thousand cemeteries in Denmark are traditional churchyards typically associated with a rural or small-town parish church, and these cemeteries are owned and run by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In addition, there are the newer municipal cemeteries, which are found mainly in the bigger towns and cities. Although these cemeteries are not owned and operated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church but by the local municipality, the land is still consecrated by a church ritual.

Both the traditional churchyards and the municipal cemeteries allow non-confessional burials as well as burials performed according to other religious traditions than those of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In the municipal cemeteries, such graves are often placed in separate sections. However, the entire cemetery must still be ritually consecrated by a pastor from the Evangelical Lutheran Church before it can be put to use.

The Danish forest burial sites operate according to a contract between the owner of the forest and the local municipality. The burial sites with their bylaws must still be approved by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, even though they are exempted from being ritually consecrated. This exemption was a crucial element in the amended legislation of 2008.⁸

To some initial surprise among the owners of the forest burial sites, forest bur-

tery in Copenhagen, the Moravian congregation in Christiansfeld, and the Muslim cemetery in Brøndby.

8 All suppliers of forest burial sites in Denmark advertise on their webpages that the ground is not consecrated and that all beliefs are accepted (see Dansk Skovbegravelse; Et sidste hvilested i skoven; 'Skovbegravelse Kohaveskoven'; 'Søndre Urnebegravelsesplads').

ials in Denmark do not only attract people who identify as non-religious; many buyers of forest grave plots are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Rothenborg 2015; Mathiasen 2019; Lilja 2020; Munk 2021). Actually, about two-thirds of those who have been buried through the leading operator of forest burials, Skovbegravelse ApS, were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.⁹ However, this does not necessarily give an indication of their religiosity, because Danes may be members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church for a number of other reasons than personal religiosity (Andersen *et al.* 2019).

The scope of this article is first to present the institutional establishment of forest burials in Denmark, thereby contributing new knowledge to the international literature on natural burials. I will then mention some important cultural and theoretical trends on nature, non-religion, and spirituality – trends that constitute the historical and general framework for analysing the empirical material on forest burials. Then I shall investigate and analyse the different motives for people considering a burial in the forest instead of choosing the conventional cemetery or perhaps ash scattering in the sea. This new primary material was gathered through field studies with participatory observations and brief interviews at different forest burial sites, supplemented by interviews with leading actors – all to be specified later where relevant. The findings are structured according to three dimensions of knowing, doing, and being, which are rooted in works on ethnic and religious identity.

9 Email to Margit Warburg from the owner of Skovbegravelse ApS, Jannik Ahlefeldt-Laurvig, 2.3.2022.

Establishing the first forest burial sites in Denmark

Among the Nordic countries, only Denmark allows forest burials. These are all placed in mature woodland designated as forest reserve, which implies that the land must always be covered by forest. The burial site is not demarcated from the rest of the forest, and the vegetation is that of the forest itself.

From around 2004, a retired Danish businessman, Preben Dalgaard, enthusiastically lobbied for allowing forest burials in Denmark, using his private company, Løvfald I/S (Leaf Fall) as a vehicle (Tinggaard 2008; Rothenborg 2015). His efforts were specifically mentioned during the debate in the parliament in 2008.¹⁰ However, Dalgaard's plans for the role of Løvfald I/S did not in the end materialize, and Løvfald I/S was dissolved by the end of 2010.¹¹

The first forest burial site in Denmark was established by the municipality of Odense, and after its opening in 2014, it grabbed considerable public interest (Rothenborg 2015). However, so far (mid-2022), only one other municipal forest burial site has been established.¹² The field has more or less been left to private initiatives, but in tight collaboration with the local municipalities, which have the overall legal responsibility for the proper handling of the burials. The first to establish such an enterprise was Henrik Count Ahlefeldt-Laurvig from the estate of Stensballegaard in East Jutland. In agreement with Horsens municipality, he applied to the Ministry of

Ecclesiastical Affairs for authorization for a burial site and its bylaws in 2016, and in early 2018 the Stensballegaard forest burial site opened (Fodgaard 2019; Mathiasen 2019). Other forest owners, mostly among large estates, soon followed suit and joined forces with Ahlefeldt-Laurvig under his limited liability company, Skovbegravelse ApS. This company, which today is run by Jannik Count Ahlefeldt-Laurvig, has gained a position as the leading operator of forest burials in Denmark. On behalf of the clients, the company takes care of all the administrative work, including maintaining the common website skovbegravelse.nu, assistance with applications to the authorities and registration of the individual graves.¹³ The individual forest owners allocate a piece of land in the forest to a burial site and take care of the practical work connected with the site, including putting up access signs, marking of the trees and digging the holes for the urns.

By December 2022, fifteen private forest burial places under skovbegravelse.nu had been approved, and seven more applications are pending ('Et sidste hvilested i skoven'). In addition, another company, Dansk Skovbegravelse ApS, offers a forest burial site near the town of Fredericia in East Jutland.¹⁴

10 See note 1.

11 See the public register of companies in Denmark ('Løvfald I/S').

12 Søndre Urnebegravelsesplads in Randers opened in 2020 ('Lykkeshøj Skov klar til urnebisættelser' 2020).

13 Interview with Jannik Count Ahlefeldt-Laurvig and his assistant Marianne Skott Nielsen followed by a visit to Stensballegaard forest burial site, 21.1.2022.

14 The owner of Dansk Skovbegravelse ApS told me that he preferred to be independent and not to accommodate himself within the overall marketing framework of Ahlefeldt-Laurvig's company. Interview with Sven Schou, followed by a visit to the burial site in Hagenør forest, 23.1.2022.

Nature, non-religion and spirituality

The Danish forest burial sites combine burial in nature with an explicit non-religious basis for the burial site. However, as mentioned above, the concept of forest burial attracts a wider audience than just those who primarily seek the opportunity to be buried in non-consecrated soil. The forest is a part of nature, which may accommodate a variety of thoughts and feelings. Among these are national romanticism, different forms of spirituality, pantheism, bodily recycling, and local belonging. This is what the Germans with a telling word call *Waldbewusstsein*, which can roughly be translated as ‘forest awareness’ (Lehman 2001; Rüter 2011: 42–4).

The development towards burials in nature also complies with a growing public concern for ecology, sustainability, and a positive identification with the idea that the remains will be part of the natural cycle of nutrients (Rumble *et al.* 2014). In an interview, dealing with the Odense forest burial site mentioned above, a team leader from the municipality emphasized this overriding idea of the forest burial: ‘It is, of course, the decay of life and its resurrection that we are trying to illustrate here – a forest that largely takes care of itself’ (Rothenborg 2015).

Forest burial is basically non-religion

Since prehistory, burials of human remains have been a central element in what we call religion. However, the explicit non-confessional basis for the Danish forest burials classifies the institution of forest burial as non-religion. A forest burial in Denmark is an ‘other’ to religion but also *related* to religion, thus fitting with leading definitions of non-religion (Lee 2012; Cragun 2016).

The academic interest in non-religion was spurred by observations from inter-

national social surveys. They showed that since around 2000, the number and percentages of respondents who considered themselves non-religious and/or reported that they were not affiliated any form of organized religion, were rising considerably (Hayes 2000).¹⁵ Closer studies indicated that this group of non-religious and/or non-affiliated was a heterogeneous group ranging from convinced atheists to people who regarded themselves as more or less committed to various spiritual ideas (Bullivant and Lee 2012; Lee 2014).

Non-religion is a wider concept than atheism, and atheism in itself seems to express a variety of more or less ambivalent identities (Lee 2015). The conceptual diversity of non-religion means that the definition and delimitation of non-religion will be fuzzy, just as religion itself is a fuzzy concept (Jong 2015). However, working with concepts having fuzzy definitions on the general level does not preclude the usefulness of these concepts in specific cases, as long as their meaning is clarified in the particular context.

Non-religion in connection with death and burial is well known; for example a civil funeral, where the bereaved themselves organize a ceremony with no religious content, or it may be a funeral organized by a ceremony leader from Humanist Association. From Sweden, Karin Jarnkvist (2021) gives an example of a funeral where a focus on nature can be understood to be a way to construct non-religion in intersection with Swedishness.

15 These respondents were first lumped together under the convenient label *nones*, but the term carries negative connotations, which meant that many respondents refrained from choosing that category in social-survey studies (Lee 2014).

What makes forest burials non-religion is the non-consecrated ground, the absence of religious symbols, and the lack of a prescribed ceremony. If there is a burial ceremony, it may be agnostic, spiritual of some kind, or religious, and it is usually organized privately. Occasionally, the ceremony may involve a ceremonial specialist; for example, I learned from one of the forest owners that once or twice, a local pastor had participated in the ceremony. In other cases, a representative from the Humanist Association or a member of Forn Siðr (the ancient Norse religion) attended the burial of the urn.

I suggest that Danish forest burials are an exemplary case of *institutionalized* non-religion. The forest burial institution is a non-religious vessel, which the bereaved can fill with thoughts and acts of their own. The vessel metaphor serves to stress that the individual motives for people to choose a forest burial may or may not be related to a non-religious worldview; they may as well be motivated by spiritual or religious ideas.

Parallel considerations apply to the Norwegian institutionalized practice of having the ashes of the dead scattered in the wind in a natural landscape. The practice is in itself religiously neutral – some of the bereaved have a religious funeral ceremony first, while others may or may not have a private ceremony at the site where the scattering takes place (Høeg 2019).

The complexity of (non-)religiosity among Danes

From the European Value Studies we can get a systematic, comparative picture of the variety of religiosity among the Danes and its change over time (Andersen *et al.* 2019). The picture is characterized by stability or only slow changes. While the percentage of the population who report that they

are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church decreased from 89 per cent in 1990 to 77 per cent in 2017, the frequency of church-going is stable, with about half of the population going to church at least occasionally and/or to the high feasts. With regard to personal beliefs, the percentage of those who are non-religious is also stable and comprise close to one fourth of the population.

One of the noteworthy changes is a slow decrease in the percentage of the population who believe in a personal god, while there is an increase in the belief in a divine force of some kind and in reincarnation. To get a sharper picture of these changes, Peter B. Andersen, Jakob Erkman, and Peter Gundelach (2019) made a longitudinal cluster analysis and identified a cluster of respondents whom they denoted spiritual and who did not believe in God. This cluster group had grown from 8 to 11 per cent of the population in the period 1990 to 2016; they were younger than the average population and better educated.

Religious complexity refers to the simultaneous presence of several and sometimes seemingly contradictory religious trends (Furseth 2018). Overall, the results from the European Value Studies reflect a religious complexity, where people may be religious according to some indicators and at the same time non-religious according to other indicators (Andersen *et al.* 2019). For example, the spiritual cluster combines beliefs of a religious nature with a possible indicator for non-religiosity, namely lack of belief in God.

Forest burial and nature spirituality

Traditional European folklore associates the forest with uncanny feelings at night and different kinds of potentially dangerous spiritual forces and beings, such as elves, goblins, and trolls. With romanticism

in the late 1700s and the first two-thirds of the 1800s, the fear of the forest gradually yielded to more positive feelings of aesthetic and/or spiritual nature represented by *avant garde* philosophers, poets, and painters of the time.¹⁶ These feelings fed into rising nationalism in Europe, and the period saw a coupling between nature, the nation, and the people, often with noticeable elements of spirituality. The works by the scholars in folkloristics and religion, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1785–1863 and 1786–1859) and Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831–80), also contributed to this coupling between nature and national identity.

The influence of romanticism on the popular perception of the forest is clearly seen in the landscape paintings of the 1800s. The German painters loved the wild mixed forest dominated by pine and spruce trees or of the foggy mountains – with Casper David Friedrich (1774–1840) as a leading figure. However, Danish romantic painters preferred motives of a beech forest in summer daylight, and the beech became the national tree.¹⁷ These conceptions of the ideal forest were not static but changed with time, and both in Germany and Denmark, it is not the primeval forest, but the cultivated, productive forest that became



Figure 1. A grave plot in Saltø forest burial site, ready for the urn. Note the mature, regular beech trunks and the clear forest floor.

16 I may here mention just a few, such as the philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), the poet and natural philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), the philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1738–1864), the poets Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850), and Emily Brontë (1818–48), and the painters Casper David Friedrich (1774–1840) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851).

17 The beech is also praised in many Danish national songs, including one of the two official national hymns.

idealized as ‘nature’ (Imort 2005; Jensen 1999). It is noteworthy that nearly all the private forest burial sites in Denmark are placed in mature beech forests where the trees have tall regular trunks and the forest floor is cleared of secondary vegetation.¹⁸ This conveys an image of the Danish forest, which is at variance with the ideal forest images of the other Nordic countries.¹⁹

18 The only exception is the forest burial site on the rocky island of Bornholm, situated in a relatively young oak forest.

19 Colleagues from other Nordic countries have reacted to my photos of Danish forest burial sites by protesting: ‘This is not a forest, this is a park!’

In his book, *Granskogsfolk* (People of the Spruce Forest), David Thurfjell gives a sweeping historical analysis of the background for the modern, urban Swedes' perception of nature (Thurfjell 2020). Drawing upon his qualitative interviews with 72 Swedes whom he encountered when walking in the forests around Stockholm and Uppsala, Thurfjell characterized their relation to nature as a mix of nature romanticism and individualistic consumer culture (pp. 9–10, 142–88). Given the cultural and social similarities between Sweden and Denmark, it is not surprising that generally, Thurfjell's considerations also apply to the Danes' perception of nature, but the differences in the type of forest in the two countries obviously influence nature aesthetics differently.

Romanticism also spurred a spiritual adoption of nature and in particular of the forest. There were strong connections between poets and philosophers in Germany and in New England in the first half of the 1800s. For example, a key concept in German nature poetry and painting at that time was the spiritual value of experiencing loneliness in the forest – in German *Waldeinsamkeit* (forest solitude).²⁰ This concept was adopted by the influential American philosopher and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82).²¹ Emerson, who was the mentor of Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), was also a leading

figure in the New England philosophical-religious movement, transcendentalism. Transcendentalism was based on a pantheistic view of human and nature, which can be traced back to Baruch Spinoza and Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Its heritage, in particular through Thoreau's famous writings on living in *Waldeinsamkeit* in the woods of New England, is clearly discernible in qualitative and quantitative studies of nature spirituality in today's Western society (Lehmann 2001; Williams and Harvey 2001; Ashley 2007; Hodder 2011; Thurfjell 2020: 253–9).²²

Investigating Danish forest burials

To attract customers to the forest burial sites, the owners regularly conduct tours at the sites. Here, the visitors may learn more about the concept and eventually select a grave plot among the trees reserved for burial. These trees are marked on the north side of the trunks by a small dark green metal disc with a number and sometimes also a letter (see Figure 2). There is space for about twenty urns buried in a regular pattern around each tree.

I participated in seven such events around Denmark in 2020 and 2021, and I briefly interviewed the participants – as many as I could make contact with – during the event.²³ In total, I spoke with nearly fifty participants. Most people intended

20 Ideally, a person should feel *Waldeinsamkeit* in the moments when alone, surrounded by the forest, and feeling totally at peace in an inherent connection to nature.

21 'There [i.e. in the woods] the great Planter plants / Of fruitful worlds the grain, / And with a million spells enchants / The souls that walk in pain.' From the poem 'Waldeinsamkeit', 1858, by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

22 Interviews with Estonians on the significance of the forest for their national and religious identity also mention the existential merits of being alone in the forest (Rommel and Jonuks 2021).

23 Saltø (Næstved), 17.5.2020 and 20.6.2021, Paradisbakkerne (Bornholm), 7.11.2020, Ledreborg (Lejre), 6.12.2020, Petersgaard (Vordingborg), 27.3.2021, Katstrup (Holbæk), 10.4.2021, Øland (Jammerbugt), 31.10.2021. The municipalities are in parentheses.



Figure 2. A burial tree marker at Ledreborg forest burial site.

to use the plot for themselves, but a few of them were looking for a plot for one of their parents. The interviews were open and concentrated on the interviewees' motives for considering buying a forest burial plot.

Usually, I asked the interviewees if they were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. This question gave rise to a noteworthy difference in the informants' reactions, depending on whether they were members or not. The non-members happily answered no, and remarked additionally that they had resigned long ago. They clearly found it a natural question to pose to people who were interested in a forest burial. This indicated that these interviewees put weight on the non-confessional character of a forest burial.

This stood in contrast to the reactions from those who were members. When I asked them, they said yes, but they were also often a little confused about the question, indicating that they did not really understand why I was asking. It seemed as if they regarded their religious membership as not having anything to do with a burial in the forest. This implies that for those interviewees a forest burial was clearly compatible with their religious belonging, even though the great majority of the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church chose a conventional cemetery.

Knowing, doing, and being - a structuring of motives for a forest burial

To choose a forest burial is an unconventional choice, and it is not a trivial matter. It involves critical questions of identity and religious belonging. The interviews touched upon important aspects of the informants' identity, and I chose to structure the material according to the dimensions of *knowing*, *doing*, and *being*.

These three dimensions were introduced in the study of ethnic identity by the sociolinguist Joshua A. Fishman (1980). Ethnic *knowing* is a worldview that helps members of a particular ethnic group to clarify eternal questions, rationalizes the group's destiny and offers a guide to universal truths (p. 90). The dimension of *doing* is the performance of acts – and in some cases *not* performing particular acts – that have the meaning and purpose of preserving, confirming, and augmenting collective identities (p. 88). Finally, ethnicity in its traditional and taken-for-granted state could be called individuals' intuitive experience of *being* (p. 85).

Inspired by Fishman's structuring of ethnicity, I have suggested that the three dimensions of knowing, doing, and being were well suited to an analysis of religious

identity, and I applied them in my extensive study of the Danish Baha'i community (Warburg 2006: 331–73). Together with two colleagues, I also characterized Danish majority identity according to these three dimensions (Gundelach *et al.* 2008: 159–64).

Fishman did not refer to earlier literature when he launched the knowing, doing, and being categorization, but the three terms combined are actually used in other fields, too. There are, for example, many cases of the use of the three dimensions in pedagogical literature, including leadership training, and here they seem to be taken as illustrative and generally known idioms and parts of common usage (Warburg 2021).

To my knowledge, the three dimensions can be ascribed first to the philosopher of religion Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher used knowing, doing, and being as an expression of piety, a grasping of the love of God with all your human faculties (Merklinger 1993: 60–1).²⁴

Fishman's and my sociological use of the three dimensions does not involve any idealization of expressing identity through all three of them in combination. I have stressed that they are manifested in both attitudes and behaviour and that they are not mutually exclusive but may supplement

each other (Warburg 2006: 332–5). Sometimes one dimension is particularly emphasized, sometimes another, and sometimes two together, depending on the specific context.

For the present study, I use the following contextual definitions of the three dimensions:

- *Knowing* requires that the informant expresses some reflective or existential considerations of the choice of a forest burial; for example, why he or she has decided that the urn shall not be buried in the local churchyard, as would be the common choice, or why he or she does not intend to choose the alternative possibility of ash scattering in the sea.²⁵
- *Doing* is for example that the informant expresses his or her thoughts about specific actions in connection with the burial of the urn, for example holding a ceremony at the site.
- *Being* is about the informant's feelings about a burial in the forest; for example that the forest offers a special aesthetic or spiritual feeling. It may also be a special linking to the history or identity of the nation.

Examples of motives and their structuring

In the following, I will quote from the interview material gathered from my field trips. The informants were contacted randomly, and as qualitative interviews, I consider that they yielded sufficient variation in the motives to cover the religious complexity associated with the forest burials. The interviews were often brief as they

24 Schleiermacher's allusion to the three concepts is found in the epilogue to his famous treatise *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799, rev. 1806, 1821) – in its later English translation, *On Religion*, knowing, doing, and being are mentioned as follows: 'I was sure you would there find, what I would willingly show you, that, in the very type of religion, which in Christianity you so often despise, you are rooted with your whole knowing, doing, and being' (Schleiermacher 1893: 177).

25 In 2021, more than 9 per cent of all cremated ashes in Denmark were scattered in the sea (see 'Askespredning'). Ashes must only be scattered in the open sea, not in lakes or elsewhere in nature.

took place during the walk to and from the forest owners' presentation of the forest burial concept and the practicalities for eventually acquiring a grave plot. There were few opportunities to delve more deeply into the informants' thoughts and feelings about forest burials; however, the excerpts of some of the interviews do give a more detailed impression of the informants' considerations about choosing a forest burial. The Danish material is noteworthy in this respect, compared to other empirical studies of natural burial in continental Europe.

In the first three examples, the respondents are clearly irreligious, and their motives fit with the knowing dimension. The first is:

A single man of about 65 years of age – retired without a wife and children, but he had a brother with family. He was not religious and not a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and he explained, 'therefore a place like this suits me particularly well'. (Ledreborg, 6.12.2020)

In the next two examples, both interviewees also express knowing motives, and they both take an active position on why they had not chosen the alternative ash scattering.

A woman about 70 years: 'I have thought a lot about how I want to be buried. I do not believe in anything, I am not a member of *folkekirken*, and I would rather not lie in consecrated ground. One of the reasons why I have chosen a forest burial is because it is not consecrated ground. I do not believe the world is spiritual, and I do not believe in reincarnation. I do not want to go to church prior to setting

down the urn. The sea has never told me anything, so I do not want to have the ashes scattered.' (Saltø, 20.6.2021)

Elderly man who was walking badly, so while his wife and son were looking for a good tree for him, he was sitting on a firewood pile while talking to me: 'I am on bad terms with all religions. They are causes of all evil. I resigned many years ago from *folkekirken*. I live in Korsør [a port in West Zealand], so I have also thought about proposing to scatter my ashes in the sea, but my children get seasick, and I love nature. My son lives nearby, so even though I am a Korsør-boy, I will stay here.' (Kattrup, 10.4.2021)

The following three interviews represent cases where the informants clearly regarded the concept of forest burial to be compatible with religion. The first example is an expression of doing, but combined with reflections of the knowing kind.

A middle-aged mother with her daughter from Svejle [a nearby town]: 'I believe in God and I have made a plan. My husband wanted to be buried in the churchyard and so he was, but I want to be buried here. My plan is that my urn should be present in the church, and then after church, we can drive directly to the forest. I am a member of three gospel choirs, so I wonder if one of them will come and sing here.' (Kattrup, 10.4.2021)

The two next examples are primarily being, and the informants express some kind of pantheistic spirituality.

A married couple in their 60s. They were both members of the Evangelical

Lutheran Church, and they would definitely have a service in the church before being buried in the forest. They were very sure of that. The wife said: 'nature is also divine and there is something sacred about nature. Maybe this is especially true in Denmark.' (Petersgaard, 27.3.2021)

A middle-aged couple who were both members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: 'We love the forest.' They expected first to have a church ceremony and then have the urn set down in the forest. 'We become part of nature', 'One's soul can feel at home here.' (Paradisbakkerne, 7.11.2020)

In my interview with Ahlefeldt-Laurvig (the owner of Skovbegravelse ApS), he and his assistant referred to some statements from buyers of burial plots.²⁶ A couple had said that being buried in the forest meant that 'they would be united with the tree, grow with the tree and come all the way up to the canopy where they could look up and out'. The assistant told of another couple where the husband wanted to have his ashes scattered in the fjord while the wife wished to be buried in the forest; therefore, she chose a tree high up on the hill where she would be able to wave to the husband from the canopy. These statements also represent forest spirituality.

Not all motives for choosing a forest burial fit meaningfully into the scheme of knowing, doing, and being. For example, several informants argued that it was important for them that their relatives did not have to keep the grave tidy and free

of weeds, as they may feel obliged to do in a common churchyard with individual graves. This motive was also mentioned by informants in a study of the German forest burials (Assig 2007: 41). However, this concern for the relatives does not seem to be an issue of identity.

A few informants mentioned as a motive that burial in the forest is cheaper than a burial in the local churchyard, but to interpret this as an expression of identity seems a little far-fetched.

An important motive mentioned by several of those interested in a forest burial was that it was a *local* forest. For example, two women and a man, all three from Buerup, a village near Katstrup, said:

'It is not religion as such, but we love the forest. We are walking in the forest every day and our children eventually do not have to look after the gravesite. We are the last generation to care for graves. But it must be exactly this forest.' The man added, 'I am not much in favour of *folkekirken*.' (Katstrup, 10.4.2021)

The next example also stresses the significance of local belonging:

Two female siblings said, 'Both our father and our brother have been forest workers here. I am not religious, so it is a good place for me', said one sister. 'I am religious', said the other sister, 'but it is pure nostalgia for us.' They both agreed on the latter. (Katstrup, 10.4.2021)

The relation to the local is something that is also recognized at conventional churchyard burials.

When I occasionally asked if a forest burial had anything to do with religion,

26 Interview with Jannik Count Ahlefeldt-Laurvig and his assistant Marianne Skott Nielsen, 21.1.2022.

several interviewees answered: 'It has nothing to do with religion.' Other people answered: 'It's what you put into it.' This last answer supports the vessel metaphor outlined above: the forest burial as an institution is clearly non-religious, but it is also open to religious and spiritual thoughts and acts.

Discussion and conclusion

As a sociologist of religion, I noted with interest that forest burials in Denmark had a slow start after the very positive parliamentary process, which made this burial form possible in 2008. Preben Dalgaard with Løvfald I/S was already prepared to seize the moment, but he did not succeed. There may be several explanations for this, but it became clear to me during my study of forest burials that to succeed required the joint interest and efforts of both a municipality and a local forest owner. The first successful mover in the field was Odense municipality, which had the advantage of already owning a suitable piece of forest (Rothenborg 2015).²⁷ Among the private operators, Ahlefeldt-Laurvig apparently had the right connections with the municipality as well as to other estates, and he realized that sharing the marketing and administrative costs among the forest owners would be necessary for a profitable business.

Overall, the nearly fifty interviews showed that forest burials attract both members and non-members of the Evangelical

Lutheran Church. Compared with the studies of German forest burials referred to above (Assig 2007; Rüter 2011; Balonier *et al.* 2019), I reached a much higher number of informants among prospective users of forest burials, which allowed the overall structuring in terms of knowing, doing, and being. Many, primarily among the non-members of the church, followed the knowing dimension by arguing that a forest burial is an ideologically attractive alternative to a burial in a conventional cemetery with its consecrated soil. For some informants, the prospects of being buried in a forest gave spiritual meaning, thus following the being dimension. Their expressions of spirituality, brief as they were, are in line with Western cultural forms of forest spirituality since romanticism. Other informants put weight on the rituals they had planned in connection with the burial of the urn, thus following the doing dimension.

The demand for forest burials is characterized by both pull and push factors. It is clear from the interviews that the forest itself is the central pull factor. This is hardly surprising: forests are popular among Danes and increasingly so.²⁸ Local forests exert a particular attraction (Hansen-Møller and Oustrup 2004). Several interviewees emphasized that it was important for them to be buried in a forest that was close to where they lived or where their relatives lived.

With regard to the question of consecrated ground, this was definitely a pull factor for many of the non-religious informants while those who were church members were not concerned about this

27 The number of forest burials in Odense per year is: 2014 (22); 2015 (26); 2016 (27); 2017 (25); 2018 (30); 2019 (28); 2020 (27); 2021 (20); in total 205 forest burials. Of this total, 120 (59 per cent) were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Email to Margit Warburg with statistics from Odense municipality, 10.8.2022.

28 In 1994, Danes aged 15 to 76 years paid about 75 million visits to a forest; this number had increased from 60 million in 1976 (Jensen and Koch 2004).

issue. In that respect, these church members are backed up by Lutheran theology, although few of them would probably know. Most contemporary Lutheran thinking does not consider burial in consecrated ground to be of significance, and the tradition of consecrating a cemetery by a prescribed ritual can be seen as a relic from Catholicism. The essential rite of passage is the funeral in the church, and the deposition of the urn with the cremated ash is not of theological relevance.

As push factors, several interviewees mentioned opposition to the ordered classical graveyard, to organized religion as such, or to ash scattering in the sea. In addition, the claimed higher costs of burials in some churchyards including the associated costs of regular maintenance of the grave – or alternatively, the future burden on the family to keep the grave tidy is a push factor for some interviewees.

Forest burials in Denmark exemplify institutionalized non-religion, and the concept interests both non-members and members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. It seems that forest burials fulfil demands which the existing cemeteries do not satisfy. The yearly number of forest burials in Denmark still amounts to less than one per cent of the burials at the conventional cemeteries.²⁹ However, the data so far indicate a significant growth.³⁰

29 Aggregated statistics on burials in Danish cemeteries are difficult to retrieve. My best estimate is that the number must be more than 90 per cent of all deaths in Denmark. According to Statistics Denmark, the number of deaths in Denmark was 54,645 in 2020 and 57,152 in 2021. Thus, the number of burials in Danish cemeteries probably exceeds 50,000. One per cent of that number is 500.

30 For skovbegravelse.nu there were 60 burials in 2020 and 200 in 2021 with

It is therefore likely that in Denmark, forest burials will become a distinct alternative to the existing cemeteries on the one hand, and to ash scattering in the sea on the other hand. ■

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about two-thirds being members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 2020, there were 211 purchased and 166 reserved plots. In 2021, there were 642 purchased plots and 745 reserved plots. Email to Margit Warburg from Jannik Ahlefeldt-Laurvig, 2.3.2022.

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