


The role of flowers in the personalization of Christian funerals in Denmark

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Flowers are a common element in Danish funerals. Drawing on fieldnotes, interviews and survey data on funeral practices in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark as well as theories of ritualization, meaning-making and practices, this article shows that flowers are not only a *sine qua non* in the funerals but are also used to make them more personal and to produce and reproduce social relations. Additionally, flowers are material objects and acquire their social meaning in the right ceremonial context. Outside this context they have no inherent meaning and might even obstruct the ceremony because, as physical objects, they have to be put somewhere in ceremonial space. Paradoxically, flowers are ubiquitous yet invisible.

IN 2021, 56,830 INDIVIDUALS DIED in Denmark and 81 per cent of them (46,044) had a funeral organized within the majority church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark. Of the remaining 19 per cent, 5 per cent were buried in other faith communities (including other Christian faith communities) and 14 per cent had a funeral without the participation of religious celebrants. Denmark is clearly an example of the *religious* organization of funeral as laid out by Tony Walter in his typology of funeral trends in the modern west (Walter 2005: 177). Nevertheless, parts of the funeral have been increasingly commercialized especially with regard

to the material dimension of the funeral, primarily flower, casket and urn options.

The ideal typical funeral within the majority church takes place in a church and is headed by a pastor. Before the ceremony itself, the pastor has learned about the deceased in one or more conversations with the family, and discussed the choice of hymns to sing during the ceremony. At the day of the funeral, the funeral director brings the deceased in the casket and places it in the church. A florist brings flower arrangements for the casket and the church as well as bouquets from people who are unable to attend but wish to pay their respects. The verger arranges the flowers that participants bring with them around the flowers already placed down the main aisle and prepares the church for the funeral. Participants arrive in time for the funeral and it often starts at exactly the appointed time with bell tolling and an organ prelude. There is a common liturgical script which includes hymns, collective prayers, a sermon which consists of a teaching part focused on the theology of resurrection and a biographical part (*vitae*) focused on the biographical narration of the life of the deceased based on the conversations with family. The ceremony lasts half an hour and ends with the committal. Depending on the

wishes of the deceased, the casket is then either carried out to the grave for interment or to the hearse for cremation.¹ In 2021, 85 per cent chose cremation, which means that most funerals end with the participants saying goodbye at the hearse when the casket is taken to the crematorium. After the ceremony in the church, the family usually invites everybody for refreshments at a nearby restaurant. The family and the participants do not usually play an active role in the ceremony in the church, but at the restaurant they tell stories and anecdotes of their experiences with the deceased.

The death and memorialization practices surrounding ordinary funerals have been the object of a large study in Denmark. A group of theologians, historians of religion and sociologists of religion collected a diverse set of data on funeral practices in 2018–20. These include two representative surveys of the attitudes and experiences of the population and pastors, 34 interviews with individuals who consented to an interview in the survey, observations from 23 funerals throughout the country, and prolonged fieldwork at two graveyards as well as interviews, fieldwork and surveys of the graveyard staff. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark is a territorial church. People belong to their local church and although it is possible to be released from the local church and choose another, most people do not change their church. Most people do not go to church either. For the last four decades between 10 and 13 per cent of the population attend church services at least monthly (EVS 2022).

1 For a detailed English description of the liturgy see the homepage of the Council on International Relations.

There are 10 dioceses, 114 deaneries and 2158 parishes in Denmark. The research team selected three deaneries in different parts of the country and asked all parishes in these deaneries to inform us of upcoming funerals. One deanery was selected in the capital area, one in the countryside on the west coast, and the last one in a city in the eastern part of Jutland. We participated in 23 funerals in 13 churches between August 2018 and August 2019. As part of the agreement with the churches, they have all been given fictitious names. The material used in this article is all from this larger project, 'Death, Memorialization and Religion'.

The aim of this article is to show that much of the material dimension of a funeral is ubiquitous and invisible, but important for personalizing the funeral and for (re)producing relationships. This is especially evident in the use of flowers. They are present at every observed funeral, but none of our informants talk about them in our interviews.

The first section is used to describe the society in which the funeral takes place as one of singularities, following the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, and the funeral as a ritual, following Catherine Bell, Tony Walter and other death researchers. A funeral may become meaningful by being attributed to the deceased as a particular and unique individual, for instance through the use of materiality. One of the most prevalent material objects is the flowers; the subsequent section presents Jack Goody's work on the use of flowers in human history and in Christianity. Based on our participation in the funerals and interviews with people on their funeral experiences, the third section examines the presence of flowers in Danish funerals. Flowers oscillate between their material and symbolic features, being both *objects*

that need to be handled and *symbols* that produce meaning and relations. At the same time, they are often invisible; their presence is seldom noted, but their absence is. In the final section, the use of flowers is discussed in relation to Goody and Bell.

A society of singularities

Coming from a background in practice theory, Andrew Reckwitz is critical of Ulrich Beck's idea of individualization in Late Modernity (2020: 3). In contrast to individualization, Reckwitz argues that singularity is a better concept as it focuses on the performative aspect of being unique and authentic. Performativity is a relational concept, and he argues that all the time and energy people spend curating ourselves for an audience show how important standing out and being recognized is. Today it is expected that we stand out and are seen as singular. We live in a society of singularities, where affect and narratives are important ways of attributing value. To Reckwitz, culture is the very practice of attributing value to something: people, objects, events, time and collectivities. Just a few decades ago the standardized logic of the general was the core cultural code in society, but today that logic has been subsumed under the logic of the particular because of what he calls the authenticity revolution, the post-industrial economy and the digital revolution. Authenticity is no longer the preserve of a small group of avant-garde bohemians, but has become attractive and possible for everybody. The post-war increase in wealth has facilitated a shift from securing acceptable living conditions to enjoying and pursuing quality of life in the search for a meaningful life (p. 72). Part of that meaningful life is the need (and expectancy) to perform and compose a unique, curated lifestyle. Late Modern culture is a hyper-culture: everything can

become culture if it is found attractive and valorized by an audience (p. 217). Listening to classical music is not better (or worse) than listening to K-pop, and choosing to play pop music in church is just as natural (and more telling of the deceased) than an old hymn.

Meaning making as a process

Christoph Klaus Streb and Thomas Kolnberger write that, especially when it comes to death and death practices, 'materiality is more than simple matter void of meaning or relevance' (Streb and Kolnberger 2019: 117). The material dimension is important because it has symbolic and interpretative value in relation to the practices it is part of. In this regard, the flowers and the casket, but also the music and the pastor's sermon, are among the most important elements of a traditional funeral. These elements shape every funeral and give them their personal touch. Especially the sermon, the flowers and the casket tell us something about the relationships between the deceased and various participants. The way the participants interact with the casket, the flowers and the decorations as well as their location in the room are markers of different relationships. The participants signal who belongs to the family, to the group of friends, and to the colleagues through their physical location, their interaction with the casket and their use of flowers. Flowers and the way participants use them are some of the few opportunities where the participants can shape the funeral according to their (or the deceased's) wishes. The use of flowers becomes a way of maintaining a relationship – not only to the deceased, but also to each other. Consequently, the understanding of the funeral ceremony in this article follows Catherine Bell's practice approach to ritual: they are practices dependent on their context and not given

authoritatively and *a priori*. Additionally, they are embodied practices where the participants experience the values of the social order. Bell writes that ‘ritualization is a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation’ (Bell 1997: 81f.). The typical Danish funeral extends between the soteriological dimension of the church and the social dimension of the family. The material dimension is important for the personalization of the ceremony because of the meanings the participants attach to various objects in the ceremony. Elaine Ramshaw argues that funerals are becoming increasingly personalized because ‘the personal’ has become synonymous with ‘the meaningful’ in Late Modernity:

This equation of ‘meaningful’ with ‘personal’ is a giveaway of post-modern culture. When people are not embedded in a tradition-bearing community, the rituals of such a community do not seem to speak to their personal experience, the private world that is the locus of meaning-making. A ritual is likely to be meaningful to the extent that it is personally constructed or tailored to one’s own experience. (Ramshaw 2010: 172)

While I generally acknowledge the relation between meaningful and personal, I also find the Danish context different from the American. American Christian funerals have been commercialized to a higher degree than Danish funerals, and most Danes actually go to church as part of a family tradition more than as a place of personal faith. The Christianity of the general population has been described as cultural Christianity (Iversen 1997; Zuckerman 2020; Lundmark and

Mauritsen 2022). Individually, there is not a lot of religious belief, but collectively (as families) there are a lot of religious practices (Mauritsen 2022). In that regard, Danes *are* embedded in a tradition-bearing community, especially when it comes to funeral practices. Additionally, the equation of meaningful with personal is probably too simplistic and there should be room for some difference between the two. Maybe the personal is always meaningful, but in a Danish setting even impersonal elements can be construed as meaningful because they are part of tradition. Nevertheless, what Ramshaw points out is that the personal elements do not necessarily imply that the entire funeral must be personally designed. She emphasizes that personalization ranges from a maximalist to a minimalist model (Ramshaw 2010: 175). Personalization is not necessarily about the format of the ritual, but also about how the next of kin complete the ritual and tailor it to their family within the framework established by the liturgy of the church. In this regard, her focus on personal and meaningful is also relevant in a Danish context.

This encounter between the established format of the church and the wish for a personalized ceremony for the family is the focal point of meaning-making, found also in other studies. A British study of forty-six funerals finds that meaning-making unfolds in three stages: in meaning-seeking, in meaning-creation, and in meaning-taking (Holloway *et al.* 2013: 44). Meaning is not present in the funeral itself, but arises in a process where the ritual and the private contexts meet. The search for meaning takes place when the bereaved consider what elements they should include in the funeral, especially the choice of hymns and flowers. Meaning is created from a desire to celebrate and show who the deceased was. In collaboration with professionals in

the death system (funeral directors in the British case and pastors in the Danish case) meaning is co-created when the elements in which the bereaved have sought meaning are put together with established ritual elements to produce a meaningful whole (p. 45). From the interviews of the bereaved after the funeral, it was clear there was some variation as to what elements participants found meaningful. Some participants found meaning in the experience of the performance of personal elements during the funeral, others in the account of the deceased in the sermon (p. 46). We do not have data on the ways the bereaved produce meaning after the funeral, but through our observations of the funerals, we can observe how personal elements and established ritual elements are combined to create particular ceremonies.

The meaningfulness of the funeral is not only about having the ceremony the deceased wanted. It is also about making a ceremony that produces and reproduces a range of relationships. Tony Walter and Tara Bailey (2020) have shown how funerals involve the construction of relationships, especially family relationships. Following Walter and Bailey I agree that funerals are also about *doing family*. Funerals are performances meant to display who is and who is not included in the family (p. 182).

The use of flowers in history and Christianity

Flowers are an indispensable part of a funeral and have been so across cultures and time for thousands of years.² In his book

2 The classic example is the Neolithic burial site of the Shanidar people (Solecki 1971) or the Natufian burials (Nadel *et al.* 2013). In a contemporary study from Norway, Marie Høeg shows that flowers were dominant in some of the interreligious funerals after the Utøya massacre (Høeg 2021).

on flowers in different cultures, Jack Goody (1993) traces the use of flowers through pagan and Christian Europe. Although the Garden of Eden places flowers prominently in Paradise, flowers have had an ambiguous role in Christian history. After the fall of the Roman Empire, they were associated with paganism and idolatry, and a distinctive theological opposition to flowers arose. Among the common folk flowers played an important role in daily life, worrying the church to the extent that it often attempted to ban or Christianize them (Goody 1993: 123). Christianization could literally be the renaming of herbs or a more symbolic transformation.

Although flowers were no longer given as offerings but as decorations, their function shifting from the religiously utilitarian to the religiously aesthetic, medieval altars were sometimes embellished with flowers. Lilies above all, so that a perpetual springtime might seem to pervade the House of God. (Goody 1993: 122)

Goody shows how flowers were seen to have symbolic meaning, and an actual language of flowers developed in the nineteenth century (Goody 1993: 232). Still today many recognize the red rose as a symbol of love and the white lily as a symbol of innocence and peace. Among some florists some of this heritage is still present as the cut flowers and their withering symbolize the transience of life, while the evergreen wreath symbolizes eternal life in both form and material (see the websites of Euroflorist and Binderiet). As our data collection did not pay attention to the species-specific symbolism of the flowers or attention to how aware various actors are of this symbolism, the analysis below will not go into this any more deeply.

With regard to the use of flowers at funerals, Goody argues that their widespread use is a recent development. Although flowers have always been used at funerals for the elite or during spring or summer, the pervasive use of flowers throughout the year and for all people is not possible without commercialization and professionalization. The use of cut flowers was popularized in America as a cooperation between the florists and the funeral director. They had a common commercial interest in the memorialization of the deceased.

Today the major mourning symbol, and a huge item of national expenditure, [funeral flowers] did not make their appearance in England or America until after the middle of the nineteenth century, and only then over the opposition of church leaders. (Mitford 1963 in Goody 1993: 280)

The opposition from the church re-articulates the older apprehensions as ‘Protestant clergy ... express themselves against elaborate funerals, talking of “pagan display”’ (Goody 1993: 281). The commercialization of memorialization seems to have outmanoeuvred the theological arguments against the use of flowers, and the American study that Goody refers to concludes that 65 per cent of the expenditure on flowers at the beginning of the 1960s was used for funerals.

Flowers in Danish funerals

We do not have such estimates from Denmark, but the combination of commercialization, memorialization and personalization is apparent here as well. On the website of Euroflorist there is a description of funerals.

Say goodbye in your own way

There is no right or wrong way to arrange a funeral. A funeral ceremony should be as simple, lavish, beautiful, traditional or personal as you want. Let music, speeches, guests and ceremony become a day full of memories. With your choice of flowers and style, you can create a certain mood and a personal setting for the ceremony. It's your goodbye. (Euroflorist, my translation)

It is not clear who Euroflorist addresses. It could be individuals planning their own funerals or relatives planning the funeral of deceased family members. However, it is quite clear that the personalized funeral is standard. The widespread use of pronouns in the second person singular (you, your), the explicit focus on one's own wishes, and the emphasis in the first sentence that there is no wrong way to plan a funeral emphasize the unique and personal dimension.

The fact that flowers are important is not only evident on florists' websites, but also resonates with our observations. There were flowers at every funeral.³ The obvious choice is to bring flowers – regardless of the season. Flowers are such a natural part of a Danish funeral that it can be difficult to imagine that at some point it was impossible to get fresh flowers all year round and it is also difficult to imagine that flowers have been seen as theologically problematic in Christianity.

In our survey of those attending funerals, we asked if they or someone in their party had brought flowers to the most

3 Funerals without flowers exist and some funeral notices in newspapers explicitly urge people to donate money to charities or research instead.

Table 1. Relation to deceased and share who brought flowers (n=1540, percentage)

Neighbour	89	n=57
Neighbourhood	89	n=27
Colleague	88	n=42
Family	88	n=562
Friend	85	n=249
Close relative	85	n=452
Friend to close relative	81	n=151

Source: Death, Memorialization and Religion survey 2019.

recent funeral they had participated in. The results can be seen in Table 1.

The table shows that most people, regardless of relationship to the deceased, bring flowers to a funeral. More than eight in ten respondents answer that they or others in their party brought flowers to the last funeral they participated in. Since we asked if any in their party ordered or brought flowers to the funeral, those doing so include couples, groups of friends and neighbours, and hence it is not necessarily possible to find age or gender differences. Nevertheless, we still find – perhaps unsurprisingly – that more women answer that they bring flowers than do men. Similarly, older age groups more often bring flowers. Seventy-three per cent of young family members (18–34) brought flowers to the funeral, compared with 89 per cent of middle-aged (35–55) and 96 per cent of older family members (56–90). As older parents could potentially buy flowers on behalf of a whole family that includes adult children in the 18–34 age group this does not necessarily mean that flowers are more important among the older generation. However, when looking at respondents who brought flowers to funerals of neighbours and friends, younger respondents less

often bring flowers than older respondents. Finally, these numbers show that flowers are sympathy signals. Neighbours, colleagues and family bring flowers more often than the closest relatives do – also across gender and age groups. These results are a first indication of the way relationships are produced and reproduced, but from this survey we know nothing of the flowers themselves apart from the fact that it is a meaningful practice to bring flowers to a funeral.

Flowers reproduce social relationships

Taking a closer look at the use of flowers in the church we find them in three instances. First, the decoration of the pews and altar of the church. Most churches almost always have fresh, cut flowers on the altar. In some places, the small stands or vases at the pews are also decorated with flowers. The flower decorations of the church itself do not necessarily produce relationships, but can be used to personalize the funeral if they can be associated with the deceased. This applies to special flowers that the deceased had a relationship to, as was the case at a funeral full of sunflowers (Thurø Kirke, 28.6.2019). Similarly, the pastor at a funeral in Sejerø Kirke told the participants that the blue hydrangeas decorating the church came from the garden of the deceased, and emphasized how important the garden and the flowers were to her (Sejerø Kirke, 15.8.2019). Additionally, even when the choice falls on more ordinary funeral flowers, like roses, it can still be part of a personal narrative of the deceased. At another funeral in Thurø Kirke, the room was full of roses, and the television screens that show which hymns to sing on a Powerpoint presentation not only showed hymn numbers but also clip-art of roses. In the sermon, the pastor spoke about the rose garden of the deceased, and in that way, the



Flowers decorating the floor with the largest wreaths closest to the casket.

rose was transformed from a traditional choice of flower to a personal dimension in the life of the deceased (Thurø Kirke, 10.7.2019). In this way, the choice of flowers is deeply meaningful; they become part of a final performance of the uniqueness and singularity of the individual.

Second, there are the flowers on and around the casket. There is no tradition for using sprays at funerals in Denmark, but large and expensive flower arrangements on top of the casket could be seen at several funerals. More common, however, are the various bouquets and wreaths around or in front of the casket along the floor. A part of these wreaths will often have a ribbon with personal greetings, which clearly marks out relationships. The largest flower

arrangements and wreaths with ribbons are typically from the closest relatives; these are also placed closest to the casket. In this way they materially mark out the closeness of the relationship to the deceased. One example is from a funeral in Thurø Kirke (5.7.2019), where the ribbon on the wreath closest to the casket has the following inscription: 'Loved and missed. Elisabeth, children, in-laws and grandchildren'. Here the widow and the rest of the immediate family are mentioned on the wreath closest to the casket, which shows how the family is connected. Furthermore, the wreath is not actually a wreath, as it is not circular but shaped as an anchor, because the deceased was a sailor, emphasizing the use of flowers as personalization symbols.

Ordinary circular wreaths and bouquets help tie the family together and document the relationship to the deceased. The texts on the ribbons often express family relationships. This can be seen in most funerals, for instance one in Hesselø Kapel, where the ordinary circular wreath with its standardized ribbon is made personal through the printed text that identifies the relationship: 'Dear father, grandfather and great-grandfather – easy to love, hard to lose – Helene, Andrea, grandchildren and great-grandchildren' (Hesselø Kapel, 30.8.2018). We assume Helene and Andrea are the names of the daughters of the deceased, and the ribbon documents and displays the family across generations. Again and again, we observe ribbons 'from grandchildren and great-grandchildren' or 'from children and in-laws'. In addition to the representation of the family line, the ribbons also often include affectionate descriptions of the relationship: 'Loved and missed', 'In the heart, hidden but never forgotten', 'My beloved', 'Loved father, grandfather and grandfather'. The casket is literally surrounded by family relationships

not only through the use of flowers but also through the actual presence of the family, which is seated closest to the casket. On the other hand, this almost natural order of things can be upset. Because wreaths and especially wreaths with ribbons are placed close to the casket, it is indirectly possible to 'buy' a spot close to the deceased. In our observations we have examples of friends and in one case what appears to be a business associate who have gained access to what is normally reserved for family because of the size of the wreath (Orø Kirke, 29.1.2019). Hence, flowers evoke more than just family, they also evoke other close relationships.⁴ Like wreaths, bouquets are placed according to size down the aisle almost as emanations from the casket. Where flowers used for decorations are sometimes related to the deceased, the wreaths and bouquets become part of the families' performance and reproduction of itself as a particular collective, in Reckwitz's terms, or doing family, in Walter and Bailey's terms.

Finally, there are the flowers that are handed out individually at the end of the funeral. They are used by the family in their last farewell, being either thrown into the grave or put on the casket outside the church moments before it is placed in the hearse on its way to the crematorium. At the time of this final goodbye flowers play an important and central role, placing the immediate family centre-stage, with the rest of the participants as audience. Family members approach the casket one by one and put the flower on the casket or throw

it in the grave. Each family member and the family as a collective are marked out as participants with a particular relationship with the deceased and they clearly stand out from the other participants, who typically gather in a semicircle behind the acting family members, watching them placing their flowers. Because this part of the funeral is such a ritualized display of the family it is also a potentially tense moment because of the possibly challenging family relations. Are ex-spouses handed a flower? Step-children? Ex-sons-in-law? It can be challenging not to be awarded a flower if you think you were in a close relationship with the deceased. On the other hand, it can also be challenging to be awarded a flower if you do not think that your relationship was that close. Doing family through flowers is not necessarily unproblematic, but we have not observed any conflicts during this part of the ritual. Here people have accepted the role they have been assigned and perform it to the best of their ability.

Flowers play a crucial role in the material expression of the funeral, and the most central flower is the rose. Roses are used in the majority of funerals both in decorations and as the flower that is laid individually on the casket at the end. In contrast to the romantic use of the rose, where red most often dominates, the range of colours is larger at funerals but white and red roses dominate.

Flowers are such naturalized elements of the funeral that it is necessary to actively ask people not to bring flowers if that is the wish. We have only attended one funeral in which the deceased wanted participants to donate money to cancer research, but from funeral notices in the newspapers this is a relatively common practice also mentioned by Goody (1993: 280). In this way, flowers are transformed from a respectful donation to the memory of the deceased,

4 As an observational note, it is impossible to determine whether some wreaths are seen as illegitimately close to the casket as it is impossible to see whether the location of the wreaths is mirrored in the location of the participants.

to a donation to a cause important to the deceased. Even in their absence flowers become a way of personalizing the funeral. Our observations show that flowers play a very central role in funerals within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark. The church is decorated with flowers, and the participants at the funeral bring flowers into the church to show sympathy and 'to do family', in Bailey and Walter's words. Following Reckwitz, flowers are the main objects used to personalize the ceremony and perform relationships in front of an audience that acknowledges the deceased as unique and the family as a singular collective. Nevertheless, as the next section, based on our interviews, shows, flowers are practically invisible in all their presence. They are hidden in plain sight when we talk to people about funerals and memorialization practices.

Invisible flowers - present only in absence

The final question on our questionnaire asked respondents if they would be interested in participating in a qualitative interview. Our polling company was very surprised by the huge interest in participation, and we were able to recruit from a large pool of individuals. Based on their answers in the survey we could create a sample with relevant background variation (sex, age, education, geography, time since participation in latest funeral, responsibility for planning funeral). A total of thirty-four interviews were conducted around Denmark, and not only in the areas where we did our observations. The interviews focused on their participation in the latest funeral and the wake, everyday memorialization practices, graveyard practices, thoughts about their own death and funeral, religiosity, and reflections and conversations on death and the afterlife. All interviews were coded in Nvivo by five of

the researchers in the team using a common coding frame consisting of fifteen themes and seventy subcodes. Funerals were a major theme with twenty-two subcodes – decoration and flowers being one of them, and the only code for flowers. Flowers were not a theme in the interviews and we did not realize that flowers could be an independent object for analysis before going into the data. In fact, it is the discrepancy between the ubiquity of flowers in our observations and their absence in the interviews that makes them interesting. Their absence could be due to the fact that we did not include them in our interview guide specifically, but the interviews did focus on the most recent funeral participants went to, what is important at a funeral, what makes a good (and a bad) funeral, what they do at a funeral, what wishes they have for their own funeral. Consequently, the interviewees had the opportunity to talk about flowers, but in spite of the pervasive presence of flowers in our observations, or perhaps because of their ubiquity, very few of the thirty-four interviewees talk about flowers. Dennis is the only one who explicitly mentions a need for flowers at funerals. For him, flowers inevitably belong to a successful goodbye. A good funeral is characterized by only two things:

Actually, it is only saying goodbye and flowers that are needed. I could easily just show up, and then there is some music, or whatever was chosen, and then after ten minutes you go over and put a flower [on the casket]. And then you could decide yourself how long you wanted to stand there. (Dennis, all translations of the interviews are mine)

Apart from saying goodbye and bringing flowers he also mentions music, but music seems to be even more ubiquitous than flowers, perhaps because flowers are physical objects you bring to the funeral yourself whereas music is provided by someone else and is already there. Apart from Dennis, one other informant mentions flowers in a casual remark, and not in a positive sense. Janne is one of the few informants who has a very hard time going to funerals. A good funeral does not have anything to do with the number of participants or with flowers, according to her. On the contrary, many people and bouquets make the funeral too impersonal:

I do not want a huge funeral; I just wish it was the people closest to me who come and scatter me over water. I'm not that good at funerals. Sometimes I think, for example, of my father-in-law's funeral, where a lot of people who he had nothing to do with for many years showed up. People just came and I know they think it's a last gesture, but somehow it provokes me because they did not come and visit him while he was sick and needed help, but they all line up with a bouquet of flowers for the funeral. (Janne)

Janne clearly does not agree with the florist website mentioned above. Flowers are not necessarily the correct thing to bring and do not necessarily set the right mood for the funeral. To her they almost become an impersonal symbol of not taking the deceased seriously. We do not know if all flowers are problematic to her, but obviously flowers from a particular type of participant are problematic because they are a symbol of a generic participation in the grief of those closest to the deceased, and appear as a substitute for a real

relationship with the deceased. Although Janne finds the personal and authentic funeral important, she is at odds with many of our observations as she finds that flowers become fake and inauthentic sympathy symbols because they signal a relationship that was not real. However, this shows that even to Janne flowers are an important part of performing the relationship with the deceased. Apart from Dennis and Janne, none of the other thirty-two informants mentions flowers in connection with the funeral. This does not mean that flowers are entirely absent from the interviews. Many interviewees talk about flowers when they visit graves, but they are absent when we talk about the funeral ceremony itself. It is paradoxical how many people say they bring flowers to the funeral, how many wreaths and bouquets we have observed, how often flowers are used in the last goodbye, and then how little attention people pay to flowers when we interview them about funerals. In our observations flowers are dominant inasmuch as they are involved in almost all the practices of the participants during the funeral ceremony. At times they are also physically dominant, and sometimes to such an extent that they draw negative attention to their presence.

Flowers as spatial challenges in funerals

Flowers are central in the personalization of funerals and crucial for the funeral to be experienced as a goodbye to a particular and unique individual following the logic of the particular. But flowers are also just material objects that need to be transported, arranged and removed again. The American philosopher and practice theorist Theodore Schatzki emphasizes that forms of practice are material events, where 'humans, artefacts, organisms, and things of nature' connect through human activity (Schatzki 2010: 129). The use of flowers is such an

activity and part of creating the funeral as meaningful action. But material objects are also included in many other practices, even if they are not directly involved in the construction of meaning. Material objects can attract attention on purpose or accidentally. Participants at a funeral share material surroundings: they share the roads and paths leading to the church, the parking lot, the cemetery surrounding the church, the church building itself, the pews inside and so forth. Usually there are no (important) coordination problems when sharing these surroundings. Nevertheless, occasionally chairs, people, flowers, or even the casket can get in the way at a funeral or two funerals can get in each other's way. There are important spatial and temporal dimensions for both individual funerals and for the potential interaction of several funerals. When two funerals are spatially and temporally close, the sharing of surroundings becomes potentially challenging, because material elements associated with one funeral are irrelevant or perhaps even upsetting at another funeral. We have seen examples of funerals that follow one after the other several times. They explicitly share the material environment and most of the time it is unproblematic. As the ritual guides the participants and the casket of one funeral out of the room, ensuring that they are located outside the church by the hearse or the grave, the staff can prepare the church room or chapel for the next funeral. In chapels, the room is sometimes constructed in a way that the casket can be moved out via another route than people enter, which makes it easier to avoid a collision of two funerals. However, flowers are often more of a problem than participants and the casket. At one particular funeral, in Thuro Kirke, the dominant flower was sunflowers, and, quite extraordinarily, the family

wanted to leave the casket in the church while they and the other participants said their goodbyes and leave the casket in the church. In this particular church the casket had to leave the church the same way it came in and this obviously conflicted with the preparations for the next funeral. The employees had to start removing flowers while groups of participants re-entered the church to say another goodbye or take a picture. In such a situation the casket and flowers are transformed from ritualized objects to mundane objects that need to be handled and moved. This is rarely the problem with the casket because it is moved out of the chapel or church as part of the ritual, but it happens more often with flowers.

From fieldwork in the relatively small Jegindø Kirke, it became quite obvious that participants from two funerals must share the space. We arrived at the church before the first funeral at 11 a.m. In the vestibule the first thing we saw was a black trolley with a couple of shelves full of flowers. On the front was a laminated piece of paper saying '1:00 p.m.'. These were flowers for another funeral waiting to be laid out in the nave, but the church is small and there are no extra rooms, which meant that the trolley had to stand here, and participants in the funeral at 11 a.m. had to pass it on the way into the church and again on the way out when the casket was carried out. Inside the church, the flowers for the first funeral were neatly arranged on the casket and down the aisle. There were also flowers in small vases at each pew. In this case, the flowers were part of the deceased's life and important to the biographical nature and consequently meaningful in the church. At the same time the flowers in the vestibule were merely objects that had to be stored until they could be used in a funeral. It was the context and the practice they were

part of that determines that one group of bouquets was meaningful and the other were just things that had not been made meaningful yet. When the casket was carried out, the verger immediately began to remove the flowers in the small vases by the pews that would not be used in the next funeral (Jegindø Kirke, 23.1.2019).

The newer Orø Kirke building provides a better opportunity for keeping waiting flowers spatially separated. As we arrived at the church well in advance of the first funeral, the verger was busy arranging the various bouquets. Some bouquets were placed in the nave, others in a storeroom. A couple arrived and entered the church bringing a bouquet, and the verger asked what funeral it was intended for before placing it in the storeroom. Judging by both the number and size of wreaths and bouquets, the next funeral would be large and the participants well off. When the first funeral began there were no signs of the next. All the wreaths and flowers were put in the storeroom and the door was closed. The vestibule and aisle had been set up with only one funeral in mind (Orø Kirke, 29.1.2019).

Although the two funerals had to be allowed to meet physically at Jegindø Kirke due to spatial limitations, the employees were aware of the need to separate meaningful flowers from flowers that were just objects in order for participants to experience a meaningful funeral. There was a careful registration of flowers, ensuring that the church room could be free for the first funeral, and it was also seen at Thurø Kirke, where the florist brought flowers for a later funeral while the participants of the first funeral were still standing by the hearse. The florist parked the van at a side entrance, enabling the delivery of flowers while the participants gathered at the main entrance.

The spatial and temporal dimensions are rarely noticed unless something unexpected happens. In a small village church, the immediate family had arrived in good time and helped carry the casket into the church (Orø Kirke). This challenged the employees' routines and when the family left the church the staff got busy rearranging flowers and discussing the disruption which revealed that practical work should preferably be handled without the presence of the family. When the pastor arrived, the staff informed her of these challenges, especially that the casket was not sitting straight on the platform, and that it was difficult to fix this because the family had arrived so early and the staff would have had to do some heavy and not necessarily elegant lifting. The flowers also needed to be rearranged because one of the closest relatives was sitting in a wheelchair and she could not proceed down the aisle with flowers everywhere. The family was the centre of the ceremony, and it should have been meaningful to them, but initially they were just an obstacle that risked upsetting the meaning-making process in the first place. They arrived too early, they made the practical work difficult to get done without them noticing, the wheelchair became a challenge for the usual set-up, and the flowers ended up getting in the way of the wheelchair.

In summary, it is clear that no materiality is so meaningful that it cannot also occasionally give rise to challenges. This applies to the order of flowers emanating from the casket, from the sheer numbers of flowers that can be difficult to place in the nave, to flowers from various funerals that must be stored as objects before they become meaningful materialities, but also to flowers that are obstacles to some people. By virtue of their materiality, there are constantly negotiations about meaning and materiality during the funeral.

Conclusion

The ritual has a relatively fixed liturgy, but the family and other participants still have several options for adding elements to it. Apart from suggesting hymns and themes in the biographical part of the sermon prior to the funeral itself, the participants have some influence when it comes to the inclusion of material objects, first and foremost related to the casket and flowers. Paradoxically, flowers as decorations are absent in their presence but present in their absence. It would be noticed immediately if they were not there, but their actual presence is not noted by our informants. There were flowers at every funeral but our informants almost never mentioned them. They were not asked specifically about flowers in the interviews, but were given ample opportunity to mention them. Most informants only associate flowers with visits to the grave, not with the funeral itself. Nevertheless, from the observed funerals, it is quite clear that they play an important role in the creation and maintenance of relationships where the size of flower arrangements and the printed ribbons can be used to express the social bonds as a way of doing family. As social events, the funerals display the social structures the deceased were embedded in and the social bonds they have with others with great precision.

Goody's distinction between the religiously utilitarian and religiously aesthetic means that the role of flowers changed offerings to decorations. The aesthetic dimension is found in the decorations of the churches, and sometimes this aesthetic dimension is also used as a means to create a more personal ceremony, using flowers important to the deceased. Furthermore, the bouquets and wreaths are used as sympathy signals that perform and reproduce social bonds between the participants in the

funeral. On the other hand, the shift from offering to decoration can be challenged when we look at the use of flowers at the end of the funeral ceremony. Here, flowers that were not used for decoration are handed out to family members and put on top of the hearse or thrown into the grave as an offering. This is not part of the official funeral liturgy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, but it is still a recurring practice in all our observations. Bell argues that ritualized behaviour tends to promote forces that derive beyond the immediate situation. This can easily be construed as references to transcendent forces, but she does not explicitly mention transcendence precisely because it potentially obscures the particular constructions of authority and relationship in particular contexts. In this final part of the ritual, the focus is not on the transcendent dimension which the pastor has preached in the sermon but on the social dimension of family and how the social bonds can be shown with flowers. The use of flowers in the personalization of the funeral ensures that the deceased is embedded in a number of different social contexts – most importantly the family. ■

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