Modes of Individualisation at Cemeteries
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Abstract
Permanent individual gravemarkers were established as social norm for large populations in the nineteenth century. These markers typically display a range of matters-of-fact about the dead: name, age or dates of birth and death, family status, social position, profession, religion, etc. They also include symbolic figurations, which communicate in a more implicit way how the survivors remember their dead. Against this background, this paper analyses gravemarkers and graveyards as material witnesses of changing social and cultural sensibilities. It explores the kinds of changes which took place in European regions with a predominantly Catholic population.

Keywords: Historical Sociology, Sociology of Religion, Gravestones, Graveyards, Sociology of Culture

"Cemeteries and tombstones … put at our disposal rather dense, albeit essentially impressionistic, information; and this mine of symbolic figurations awaits systematic treatment" (Vovelle 1980, 546-7).

"Far more than … space … set aside for the burial of the dead, cemeteries are … open texts, there to be read … by anyone who takes the time to learn … their special language" (Meyer 1993, 3).

Introduction
1.1 To study the evolution of society, it is often helpful to study specific social institutions. The historical-sociological study of universities, for example, can be used to gain insight into the distinctive features of our 'knowledge society'. The evolution of religious institutions can equally be analysed with more general sociological interests. From such a point of view, this article focuses upon our burial practices and, more particularly, of the markers we use for the last resting places of our dead. Such gravemarkers represent the efforts of the survivors to remember and commemorate their dead. They potentially capture a range of responses to death; these carved stones may be considered as material witnesses of changing social and cultural sensibilities. In this article, the emphasis will be on such forms of remembering and commemorating in relation to changing social conceptions of individuality.

1.2 Historically, the widespread use of permanent individual gravemarkers is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the modern era, most people did not inter their dead in individual tombs or construct permanent graves. In Europe, it was only in the twelfth century that funerary monuments began to be constructed for high-ranked clergy and nobility. Afterwards affluent families increasingly tried to bury their dead within church buildings. Interment was often marked by an inscribed ledger slab, which was set in the floor of the church over the grave. For the 'unwashed masses', however, the ad hoc re-use of graves, usually in churchyards, was common throughout the late-medieval and early-modern era. For them, overburial and clearance of remains frequently led to the placing of the bones in a charnel house or an ossuary (Ariès 1977; Colvin 1991, 327-63; Kselman 1993, 165-221).

1.3 Linked with processes of population growth and urbanisation, on the one hand, and with the growing influence of the medical profession, on the other hand, the health risk was the most openly championed reason for the so-called 'burial reform', which took root around 1800 (Walter 1990, 9-25; see also Eyler 1979). Enlightened reformers condemned the churchyard as a spawning place for disease and a danger to public health. At many places, this reform went hand in hand with secularisation (in the word's original
In this article, attention is directed towards recent, 'modern' ways of commemorating the dead by means of permanent gravestones at public cemeteries. Because there exist considerable differences in the material artefacts of our burial practices at graveyards, especially in relation to religious affiliation (e.g. McDannell 1995; Mytum 2003), our approach hereafter has to be selective. Against the background of a brief overview of early-modern and nineteenth-century burial traditions and their structural correlates, the focus of this article is on twentieth-century changes on graveyards which (used to) serve predominantly Catholic populations. The pictures, selected as illustrations, were taken between June 2006 and November 2008 in Belgium and the Netherlands, both in urban and rural cemeteries. They do not focus on the extraordinary; they depict typical, 'average' gravestones. In this exemplary way, the aim of this article is to contribute to a more general historical-sociological understanding of the distinctive features of contemporary society.

Material culture

2.1 The sociological relevance of public cemeteries should be apparent. The gravestones show how individual biographies were/are grasped. They not only display various matters-of-fact about the dead: name, age or dates of birth and death, family status (mother, father, son, daughter), social position, profession, religion, etc. They also entail a variety of more implicit information about both the deceased and their survivors. Moreover, even when owned or controlled by secular authorities, these cemeteries can be characterised as "sacred" places (Durkheim 1960, 49-58; Etlin 1984). They are carved out of the environment; they are marked off from profane space. And this spatial separation makes it relatively easy to elaborate new ways of communicating social distinctions and individual identities (Coleman and Collins 2007; Schor 1994).

2.2 But while scholarly examination of our cemeteries is at present substantially represented by disciplines such as (art) history, archaeology, genealogy, and anthropology (Walter 2005), this source of information has not yet been explored systematically by sociologists. In a few historical-sociological or demographical studies, cemeteries have been treated as archives, which yield social data about extended family networks or seasonal patterns of natality and mortality (e.g. Foster et al. 1998; Jimenez and Cossman 2006). However, sociologists have hitherto hardly invested effort in studying the finer details of the "language" of the gravemarkers' texts and subtexts. In this article, I explore some of the implicit changes related to our contemporary concerns about the individuality of individuals. In the following subsections, I first briefly reflect upon the social and cultural changes underlying the burial reform that shaped the 'modern' reactions to the death of single individuals.

The afterlife

2.3 It is now widely accepted that the western, institutionalised forms of individualisation have distant "Christian beginnings" (Dumont 1986, 23-79; Taylor 1989). The historically predominant ways of remembering and commemorating the dead have been heavily influenced by Christianity, too. And notwithstanding the impact of secularisation, religious symbols remain omnipresent at cemeteries. Until today, there are probably no other places in the western world, which are so densely populated with Christian symbols.

2.4 In his detailed and authoritative account of western attitudes toward death from the Middle Ages to the present, the French historian Philippe Ariès (1977) likewise focused upon the role of religion. Ariès situated the diffusion of individual-oriented theological teachings in the (late-)medieval era; he pointed particularly to discussions about the partition of body and soul following death, the Last Judgement at the moment of dying, Purgatory (and its different parts), and the risks of eternal damnation in Hell. For Ariès, the medieval concern with "la mort de soi" and the personal afterlife were early manifestations of individualisation within Christian culture. It can be added that life in this world became linked to that in the next one. The individual biography was extended beyond death. Eternal salvation/damnation were presented as reward/punishment for one's life on earth. As a consequence, medieval theology stimulated reflection upon the choices made during one's life in this world. As several authors have argued, medieval Christian teachings underpinned the first systematic, institutionalised attempts to individualise and discipline personal biographies (e.g. Le Goff 1981; Dumont 1986, 23-59; Hahn 2000, 117-96; see also Elias 2001, 166-205).

2.5 As Ariès (1977) has argued, the 'invention' of personalised funerary monuments in medieval Europe can be understood to signal the rise of a sense of individual distinctive. While communal burials stressed the importance of group membership, these monuments constitute an expression of a growing awareness of, and concern about, individuality. They focus upon particular individuals, and their existence in this world and the next one. Generally, however, macabre decorations on late-medieval or early-modern funerary monuments also directed attention to the degradation of the self in death: skulls, crossbones, so-called transi images (i.e. images of the deceased as a corpse or a rotting cadaver, sometimes complete with worms, as an allegory of how transient worldly glory is), etc. While monuments were thus built to and for the elite as a material representation of preordained destiny, they could at the same time present frightful pictures of the afterlife (see also Cohen 1973; Lowenthal 1994; Wood and Williamson 2003). As such paradox expresses, new, more individualised forms of remembrance were not self-evident in the late-medieval era.
2.6 In the eighteenth-century Christian theology, these frightful pictures of the afterlife disappeared almost entirely. In a number of writings, Hell was depicted as an intellectual instrument of priests to terrify and dominate the people. Instead the idea of a merciful and loving God gained prominence; the notion of universal salvation was widely defended (e.g. Cuppé 1745; Blake 1793/1993, 46-58). In the words of the Oxford historian J. McManners: "Conversion begins with fear – a history of the progress of Christian thought in the eighteenth century could be written around the theme of the abandonment of this harsh un-Christian maxim" (1981, 145). However, this so-called "progress of Christian thought" reflects major social transitions. In the early-modern era, more inclusive notions of personhood gradually gained prominence. The most explicit expression thereof probably is the Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme, adopted in 1789 as part of the French Revolution, which marked the abolition of the Ancien Régime. Although a wide range of researchers have pointed to the religious, especially Protestant, roots of modern society (e.g. Weber 1988), Christianity was also forced to adapt to the structural pressures towards full inclusion in modern society.

2.7 The "great transformation" changed the conditions of the individual. For several classical authors, it was in fact only with the emergence of modern society that the separate individual became a focus of attention (e.g. Durkheim 1930). In the more recent sociological literature, critical questions have however also been raised. Are people nowadays more individual than their ancestors? Which social institutions define individuality? Which elements are nowadays important, and which are not? As Anthony Giddens argued in Modernity and Self-Identity, "rather than talking in general terms of 'individual', 'self' or even 'self-identity' as distinctive of modernity, we should try to break things down into finer detail" (1991, 75). In this light, we might ask how the 'individual' is remembered at cemeteries. The increasing use of permanent individual gravemarkers corresponds with expanding notions of individuality. Exclusion became increasingly difficult to legitimate – in religious as well as in other social contexts (Bohn 2006; Vanderstraeten 2006a, 2006b; Lindemann 2009). But how did religion and other social institutions contribute more specifically to changing definitions of individuality?

2.8 In general terms, it can be said that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century cemeteries present both inner- and other-worldly conceptions of individuality (but with shifting emphases). While the language of the inscriptions on late-medieval and early-modern monuments to the dead was mostly Latin, pretensions to such other-worldly linguistic agelessness were abandoned in the modern era. The inscriptions on gravestones started to address the general public in the national language it understood. The modern cemeteries are conceived as this-worldly spaces, in which the survivors openly remember and commemorate their death. What they do (or don't) is in principle observable by the public.

2.9 However, other-worldly references abound at cemeteries throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. In Catholic regions, the monuments to the dead were often characterised by a more explicit vertical architecture. They pointed to Heaven. Most ornaments also entailed this other-worldly reference, such as angels and effigies or white doves (symbolising the Holy Ghost). Moreover, Catholics meditated on the suffering body of Christ. They decorated their graves with massive crosses or crucifixes and base-relief carvings of Christ with a crown of thorns on his head. Christ's sacrifice on the cross was seen as the source of eternal life. His resurrection symbolised the life in Heaven that would come from death. The 'average' gravestones emphasised this hope of an everlasting life near God. The funerary architecture of Protestant cemeteries is on the whole more modest than that of Catholic ones. The Protestant suspicion to such other-worldly linguistic agelessness were abandoned in the modern era. The inscriptions on late-medieval and early-modern monuments to the dead was mostly Latin, pretensions to inner- and other-worldly conceptions of individuality (but with shifting emphases). While the language of the inscriptions on late-medieval and early-modern monuments to the dead was mostly Latin, pretensions to such other-worldly linguistic agelessness were abandoned in the modern era. The inscriptions on gravestones started to address the general public in the national language it understood. The modern cemeteries are conceived as this-worldly spaces, in which the survivors openly remember and commemorate their death. What they do (or don't) is in principle observable by the public.

2.10 The material artefacts at modern, nineteenth and early-twentieth-century cemeteries have created a reality on their own. Until today, we continue to be confronted with this material Christian culture. Fears about the afterlife became less prominent; everyone was thought to have access to the fruits of eternal life. Such "progress of Christian thought" (McManners) not only included large populations within religious contexts, it also made it difficult to regulate behaviour in this world via religious teachings. When no sanctions can be imposed, religion is bound to lose relevance (Luhmann 2000; Vanderstraaten 2007). Such message seemed, however, reassuring for individuals confronted with their finitude. At public cemeteries, we still have to deal with the material artefacts of this modern, 'invented tradition'.

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Before proceeding to an analysis of recent evolutions at our public cemeteries, I would like to point to some characteristics of modern military or war cemeteries. Memorials to the dead of military conflicts were not common in Europe until the middle of the nineteenth century. Most older monuments celebrate a military victory; they were not erected to commemorate the casualties of the war (Koselleck 1994; Turner 2006). Mass graves were common for quite a long time, especially for private soldiers. The mausoleum erected in the Evere Cemetery in Brussels for the British casualties on the field of Waterloo is probably the first British national memorial to the dead (as opposed to a monument to a victory). But it was constructed in 1889, i.e. about three quarter of a century after the Battle of Waterloo. As one can witness at many places in Northern France and Western Flanders, it is only at the end of and after the Great War that the first systematic efforts were made to give permanent commemoration to all individual victims of that war (Stamp 2007, 72-100; see also Rigney 2008).

The Imperial War Graves Commission (established in 1917), which became responsible for the burial and commemoration of the British victims of the Great War, stated its rationale in unequivocal terms in January 1918: "If memorials were allowed to be erected in the War Cemeteries according to the preference, taste and means of relatives and friends, the result would be that costly monuments put up by the well-to-do over their dead would contrast unkindly with those humbler ones which would be all that poor folk could afford. Thus the inspiring memory of the common sacrifice made by all ranks would lose the regularity and orderliness most becoming to the resting places of soldiers, who fought and fell side by side" (quoted in Stamp 2007, 84). Although this rationale elicited at that time considerable controversy, it was implemented in a rather straightforward way. Overall, these war cemeteries still are characterised by soberness and simplicity. The markers hardly differ from each other. In most instances, the markers bear the name of the man beneath. Carved into the stone is mostly also his military rank and regiment, his age and nationality, as well as a religious symbol (a cross, or Star of David). Over those graves containing an unidentified body, the same headstone bears the inscription "known unto God". But further differentiation is entirely eliminated at most war cemeteries. Differences of military rank, for example, are not rendered into differences in the size or the position of the markers. These cemeteries and their standard headstones aim to achieve equality of treatment. They impose equality for all the dead – whether rich or poor, titled or common, officers or private soldiers.

In the course of the twentieth century, these war cemeteries created a new reality, which also affected traditions at other (parts of our) public cemeteries. Confronted with the sober standard stones for those individuals who gave their life for others, it became difficult to worship the well-to-do by means of large and triumphant mausoleums. Most direct celebrations of power and status indeed disappeared in the early-twentieth century. From about 1920, cemeteries throughout the western world have reflected a drastic
decrease in "conspicuous consumption" (Gillis 1994; see also McDannell 1995, 103-31).

2.14 It can be added that the equality of treatment of the victims of military conflicts does not conflict with individualisation processes. Since the early-twentieth century, many prominent war memorials highlight the toll paid by individuals. The wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, for example, lists over 58,000 names of American soldiers who died in service or remain unaccounted for. In ceremonies, such as those related to the Holocaust, the names of the victims are recited one by one – for many hours and days. Nowadays it has become difficult to imagine that commemorations of a military conflict do not bring it down to the individual level. While high-tech forms of warfare drastically increased the number of victims, each of these victims now is important.

Modes of individualisation

3.1 At graveyards, the bereaved do not remember their dead privately or quietly, as, for example, in prayers (Dutton 2008). Instead they do so publicly and visibly, so that what they do (or don't) can be noticed by the public. Beyond denoting the deaths of single individuals, they give material form to what Durkheim called "collective representations". In Durkheim's words: "mourning is not a natural movement of private feeling wounded by a cruel loss; it is a duty imposed by the group" (1995, 400). From a historical-sociological perspective, these carved stones may be considered as material witnesses of changing social and cultural sensibilities.

3.2 At present, we build upon, and react to, the choices that were made in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Religious frameworks of meaning, which focus upon the expectation of an other-worldly salvation, still play a prominent role in our burial practices. Church attendance is dwindling to one-figure numbers in most European countries. But, as Jack Goody wrote some fifteen years ago, "even in our secular age it is difficult to die, or at least be buried, except in a religious mode" (1995, 284; see also Lee). We can, nevertheless, discern a number of significant qualitative changes in our burial practices. As the discussion in the following subsections illustrates, individualisation is not a one-dimensional and unidirectional process of change. One additional preliminary remark needs to be made: While the focus hereafter is upon relatively recent changes, I do not at all claim that traditional funerary and burial practices have fully disappeared. What has changed in recent years, however, is that the choice for such traditional practices can be perceived as an intentional one (and/or criticised as being outdated or old-fashioned).
Individualisation

3.3 It is, firstly, not difficult to see that religious definitions of individuality have become less prominent in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Although tombstones often remain decorated with religious symbols, these symbols no longer dominate the marker. Crucifixes and crosses no longer constitute the marker's centre or apex. Instead it has become customary to put the name and/or portrait of the deceased much more central. The references to the particular identity of the deceased push the other-worldly references to the margins. The (memory of the) deceased is moved into the centre of the social rites of remembrance. In a few nineteenth-century instances, mostly in the case of 'extraordinary' individuals, such as renowned artists, markers already explicitly focussed on the genius and singularity of the deceased. Such references are now more widely used. Nevertheless our ways of constructing and expressing personal identity are still regulated by social conventions. Individualisation goes at the cost of religious frames of meaning, but the possibility of an individual definition of individuality is made possible within and by society.

3.4 In this light, the increasing use of visual images at cemeteries is of particular interest. There exist early examples of this aspect of commemoration, from the time when daguerreotypes were the form of image available. But the use of photographic images truly became en vogue in the 1960s, shortly after photography became part of the western consumer culture. In recent decades, the new communication media have been introduced, too. The webcasting of funeral services is now beginning to take root in the funerary industry, although this practice still seems rare. Some funeral entrepreneurs also sell monuments with computer and screen, thus allowing the survivors to watch slide shows or stored videos from/with the deceased (for an overview of such new funerary practices, see Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2006).

3.5 To understand the current significance of visual images at graveyards, we can make use of Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of the functions of amateur photography. Visual images were not yet commonly used at graveyards at the moment that Bourdieu published his analyses (1965), but we can extend his analyses of the relationship between photography and domestic cults. And although the information made available by the gravestones at our cemeteries makes it difficult to come to firm conclusions, the adoption of visual images (pictures, videos, etc.) also seems to be characterised by a class-bias. For Bourdieu, photography developed first and foremost as an "art moyen", i.e. a middlebrow and middleclass art. But in the last decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the use of visual images has become more widely spread throughout different social classes (Voyé 2007).

3.6 On some headstones from the mid-twentieth century, one finds pictures of the corpse which was buried beneath; the survivors apparently wanted to remember the last image of their beloved one. Much more typical, however, are images which conserve identities different from the transitional identity of dying and final illness. Especially during the late 1960s and 1970s, the survivors used "official" black-and-white portraits, taken in accordance with the rules of social etiquette. Such passport pictures depict responsible citizens in their Sunday best; they show individuals face on, in the centre of the picture, motionless and in a dignified attitude ("deadly serious" as it were). In more recent years, colour pictures sometimes substitute for these black-and-white photographs. But other kinds of illustrations are now also in use – such as snapshot collages and eye-catching near-life-sized pictures depicting the deceased in informal situations or at happy times (in a pool, with a beloved pet, as fan of her/his favourite football team, etc.). Stored videos, which are mostly accessible through a password-protected site, constitute another recent example. The historically shifting concerns and orientations of the survivors inform about the changing contexts which shape their thoughts and actions. People search for ways of singling out the particular identity/memory of the deceased from those of the mass of the population. As the pictures below illustrate, the use of a likeness of a "beloved one" on the grave implies a somewhat different view on life and death. It gives a face to the deceased. But although many of the more recent expressions of individuality are no longer dominated by religious frameworks of meaning, the means which people use to construct individuality remain in many ways socially determined. In this sense, diversity indeed is "façade diversity" (Boli and Elliot 2008).
The cult of life

3.7 Secondly, it is important to devote attention to some consequences of the increase of the average life expectancy in Europe. Life often remained short in the early-modern era. It frequently ended abruptly, too, especially for young children and for women in the postnatal period. In the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century, such things changed – as a consequence of improvements in public health and hygiene, of changes in the economic production process (less accidents, less pollution, etc.), and so on. In Belgium, for example, life expectancy at birth rose from 43 years for men and 46 years for women at the end of the nineteenth century to respectively 75 years and 82 years one hundred years later. In other European or "developed" countries, similar evolution did take place (Sardon 2006). Because of the increasing life expectancy, the appreciation of human life on earth could change. Because death seems far/further away, attention could be directed toward this world, instead of the other world. It could focus on one's life here and now, instead of that in the proximity of the Almighty. In recent decades, it has therefore become difficult to see human life in terms of sacrifice, suffering, hardship, deprivation, and death in terms of redemption, resurrection, salvation or eternal happiness. As a consequence, many of the Christian symbols traditionally used at our graveyards have lost their taken-for-granted character.

3.8 The emphasis on the body, which, according to many sociologists, is characteristic of the individualisation processes of our contemporary era, cannot but be understood against this background of increasing average life expectancy. Our western culture celebrates joyful life in the here and now; its cult of health, fitness and youth has become omnipresent. The healthy or strong body is attributed a value of and in itself. It is no longer seen as the mere earthly frame of an immaterial spirit or soul (Giddens 1991; see also Mellor and Shilling 1993; Voyé 2007).[8] The individual body currently also plays a prominent role in the process of identifying and commemorating the dead. Many attributes on graves presently commemorate the physical person, her/his corporeal "presentation of self". Such attributes often replace religious symbols; they relate the gravemarker and the memory of the dead it is intended to perpetuate. The aforementioned success of visual images on gravestones is one of many manifestations of this growing concern with embodied individuality.

3.9 Another expression of this pattern of change is the emergence of new ways of dealing with the death of the very young. Although archaeologists have found children's courtyards which date back to the Roman Period, most graveyard authorities have only in recent decades started to create separate children's gardens or children's corners (Mytum 2003). As we currently are all familiar with, the gravemarkers in most of these courtyards are small – just as the persons for whom they are constructed. References to cherubs and other benign images abound. Colourful toys and teddy bears are omnipresent, too. Their disorderly nature clearly separates the children's corners from the other parts of current-day cemeteries. Because of the higher average life expectancy, the brevity of some people's life now stands out as a special problem. We search for new ways to remember and mourn these individuals – since death took them while young. Although this vulnerability vis-à-vis the death of young children seems now self-evident, entirely different
customs existed until only a few decades ago. Until the mid-twentieth century, the Catholic clergy often refused to bury unbaptised persons (such as children who were stillborn or died immediately after birth) in "holy ground". Such forms of exclusion have become totally unacceptable; the Church has been forced to accept universal categories. All individuals now have the right to be remembered, members as well as non-members of the Church. As indicated, these forms of individualisation and secularisation go hand in hand with an increased emphasis on the value of this-worldly life.

See footnote [9]

Strong ties

3.10 Thirdly, there have occurred a number of interesting changes in the social networks which take responsibility for remembering the deceased. In the broader literature on mourning and remembering, it has become customary to reject the "scripted religious rituals" and to defend instead of the "principle of participation". Current-day reformers air concerns about the impersonality and uniformity in life cycle rituals and portray their struggle as that of freeing families and individuals from religious conformity. In fact, it has already frequently been observed that the survivors construct funeral practices out of a plethora of religious idioms available to them – which are neither tied to nor controlled by organised, denominational religion (see, e.g., Vandendorpe 2003; Walter 2005; Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2006; Voyé 2007). During many funerals, for example, the survivors have ceased to have the local priest prepare their texts. They become involved in the preparation of the ritual; they read personal messages during the ceremony; they choose texts from both the religious and the non-religious repertoire, etc. We might say that the social networks of individuals during their lifetime also organise and control the forms of remembering and mourning after their death. Once again, it can be seen that individualisation basically is a social phenomenon.

3.11 On cemeteries, similar evolutions took place in the course of the twentieth and early-twenty-first century. Here, too, the relation of the dead to the living (instead of to the Almighty) has moved to the centre of burial practices. The deceased is valued in "social" terms. The survivors mourn the tender father or mother, the irreplaceable spouse, the loveable daughter, the beloved partner, the true friend, the inspiring companion (see Vovelle 1980; Auger 2007; O'Rourke 2007). At many gravestones, expressions of a religious belief in resurrection and salvation continue to be juxtaposed to a wholly worldly notion of survival in the memory of family members and friends ("we will never forget you", "your memory lives in our hearts", etc.). The overall focus, however, seems to have shifted to the memory of the dead among the living. The 'strong ties' remain visible after the individual's death – and these social ties are increasingly expected to remain important. The survivors visibly affirm the social imperative of remembering and mourning the dead to which the monument was dedicated.

3.12 In the Catholic Church, the family dead are officially remembered and commemorated at religious
In the Catholic Church, the family dead are officially remembered and commemorated at religious festivals. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the first days of November became the days when people visit the cemetery and take flowers – especially chrysanthemums – to the graves of their family dead (Goody 1993; Goody and Poppi 1994). These days remain important in the contemporary era. But in recent decades, remembering also seems less circled around or structured by specific religious festivals. For vast numbers of people, more or less regular visits to the graveyard now constitute a filial duty and an indispensable source of solace. The survivors leave personal messages, cut flowers, burning candles, and all kinds of memorabilia. The many temporary accessories, adds-on or decorations with which the survivors remember their dead contribute to her/his post-mortem individualisation. They single out or differentiate her/his gravemarker from the others.

In other words, the process of secularisation enabled the exploration of new forms of remembering and commemorating. In the Low Countries (as elsewhere in Europe), the Catholic Church is no longer able to impose its definition of the situation. It is no longer able to define the problem of death in such a way that it can itself provide, and monopolise access to, the solution. For large parts of the population, the prospect of eternal life in Heaven has lost its appeal. Instead the problem of death has increasingly become defined in this-worldly rather than in other-worldly terms. The post-mortal existence (or survival) of the dead now is most of all one in the memory of the living (see also Vanderstraeten 2002).

These pictures show ways in which the living take responsibility for the dead. The first one was taken at All Souls' Day (2 November), it shows a conventional, somewhat conservatively decorated grave. The second picture, taken in the summer, depicts a rather unremarkable monument, on which relatives and others deposited extravagant temporary decorations. Many more of such monuments can now be found on our burial sites. And when visitors come often, the decorations they leave frequently follow the cycle of the seasons – as if those seasonal passages still mattered to the deceased, as they do to the survivors.

Concluding remarks

Our ways of dealing with death and dying are dependent upon a number of factors. Medical advances, for example, such as the increase of the average life expectancy, have in recent decades changed the frequency with which people 'normally' are confronted with death. However, the mere frequency with which we experience death seems less important than the kind of relationship which exists with the person with whose death one is confronted. This relationship depends upon social preconditions, such as expectations regarding the character of individual uniqueness and/or the nature of affective ties. It depends, in the language of classical sociology, upon the degree of individualisation and role differentiation within society. It depends, we might also say, upon the kinds of social networks that have nowadays become prevalent. Our ways of dealing with death and dying cannot be understood without sociological analysis of the basic structural features of contemporary society.

From this perspective, this article has focused upon the material culture of cemeteries and gravestones. In the western world, permanent individual gravemarkers were only established as social norm for large populations in the course of the nineteenth century. Although this social norm proved rather stable, gravestones have since witnessed a number of (sometimes quite small) transformations. And although the material form of these carved stones limits what may be expressed, these transformations reveal changing social notions of individuality. Our burial practices constitute a space within which individuality can be performed. In the Low Countries, the emphasis has shifted from the afterlife to life in this world and within particular social networks. On the 'average' gravestone, religious symbols highlighting the hope of eternal salvation have become less prominent. The current, more secularised modes of remembering both emphasize the deceased individuals and their social network. They once again illustrate that individualisation is a social accomplishment.
Notes

1 The Napoleonic empire was the means by which new civic and legislative practices were promoted all over Europe – albeit with variable results. Not only the Napoleonic Code had an immense impact on the political administration in countries subjugated under the French Empire. French legislation also changed burial practices in a great number of European countries. For a discussion, see Queiroz and Rugg (2003).

2 The preference for interments in churches emerged against the same theological background. Churches or chapels were perceived as privileged places, in which individuals could be buried near the relics of saints preserved within the building, or survivors could pay for Masses to be said for the deceased.

3 An exception was/is made for the Church's secular priests, whose tombstones were/are mostly decorated with the symbols of their "vocation", [0]viz. the Host and the chalice. But both symbols refer to Christ's sacrifice (to his body and his blood), too. Their use illustrates the Catholic belief that priests, i.e. individuals who have received the sacrament of the holy orders, engage in a privileged relationship with their God.

4 Belgium had a relatively homogeneous Catholic population until the 1960s. The situation was different in the Netherlands, because Protestants here long dominated at the national-political level (see Lechner 2008, 103-36). As a consequence of the presence of 'critical' Protestant onlookers, Catholic burial places in the Netherlands are on the whole fairly sober, too. But, as one of the first 'global players', the Roman-Catholic Church implemented its symbolic language globally.

5 Notwithstanding the overall emphasis on soberness, some central monuments at war cemeteries do entail symbols of victory. Perhaps most used were crosses which resemble swords. It should also be added that there exist differences between the war cemeteries for the soldiers, who fought in the German army which lost the Great War, and those for the victims among the allied forces. For a recent discussion of the neglect of war in social theory, see Joas and Knöbl (2008).

6 As of 1963, the Catholic Church has officially tolerated the burning of the corpse at a funeral cremation. But even today, the Catholic Church does not support cremation – as Christ was buried. Cremation adds to the range of possibilities available to the survivors, This article primarily focuses on burial practices at graveyards – given its dominant position in the Catholic areas of Europe. Neither will I deal here with recent demands for ethnically appropriate services; most migrants still prefer to repatriate the corpses of their relatives.

7 In perspective, amateur photography serves a family function: it is both an index and an instrument of integration. According to Bourdieu, "photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of … the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life" (1996, 19). Bourdieu's analyses focus on some grand ceremonies in Catholic France, especially baptisms, first communions and weddings (see also Bourdieu and Bourdieu 1965). As I try to indicate, the use of likenesses of beloved ones on gravestones probably 'obeys' the same functional logic.

8 At the other side of a 'normal' life, other challenges now impose themselves. We increasingly view many of our living at the end of life as a form of death. Many residents at nursing homes nowadays see themselves as persons who are dying, at least as persons who will stay there until they die. The current scholarly discussion of these changing social conditions and communications about death revolves around the notion of "the denial of death" and "the shameful death" (see, e.g., Kellehear 2007, 191-233; Saake 2008). For a related view on the "sequestration of death", see Giddens (1991, 144-80).

9 It should be added that most local governments have loosened their regulations regarding the construction of gravemarkers in recent decades. Everywhere more materials are allowed: one nowadays finds markers of stale, recycled material, glass, plastics, etc. Innovations such as these give the graveyards more colour; the traditional shades of grey have become less predominant at our burial sites.

10 In the Protestant world, this Feast of the Dead lives on only as a secular festival, largely for children, for it was the occasion for the development of Halloween, the eve of All Saints or All Hallows ("All Hallow Even"), on 31 October. This festival still (but hidden beneath commercial interests) refers to the day that the spirits of the deceased are said to return to this world, and give the living an opportunity to consult them.

11 In a number of instances, burial sites themselves also seem to lose social importance. Sights of remembrance are sometimes relocated, especially in the case of the victims of crimes or accidents. The best-known examples constitute the roadside crosses that mark fatal car wrecks. Such memorials are mostly tolerated by local authorities, but they are set up and tended by the family and friends of those who were killed (see for more detailed writings about roadside crosses, Reid and Reid 2001; Everett 2002; Grider 2006).

References


