

# Mourning rituals: between faith and personalisation

*Changing ritual repertoires on All Souls' Day in the Netherlands*

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## Abstract:

In the Netherlands a remarkable new repertoire of mourning rituals is occurring: secular All Souls celebrations. Those rituals on the one hand stand in a long ecclesial tradition, but on the other hand have a highly personalized character. At the same time we see the traditional repertoire of mourning rituals change. How is the relation between faith and personalisation in those rituals? And how can ecclesial liturgy meet the needs of contemporary mourners when trying to cope with bereavement? This article explores these questions on a theoretical and empirical basis.

## Key-words:

Mourning rituals; Roman Catholic liturgy; All Souls; bereavement

The scene: an early November evening in a cemetery in North Holland. Thousands of people are milling around in the dark among the headstones. The graveyard is lighted by torches, fires and innumerable small candles. They are watching performances: sometimes choir singing, sometimes a Surinamese mourning band playing swing music. A group collects round a person who is reading poetry by torch light, or another reciting mantras; someone else is saying prayers. All are artists or modern-day officiants in mourning rituals. We pause at individual graves, which relatives have clearly done their best to beautify with personal mementoes, gifts for the deceased – all on display; the section with children's graves looks like a toy shop. A new All Souls celebration – an emerging tradition in the Netherlands. By 2009, after a modest start in the 1990s when All Souls art projects were first organised in cemeteries, there were more than twenty locations offering official artistic programmes, not counting the many cemeteries that presented other kinds of memorial evenings. These occasions represent new mourning rituals in the ancient tradition of All Souls' Day.

In the revival of this tradition the original Catholic feast is becoming important in various contexts. Naturally the traditional All Souls liturgy is still performed and heavily frequented in the Netherlands. But besides that institutions like hospitals and care centres are starting a new tradition of inviting relatives of patients who died in the past year to a memorial service in early November. Cemeteries, too, organise secular All Souls celebrations, like the one described above. These involve artworks, as in our example, that help people to commemorate their dead, no longer using religious symbols.<sup>1</sup> This is a logical development, considering that the 75% church membership in the Netherlands in the 1970s had dropped to 45% by 2005.<sup>2</sup> The need for ritual commemoration to cope with bereavement manifestly exceeds church affiliation, yet in many respects this revival is surprising, since for a long time people thought that public rituals were on the decline rather than burgeoning.<sup>3</sup> It is remarkable

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Lee, *Allerzielen alom*.

<sup>2</sup> Becker & De Hart, *Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Quartier, 'Memorialising the dead'.

that an originally Christian liturgical feast should be absorbed into a broader ritualism associated with commemoration and mourning. How does one account for it?

In my view it indicates that in present-day culture people may be more intent on finding mourning rituals than ever before. Whereas hospital chaplains have devised deathbed rituals and parishes and funeral undertakers offer new burial rites, new mourning rituals are much less readily available.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the popularisation of death in recent years,<sup>5</sup> therefore, the emergence and revival of annual traditions in mourning rituals are understandable. Yet the revival of All Souls' Day raises some questions. Firstly, are these new rituals similar to classical All Souls services in Roman Catholic tradition, and if not, how do secular and religious All Souls celebrations differ? Another pertinent question is what a revival of this nature implies for the ritual repertoire of Christian churches: can it stimulate innovation of existing mourning rituals if there is indeed a strong need?

According to the organisers of non-ecclesiastic All Souls evenings at cemeteries in the Netherlands like the one described above, they differ from classical All Souls feasts in one important respect: the new rituals do not centre on a particular belief or hope of resurrection, but on commemorating deceased people as they were in life.<sup>6</sup> Thus the dead are no longer commemorated as metaphysical entities in the hereafter (souls) but as explicitly human persons whose earthly lives become the criterion for commemoration, and not only as a kind of inventory of sins committed. This could be a crucial difference from classical mourning liturgies, also observable in present-day funeral rites: traditionally religious and ecclesiastic rituals were not primarily aimed at commemorating a human life but rather at proclaiming the faith, whereas modern rituals centre on the person.<sup>7</sup> Yet research has shown that present-day participants experience the contrast between faith and personalisation in funeral rituals as far less radical than one would theoretically anticipate.<sup>8</sup>

This article seeks to shed light on the current practice of All Souls' Day celebrations as instances of mourning rituals. The main question to be answered is as follows: how are current All Souls' Day celebrations in the Netherlands perceived and what does that imply for ecclesial mourning rituals in modern society?

Section 1 distinguishes theoretically between three dimensions of mourning rituals that help to clarify current All Souls rituals and in which major changes are discernible (1). In the second section I probe the meaning of classical Christian liturgical repertoires theologically: the All Souls' Day ritual of yore (2). The third section gives examples of new All Souls' Day celebrations from the perspective of organisers and artists' backgrounds (3). Then, in section 4, I present the perceptions of participants by citing empirical findings from a survey of visitors to All Souls' Day celebrations (4). On the basis of these general data section 5 looks at the transcendence of current All Souls rituals (5). Finally I offer some conclusions about the revival of ecclesial All Souls' Day in terms of faith and personalisation (6).

## **1 Changes in mourning rituals**

This section considers the general question of changing mourning rituals in present-day society. When people take part in All Souls rituals it is a way of ritually coping with bereavement. This is a common human need when humans are confronted with death, at least according to Van Gennep's classical theory of rites of passage.<sup>9</sup> Relatives' need to express

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<sup>4</sup> Quartier, 'Rituelle Pendelbewegungen'.

<sup>5</sup> Walter, *The revival of death*.

<sup>6</sup> Van der Lee, *Allerzielen atom*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Quartier et al., 'Kreatives Totengedenken', 167.

<sup>8</sup> Quartier, *Bridging the gaps*.

<sup>9</sup> Van Gennep, *The rites of passage*.

their grief ritually does not cease once the loved one has died and been buried. It continues and even acquires a dynamics of its own, since apart from the life of the dying person or the one who has been buried or cremated, the lives of the relatives are very much at issue. Sörries hypothesised that in Van Gennep's scheme of rites of passage mourning rituals function as rites of integration. They not only give the deceased a place in their relatives' lives, but also help the latter to carry on living.<sup>10</sup> But such integration requires various forms of reorientation on the part of the relatives, and these do not necessarily happen automatically: the deceased, although no longer there, remains perfectly real to the relatives. That is the first gap that people have to face. The second has to do with the social network: after the first six weeks of mourning are past, the concern dies down – friends no longer call by so frequently, also because they find it difficult to relate to the bereaved. The third gap is the relatives' worldview: the contrast experience of death can turn religious certainties on their heads.<sup>11</sup> Obviously church burials are supposed to bridge these gaps, but that does not put an end to the need for ritualisation. More specifically, people often take much longer to deal with these gaps than it takes to bury the person.

That is why, according to Michaels,<sup>12</sup> mourning rituals re-enact the death of the loved one. The full impact of the person's death is only realised through effective ritualisation of mourning. Following the crisis of ritual in the 1960s many authors discern a revival in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Just as all rites of passage are 're-invented',<sup>14</sup> new repertoires of mourning rituals arise. These differ radically from classical mourning rituals. What are the differences? To my mind they pertain to the aforementioned three gaps: the relationships with the deceased, the social environment and the system of meaning – the deity.<sup>15</sup> Let me clarify the major shifts in regard to each gap.

The key question regarding the relationship with the deceased is whether it is one of continuity or discontinuity. Psychologically this can best be analysed by examining the bereaved's attachment to the deceased: the emotions linking people to their loved ones need to be channelled and transformed so as to build a new attachment to the person in her or his capacity as a deceased.<sup>16</sup> In this area psychology notes a major shift in present-day mourning rituals: whereas formerly the emphasis was mainly on letting go of the deceased and on digesting and reaching emotional closure,<sup>17</sup> the accent nowadays is on building an ongoing attachment to the person.<sup>18</sup> That means that mourning rituals in modern society express continuity rather than discontinuity in relation to the deceased. This raises the following question about All Souls' Day celebrations as described in this article: to what extent do they facilitate commemoration of the person one has lost? Formerly they were less concerned with the deceased – death was the great leveller. Has that made way for an attitude of continuing bonds?

The second question about mourning rituals is social: how do the bereaved relate to their social environment in their ritual practice? If one assumes, in a ritual perspective, that the bereaved are in a state of uncertainty as a result of the status transformation (liminality) that they are experiencing,<sup>19</sup> it is important to know whether and how mourning rituals further

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<sup>10</sup> Sörries, 'Moderne Bestattungskultur', 74.

<sup>11</sup> Quartier, *Bridging the gaps*, 31, 93, 127.

<sup>12</sup> Michaels, 'Geburt-Hochzeit-Tod', 254.

<sup>13</sup> Lukken, *Rituals in abundance*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Grimes, *Deeply into the bone*.

<sup>15</sup> Quartier, 'Pendelbewegungen', 188.

<sup>16</sup> Stroebe, *Handbook of bereavement*; Parkes, *Love and loss*.

<sup>17</sup> Van der Hart, 'Het gebruik van afscheidsrituelen in de rouwtherapie'.

<sup>18</sup> Fiddelaers-Jaspers, *Verhalen van rouw*.

<sup>19</sup> Quartier, *Bridging the gaps*, 97; Quartier & Hermans, 'Transformation of the bereaved'.

their social integration (*communitas*).<sup>20</sup> Is the status transition still a social event? Whereas Jewish mourning rituals, for example, still stress the social character of bereavement in that neighbours, et cetera look after the family, it sometimes seems that in modern society bereavement, like death, has been privatised and thus individualised.<sup>21</sup> When it comes to mourning the accent seems to be on its individual rather than its collective aspect. In the case of the new All Souls' Day celebrations, however, one must ask to what extent they may give rise to a new collective that helps people reintegrate with society. How does that work?

Because mourning rituals are so focal in dealing with the death of a loved one, religion has always played an essential role. That applies to the classical rites found in virtually all religions<sup>22</sup> but also to new forms of popular religion, such as unaffiliated forms of spirituality that inspire people to put the death of a loved one in an appropriate framework. Knoblauch actually maintains that confrontation with death and loss is a major motive for the emergence of new forms of religiosity.<sup>23</sup> But for all the commonalities between the sources of mourning rituals in classical religions and new, popular forms of religiosity, Knoblauch discerns a major difference. Whereas in classical religions various images of life after death in a transcendent sense help the bereaved to 'place' the deceased, this is not necessarily the case in modern, popular forms of religiosity. The latter do not always distinguish between transcendence and immanence, and the place the deceased is assigned after his or her death is often located in this world. Thus the accent is on immanence rather than transcendence, if the distinction is made at all. Yet the new All Souls' Day rituals make one wonder whether they do not convey some sort of religious conception, no matter how secularised and often amorphous.

These three aspects lead to the question whether present-day mourning rituals in fact assume continuity in the relationship with the deceased, are individualised at a social level, and are immanently rather than transcendently oriented in relation to the deity. The various All Souls ritual repertoires in the Netherlands indicate that there is no unequivocal answer to these questions. It depends on one's premise. Is that premise the classical theological view that one might expect from an ecclesiastic perspective? Or rather a broad anthropological view that one may expect from non-ecclesiastic rituals? The next two sections deal with these two points of view on All Souls rituals: the old and the new All Souls' Day.

## **2 Liturgical forms of mourning rituals: the old All Souls' Day**

Commemoration of the dead plays a role in all mourning rituals. They consist in a process of assigning the deceased a new place. The question is: what form does the commemoration take? Aleida Assmann distinguishes two forms of commemoration that have determined the way people keep their dead's memory alive since antiquity: *fama* and *pietas*.<sup>24</sup> The former commemorates the dead on the basis of their achievements in their lifetime. It entails a kind of immortality that is very much focused on earthly life. Assmann cites the example of ancient warlords that wanted to earn immortality by winning battles. After their death people honour their memory by recalling these victories. The second form of commemoration is geared to a metaphysical existence after death, in which the dead continue to live in the hereafter and their earthly accomplishments and attributes are less focal or become irrelevant. An example is the soul that lives on after the person's death. My premise is that these two forms of commemoration and the underlying assumptions determine various forms of mourning rituals such as those associated with All Souls' Day. Traditional All Souls liturgies centre on *pietas*,

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<sup>20</sup> Turner, *The ritual process*.

<sup>21</sup> Elias, *De eenzaamheid van stervenden*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Metcalf & Huntington, *Celebrations of death*; Garces-Foley, *Death and religion*.

<sup>23</sup> Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion*, 255-264.

<sup>24</sup> Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 33-34.

whereas new All Souls rituals tend to concentrate on *fama*. This hypothesis will be explained in the next section.

If we review the form All Souls rituals have assumed in churches and church cemeteries, we find that they honoured the dead in a largely uniform manner. Standardised graves were decorated in standardised ways. Until recently the liturgy did mention those who died in the preceding year, but it was confined to listing their names and lighting a candle for the person: there was little scope for individual mementos, gestures or expressions of remembrance. It was fully consonant with the idea of church funerals as rituals aimed primarily at proclaiming the faith rather than at personal remembrance.<sup>25</sup>

Let me briefly outline the ecclesiastic significance of the Catholic All Souls feast. Here commemoration of the deceased seeks to advance their position in the afterlife. Since the Catholic conception of life after death distinguishes between hell, purgatory and heaven, in church history most people assumed that their loved ones were in purgatory. By commemorating them, praying for them and bringing sacrifices for them (Sacrifices of the Mass) people in this world could further the salvation of the dead person's soul.<sup>26</sup> But it was an abstraction: a soul newly stripped or being stripped of all earthly limitations and personal attributes. In the sense of Assmann one can see it as a clear example of *pietas*.

The church's traditional classification that distinguishes between Christians during their lifetime and Christians in purgatory and in heaven is helpful in this respect: those in the midst of life (*ecclesia militans*) do all they can for the salvation of their own souls and especially for the salvation of those in purgatory (*ecclesia penitens*). Those already in heaven (*ecclesia triumphans*) can serve as mediators with God. Together they constitute the church: the communion of saints. That is why All Souls and All Saints<sup>27</sup> are closely linked in the church calendar: it suggests that in faith everyone joins in the communion of saints.<sup>28</sup> But this communion is distinct from worldly merit in the sense of attributes and achievements. It is rather a kind of heavenly credit that people can accumulate in the course of their lives, but which is mainly built up by the 'church militant' after their death.

Theologically the origin of eschatology is highly pertinent to these notions.<sup>29</sup> When Christ's parousia failed to materialise right away it raised the question of what happened to souls between death and the last judgment.<sup>30</sup> The good nestled in the bosom of Abraham after the image of Lazarus and the wicked ended up in purgatory. The *In paradisum* in the liturgy for the dead indicates that paradise still has to come after the person has died. In the course of church history this became an appeal to the living to do penance for the dead.<sup>31</sup> In monastic communities All Souls' Day became a kind of cumulative annual commemoration to ensure that the dead are remembered. It was instituted by abbot Odilo in the abbey of Cluny in 998.<sup>32</sup> Commemoration of the dead became a religious duty for their relatives.

During this period the commemoration acquired a marked ecclesiastic character: bells chimed, the dead were prayed for in the office for the dead and masses were said for them.<sup>33</sup> To my mind this liturgical commemoration of the dead that was in evidence since the earliest beginnings of All Souls' Day explains the further development of the feast in the ecclesiastic context. Visiting and blessing graves acquired a largely impersonal character. The liturgy contained hardly any personal reminders of deceased persons other than their names, and all

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<sup>25</sup> Rutherford, *The death of a Christian*, 75.

<sup>26</sup> Bieritz, *Het kerkelijk jaar*, 161.

<sup>27</sup> Fischer, 'Allerheiligen'.

<sup>28</sup> Bärsch, *Allerseelen*, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Quartier, 'Eschatology'.

<sup>30</sup> Bärsch, *Allerseelen*, 26-27.

<sup>31</sup> Bärsch, *Allerseelen*, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Bärsch, *Allerseelen*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Bärsch, *Allerseelen*, 119.

graves were decorated with the same flowers (chrysanthemums). The duty to commemorate the dead focused on their souls and was largely separate from actual memories of their lives. It was a form of *pietas*.

That is why the classical meaning of All Souls' Day implies discontinuity in the bereaved's relationship with the deceased – the first aspect of mourning rituals described in the previous section. In the community of the church, while one does relate to the deceased, one does so in faith rather than in everyday life. The deceased are not real-life individuals but souls on their way to consummation in heaven. Secondly, the ecclesiastic meaning of commemoration explains why it has hardly any individual features but is collective in its social orientation – aspect two in the previous section. The church community is the constitutive forum for the commemoration that is automatically available as a kind of symbolic universe of meaning.<sup>34</sup> As for the third aspect – the relationship with the deity – the orientation is exclusively transcendent: the activities are directed to God, whom one hopes will judge the deceased mercifully. The 'church triumphant', the ultimate destination of every person's journey through life, is in heaven, which is the seat of transcendence par excellence.

This brief sortie into history gives us a picture of the ecclesiastic form of the All Souls liturgy with its exclusively discontinuous, collective and transcendent character. Of course, one has to consider in how far it is actually so. It would be interesting to take a closer look into everyday practices discovered in historical studies focused on popular religion. Recent studies show, that popular religion and institutionalized religion interact in the development of concrete religious practices.<sup>35</sup> It could be the case that continuing bonds, individual piety and immanent memorial cultures did play a major role in earlier periods beyond the official ecclesial repertoire, e.g. in the decoration of graveyards or prints for the deceased.<sup>36</sup> A detailed analysis of the question is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, inasmuch as we know that present-day mourning rituals display trends towards continuity, personalisation and individuality, we should determine whether the same may not be said of church liturgies as a result of the interaction mentioned. I shall come back to the question in due course, but first I want to outline some backgrounds to new All Souls rituals in the Netherlands.

### 3 New interpretations of mourning rituals: the new All Souls' Day

While traditional religious mourning rituals like the ecclesiastic All Souls liturgy very much resemble *pietas* in Aleida Assmann's sense, new, non-ecclesiastic mourning rituals are different: they are enacted almost exclusively in the domain of *fama*, at any rate according to their designers. The aforementioned re-invention of mourning rituals in the wake of the ritual revival in Dutch society entails a pronounced personalised dimension.<sup>37</sup> Personalisation is also the explicit intention of people to whom the old church repertoire is no longer relevant.<sup>38</sup> It might be the case, that with the disappearance of a given repertoire of an ecclesial kind, the focus on personal experience and popular images of death becomes stronger, as e.g. the use of personal objects shows which become carriers of meaning in a social and cultural sense without being directly inspired by an ecclesial tradition.<sup>39</sup> Two examples who make use of those kinds of objects but also texts or gestures without tradition are ritual counsellors, a new profession emerging in the Netherlands specialising mainly in death rituals, and artists

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<sup>34</sup> Berger & Luckmann, *The social construction of reality*.

<sup>35</sup> Nissen, 'Percepties van sacraliteit', 242.

<sup>36</sup> Brauneck, *Religiöse Volkskunst*, 30

<sup>37</sup> Quartier, 'Personal symbols', 135.

<sup>38</sup> Quartier, 'Deathbed rituals'.

<sup>39</sup> Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things'.

specialising in the design of mourning rituals for All Souls' Day. In this section I describe these two groups and their respective backgrounds.

According to the designers the person of the deceased loved one is focal in modern mourning rituals. The deceased must come into their own. The artist Ida van der Lee, who organised one of the first non-ecclesiastic All Souls celebrations, today entitled '*Allerzielen alom*' ('All Souls everywhere'), describes the aim as celebrating the dead for what they were and what they can tell us rather than keeping silent about them. To her the point is that the dead may not be forgotten. In a sense they remain who they always were, and for that reason they are assigned a place in the lives of their relatives.<sup>40</sup> According to Van der Lee the taboo on death has led to oblivion: people try to let go of their loved ones. They end up remote from life and are hidden away in graveyards which people rarely visit. Her rituals are meant to create a new place that permits personal remembrance. The means to this end is art. In her projects artists beautify cemeteries on evenings round about All Souls' Day (early November). At the same time relatives are supposed to decorate the graves of their loved ones. They also take part in artistic performances: the names of the dead are sung, photographs are turned into artworks, et cetera. I referred to this briefly in the introduction. A typical artwork from an evening in such a project was entitled '*Herinnerdingen*' ('Memory things'). It comprised a wall of pigeonholes the size of shoeboxes. Visitors that evening could fill the pigeonholes with their own mementos of the deceased, using characteristic objects.

The accent on objects is found in mourning rituals other than Van der Lee's art evenings as well. Many ritual counsellors in the Netherlands make use of personal objects that come to symbolise a deceased loved one, in the sense of forming part of the person: somehow they ensure the literal presence of the deceased in the ritual.<sup>41</sup> This is strongly emphasised in many death rituals in the Netherlands. Ritual counsellors stress that a rite should centre on some personal symbol: an attribute, something typical of the deceased.<sup>42</sup>

This accent on things that characterised the deceased during their lifetime changes the nature of memory in these new mourning rituals, including those for All Souls' Day. The deceased remains focal: instead of remote objects symbolising the deceased as a metaphysical soul in heaven there are linking objects.<sup>43</sup> These are mentioned in various studies of commemoration of loved ones: personal objects belonging to the deceased feature prominently on altars that Dutch people erect in their own homes.<sup>44</sup> I return to this below. Whether in Dutch living rooms or cemeteries, the form of commemoration is highly personalised, much more so, for example, than in neighbouring Germany. German visitors to Dutch cemeteries sometimes feel they are in a second-hand shop rather than a graveyard, because there, too, many mementos for and of the deceased are displayed. The conventional headstone with a cross and a particular type of flower has made way for highly individual graves. This broad trend strongly determines the decoration of graves for a new-style All Souls evening.

Regarding the three aspects of mourning rituals described in section 2, we observe a major change in new All Souls' Day celebrations. The relationship to the deceased, for instance, is marked by continuity rather than discontinuity. Linking objects in particular perpetuate the relationship by focusing on the persons, characteristics and concrete significance of the deceased. Relatives keep the actual person alive in memory. Secondly, these rituals are interpreted individually rather than collectively. The choice of a ritual repertoire is made by individuals, and even when they collaborate on artworks like 'Memory

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<sup>40</sup> Van der Lee, '*Allerzielen Alom*', 26.

<sup>41</sup> Quartier, '*Personal symbols*', 139.

<sup>42</sup> Embsen & Overtom, '*Hoe zou jij het willen?*'

<sup>43</sup> Klass, '*Grief, religion & spirituality*', 287.

<sup>44</sup> Wojtkowiak & Venbrux, '*Gedenkplekken*', 82-96.

things' the aim is mainly to free their own ritual creativity.<sup>45</sup> Thirdly, the rituals are marked by immanence rather than transcendence, at any rate if the latter is seen as a relation with the deity, as in the preceding section. The deceased lives on in this world, not beyond it.

These observations give one some impression of the noises that artists and ritual counsellors are making on the Dutch ritual scene. It's an impression of undiluted *fama* in Assmann's sense. But, as in the case of the ecclesiastic All Souls rituals discussed in the previous section, we must ask whether the picture is not overly one-sided. Sometimes a warning against trivialisation of these commemorations is clearly discernible,<sup>46</sup> hence there are also shared images of life after death that express a breach in the relationship with the deceased. Yet overall the views of ritual are consistent. Whereas the traditional aspect of ritual is emphasised by those – usually in ecclesiastic circles – who base their approach on a liturgical order,<sup>47</sup> others concentrate almost exclusively on the individual, emerging nature of the rituals.<sup>48</sup> Still, the view of popular religion mentioned earlier, offers also a possibility to go a step beyond this distinction. Like in the past, popular objects and experiences possibly shed a different light on death than the officical liturgical repertoire, today secular objects, texts and gestures could contribute to a new form a popular religion, like Knoblauch mentions with regard to death as – according to him – the most important source for modern popular religion.<sup>49</sup>

Typical of mourning rituals centring on commemoration is the need to develop a connective structure, as Jan Assmann insists.<sup>50</sup> Ritual has the power to connect different layers of memory. That is how it helps people to transform their relationship with the deceased and their social environment in terms of certain religious images. The question is whether that is true of contemporary mourning rituals such as those performed on All Souls' Day, be they old or new. Is there a 'popular bridge' between old and new? To answer this question the next section cites the experience of participants in present-day All Souls evenings in the Netherlands.

#### 4 Perceptions of participants

We investigated All Souls' Day projects in the Netherlands through various research activities. Among these were qualitative and quantitative studies of the experience of participants in occasions like the evenings organised by artist Ida van der Lee and others.<sup>51</sup> By using complementary methods we hope to get a picture of liturgy participants' perspectives in each case.<sup>52</sup> The scope of this article does not permit an exhaustive description of all the data sources, so I confine myself to an example of a study that accords with the aspects under consideration. For more details on the research, see my own and my colleagues' publications via the Nijmegen *Centre for Thanatology*.<sup>53</sup>

In 2009 we broadened our research into All Souls mourning rituals by doing a survey of some twenty All Souls rituals at public cemeteries. The diverse celebrations all fall in the category of re-inventions of All Souls' Day rituals. Although there were no explicitly ecclesiastic celebrations, they definitely revealed Christian elements. In some of them

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<sup>45</sup> Venbrux, Heessels & Bolt, *Rituele Creativiteit*.

<sup>46</sup> Quartier, 'Personal symbols', 141.

<sup>47</sup> Rappaport, *Ritual and religion*.

<sup>48</sup> Mitchell, *Liturgy & social sciences*.

<sup>49</sup> Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion*, 255.

<sup>50</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 16-21.

<sup>51</sup> Quartier et al., 'Kreatives Totengedenken'.

<sup>52</sup> Quartier, 'Liturgy participants' perspective'.

<sup>53</sup> Information about recent publications etc. can be found on: [www.ru.nl/ct](http://www.ru.nl/ct). Cf. Venbrux, Heesels & Bolt, *Rituele Creativiteit*.

Christian choirs performed and some visitors used Christian symbols to decorate the graves of their loved ones. The majority of visitors at the rituals we observed were not church members, but that corresponded with the distribution among the Dutch population.

To explore the experience of participants in present-day All Souls rituals we compiled a questionnaire which required respondents to state their experience of the three dimensions of mourning rituals described above: relation to the deceased, the social environment and the deity.<sup>54</sup> We asked them to indicate how important they found the various extremes in an *Allerzielen Alom* celebration: discontinuity and continuity;<sup>55</sup> collectiveness or individuality;<sup>56</sup> and transcendence or immanence.<sup>57</sup> To this end we operationalised each of these attributes in three items, in which respondents had to indicate the extent of their agreement on a Likert scale (1 = 'totally unrecognisable' to 5 = 'fully recognisable'). A total of 428 visitors took part in the survey, which in no way makes it representative but does highlight some interesting aspects in an exploratory way.

Because our research focused on visitors to secular rather than ecclesiastic celebrations, we expected the changes in mourning rituals described in section 2 to be fully reflected in participants' responses. We hypothesised that they would concur with continuity rather than discontinuity, individuality rather than collectiveness, and immanence rather than transcendence.

The exact findings of the study will be published by Thomas Quartier, Eric Venbrux, Joanna Wojtkowiak and William Arfman in 2010. For present purposes the following table suffices. It gives the mean scores of participants on items summarised in a factor analysis.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std</b>	<b>alpha</b>
Continuity	3.9	1.3	.75
Discontinuity	3.4	1.7	.48
Individuality	3.9	0.8	.79
Collectiveness	3.9	1.3	.76
Immanence	3.9	1.7	.86
Transcendence	3.3	0.8	.71

(1=totally unrecognisable; 2=unrecognisable; 3=slightly recognisable; 4=recognisable; 5=totally recognisable)  
N=428<sup>58</sup>

The results confirm the first hypothesis – that the experience is mainly one of continuity. Visitors at secular All Souls' Day celebrations agree that the ritual perpetuates their relationship with the deceased rather than that it enables them to let go of the person: they are

<sup>54</sup> Quartier, 'Rituelle Pendelbewegungen', 188

<sup>55</sup> The following items were included in the factor analysis: Continuity – "At the All Souls evenings I felt a close bond with the deceased"; "...I felt close to the deceased"; "...the bond with the deceased was clearly noticeable". Discontinuity – "...I was able to let go of my bond with the deceased"; "... I said farewell to the deceased".

<sup>56</sup> The following items were included in the factor analysis: Individuality – "At the All Souls evening I could give my motions free rein"; "... I remembered in a way that suited me"; "...I had an opportunity to be myself in commemorating the deceased". Collectiveness: "...I felt a bond with the other participants"; "...I found the security of being among other participants valuable"; "...I experienced that other people faced the same situation as I did".

<sup>57</sup> The following items were included in the factor analysis: Transcendence – "At the All Souls evening I realised clearly that the deceased lives on after death"; "...I experienced that there is life after death"; "...I experienced some sense of where the deceased is now". Immanence – "...it centred on the deceased and what they mean to me"; "...it was possible for me to remember the deceased as they were"; "...it concerned the deceased as they were in their earthly lives".

<sup>58</sup> 'Mean' indicates the mean score among all respondents on the scales from the factor analyses; 'std' is the standard deviation; 'alpha' indicates the reliability of the scale.

ambivalent about the latter, although discontinuity is not wholly rejected. As for the second hypothesis – the relation to the social environment – there is manifest recognition of individuality, but equally clear agreement with collectiveness, in the sense that the ritual is experienced as a communal affair. This finding is remarkable and unexpected. In regard to the third hypothesis – the relation to the deity – the emphasis is on immanence: on average the visitors agree with it. They are ambivalent about transcendence, although it is by no means rejected.

The results of our factor analysis raises the following question: does it make any difference whether visitors at secular celebrations are churchgoers or not? We conducted a correlation analysis to determine whether churchgoers in fact agree more with discontinuity, collectiveness and transcendence as we would expect on the theoretical grounds outlined in section 2. This expectation was not confirmed, except in the case of transcendence. Only on the point of relating to the deity or a higher power in commemorating their loved ones do churchgoers attending All Souls rituals differ from non-churchgoers – they experience it to a greater extent.

If we relate these findings to our reflections on different forms and emphases in ecclesiastic and non-ecclesiastic All Souls rituals in the previous two sections, there is food for thought. People with a church background manifestly attach greater value to continuity than to discontinuity. Churchgoers celebrating All Souls' Day at public cemeteries clearly no longer conform to the traditional classification of the dead as metaphysical entities. They put more emphasis on the actual person to whom they continue to relate after death. A second interesting finding is that non-churchgoers find the collective aspect of these rituals just as important as their individual dimension. The hypothesis regarding the privatisation and individualisation of mourning is not altogether correct. We discern a difference in emphasis: while the private, individual aspect is clearly in evidence, the collective side is equally noticeable. The fact that churchgoing visitors should experience it thus is thought provoking in itself, but their strong emphasis on the individual aspect was unexpected when viewed against the background of ecclesiastic tradition. Finally, it is remarkable that immanence should score higher than transcendence. Even though churchgoers score higher on transcendence and on average do not reject it, immanence is still more popular. This result makes it imperative to reconsider the conception of transcendence from the perspective of religious studies. We have tried to conceive of transcendence as broadly as possible, but in modern All Souls' Day rituals there appears to be a real need to probe the actual experience and meaning of transcendence more deeply. That is what I propose to do in the next section.

## 5 Personalised transcendence

The question of what happens to people after death is basic to the issue of transcendence in commemorating the dead. One could argue that the personal eschatology<sup>59</sup> people subscribe to is evident in the way they commemorate their dead. The church's traditional classification into those that are still alive (*ecclesia militans*), those in purgatory (*ecclesia penitens*) and those in heaven (*ecclesia triumphans*) is seldom explicitly reflected in the perceptions of present-day participants in All Souls mourning rituals. But that does not mean that they have no conception of the hereafter related to this, no picture of life after death. From open items in our questionnaire we know that the image of heaven features, literally and figuratively.<sup>60</sup> I cite an example: cemetery organisers of a secular mourning ritual in Amsterdam set up large post boxes, like the ones found along all city streets. The ones on the cemetery bore white wings reminiscent of angels' wings. Participants in the ritual could write notes with messages

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<sup>59</sup> Quartier, 'Eschatology'.

<sup>60</sup> Quartier, 'Heaven'.

to the deceased and deposit them in the letter boxes. Some participants referred to ‘mail to heaven’. Angels, suggested by the wings, are traditionally regarded as messengers between heaven and earth.<sup>61</sup> Here, too, one discerns a note of transcendence: the message flies off to heaven. Clearly participants in the mourning ritual picture the deceased in a state in which they can receive messages. The 5000 visitors at this commemoration left 1800 messages in the post boxes – a remarkably high number.

In this case literal communication with the deceased<sup>62</sup> implies an interpretation of transcendence: communicating with the deceased expresses a transcendent image. All these images are personalised, so traditional images of transcendence are often not readily recognised, as noted in the previous section. We encountered this form of communication with the deceased in other contexts as well: at an individual level the aforementioned home memorials in the Netherlands are another way of communicating with the dead. In a representative survey three out of every ten Dutch people indicated having a memorial for one or more deceased in their homes. These often include photographs of the person, as well as personal mementos. Everybody is probably familiar with the phenomenon of grandpa’s cherished watch, only here the watch acquires a ritual function. That is evidenced by the use of flowers and candles on these shrines, which also emerged in the survey. Thus individual commemoration is given a ritual framework – in itself an interesting fact from the point of view of new mourning rituals. In addition Wojtkowiak’s study indicates that people have actual contact with the deceased. According to her half her respondents experienced their loved ones’ presence at the memorial, sometimes literally when a door suddenly banged shut on a windless day, sometimes more symbolically by ‘conversing’ with the person.<sup>63</sup> But in all instances it refers to what I call *personalised transcendence*. Such experiences associated with personal memories are to my mind a hallmark of new mourning rituals.

If we look at the traditional All Souls’ Day practices in section 2, the prayers and sacrifices of the mass maintain contact with the deceased: one can do something for them. But the deceased as human persons are eclipsed by the salvation of their souls. In modern forms of transcendence such as the ones described here it is a different matter. The survey finding that immanence scores higher than transcendence, also among churchgoers, implies that even in personalised forms of transcendence immanence is the key to recognition.

Hence I believe that commemorations of the dead offer a good starting point for reappraising and possibly re-inventing transcendence: *personalised transcendence* includes many facets of modern mourning rituals. Here transcendence represents contact with the deceased, the special place assigned to her or him: in this way the deceased is given a memorial space in one’s own life.<sup>64</sup> The interaction between popular experience as a source of new forms of religion<sup>65</sup> and next to that, a liturgical repertoire inculturated in a particular context, could be a vital relation here between anthropological roots and ecclesial repertoire.<sup>66</sup>

I see this as a theological key to the re-invention of Christian mourning rituals. If it is true that people have problems with transcendence in the sense of a de-personalisation of the deceased in the church triumphant, if they are in fact reacting against it in their communication with the deceased, then personalised transcendence could enable them to link religious symbols with personal ones, as in the use of symbols at funerals.<sup>67</sup> If a simple symbol like a post box is meaningful to a substantial number of participants in a secular All

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<sup>61</sup> Quartier, ‘Angels’.

<sup>62</sup> Schmied, *Friedhofsgespräche*.

<sup>63</sup> Wojtkowiak & Venbrux, ‘Gedenkplekken’.

<sup>64</sup> Chidester, *Patterns of transcendence*, 228.

<sup>65</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Mensen als verhaal van God*.

<sup>66</sup> Schillebeeckx, ‘Naar een heronderking van de christelijke sacramenten’.

<sup>67</sup> Quartier, ‘Personal symbols’.

Souls' Day celebration, then symbolic repertoires in religious traditions could offer possibilities for many people who are susceptible to them.

Naturally personalised transcendence does not mean that everybody actually believes in an afterlife, and certainly not that this afterlife can be linked to Christian conceptions of it.<sup>68</sup> Art or other symbolic media offer equally adequate horizons of meaning. But for Christian mourning rituals a contrast between faith and personalisation is probably inappropriate: it is rather a matter of personalised faith or faithful personalisation. That could contribute to a re-invention of Christian mourning rituals.

## 6 Old and new: an ecclesial re-invention of All Souls' Day

The cardinal question in this article was: how are present-day All Souls rituals perceived in the Netherlands and what does that imply for mourning rituals in modern society? The impressions in the foregoing sections do not permit a conclusive answer, but do invite some general considerations.

In Dutch praxis there are certainly attempts to re-invent ecclesiastic mourning rituals like All Souls' Day in the midst of secular re-inventions.<sup>69</sup> In this article I explored three aspects: firstly the historical sources of the traditional All Souls' Day, then the background to what is known as the new All Souls' Day, and finally the perceptions of participants in new All Souls rituals. This yielded a number of insights. The first is that the contrast between old and new All Souls rituals is probably a misrepresentation. If mourning rituals in general aim at bridging the gap between mourners and the deceased, their social environment and their religious conceptions, then the contrasts that public debates on coping with bereavement tend to suggest are often false. Many mourning rituals contain both dimensions: faith in transcendent reality and personalisation. Providing a horizon for contact with the deceased could well be a task for the church's ritual tradition.

To my mind such a framework is essential, since otherwise there is a danger that the symbolism and the communication occurring via it will be trivialised.<sup>70</sup> There is a reason why new rituals also give rise to collective (new All Souls rituals) and individual (home altars) frameworks in which people can enact their personal commemoration. But church tradition can also benefit by this development, for in our individualised age de-personalisation runs a risk of becoming too 'sacral' and losing touch with people's sense of loss. The French liturgist Chauvet calls it 'hieratism'. Personalised transcendence is immanent, proceeding from concrete human lives and experience.<sup>71</sup> That movement has long been discernible in the personalisation of church funerals,<sup>72</sup> but it also has a place in mourning rituals.

In Christian mourning rituals, therefore, faith and personalisation often go hand in hand as was evident in these reflections on the Dutch context. And what applies to transcendence – the third dimension of mourning rituals discussed above – is certainly applicable to the first dimension as well: the relation to the deceased. The antithesis between continuity and discontinuity is false: the point is that discontinuity in the form of symbolism (e.g. 'heaven') in fact effects continuity, albeit continuity translated to another level. Mourning rituals transform<sup>73</sup> the relation to the deceased. Nowadays they do so in a personalised manner, but the relationship still changes. Here, too, Christian ritual can offer a framework, provided it does not hieratically de-personalise the deceased.

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<sup>68</sup> Lifton, *The broken connection*.

<sup>69</sup> Grimes, *Deeply into the bone*.

<sup>70</sup> Chauvet, *Symbol and sacrament*, 332-339.

<sup>71</sup> Schillebeeckx, *Mensen als verhaal van God*.

<sup>72</sup> Van Tongeren, 'Individualizing ritual'.

<sup>73</sup> Driver, *Liberating rites*.

That leaves the relation to the social environment – the second dimension discussed above. In the Dutch practice of re-inventing mourning rituals the strict individualism that had been the premise for so long appears to be inadequate. Yet the renewed need for collectiveness does not mean reverting to old, uniform religious conceptions or symbols – that is also evident in the praxis we have described. The concept of collective individualism<sup>74</sup> proposed by Venbrux may be helpful: mourning together in a personalised way. Again Christian symbols and rituals may offer a solution, for instance in the context of All Souls’ Day. But again it must be stressed that it does not necessarily apply to everybody.

Let me – at the end of this article – try to offer some possibilities for inculturated ecclesial mourning rituals – as inculturation means an reciprocal interaction between tradition and context.<sup>75</sup> This is only one possible attempt derived from the findings in this article, in other contexts other practical conclusions could be necessary.

For the first dimension, the relation with the deceased, ecclesial celebrations could offer the possibility to the bereaved to include personal objects of the deceased in the liturgy. In the Netherlands they are sometimes put in front of the church an blessed – this to help the mourning people to cope with their bereavement and carry the memory of the deceased in a sacred manner with them. For the second dimension, the social embedding, church liturgy should even more be directed to the community of mourners. This community can include all – church member and non-church members, as long as they are looking for meaning and community. The third dimension, transcendence, is the most difficult one, as the participants of the liturgy might not share common beliefs. Still, the afterlife of the individual person has – in the sense of the resurrection of Christ – strong roots in Christian tradition. Christ and the saints *are* concrete persons in Christian traditions. This can offer a possibility to stress the personalized afterlife of the people who have died during the last year within the liturgy in stories, poems etc. inspired by the experience of loss of the concrete bereaved. These are attempts, which I summarize in the next figure:

RITUAL DIMENSION	LITURGICAL FORM
Relation to the deceased	Personal objects of the deceased blessed
Relation to social network	Open community of mourners stimulated
Relation to transcendence	Personal stories connected to personal resurrection

These are just suggestions, as already mentioned. In different countries the situation can be different, but still I hope that the context I described is helpful for ecclesial rituals between faith and personalisation. Mourning rituals, like funerals, now compete in an open market, in which church rituals are an important player. Hence in people’s perceptions they have changed, but that does not imply that they have become meaningless. Dutch praxis indicates that they are perfectly amenable to re-invention, and that may happen in comparable ways in other contexts and countries as well.

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<sup>74</sup> Venbrux, *Ongeloofelijk!*

<sup>75</sup> Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation.*, 51.

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