

Memories of Religious Ritual and Prayer in Older People's Lives

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Although religious memories can often be central to meaning giving, they have received relatively little attention within the study of reminiscence. In a comparative study of older people's memories of ritual in Eastern and Western Europe we have been able to highlight a number of important features of memories of religious ritual and prayer in later life. These include: the abiding influence of childhood experiences; the supportive role of religious attitudes in bereavement and reconciliation; resistance to forced change in practices; and the role of older people themselves as the custodians of ritual. Our study has also shown how greater respect for religious ritual evident in Bulgaria and Romania, in contrast to England, may reflect negative memories of secular ritual that was developed under communist rule and the deeper family and community ties associated with religious ritual.

Key Terms: Comparative Oral History Study; Elders' Memories

Religious memories have been a neglected aspect of the study of reminiscence. Yet religious ritual, both communal and private, accompanies most people throughout their lives and often provides essential meaning to important life events. In a recent study funded by the UK Research Councils' "Religion and Society" programme we have had the opportunity to study older people's memories of prayer and religious practice in two very different parts of Europe. Both have seen remarkable changes in attitudes to religious practice over the lifetimes of current generations of older people.

Our study was based on oral history interviews, conducted by native speakers with sixty people aged over 75, twenty each in different areas of England, Bulgaria and Romania. Each person gave permission for their interviews to be recorded and published (although we have employed pseudonyms in the following accounts). The study formed part of a larger project examining the role of religious ritual in older people's lives. The interview guidelines and a full account of the methodology used are provided in a

recent publication (Coleman, Koleva, and Bornat, 2013). Bulgaria and Romania were chosen as neighbouring but contrasting examples of former post-war communist societies. Although the Romanian state actively discriminated against religious believers, it was not as assiduous as the Bulgarian government in eradicating any trace of genuine belief and substituting religious with specially designed secular ritual (Kanev, 2002). The Romanian government also favoured the national Orthodox Church against competing Catholic and Protestant forms which were more harshly persecuted. Nevertheless in both Bulgaria and Romania religious practice has increased after the collapse of communist rule in 1989. In the UK on the other hand Christian religious practice has followed a steady decline from the relatively high attendance at religious services of the 1950s. Although many non-church-attenders still choose religious ritual to mark births, marriages and deaths, there has been significant development in the provision of alternative forms of secular ritual. By examining remembered religious experience across these three cultures, all three predominantly Christian in history and culture, we aimed to explore meaning-making from memories as it unfolds in different socio-historical contexts.

The study has highlighted a number of important aspects of religious reminiscence: the formative influence of early life experience, the benefits of religion in later life, adult resistance to external pressures to abandon religious practice, and the older person's role in the transmission of religious ritual. Similar observations were made in regard to the former two points, but more contrasting observations in regard to the latter two. We illustrate each with examples from participants in our three countries.

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Religious Influences in Childhood

In general, our participants seem to have remained with the same level of religiosity they acquired during childhood, illustrating the important link between religious faith and practice and attachment bonds formed early in life (Kirkpatrick, 2004). Those with religious parents tended to have become religious themselves. Grandparents also played an important role. Ivanka (Bulgaria) for example recalled that one of the happiest moments in her life was when her grandfather would read to her from the Bible. For Sarah (England) it was her stepfather, a minister in a rural church, who had helped form in her a love for high church Anglican ritual with its “candles, incense marvellous music” and a sense of “reverence” which she found lacking in present day church services.

Other religious influences when young also seem to have had lasting effect. Ioana (Romania) had been sent away to a Catholic boarding school after the death of her mother. Although Ioana clearly remembered the words her mother often repeated that “God is everywhere,” the most decisive influence on her seems to have come later at the school.

After my mother died and I had to go to boarding school, there was a morning service such a beautiful chapel, a big chapel, with an organ, it was very beautiful and they had a service in the morning. There was a priest, he came from town, it was the sisters' choir who answered, it was sublime you know. I was in a bad state, you know. I felt the need to go to church. And I went, but I didn't know, I didn't know, it was new to me and I didn't know the rituals. The Catholic rituals are very different than ours (Orthodox). And almost every morning I was going to church, to the religious service.

Although she subsequently became an active member of the Orthodox Church this early experience of the power of ritual was influential in Ioana's strong interest and expertise in religious ritual, well recognised in the local community, throughout her life.

Attending Sunday school had also made the biggest impression on Kitty (England). She both enjoyed and learned from it.

Well I wouldn't say I was a religious person but I do believe in what our religion is. I do believe that. Even when I didn't go to church, it was there, what I'd been taught in Sunday school. That, you know, was so deeply put into me though, as I say, I didn't go to church.

Even among the nonreligious and atheists in our samples, the more affective memories of religious life in

childhood could leave a lasting impression as with Jennifer's happy descriptions of Catholic processions in her childhood in the poor East End of London. She described the enjoyment they provided although she did not participate in the rituals themselves.

The churches used to bring out their regalia and their statues of Mary with Jesus or Jesus on the cross. You would get men who were part of the church with their green braids across and hats too – they would play quite solemn music. The kids would all be dressed, white, boys used to wear black short trousers and a white shirt, white socks, black shoes. The girls used to wear a white dress like a confirmation dress. They would have blue ribbons round their hair. And this procession could be anything up to about half a mile long and it'd trail through the streets. And various houses would have opened up their window or pulled down their window and decorated their front window. So it was like an altar ... We thought “Aint the frocks nice, don't the girls look lovely?” I mean it wasn't religious thoughts We knew that this lot believed in something. Whether we believed in it or not I don't think it really mattered. And I don't think – no. I just think we thought it was the ceremonial, how nice it was to see these kids, how nice it was to see this all going on.

Also, Lewis (England) who had rejected the Catholicism of his childhood in favour of humanist-based rituals appeared to regret the loss of the Latin mass and remembered how during war service in France in 1944 it had made him “feel part of something,” even though being a humanist now provided a more meaningful sense of relationship to him.

Religion in the Experience of Ageing

One of the most painful aspects of ageing is the experience of often multiple bereavements which leave the older person increasingly isolated. Kate (England) had lost her husband eight years previously to cancer just two years after they moved to a different city. She described the experience of coping with her bereavement shortly after relocating to a new city where she knew very few people.

How did I cope? Well it wasn't all that easy because I was a newcomer to ...[the city] and I hadn't really made, or at least we had very little opportunity to make friends, cos my husband was not well and we didn't get out and about much. So I found it quite difficult but I realised that I'd been very fortunate in the marriage that I'd had and I knew that my husband was with his Lord and I decided that

what God wanted of me was to try to sit still and just take things very quietly. So whereas most people find things to do as quickly as possible, I felt God was saying to me 'I want you just to learn to just be quiet on your own and be with me' and I did that for, I think, a good two years. And then I started feeling that it was right for me to get more involved with the church and that's it really.

Kate's description of her church activities was similar to that reported by other religious British older adults who, after losing a spouse, found a new post-bereavement identity through becoming more involved at church (Spreadbury and Coleman, 2011). Our Eastern European participants were also comforted by their involvement in religious mourning rituals.

Many of our participants had painful memories of difficult events in their lives which they had needed to come to terms with. Life review with a spiritual character was noticeable especially among some of our Bulgarian and Romanian interviewees. Our sample contained examples of strong elders, such as Aurelian, Eleonora and Ioana, who seemed very much at peace with themselves and others, despite the hardships they had encountered. They were looked at by those around as examples of wisdom in late life. This appeared a product both of the suffering they had experienced and the way they had responded to it without hatred and resentment.

Despite the recall of so many painful memories, including the death of his beloved sister when she was a child, the disappointment of obtaining and then losing a scholarship for further study as a result of change of government, and his imprisonment before and after the war, Aurelian (Romania) repeatedly affirmed his faith in God's providence.

Sometimes you don't know whether some evil is for the greater good or not, you can never tell, that maybe that evil was the greatest good in your life because you have no perspective upon the future, we don't know if what happens to us is for the better or for the worse many times I think that God has a plan for each and every man.

Eleonora (Romania) highlighted the bereavement of her parents as a key turning point in her life, especially with regard to the strengthening of her religious belief and practice. She used the word "covenant" to describe her new solemn commitment or agreement with God, creating a more intimate relationship with God and producing a new sense of self-identity.

I proposed myself not to speak; not only not to speak ill of anyone, but not even to think bad things about anyone and then I felt so, so suddenly, this feeling, of purification and had a positive and optimistic vision of the world. ... I've always felt that my tests have spiritually fortified me and from every trial I came out more robust emotionally and strengthened spiritually.

Ioana (Romania) provided a striking example of forgiveness, another very important aspect of reconciliation in the experience of ageing. She had accepted her former husband and his second wife to live with her when their house was demolished following an earthquake. They lived in peace together, Ioana teaching her children to respect her husband's wife and caring for her before her death from cancer.

People asked me how was I ever able to live in the same house with my former husband and his wife. I said we are Christians, civilized people. We took care of one another.

Resistance to External Pressures to Change Religious Practice

Particularly telling was the evidence our study provided on the resistance to secular pressure among religious believers in Eastern Europe. There were examples of men who endured long years of imprisonment, and others who had to face dismissal from employment or hide their religious affiliation in order to maintain employment. Many of the women also behaved heroically or were called by the circumstances of the time to undertake unusual tasks, as Dimana (Bulgaria) performed behind the iconostasis serving the priest within the sacred liturgy, a task normally reserved for men.

Eleonora (Romania) emphasised throughout her interview how her belief had been important to her during the most difficult moments of her life which centred on her demotion from her job for attending church, consequent moments of financial austerity, the near loss of her home, and the deaths of her parents. She explained how she drew on Biblical scripture to make meaning out of difficulties and to reinforce and support her strong faith. She described some of the internal debate that took place in her own mind.

I read, and at night, Psalm 90, which ends: 'He shall cry unto Me, and I will hearken unto him. I am with him in affliction, and I will rescue him and glorify him. With length of days will I satisfy him, and I will show him My salvation.' And so...then I read it...'I will rescue him and...' How can it be?! God does lie! 'How? Does God not see that I thank

Him wholeheartedly and sincerely feel this spontaneous need to thank Him and through religious service and He sees me going through hardships and could He turn His back on me?' No! That was my conviction, which I've had all the time. Yes.

Aurelian (Romania) recalled in detail his imprisonment both before and after the war because of his former membership of a right wing party (the 'Iron Guard') to which he had been attracted by its religious as well as patriotic character. In prison he had contemplated suicide, but his faith, he said, had kept him alive.

Our British participants had not faced pressure to stop attending church but in some cases had experienced changes in church practice which they found disturbing. Sarah (England) listed the many churches that had closed in her home city and criticised the ordination of women priests because they "didn't look the part" to take the place of Christ in the Eucharistic service. She experienced a "downhill process" within the church and also a disappointing loss of belief within members of her own family.

Derek (England) had also witnessed substantial change in religious services during his time as a lay minister and had reflected on the new situation. In his case this was the result of a shifting population, with in and out migration, in his area of North London, which had dramatically changed the character of the liturgy in his parish church.

They love this happy clappy stuff. They wave their arms and they move up and down. And they go on and on with this, and to me that puts me off. I go to church, to a communion service, to say my prayers and to sing a few hymns and all the rest of it. ... 'Oh well we haven't got time for the communion, we'll cut that out'. And that's, I mean I couldn't believe it, because that is a communion service, the Eucharist is what you go to it for.

Although he continued to be present at services in his parish church, Derek was also attending services at another church which maintained the traditional ritual he had grown up with.

Older People as Custodians of Ritual

A further interesting feature of our observations was the way they highlighted the important role older people performed in preserving and passing on ritual traditions in Eastern Europe but not in England.

Dimana (Bulgaria), for example, had prepared instructions for her family concerning all that needed to be done after her death:

Everything has to be ready, so the children don't worry..... There are people who say, 'No, no, I don't want to hear about it.' You don't want to hear about it, but when I die you'll get mad with grief – who, what, where. I've written everything that needs to be done. The incense, the candles, how to bathe the body. And to anoint the body with wine and basil. And you spread a white piece of clothing at the front and behind. That's how a person appears on Judgement Day.

Also, Ioana (Romania) had become expert with regard to the ritual and ceremonial uses of food related to commemorating significant life events, especially those related to bereavements and funerals. In addition, Ioana placed great importance on the giving of alms. Both practices were described in the context of "honouring the dead" and Ioana possessed a detailed knowledge of how these activities should be prepared and conducted. She recalled how she prepared 'koliva,' the food to be eaten following a death, related to arguably the most traumatic bereavement of her adult life. When she was in her mid-twenties and pregnant, Ioana's eldest brother who had been her childhood guardian and with whom she had lived when she left boarding school died suddenly at the age of 39 years in a motorbike accident. Remembering the event Ioana recalled:

I could not cry during the funeral... I had to live with my sister-in-law, she was afraid to be alone, and I stayed with her until his 40 days commemoration service. I don't know why, but I had this on my mind for a long time now, that I had to prepare koliva! And indeed, now I was preparing it for my brother.

In England by contrast there was more sadness at the failure of transmission to the next generation. Derek described himself as "bitterly disappointed" that his goddaughter never decided to become confirmed as a Christian. Sarah also expressed regret that her nephew whose christening she remembered was now a "non believer." He had not christened his own child.

Conclusions

Although we began our project with an equal focus on contrasts between our two Eastern European countries as on those between them and the UK, the latter comparison has proved more striking. There seemed to be noticeable differences between attitudes to ritual practice in our Eastern European and Western participants over the age of

75 years. Our Bulgarian and Romanian elders appear both to have engaged more with and to be currently more respectful of religious ritual than their British counterparts. This can in part be accounted for by their different historical experience, in particular the stigma attributed to secular ritual because of its prominent role during communist rule. The attempt on the part of communist authorities to replace traditional religious rituals, especially for life transitions as births, marriages and death, appears to have been deeply unpopular.

Perhaps most importantly the cultural and family ties associated with religious ritual are deeper and stronger in Eastern Europe, as well as the feeling of belonging to a tradition of spiritual and ritual practice. This creates a sense both of responsibility for and also ownership of this tradition. A number of the people we interviewed in Eastern Europe, such as Ioana, Ivanka and Dimana, indicated such close attachment to ritual. Membership of a ritual tradition appears to be of great benefit to many people as they age. Older people are given the opportunity not only to be part of the continuation of this tradition but, perhaps most importantly, to teach younger generations how to maintain the tradition. This contributes greatly to a person's sense of generativity, the ability to be able to transmit valuable cultural products to the next generation.

However the practice of tradition also changes and develops throughout time, and this brings with it inevitable tensions, especially if the change is abrupt and inadequately introduced. In Western Europe, imposed religious change has mainly been liturgical in character, and surprisingly little investigation has been carried out into older people's experience of the sometimes disruptive Reforms that have occurred, for example the sudden

abolition, following the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, of the centuries old Tridentine form of the Roman Catholic Mass. There were older people in the English sample who regretted the change, but also others, as Sylvia, who had welcomed it because it was part of a Council that had inaugurated a greater openness in the Church.

It would be wrong to think that older people are also not capable of change. Indeed, even within a religious context, prophecy – reading the signs of the time – is associated with age, experience and wisdom. Faithfulness to a tradition is compatible with, and can be argued to require readiness to accept, new insights into that tradition's meaning. It is often older people who have the necessary maturity of mind to integrate the tension between tradition and change (Coleman, Mills and Speck, 2006; Sinnott, 1998).

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