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## Article

# Intersection of the Religious and the Secular: The Cemetery Festival in Latvia

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the commemoration of the deceased by examining a peculiar Latvian religious tradition—the cemetery festival. Latvian society is moving down the path to secularization. Participation in religious ritual practices could be expected to decrease in a predominately secular society. Nevertheless, the tradition of the cemetery festival practiced in Latvia shows that the relationship between the religious and the secular is much more complex than simply being in opposition to each other. The analysis is based on data obtained by undertaking fieldwork at cemeteries in Latvia. Participant observation and qualitative in-depth interviews were the main research tools used in the fieldwork. Through an analysis of the fieldwork data, this article explains, first, how honoring of the deceased currently takes place in Latvia; second, the factors which have determined the preservation of the cemetery festival tradition despite the forced secularization of the Soviet period and the general secularization encountered today; third, the relationship between religious and secular activities and their transformation at the cemetery festival.



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**Keywords:** transformations in religious practices; cemetery festival; religious; secular; death rituals; commemoration of the deceased; gravesites

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, the conviction has been expressed in contemporary Western society that our ability to rationally control nature, the human body, and social order is increasing with each passing day. Progress in medicine and technology is truly impressive. Illnesses, which were fatal 100 years ago, can now be easily cured and our lifespan is increasing. Science and social security have, respectively, made people's lives much safer and more protected. However, new dimensions of risk have appeared: new epidemics, the degradation of our natural environment, global warming, and the threats of biological war and nuclear disaster (Couch 2000). Death is a particularly significant part of culture (Strinati 2000; Leming and Dickinson 2002), as the media and popular culture offer it up to us in the most diverse kinds of products: from information and news about the deaths of people in disasters to thrillers and television serials (Kearl 1995; Durkin 2003). Existing in parallel with people's everyday lives, death has lost its taboo status (Jacobsen 2020), and this has also influenced death rituals, funerals, and commemorative rituals for the deceased. It is important in this context to reflect on the functions these rituals have in a modern secularized society.

In geopolitical terms, Latvia<sup>1</sup>, as a country of the Baltic region, qualifies for the status of a Western country, that of a Nordic country in particular (Latvia became a Member State of the European Union in 2004). Latvian society could be expected to be highly secularized, but data from the European Values Study show that 76% of people consider

<sup>1</sup> For insight into the religious demography in Latvia, see data on religious belonging (Stasulane 2017).

themselves to be “a religious person” (AEV 2008b). However, in Latvia too, secularization is moving in the same trajectory as in Western Europe, characterized by believing without belonging (Tromp et al. 2020): in Latvia, only 8% attend religious services (AEV 2008a). The secularization process influences Latvians’ attitudes towards religious rituals. This is marked in an especially striking way in relation to death rituals. As an example, one could mention the increasing demand for cremation services chosen by families that do not practice religion. Respectively, civil celebrants, rather than clergy, are being chosen to send off the deceased. As in Western Europe (Walter 1996; Groote and Klaassens 2014), death rituals in Latvia too are being transformed into business, which is focused on the consumer.

This article addresses the commemoration of the deceased by examining a peculiar Latvian religious tradition—the cemetery festival. An explanation has been provided through an analysis of the fieldwork data revealing, first, how honoring of the deceased currently takes place; second, the factors that have contributed to the preservation of the cemetery festival tradition despite the forced secularization during the Soviet period and the general secularization encountered today; third, the relationship between religious and secular activities at the cemetery festival.

In the Latvian Culture Canon<sup>2</sup>, the grave tending tradition is mentioned among the 13 cultural phenomena. This tradition encompasses a special “socialization event” (Lukaševičs 2012, p. 305)—*kapusvētki*, the cemetery festival. In Latvian, the term *kapusvētki* is a compound word made up of *kapi*—“cemetery” and *svētki*—“festival”. In explaining this phenomenon, its paradoxical nature is highlighted: “The concept itself contains a peculiar dualism—the cemetery, which is associated with sorrow, mourning, the loss of a loved one, and the festival, the main constituent of which is joy, which can have a certain touch of sacredness added to it.”<sup>3</sup> (Mellēna n.d.) In the summer period from June to August, the family members of the departed, closer and more distant relatives, who arrive for the cemetery festival from all over Latvia, and presently from other countries as well, gather on various weekends at cemeteries. In preparing for the cemetery festival, the relatives tend the gravesites of the departed with particular care. This is a religious event, at the center of which is a certain ritual performed by clergy, but the religious dimension of the cemetery festival coexists with the secular one, which is particularly worth researching.

## 2. The Development of the Cemetery Festival Tradition

The intensity and forms of commemoration of the departed vary. A string of factors determines their intensity: the veneration of one’s ancestors, the attitude towards death, grieving traditions, religious doctrine, belief, etc. The interment site of the deceased, associated with certain taboos, is a sacred space, and even a secular standpoint entails showing respect for the deceased and a certain code of behavior at a cemetery.

One should look at various sources when seeking answers to the question of how the tradition of the cemetery festival has evolved historically in Latvia. Unfortunately, archaeological material does not shed any light on the ritual itself, the motivation and many other factors, which existed in seeing off, burying and later commemorating the deceased (Ciglis and Vasks 2017). The oldest written records about Latvian traditional religion can be found in 13th and 14th century chronicles (Pfeiffer 1844; Heinrich 1955; Hermannus 1863), papal bulls and agreements (Švābe 1937). Detailed descriptions of ancient rituals and traditions were not included in these sources. From the 15th century, the range of written sources gradually increased, and the evidence became more detailed and specific. In this and later centuries, more information was derived from descriptions provided by travelers and from documents of the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. However, one should note that the authors from this period often used earlier

<sup>2</sup> The Latvian Culture Canon is a list of the most outstanding and remarkable works of art and cultural treasures, which includes the most significant achievements in culture (Latvijai 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Here and onwards, the translation has been made by the author.

essays, repeating them uncritically in their own works. *Das Sudauerbüchlein* (Sudovian booklet) written in Prussia (Vēlius 2001, pp. 123–27), was used as a guide in the 16th century essays describing the gods of the Balts<sup>4</sup>, the burial traditions and anniversary celebrations commemorating the departed.

Folklore should be mentioned in addition to the archaeological and written sources. Unfortunately, the interpretation of this material is often dependent on the subjective approach and interests of the researcher. The most comprehensive Latvian folklore material—the folk songs<sup>5</sup>—do not contain convincing and accurate information to establish a direct link between folklore and evidence from archaeology and written sources. Despite the efforts made to link folkloric material with prehistory, academic research ascribes folkloric evidence to events, beliefs, and traditions from the recent past. However, some elements of Latvian traditional religion can be identified in folkloric material: the materialization of the soul, the demonization of the prematurely deceased, concern for the deceased, and their being considered to be fully fledged community members. Folkloric materials allow one to understand why the cemetery festival tradition has been able to become deeply rooted in Latvian culture.

In the context of the development of the cemetery festival, it should be noted that in addition to congregations' cemeteries, which were usually located by Christian churches in Latvia, there existed a significant number of sacrificial and burial sites favored by local inhabitants (Muižnieks 2009, p. 41). Even in the 15th century, according to old customs, some newly christened peasants did not bury the deceased in church cemeteries, but in burial grounds where their ancestors were interred prior to the arrival of Christianity in Latvia (Hildebrand 1881, p. 19).

The question could arise as to why did not the Latvian Church object to the existence of such cemeteries? Here account should be taken of Latvia's low population density, as a consequence of which territories of congregations were large. To make the organization of funerals easier, the Church did not object to the interment of the deceased in a cemetery, which was closer to their place of residence. Consequently, village cemeteries existed as alternative places of burial in parallel with cemeteries next to churches. Given that the pagan tradition of burying the deceased fully clothed together with various items was practiced in the Middle Ages and beyond and that the departed were laid to rest in ancient graveyards (Muižnieks 2009, p. 43), we can assume that the traditions for seeing off the deceased were also preserved. It is likely that it was in these alternative places of burial that people also continued to practice the pagan traditions for honoring the memory of the deceased. Without doubt, the continued stability of the ancient religious ideas and traditions also explains the relatively late conversion of the Latvians to Christianity (13th century) and the syncretic character of their religious life, i.e., in Latvia, just as with elsewhere in Europe, Christianization was not followed by an immediate rejection of paganism (Finnestad 1990). The Latvian traditional religion merged with Christianity in the Middle Ages, leading to the emergence of peculiar cultural and religious forms, the elements of which continued to exist in later centuries as well (Biezais 1969). During the Reformation, the fight against the remains of Latvian traditional religion, Catholic traditions, and syncretic expressions of religion unfolded. The consolidation of Christianity, or one could even say, the cleansing from paganism, was steered by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, but the Herrnhutian movement<sup>6</sup> also played an important role. This

<sup>4</sup> Balts or the Baltic people are a group of the Indo-European peoples. In the 1st millennium BC, the territory inhabited by the Balts was six times larger than today's Latvia and Lithuania, where the descendants of the Balts now live and where the last two living Baltic languages—Latvian and Lithuanian—have been preserved.

<sup>5</sup> Latvian folk songs *dainas* have the form of little quatrains and were preserved in oral tradition until the 19th century, when the collection of folk songs became an essential activity during the period of national awakening. Today, the collection contains approximately 1.2 million *dainas*.

<sup>6</sup> Several religious movements developed on the basis of the theological ideas of Jan Hus (1369–1415). One of them was the *Frates Legis Christi* or Moravian Church (1457). Fleeing persecution in the 18th century, its members ended up in Saksen Oberlausitz. There, having settled in the vicinity of Hutberg hill, they named their settlement Herrnhut (1722). This is how the history of the Herrnhut Brethren community began, the members of which are called Herrnhutians in Latvia. In Latvian, the term *Brāļu draudze*—'Brethren congregation' was created from the German *Brüdergemeinde*.

process had an impact on the ancient traditions of honoring the memory of the deceased, with both the Lutherans and the Herrnhutians acting against these traditions.

The cemetery festival tradition developed in the central part of Latvia, in Vidzeme, where the interment of the deceased away from church cemeteries was gradually discontinued after the Great Plague (1710) and the Great Northern War (1700–1721) (Muižnieks 2009, p. 46). Since there were no new burials in the places where the ancient traditions of honoring the memory of the deceased were observed, it is likely that this practice dwindled. It was in this period that missionaries of the Herrnhutian Brethren community commenced their activities in Vidzeme (1729). They brought together a significant number of followers in ten years to initiate a powerful Latvian religious awakening (Ceipe 2010, p. 39).

The Herrnhutian movement has left a deep imprint on Latvian cultural life, as this developed self-confidence of Latvian peasants<sup>7</sup> and prepared the ground for social changes—the Latvian National Awakening or the Neo-Latvian movement (1850s–1880s). Several enduring cultural traditions began under the influence of the Herrnhutians. First, the choir singing tradition should be mentioned. At the Herrnhutian religious meetings, the laity sang easy-to-learn and sentimental Christian “folk songs” in their native language. This special musical culture of the Brethren community assisted in the democratization of the Church, the emancipation of believers and in anchoring the ideas of the Herrnhutians even deeper (Štolls 2009, p. 37). The Herrnhutians laid the foundations for the Latvian choir culture, as the first Latvian Song Celebration<sup>8</sup> (1864) was organized by Juris Neikens (1826–1868), the son of a Herrnhutian preacher, (Gudriķe 2003, p. 418).

The Herrnhutians commenced their activities in Latvia at a time when the ancient traditions of honoring the memory of the deceased were dwindling, i.e., when a need for new traditions that would be understandable and acceptable to Latvian peasants arose. It is the Herrnhutians who are considered the founders of the grave tending tradition in Vidzeme (Uzule and Zelče 2014, p. 40; Misāne 2012, p. 249; Štolls 2016, p. 118). Even though there is no documented evidence, Misāne is convinced that there is no reason for calling the above into question (Misāne 2012, p. 249), as Vidzeme was the center of the Brethren congregation movement. There, just as with elsewhere in the territory of Latvia, many new cemeteries were opened in the late 18th century, as the government of tsarist Russia had forbidden the interment of the deceased within churches and in their nearby territory (Švābe et al. 1932, p. 1525). It was at this time that Latvian peasants began to decorate graves with flowers in Vidzeme (around Valmiera and Cēsis). In contrast, the decoration of crosses on graves with woodcarvings, bands and ribbons was practiced in the fishing villages of the western part of Latvia (Kurzeme). This can be considered an older traditional form for honoring the memory of the deceased.<sup>9</sup> As the Herrnhutians tried to eliminate traditional forms of Latvian culture<sup>10</sup>, we can assume that the Herrnhutians modified the traditional form of honoring the memory of the deceased in Vidzeme, attuning it to the ideas of the reformers.

The Lutherans believe that a cemetery plays a special role as a garden in the lives of Christians, facilitating reflection on both secular and religious matters. Martin Luther’s idea that a cemetery must be a quiet place for aesthetic reflection, away from daily activity and one’s place of residence (Luthers 1901, p. 375), was adopted by the leader of the Herrnhut

<sup>7</sup> The Latvian cultural traditions are traditions of the peasant people, as up until the middle of the 19th century, the dominating majority of Latvians lived rurally and worked in agriculture. Changes took place only after the abolition of serfdom. Nevertheless, the majority of Latvians remained employed in agriculture right up to the middle of the 20th century (MUIŽNIEKS 2009, p. 41).

<sup>8</sup> Since 2008, the Song and Dance Celebration tradition has been included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

<sup>9</sup> The Roman Catholic Church had already eliminated the leaving of food at burial sites, which was characteristic of the traditional religions of various peoples. As the Orthodox Church has not clamped down on this, Orthodox believers in Latvia continue to practise this.

<sup>10</sup> The Herrnhutians attempted to eliminate Latvian folklore, first of all Latvian folk songs, as well as traditional folk musical instruments, popularizing playing the violin instead (Johansons 1975, pp. 287–88).

Brethren congregation Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf<sup>11</sup>. On his initiative, the *Gottesacker* (1730), one of the first garden cemeteries in Europe, was created in Herrnhut, and many Lutheran countries followed suit (Pettersson 2004, p. 31). A cemetery as a garden<sup>12</sup>—this new interment culture flourished in Latvia in the first half of the 19th century. Against the background of industrialization and urbanization, “romantic visions of ideal landscapes and English gardening” (Pettersson 2004, p. 31) came to the fore. This was in line with the Latvian traditional understanding of a cemetery as a resting place (*atdusas vieta*), since death was considered a sort of sleep (*atdusa*). However, the cholera epidemic, which affected the population of rapidly growing cities more directly than ideas of theologians or romantics, played the pivotal role in the creation of a new type of cemeteries (Curl 1975; Tarlow 2020).

In the 19th century, when cemeteries in Latvia became similar to gardens/parks, concepts such as *kapsētas svētki* (graveyard festival), *kapsētas dievkalpojums* (graveyard service), *kapusvētki* (cemetery festival) and *miroņu svētki* (festival of the dead) were mentioned in Latvian newspapers<sup>13</sup>. Assuming that the newspapers wrote about the existing traditions, we can conclude that the cemetery festival was celebrated in the first half of the 19th century. Even though the time of the first cemetery festival celebrated is not precisely known, it is accepted that the tradition of the cemetery festival was commenced by the Krimulda congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, where the cemetery festival was celebrated in 1831 (Ērmans 1930, p. 14). This assertion can be called into question, as the cemetery festival tradition was not initiated by the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church but by the grass roots—congregation members, i.e., Latvian peasants. It is likely that the Evangelical Lutheran Church took over an established cemetery festival tradition. This is underpinned by editions of the prayer book *Dziesmu grāmata* (Song Book): Misāne has noticed that the editions of 1852, 1879, and 1898 do not include texts for the cemetery festival. A special procedure for the cemetery festival service was only published in 1900 (Misāne 2012, p. 248). However, newspapers published in Latvia in the German language mentioned the cemetery festival (*Friedhofsfest*) in the early 20th century, i.e., at a time when its celebration had already been established (Anonymous 1905, p. 3; Anonymous 1914a, p. 6; Anonymous 1914b, p. 5).

To understand the dynamics of the emergence of the cemetery festival, it should be noted that the period of decline of Herrnhutism began in the 1820s. The decline intensified in 1860, when the Brethren congregation’s center in Herrnhut agreed to withdraw its special status in the Baltics because of political pressure from tsarist Russia (Ceipe 2006, p. 282). The local nobility, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and institutions of tsarist Russia restricted activities of the Brethren congregations: they forbade them from taking on new members, preachers had to coordinate sermons and songs with a Lutheran pastor, closed meetings could not be held, etc. Action against the “specific way of expressing Latvian Christianity” (Ceipe 2006, p. 281), the almost “national Church”, was part of the turning against the Latvian National Awakening. Tsarist Russian propaganda aimed at converting Latvians to Orthodoxy<sup>14</sup> faced opposition from stubborn Herrnhutians (Štolls 2016, p. 108). Having come under the crossfire between the Lutherans and the Orthodox, the Herrnhutians preferred Protestantism and more or less formally integrated into Evangelical Lutheran congregations, bringing their traditions into them as well.

The cemetery festival tradition, after its development among the Herrnhutians, and its consolidation in the Lutheran environment in Vidzeme, also reached the western part

<sup>11</sup> Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) allowed the colony of refugees to settle on his lands in Saxony, and the first Herrnhut congregation was formed there (1722). Christian David (1692–1751), a carpenter and the founder of the movement, and weaver Timotheus Fiedler (1700–1748) arrived in Vidzeme in their capacity as the first Herrnhutian missionaries (1729).

<sup>12</sup> In Latvian, these types of cemeteries were called *meža kapi* (forest cemetery). The name of the cemetery, which was established in Rīga in 1913, is still *Meža kapi*. This is a very significant cemetery from the cultural and historical point of view. Styles representing various eras and the footprints left by political regimes can be seen there. Innumerable artistically valuable grave monuments and memorials dedicated to Latvian politicians, artists, military staff, etc. are located at this cemetery.

<sup>13</sup> The first newspaper in Latvian *Latviešu Avīzes* (Latvians’ Newspaper) was only issued in 1822.

<sup>14</sup> The tsarist government promised to allocate land to those who converted to Orthodoxy.

of Latvia—Kurzeme, where it was documented in Dubulti in 1865. It is again noteworthy that the first Brethren congregations in Kurzeme began to develop around 1863–1864. However, in the eastern part of Latvia, in Catholic-dominated Latgale, the cemetery festival tradition arrived much later—only after 1932, when the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church recommended the celebration of the cemetery festival at all Catholic cemeteries (Strods 1996, p. 263). To understand the context of this recommendation, the bitter competition between denominations in Latvia on various aspects should be recalled (arguments about the ownership of church buildings, property rights, congregation membership numbers, etc.). Without going into detail about the development and modification of liturgical forms of the cemetery festival, it should be emphasized that prior to World War II, the cemetery festival was celebrated by both largest Christian denominations in Latvia: the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

After World War II, under the Soviet regime, the cemetery festival was subjected to the whims of the Communist Party: it could be freely celebrated in the first post-war years, but later attempts were made to ban it under the pretext that it was taking place at harvesting time (Cakuls 2001, p. 218). In the end, the cemetery festival became the sole religious event that was allowed to be organized outside of religious buildings, i.e., outside the walls of a church. As the cemetery festival was such a mass event, Soviet authorities were unable to ban it, and new solutions were sought for this. *Sabiedriskie kapusvētki* (the public cemetery festival), i.e., the secular cemetery festival was introduced to combat this religious tradition.<sup>15</sup> The public cemetery festival was organized by the local culture center, which involved amateur or even professional actors to perform at the event. By inviting brass bands, the local coordinators of cultural life tried to attract as many people as possible to the events, hoping thereby to outdo the religious cemetery festival. As it was difficult to compete with a well-established tradition, the public cemetery festival was often held on the same day as the religious one: the secular event took place in the morning, but the religious one in the afternoon. In this way, attendance at the event organized by Soviet officials was also guaranteed: in the morning, people hurried to tend the graves of their loved ones, thus becoming the target audience that could be reached. Despite the efforts of Soviet authorities to eliminate the “opium of the people”, i.e., religion, from the lives of Soviet citizens, the cemetery festival tradition was able to be maintained.

After the restoration of Latvia’s independence (1990), the cemetery festival has been celebrated with renewed vigor, but new challenges also arise, including the rapid decline in the number of people living in Latvia, which could also affect the practice of the cemetery festival in the near future, especially in the Latvian countryside. Population aging introduces changes in the practices of the cemetery festival, e.g., Catholics are gradually giving up the joint procession through the cemetery and the special decoration of the graveyard with an avenue of freshly chopped birches leading to the central place in the cemetery where priests conduct the event. Despite these changes, we can talk about enduring, regular cemetery attendance and a tradition of tending graves extending over centuries in Latvia.

### 3. Interplay between the Religious and the Secular at the Cemetery Festival

From the perspective of phenomenology of religion, a visit to the cemetery could be compared with a pilgrimage whose destination is a sacred place, but its visitors have varying motivations and interests, and they undertake multiple activities, some of which have no direct connection with religion. This could be considered a pleasant way to spend a weekend or a journey undertaken for social and cultural reasons (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot 2000). As with a pilgrimage, heading for a cemetery festival is a multi-functional journey, which involves religious factors along with other visitor motivations (Weidenfeld 2005, p. 147). Studies discuss the difference between a pilgrim and a tourist (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot 2000; Fleisher 2000; Weidenfeld 2005) and conclude that it is almost

<sup>15</sup> Soviet authorities introduced various secular rituals to turn against religion (see Kiope et al. 2020, pp. 143–47).

impossible to distinguish between “religious travelers” and ordinary “vacationers”, since both are often linked to one another in a shared space (Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner 2006). By analogy, this also applies to those attending a cemetery festival. Some of them engage in religious activities, while others have hedonistic intentions, but there is still no obvious dichotomy between them. Even though it is considered that “the secular and the religious are two categories that pertain to different spheres of life and are opposed to each other” (Ivanescu 2016, p. 16), the phenomenon of the cemetery festival shows that religiously motivated activities and secular activities take place at the same place and at the same time, supplementing each other in a very natural way. Thus, the secular activities become a constitutive other.

To understand the mutual dynamics between religious and secular activities, we will first have a look at the procedure of religious activities at the cemetery festival and the meaning the participants of the event give to them. Secondly, we will clarify the types of secular activities that accompany the process at the cemetery festival and their social significance.

### 3.1. Methods and Data Collection

The analysis is based on data obtained by undertaking fieldwork at cemeteries in the eastern part of Latvia (Latgale) in June, July, and August 2020. Latgale was selected as the location for the fieldwork, since the cemetery festival organized there mainly takes place in a rural environment, where the traditional way of celebrating the cemetery festival has been best maintained.

Participant observation and qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were the main research tools used in the fieldwork. The period of observation varied: from one and a half hours to four hours. The researcher’s diary was filled in immediately after the observations were made, and the data contained in it were used to analyze the cemetery festival phenomenon.

In total, 12 interviews were carried out: two interviews were conducted with priests and ten with cemetery festival participants aged 16–72 (5 males and 7 females). The interviews lasted from 55 min to 1.46 h, for a total of 9 h and 19 min. The interviews were transcribed, following generally accepted transcription rules and marking particularly vivid emotions or longer pauses (Dresing et al. 2015).

The goal of the research was explained to cemetery festival participants of various ages, genders, and ethnicities who had agreed to have a conversation with the researcher. Respecting the ethical principles of academic research, pseudonyms were assigned to interviewees randomly from a list of names after the process of transcribing the interviews and all information that could reveal the identity of the interviewee, such as names, places, and other information, was anonymized. The pseudonym, gender, and age of the interviewee have been used in this article when quoting data.

The interviews were coded by employing NVivo software. The researcher made preliminary coding—got familiar with data and tried to identify some main themes (codes) discussed during the interviews and took notes for future main coding by employing NVivo software. After uploading all interviews in NVivo software, the researcher made line-by-line coding. At this stage, the researcher took a closer look at data. The researcher thoroughly read each of the interviews, tried to code everything that seemed important for the conceptual framework<sup>16</sup> of research (words or short phrases were used as nodes), and at the end of the first stage of coding the preliminary structure was formed. When the researcher finished the line-by-line coding, the process of categorization of codes began, and the coding structure was refined. Coding categories were collapsed, expanded, and revised, merged with other codes or deleted until the final result was achieved.

<sup>16</sup> The researcher organized codes based on interviewees’ views on certain topic using hierarchical frames: the top-level nodes described the topic (the religious activities/the secular activities), the mid-level nodes specify the topic (collective religious activities/individual religious activities; collective secular activities/individual secular activities), and the third levels detail the attribute on specific theme (for example, the collective religious activities: the Liturgy/procession/singing of psalms etc.).



### 3.2. Religious Activities at the Cemetery Festival

The cemetery festival is perceived as a religious event not only by older people but also by young interviewees. In response to the question regarding the kind of religious festival celebrated within the family, a young person mentioned the cemetery festival first, even though a little doubt was also expressed in the answer: *Religious [festivals] include the cemetery festival, don't they?* (Marks, male, 16 years old.) As the questions were initially given about the tradition of celebrating festivals within the family, the response was particularly meaningful. Christmas and Easter<sup>17</sup> were not the first things that came to his mind and were mentioned by the young person, but rather the cemetery festival, to which was also added: *But we don't always celebrate it [the cemetery festival]*. (Marks, male, 16 years old.) Therefore, even where participation in the cemetery festival does not take place on a regular basis, it is still viewed as being an important religious event.

Catholicism dominates in Latgale, and the process for conducting the cemetery festival is determined by Catholic liturgical traditions. The interviewee described them generally as follows: *When everyone gathers, the priest greets those who have arrived and commences the Holy Mass, just like at church on a Sunday. When the procession commences, the cross and the flag [celun<sup>18</sup>] is carried, with the priest at the front, followed by everyone else who wants to.* (Lonija, female, 72 years old.) At the Catholic cemetery festival, the Mass is celebrated at the center of the cemetery<sup>19</sup>, during which those attending pray for the repose of the soul of the faithful departed. This religious activity is strictly regulated by the liturgical procedure of the Roman Catholic Church, therefore, divergences from this are not possible. The Mass is followed by a procession, which has the cross and the *celun* being carried at the front, followed by the priest and the most active singers and participants of the cemetery festival. The procession commences in the central part of the cemetery and continues around the inside perimeter of the fence. A special procession song is sung while walking. It contains a message about the end of the world, the perils of Judgment Day, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of sinners, the repentance of sins, and the request to grant the deceased the bliss of Heaven. To follow the text of the songs, the participants in the procession use the Catholic prayer book in which the cemetery festival procession song is published in the section "Prayers for the Dead", (Pujats 1989, pp. 316–18). The procession stops at four places, usually at the corners of the cemetery at small altars, which people call *galdiņi* (little tables), and which have been set up specifically for the needs of the cemetery festival. At the first stopping place, they pray for the souls of departed priests, bishops, and other clergymen, at the second—for deceased fathers, mothers, and their ancestors, at the third—for brothers, sisters and other close relatives who have died, and at the fourth—for all the deceased who are interred in the cemeteries of this and other congregations. At the conclusion of the cemetery festival, the priest blesses children. Parents perceive this as being a protective measure against accidents or illnesses, even though the priest explained: *In praying for the dead, we remember the new generation, who will pray for us.* (Teodors, male, 68 years old.) Newly erected tombstones are blessed as well if requested by relatives. Overall, the event lasts for about 1.5 h. This is the general structure of the event, characterizing the Catholic cemetery festival from year to year.

The interview data helps in understanding how the cemetery festival participants comprehend the religious meaning of the event. In clarifying the religious content of the cemetery festival, the priest pointed out:

*The departed do not disappear, and the cemetery festival is a valuable tradition, which keeps their memory alive and lets living relatives be closer to them. The cemetery festival*

<sup>17</sup> In recent years, Christmas in Latvia has become very commercialized, but traditional Latvian cultural customs rather than the commemoration of the resurrection of Christ, dominate at Easter.

<sup>18</sup> Black rectangular fabric with a white cross—a symbol of a grave.

<sup>19</sup> A chapel is often located in the central part of the cemetery, which sometimes is not the very geometric center. It should be clarified that chapels are quite a new phenomenon in Catholic cemeteries in Latgale. They were usually built in cemeteries where manor owners were interred.

*is not meant just for prayers. It is an opportunity to think about one's life, about one's values here and beyond in the afterlife. (Andris, male, 65 years old.)*

Those attending also value this as an opportunity to come in contact at the cemetery festival with questions about the meaning of life and transcendence: *The cemetery festival is a good reminder of the secular world, which is transitory. It provides a point of reference for reflection about life's hurry, to evaluate one's life. (Vincents, male, 71 years old.)* The interviewee explained that the cemetery festival helps one to see *that death is a part of life, that it should not be feared and that it is just a normal process. One also learns that we can talk about the deceased, we can talk about the fact that a person's life is as long as it is meant to be. (Rasma, female, 58 years old.)* In the interviews, the educative significance of the cemetery festival was also emphasized:

*Even though not everyone understands and accepts the cemetery festival traditions in Latvia, to some degree they can be considered to be a kind of getting used to death and not being afraid of grieving. Parents often choose to distance their children from death—they don't talk about it or say what really happened to some relative, and choose not to take them to funerals with the thought that they will protect them in this way. Protect them—from what? Often it is the parents' own fear and not knowing how to cope with sadness and emotions, not just their own, but those of the child. (Liene, female, 44 years old.)*

Presently, it is easy to avoid conversations regarding death, as a large proportion of the population passes away in specialized institutions (hospitals, nursing homes, etc.) rather than at home in the presence of relatives. Real death has become distant, but the death that is presented in the media and portrayed in popular culture creates a new attitude to it. Respectively, death loses its taboo status, as it becomes transformed into a part of the daily media message or a product of popular culture. That is why, in the view of the interviewee, the cemetery festival provides an opportunity to explain to children what death is. Knowingly or unknowingly, this is used by all the families taking part in the cemetery festival, as they usually attend them together with the younger generation. The fact that all generations participate in the cemetery festival in Latvia should be noted.

The cemetery festival encompasses both individual and collective religious activity. As explained by the interviewee, the departed must not be forgotten. They must be prayed for, as prayers are the greatest thing that we can give them, and they expect this. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.) This is considered to be an obligation: It is important to pray for those to whom we are close: fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters. (Ance, female, 47 years old.) As the Roman Catholic Church invites one to pray for the departed, the religious pray individually using the texts included in the prayer book and, therefore, changes cannot be observed in individual religious activity. In contrast, changes can be clearly identified in the collective commemoration of the deceased which the interviewee explained as follows:

*Earlier we sang psalms at home and much more frequently—every day, from the day of death until interment, on the 14th day after death and also on the Days of the Holy Souls in November. Nowadays, the women of the village gather in the chapel prior to the cemetery festival, as well as on candle evenings. It is sad that there are very few young people among the psalm singers. My heart bleeds for this, as this tradition must not be lost. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.)*

As can be seen, the gathering at someone's home to recite psalms is disappearing. This is caused not so much by secularization but the demographic situation in rural Latvia: the number of inhabitants has decreased significantly<sup>20</sup>. Demographic changes have also affected decoration of sites for cemetery festival activities: the special path is no longer being formed from the cemetery gates to the central cemetery altar—earlier this path was sprinkled with yellowish sand. Heavy physical work is required for achieving this, and this requires the physical strength of young men. Taking into account the current age structure

<sup>20</sup> According to data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, the proportion of urban residents reached 68.5% of Latvia's population in 2019 (Centrālā Statistikas Pārvalde 2020, p. 18).

of the Latvian population<sup>21</sup>, it is self-evident that activities, which require a lot of physical effort, are no longer included at religious events.

In discussing the procession, the priest explained that its procedure depends on both the size of the cemetery and local traditions:

*The core of the traditions does not essentially change. At some village cemeteries, which are located further away, people are gradually dispersing and disappearing, whereas at the cemeteries, which are close to larger populated centers, many people attend—this is understandable. At some places, for example, in Rīga, the processions are not particularly popular, as the cemeteries are very large and it is not possible to go around them physically. Then the prayers take place at the chapel or a smaller procession loop is walked in the central part of the cemetery. (Andris, male, 65 years old.)*

The explanation from the interviewee allows for the conclusion that the traditions for the cemetery festival are being modified, changing according to the environment in which they are celebrated. Respectively, the tradition, which originated in the rural environment, is now being adapted to the urban environment.

From having observed the participation in prayers and singing by cemetery festival participants, the conclusion can be drawn that only some of the participants get actively involved in the religious activities. Most cemetery festival participants remain at the final place of rest of their relatives, observing what is taking place from afar. The key word is *observe*, i.e., they do not actively participate in the celebrations of the cemetery festival. Most cemetery festival participants cross themselves and light candles at the grave of their relatives, with these being their only externally observable religious activities. The passivity of the cemetery festival participants was described by a priest as follows:

*The older ones no longer have a voice, there are no younger ones, or they have also distanced themselves from the Church. This year I was the only one singing, and the ones who had arrived from Rīga could not remember anything and do not know what has to be done at the cemetery festival. (Teodors, male, 68 years old.)*

However, another priest optimistically related that at the cemetery festival, People participate in the singing and do not arrive as if they were attending a concert. This makes me happy, as cooperation can never be too great. (Andris, male, 65 years old.) It should be clarified that the active singing by cemetery festival participants is usually directly proportional to the cultural participation of the local population. The involvement in the cemetery festival is significantly more active in localities where there are active folklore groups and choirs.

The religious activities undertaken at the cemetery festival are sequential; they are performative by their nature and require certain behavior from those who are present. The repetition of these activities, from year to year, transforms them into tradition, which ensures the stability of the social order and a feeling of security. The cemetery festival as a commemoration ritual is an important component of the death rituals alongside the rituals of interment. The individual and collective religious activities undertaken during the cemetery festival allow both individuals and the whole group of participants to cope with the social and cultural consequences caused by death. They, just as with other death rituals, “bridge the gap between past, present and future and diminish the threat that death poses against enduring individual and collective identity” (Reimers 1999, p. 148).

### 3.3. Secular Activities at the Cemetery Festival

#### 3.3.1. Tidying Up of Gravesites

The cemetery festival is celebrated at a specific place—at gravesites, which are tidied up, especially before the festival. The existence of a special cemetery aesthetic culture in Latvia should be noted: cemeteries are tended as if they were flower gardens, and in the

<sup>21</sup> 20% of the population of Latvia are, on average, aged over 65 years, but this is far in excess of 30% outside the capital city, even reaching 92% in some places (Centrālā Statistiskās Pārvalde 2019).

view of landscape architects, Latvian cemeteries are similar to memorial parks (Lināre 2013, pp. 41–49). Even though the local government and congregation care for their maintenance, it is mainly family members of the deceased and other relatives who care for the graves of the deceased on a more or less regular basis. They are made greener with the flowers that are planted every few years, and sand or other covering is used for the renewal of the site around the graves, etc. Notably, the cemetery culture of the Lutherans and Catholics has also influenced the cemetery aesthetics of the Orthodox, Old Believers, and even Muslims in Latvia. These changes have taken place because the interment of people of various denominations and religions has taken place at common cemeteries, i.e., presently there are no longer denominational cemeteries in Latvia, as was the case until World War II.

According to the interviewees' observations, following the example of the Lutherans and Catholics, the Orthodox and Old Believers<sup>22</sup> are starting to regularly tend the graves of their deceased:

*I remember that in childhood [the 1970s] I was walking past the Russian graveyard with my parents—it looked quite unkempt there. The deceased person was interred, a cross mounted, a fence set up around the gravesite, but nothing was planted, no flowers or any greenery. It was obvious that no one went there and did anything. But now, Russians<sup>23</sup> also tend their gravesites. (Rasma, female, 58 years old.)*

An interviewee of Russian descent explained her attitude towards cemetery culture in Latvia as follows:

*I hold onto the view that it is not advisable for children to go to the cemetery. Looking at photographs and remembering [the deceased], that is all right. I go to the cemetery with my mother as well, but the children don't want to go to the cemetery, that is how it is . . . They do still come once a year—[the deceased's] anniversary of their day of death. But going to the cemetery every week, they do not do that. I do that. I do not ask this of my children, as we do not have this sort of tradition. (Olga, female, 42 years old.)*

In their discussion of the cemetery festival, the interviewees valued this maintenance of their sites: The cemetery is always beautiful and tidy, and I'd like to say, it is one of the most beautiful in Latvia, and gratitude for this should be expressed to the cemetery elder. (Aiga, female, 38 years old.) Pride was often expressed: The cemetery is like a rose garden here! (Gerda, female, 27 years old.) Discussions about the aesthetics of the graves were heard in the interviews: Someone might criticize the fact that some have set up a whole garden here, but in my opinion, they could even set up a whole botanic garden. I don't have any objections, because the main thing is that the graves are tended, everything is orderly and beautiful. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.) When explaining why the cemeteries are specially cared for, one of the interviewees pointed out that the neatness of the graveyard had been clearly determined by the cemetery festival tradition: If there was no cemetery festival, the graves would not be as well tended. (Vincents, male, 71 years old.) Other interviewees mostly alluded to traditions and obligations: It has become a custom that we have to do this. It is an obligation. (Liene, female, 44 years old.) The interview data also revealed other motivations and reflected the wish for the cemetery tending tradition not to disappear:

*I would like you to think about a fact—if you don't come and tend for your departed parents, then maybe nobody will come to tend for you either. I keep the family gravesite in order and hope that someone will also remember me when I have departed. (Rasma, female, 58 years old.)*

<sup>22</sup> The Christian denomination that split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century. The Old Believers refused to accept the liturgical reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church. To flee from persecutions, they either went to remote parts of the tsarist empire or left Russia. The first religious refugees settled in Latvia in the 17th century. They have preserved their religious and ethnic identity over several centuries by living in relatively isolated communities. There are approximately 55,000 Old Believers in Latvia today (Pazuhina 2019).

<sup>23</sup> In Latvia, denominational belonging is explicitly ethnically based: Lutherans and Catholics are predominantly Latvian or Polish, while Orthodox and Old Believers are mainly Russian.

Hoping that she would also be remembered, the interviewee revealed that the cemetery fulfilled a commemorative function that was guaranteed by the annual cemetery festival. This type of view is centered on legacy creation and the passing on of the tradition to the next generations.

The cemetery elder had observed that *people often drive up to the cemetery to tend the gravesites*. (Ance, female, 47 years old.) However, not everyone fulfils their obligations towards their predecessors: *a family drives up from Rīga, each year, to where their great-grandparents are interred, but someone else living right here doesn't even drive up to dispose of dried up flowers*. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.) In the interviewee's view, people's participation in the tending of the cemetery territory is determined by their attitude:

*How far away you live is unimportant. There are elderly people who live here and take part in the working bees all the time, but there are young people who simply drive straight past. Others come and just take care of their own gravesites, but do not help in the tending of the overall territory. Another's response was that they drive up to the country to rest, not to work. I would like to see more helping hands around, but people are different.* (Ance, female, 47 years old.)

People's ethical behavior is evaluated in this way, according to their attitude towards the cemetery, especially the intent with which the graveside is tended: *I would not like people to come to rake up the leaves, just so that they would look better in the eyes of others, but rather that they had more noble intentions behind their work*. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.)

A special grave industry has developed due to the particularly careful tending of gravesites which is necessary before the cemetery festival. In other words, a process of commercialization can be observed. Companies are being established to not only prepare and set up gravestones professionally, but to also tend gravesites and make them greener. Customers merely have to choose the type of service they wish to receive and its expense. A regular maintenance service for gravesites is being offered, as well as the tending of gravesites prior to the cemetery festival at any Latvian cemetery (Kapu 2019). The local press, which publishes notifications about the date and time of the cemetery festival, also has a role to play in the cemetery industry. Special magazine editions are already released in the spring, offering practical ideas and reflecting the latest trends in the tending of gravesites (*levas Dārzs Speciālizlaidums: Kapusvētki* 2017). Traders, who provide flowers, candles, and other goods at all times of the year, have set up next to cemeteries in the urban environment. A particular type of infrastructure has been created, assisting the maintenance of the cemetery aesthetic traditions. In turn, there are thieves active at the largest city cemeteries who steal flowers from graves, and this can only be prevented by staining the flowers lightly with iodine or diamond-green spirits.

### 3.3.2. Transformation of the Cemetery Festival

As revealed by the observations, the cemetery festival serves as an instrument of the social interaction. The meeting up of people at the cemetery before/after the event provides an opportunity to socialize with current and former neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. After exchanging greetings, they discuss the latest events in people's lives, as well as current events in local government and nationally. The opportunity to socialize is particularly important for the aged, whose social isolation in rural Latvia is high (Rungule 2007). As shown by the stories from the interviewees, the cemetery festival is a reason to go out into the community: *I drive to the cemetery festival every year, and I also participate in several cemetery festivals, as my relatives are interred at various cemeteries [the names of five cemeteries followed]*. (Vincentis, male, 71 years old.) With respect to the number of participants at the cemetery festival, an interviewee from the older generation maintained that people's response had not decreased over time, and about 300 people attend the cemetery festival each year: *There are fewer people who still live in the neighborhood, but everyone always arrives for the cemetery festival*. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.) The opportunity to maintain social contacts is actively used in this way.

The cemetery festival has a consolidating function for social ties. Collective participation is necessary to prepare for them. An interview with a congregational activist and regular cemetery festival organizer clarified that she had to organize the cutting of the grass at the cemetery and to arrange the people who would carry the cross and the *celun* in the procession, as well as those who would cover the little altars and so on. If a cemetery is the common burial place for several villages, the residents themselves agree on the year in which a particular village would tidy up the cemetery and organize the procedure for the event. This type of self-organization by residents ensures the regular tidying up of the cemetery from year to year. In Latgale, where a characteristic of the population distribution structure is that people live in villages rather than on individual farms as they do elsewhere in Latvia, the organization of the cemetery festival strengthens the mutual solidarity of rural residents even more, differentiating the residents of this Latvian region from others.

If it is hard to imagine the cemetery festival in Latgale without collective involvement, then the influence of the free market can be observed in the organization of the cemetery festival in other places. The cemetery festival in the Latvian region of Zemgale, where the Evangelical Lutheran Church is dominant, are organized by funeral parlors. A half-hour long cemetery festival program has been developed. It includes music (instrumental compositions and songs), poetry readings, an address by a pastor, prayers, and blessings. The local government covers the costs for the event (Uzule and Zelče 2014, p. 185). The fact that a different principle regarding the distribution of the territorial population exists in Zemgale should be clarified: people do not live in villages but in individual homesteads instead. This has influenced the density of the population, as well as the mentality of the residents—this more marked individualism is a significant hurdle to collective involvement.

The cemetery festival, as instrument of the social interaction, provides an opportunity for maintaining links with close and distant relatives. It emerges from the interviews that the cemetery festival is the main annual get-together event for relatives: *The assumption is that cousins and godparents will attend—everybody who can* (Rasma, female, 58 years old), therefore, the cemetery festival is very well attended. If someone has not arrived, the others will try to clarify the reason for non-attendance, e.g., illness, being busy at work, the birth of a child, a business trip, a foreign journey, etc. As the cemetery festival is held from year to year and follows the previously established, yet unofficial calendar order (e.g., the cemetery festival usually takes place on the first Saturday in July at one graveyard, at another—on the second Saturday in July, etc.), people can plan their attendance at an event ahead of time, reconciling this with their interests or work obligations. It should be added that today the cemetery festival is no longer celebrated on Sundays, as most cemetery festival participants must travel a long way from the capital city or from other places. Clergy has responded to this request that the cemetery festival should be celebrated on Saturdays, as this ensures a larger number of attendees.

The interviewees, who were regular attenders of the cemetery festival, maintained that this event was always important for the family. The cemetery festival often turns into a family reunion where relatives from all parts of Latvia take part: *I do not know what it is like elsewhere, but a lot of people attend the cemetery festival here. They drive here from near and far.* (Ance, female, 47 years old.) In the views of the interviewees, the cemetery festival unites members of the family: *If we did not have the cemetery festival, the children of cousins would just walk past each other in Rīga, as they would not know each other.* (Liene, female, 44 years old.) The cross-generation interaction aspect is particularly pronounced, as the cemetery festival provides the opportunity for members of different generations of a family to meet. As shown by the data obtained by the survey, 55% of the respondents attended the cemetery festival with their children (Uzule and Zelče 2014, p. 166). However, the qualitative interviews provided a deeper understanding of the imperative within families for attending the cemetery festival: *I am joking that it would be a lesser scandal if I told them that I was pregnant at 15 years of age, than if I were to say that I would not be attending the cemetery festival this year.* (Gerda, female, 27 years old.) It could be asserted that the younger generation is forced to attend the cemetery festival. Even though young people did not

want to speak about it in the interviews, their disinterested attitude towards the cemetery festival was obvious. In contrast, middle-aged interviewees talked about their attitude towards the cemetery festival in their teenage years with humor:

*Oh, how I could not stand the cemetery festival! As soon as Sunday arrived, we had to go to the cemetery festival! It was the Soviet era and new clothes could not just be purchased from shops, which is why my mother took me to the seamstress every season to order a new dress. Oh, how I hated it all! You could not arrive at the cemetery festival in trousers! I was angry about all this showing off, but the new dress must have been good enough and cooled that anger...until the next summer . . . (Rasma, female, 58 years old.)*

Another important social function of the cemetery festival was revealed in the interviews—the cemetery festival is an instrument for passing on cultural traditions. An interviewee explained that the cemetery festival facilitated the learning of cultural traditions: *Grandfather, who did the most work and prepared for the cemetery festival ahead of time, taught me a lot. Both about my family and its history, as well as the fact that he would die one day, which I really had to learn as a child. (Ance, female, 47 years old.)* The celebration of the cemetery festival has remained vividly in the memories of interviewees from the older generation:

*One of my most striking [childhood] memories is of a cemetery festival in Latgale. Even though I was little, I may possibly not even have understood the real essence of the festival, nor what the priest was saying. However, at that festival, there was something very special and yet everyday at the same time—the celebration, marking and remembrance of the presence of death with the relatives all around! (Liene, female, 44 years old.)*

As the cemetery festival is an event where the greatest number of relatives get together, the communal meal is a significant part of the celebration. Usually, the one who lives closest to the cemetery invites the relatives' home for the communal meal: *In my family too, it was always a big get-together when we headed home and set the table for the celebration. In actual fact, the cemetery festival here is a family reunion. (Rasma, female, 58 years old.)* Unlike the Orthodox and Old Believers living in Latvia, Catholics, and Lutherans did not previously organize the partaking of meals at cemeteries or near them. As explained by an interviewee,

*Russians organize their wake or 'pominka' right there at the cemetery. They put down a little table and a bench right next to their relative's grave, sit for a while, chat, and eat and drink. Every nation has its own traditions. Latvians don't eat or drink at the cemetery, but the Russians have such a tradition. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.)*

It is obvious that a transformation in cultural traditions is taking place presently—in some places now, people do not disperse after the completion of the official part of the cemetery festival: *Those who no longer have a family home near here, hang around there—they bring [picnic] baskets and chat. (Ance, female, 47 years old.)*

Finally, one more social function of the cemetery festival should be mentioned—a tool of social protest. Participation at the cemetery festival was a protest against the communist regime during the Soviet years and influenced the general social attitude towards Soviet authorities. Older people still remember how the former tried to ban the cemetery festival:

*During the Soviet years, one had to get permission for when the cemetery festival could be celebrated. As the local authority dragged its heels in providing permission, one Sunday the priest announced from his pulpit: "Due to religious freedom, the cemetery festival will not be taking place this year!" Then the local communists hurried to the priest, to prevent the incitement of the people and granted permission to hold the cemetery festival. (Vincents, male, 71 years old.)*

At that time, for many people, the cemetery festival was the only local religious event in which they dared to participate, as they did not attend the local church: *People went to church despite persecution—they attended a congregation that was further away or headed for a place where they would not be recognized. (Lonija, female, 72 years old.)* Researchers have concluded that the celebration of the cemetery festival in Soviet period was a collective confirmation

of Latvian identity: “The Latvian countryside, where the majority of the people were Latvians, was also the Latvian language cultural space. A place where Latvians met. This cultural space was a contrast to the city, especially the large cities where the public space was dominated by the Russian language” (Uzule and Zelče 2014, p. 138). As a collective event, the cemetery festival maintained the Latvian cultural space and was in striking contrast to the mass events of Soviet authorities, e.g., the celebrations of 1 May the October Revolution, Victory Day, etc.

The cemetery festival is often also attended by those who do not consider themselves to be Christians. An interviewee, who is the head of a Latvian folklore group and a *local history enthusiast*, experiences the cemetery festival purely as a family get-together. He considers the cemetery festival to be similar to a Christian adaptation of a pre-Christian-era tradition:

*Christianity was forced on the common people when the Crusaders conquered the Letgallians and slaughtered the pagans. The Christians replaced the pagan customs with their own traditions, but with adaptations. It is possible that they replaced one of the [archaic] cemetery traditions with the cemetery festival in this way. However, this is not official history, only my personal opinion. (Salvis, male, 56 years old.)*

However, the cemetery festival is unable to unify people with different worldviews and religious faith. It has not become a unifying event, even between various Christian denominations. There have been attempts to hold an ecumenical cemetery festival for Lutherans and Catholics in those places where people of different denominations reside in Latvia. This has been facilitated by the circumstance that, during the Soviet period, the deceased were interred at the closest cemetery regardless of their denomination. Nevertheless, this ecumenical cemetery festival has not caught on, as the religious want only religious rites characteristic of their denomination to be conducted at their cemetery festival.

The cemetery festival has continued to serve as an instrument of social protest presently. On 8 July 2011, a symbolic campaign called the Oligarch Cemetery Festival<sup>24</sup> took place in Rīga, where about 8000 protesters took part. In this way, dissatisfaction with corruption and the compliance of the political elite with the interests of the business elite was demonstrated. The largest Latvian social portal [www.draugiem.lv](http://www.draugiem.lv), which took part in the organization of the event stated: “We invite everybody who is not indifferent to the future of Latvia, who wishes to live in a country without oligarchs, without governments and presidents appointed by them, without lies, thieves and fools in the *Saeima*, the government and Rīga Castle. Everybody who is ready to regain their freedom—their own and that of their nation, can join the campaign—the Oligarch Cemetery Festival” (Jaunā 2011). The initiators of the event created a homepage [www.manabalss.lv](http://www.manabalss.lv), where anybody can still submit an initiative. In turn, visitors to the home page can vote on these initiatives so that they can be submitted to the *Saeima*, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Chancery of the President of Latvia and other institutions. It is a significant social platform, which ensures the involvement of society in the solution of important problems.

#### 4. Concluding Reflections

Latvian society, with its place rooted in Western culture, is moving down the path to secularization, inspired by modernization. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the process is leading automatically to the loss of importance of religion within society. The traditional secularization thesis criticized by several researchers has been seriously contested by Habermas. He introduces the concept of post-secularism (Habermas 2008) and highlights “the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Habermas 2009, p. 63). Since academic research pays “a growing attention toward the impact and the role of religion in our modern pluralistic societies” (Kaltsas 2019, p. 1), the continued existence of the cemetery festival as a religious ritual in an increasingly secularized society should be examined in the case of Latvia.

<sup>24</sup> A brief insight into the campaign, (LTV1 Panorāma 2011; RīgaTV24 2011).



The cemetery festival tradition has developed over a long period of time, creating a new layer on top of older habits practiced to honor the deceased and adapting to the peculiarities typical of a particular era. Participation in religious ritual practices could be expected to decrease in the cultural climate of a predominately secular society. Yet, the tradition of the cemetery festival practiced in Latvia shows that the relationship between the religious and the secular is much more complex than simply being in opposition to each other. The observations made in the fieldwork show that the cemetery festival is also attended by nominal Christians, who do not get actively involved in the religious activities. We can assume that the sustainability of the cemetery festival as a religious tradition is not determined by the zeal of those practicing religion but by other factors. A comparison of the cemetery festival with another religious tradition, the May services (*Maija dziedājumi*), which are practiced outside of church buildings in Latgale, allows for a better understanding of what those factors actually are.

The May services involve rural inhabitants gathering at outdoor crosses on evenings in the month of May to pray and sing together to honor the Virgin Mary. This practice was introduced by the Jesuits in the late 18th century, with the May services continuing until World War II. Soviet authorities then took down the village crosses, and the tradition of gathering on May evenings also died out. After the Republic of Latvia regained its independence, the crosses were put up again, but the tradition was only resurrected in a few places. The May services are predicted to be a dying tradition due to the demographic situation in rural Latvia. The cemetery festival, however, did not disappear during the period of religious persecution and continues to be celebrated every summer at every Latvian cemetery.

The cemetery festival reflects the aspect that Knoblauch considers especially crucial to contemporary spirituality: the holistic connections between the sacred and the profane (Knoblauch 2008). It is this aspect in particular that helps to understand the sustainability of the cemetery festival: secular activities are undertaken at the cemetery festival alongside the religious ones. The interview data reveal that participants of the cemetery festival highly appreciate aesthetics of Latvia's cemeteries and engage in tidying up graves of their loved ones on a regular basis. The graves are tended according to the local understanding of the beautiful and current trends. Secular activities accompanying the cemetery festival have been commercialized today, thus ensuring that graves are tended even without a direct engagement of relatives.

Even though the secular activities could be considered secondary activities, they have in reality gained such important social significance that they even overshadow the primary, i.e., the religious activities. In the case of the cemetery festival, the religious ritual serves as a powerful instrument of socialization, it strengthens social ties (prevents social isolation in rural areas, enhances collective participation, maintains intergenerational interaction) and serves as a means for transmission of cultural traditions. Finally, the cemetery festival tradition is so significant in Latvia that it is used as an instrument of social protest. It could be maintained that the religious tradition at the cemetery festival has been able to be preserved and is still actively practiced due to the powerful intersection of religious and secular activities.

As Foltyn suggests, a society's notion of death is parallel to its notion of life (Foltyn 2008). In the case of the cemetery festival, religious content and ritual is being replaced by the celebration of life as the primary reason for commemorating death. It becomes apparent that the relationship between the religious and the secular has been proportionately reversed at the cemetery festival: the value of secular activities is increasing with a reduction in the importance of religious activities. The example of the cemetery festival shows how some forms of religion may bring enchantment and empowerment to secular life. This facilitates the expansion of the cemetery industry, which goes hand in hand with social and cultural tendencies in Latvia. The cemetery festival phenomenon assists in understanding that the task of studies is not to establish whether there is secular-

ization or a resurgence of religion, but rather to attempt to explain how these processes (secularization and the resurgence of religion) are interrelated.

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