

Religious rituals continue to mark the life course, especially in ex-communist countries



An image from the project's website of a traditional, full-immersion Romanian baptism

This project set out to compare life-course rituals in Bulgaria, Romania and England by interviewing older people who have lived through the social, political and religious transitions which have affected these countries after the Second World War. The three countries were selected because they represent one in which religion was successfully removed from public life during the communist era (Bulgaria), a second in which religion retained an important position in society despite persecution (Romania), and a third which has experienced a gradual decline of religious practice (England). In Bulgaria the atheistic communist regime worked particularly hard to replace religious rituals (national and personal) with secular ones, whereas in England a similar process appears to be taking place without evident government direction.

Strikingly, however, the research team of Peter Coleman, Joanna Bornat, Daniela Koleva and European researchers, found that religious rituals remained important to most older people they interviewed in all countries throughout their lives, and were never supplanted by secular ones. In this respect, there was much less difference between Bulgaria and Romania than was predicted. It is in fact in Britain where there has been greater uptake of secular options for marking the key transitions of birth, marriage and death.

Experience of religious ritual was remarkably constant over the course of participants' lives, despite official disapproval and some consequent fear in Bulgaria and Romania. Individuals merely adapted their ritual practice to the context, conducting baptisms and marriages covertly in the home rather than church. Grandmothers were found to have been important in ensuring ritual continuity, and communal religious rituals give older women social presence and power that they might otherwise lack.

Using life history interviews with people aged 75 and over, the project answered an urgent need to capture these living memories through a unique combination of oral history, gerontology and the study of religion.

Find out more...

- Visit the project's website: <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/mrasc/>
- Access the project interviews and transcripts which are being deposited with the British Library and academic oral history archives in Bulgaria and Romania.
- Look up Peter Coleman's book *Belief and Ageing* published by Policy Press in 2011: <http://www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781847424594>
- Keep an eye out for an edited volume of research from the project to be published as part of the Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme book series: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/news/show/announcing_new_book_series

You might also be interested in...

- The final conference of the Religion and Society Programme on 'Sacred Practices of Everyday Life' at which Daniela Koleva, and Peter Coleman will be presenting the project: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/sacred_practices_of_everyday_life
- Listening to Hannah Rumble and her supervisor Douglas Davies discussing her PhD funded by Religion and Society investigating the trend of woodland burials in Britain: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/burial_study_breaks_new_ground
- Reading about the findings from a Religion and Society-funded project investigating shared ritual spaces in Punjab: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/shrines_in_india_and_pakistan_demonstrate_shared_practices_of_sikhs_hindus_and_muslims
- A Religion and Society research network on secularism: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/secularism_means_very_different_things_in_different_times_and_places

Award Title

Marking Transitions and Meaning across the Life Course: Older People's Memories of Religious and Secular Ceremonies in Eastern and Western Europe

Team

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Award Type

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