

# Progress Report

## Religion and old age

GRACE DAVIE and JOHN VINCENT\*

The interconnections between religion and old age are complex; the more so given that the concept of age itself has – for a large part of human history – been determined by religious understandings of life. In traditional societies, religion played a crucial part in structuring the transitions between one stage of the life and the next and in defining maturity and fulfilment. And up to a point it still does: in Western societies at the turn of the millennium the association of religious rituals with key moments in the life course – birth, adolescence, marriage and above all death – remains widespread. Such interconnections change over time, however; they also vary from place to place.

A second difficulty lies on the definition of religion. Definitions vary along a continuum from the substantive – with a strong emphasis on the presence of or belief in some sort of supernatural, to the functional – with a much more inclusive framework. And even within substantive definitions, there is a tension between the traditional faith communities (the world religions) and new forms of religious life, many of which exist as cultural rather than structural phenomena. This paper will look first at sources which associate religious belief and practice with age, examining (a) material from surveys of practice and opinion, (b) case studies, and (c) comparative ethnographies. The second part of the paper uses a more theoretical perspective to reflect about the changing nature of the life course and the place of religion within this.

### **Beliefs and old age: data sources**

#### *What the surveys indicate*

Older people, it appears, have always been more religious than the young. Whether elderly people have regarded God as judgmental (the source of all their troubles) or as a father figure (a rock in the storm of

\* Department of Sociology, University of Exeter.

life), they have always taken him more seriously than their sons and daughters. This kind of generational difference has been reflected in church membership studies for some time,<sup>1</sup> and is, increasingly, supported by studies of religious belief. A Mori poll (Jacobs and Worcester 1990) illustrates this point clearly, revealing that 67% of those aged between 15 and 34 years believe in God as against 87% of those aged over 55 years. Similarly only 55% of the younger age group believe in heaven as opposed to 65% of the older. It seems that belief in God, and specifically belief in a personal God, declines with every step down the age scale, as indeed do practice, prayer and moral conservatism. In short, in Britain as in most of Western Europe, a religiously and morally conservative majority among the retired becomes a religiously conservative minority in the 18–24 age-group.

These findings are supported strongly in the two European Values Studies carried out in 1981 and 1990.<sup>2</sup> In both surveys age, together with gender, is a strong and straightforward indicator of both religious practice and religious belief (*cf* Moberg 1990 for the USA). The relationships with social class, education or occupation are considerably more complex. The *interpretation* of the age factor is, however, difficult: is this a feature of age or cohort? In other words, is this finding related to people becoming more conservative in their views as they get older – the suggestion being that there is a natural concern with matters of mortality the closer one comes to death (*cf* Bauman 1992); or is it a question of societal rather than individual change – those growing up in a more secular world have persistently different beliefs from those who were born in a more religious environment? Whatever the case, the inter-relationship with gender is crucial. Indeed religion (in terms of both belief and practice) appears to be disproportionately attractive to elderly women in Britain, Western Europe and the United States, a section of the population that is growing demographically.

The implications of these data are interesting. They help to explain the growing mismatch – particularly in Western Europe – between indices of religious attendance and those of religious belief (see Davie 1994 for a full discussion of this theme). Pre-war generations, to a greater extent than is often realised, grew up under the influence of the churches, or, at least, under the influence of a wide network of parachurch organisations. By no means all West Europeans practised their faith with regularity, but they possessed, nonetheless, a degree of religious knowledge that had some connection with orthodox Christianity. This connection was most obviously expressed in the possession of a shared vocabulary; a common language which could be assumed, on either side, in encounters with the churches' personnel. Since the

war, this pattern has altered radically, for it is the generation born immediately after the war that has, very largely, broken the formal link with the churches: hence the marked drop in both membership and attendance figures in the 1960s. But nominal belief in God persists, partly embodied in an accepting – and in some senses grateful – attitude to the churches despite the lack of regular attendance. It is, however, a belief which is less and less influenced by Christian teaching, in the sense of shared knowledge (very largely the preserve of older people in modern Britain), a point which is well illustrated in the first of the following case studies.

*Two case studies – the hospital and the old people's home*

The first account (Davie 1994: 123–4) is taken from the experience of a hospital chaplain responsible for the pastoral care of two hospitals in one city, Liverpool, both of which cater exclusively for women. The first admits patients primarily for gynaecological treatment, including substantial numbers of women in late middle-age or older. The second was the maternity unit for most of Liverpool, admitting mothers for ante-natal care and delivery, for the most part women in their late teens, twenties and early thirties. For all practical purposes the constituencies of the two hospitals were similar, apart – that is – from the difference in age.

Both groups of women were equally pleased to see the Chaplain. Indeed there were repeated expressions of gratitude in both cases that there was someone in the institution whose business it was to affirm joy, to assuage grief and to comfort in times of tribulation. The crucial point, however, was the Chaplain's appreciation that in going about her task in the two hospitals, she had to make different assumptions. For in the first instance, where appreciable numbers of the patients might have had some connection with their churches at least in their youth, the shared vocabulary was evident, if not always articulated; a common language was significant both in the personal encounter and in the form of worship, even informal worship, that was possible on a Sunday morning. Exactly the same routines in the Maternity Hospital had to be undertaken differently. The younger women were equally appreciative of the Chaplain but unable to communicate with her in the same way as their mothers or grandmothers. Similarly such worship as took place had to be effected without the benefit (or some might say hindrance) of a half-remembered language. Ministry was not necessarily more difficult amongst younger women – particularly those emerging from the experience of giving birth – but it had to be

approached in a different way. New formulae had to be found for articulating the sacred for there was nothing to fall back on in this generation of women, born for the most part since 1960.

Ethnographic accounts of life in residential care for old people provide an additional source for insights into religious practice and belief. Hazan (1984) demonstrates how religion is used as part of a survival strategy by the elderly residents of a Jewish care home. His study describes how residents use religion as a social resource to distance themselves both from undesirable categories of residents and from the authority of management. Vincent's (1996) recent study of private residential care examines accounts of the supernatural supplied by the staff who work in such places; he links these to an interactionist perspective emphasising relationships which are left unresolved at death.

#### *Ethnographic and anthropological sources*

If the modern world – rightly or wrongly – has become associated with urban life and secularisation, it follows that the rural periphery will contain communities which adhere to traditional religious frameworks. These communities become classic sites for ethnographic study. They are characterised by disproportionate numbers of older people and by high rates of religious participation. Gender, moreover, is a crucial factor, deriving at least in part from the greater longevity of women (Ingrisch 1995). The combination has prompted the stereotype of the elderly widow in black finding consolation in the church; a stereotype which has typified religion and its role in the mountains and remote peninsulas of Europe. It is closely associated with dying languages and cultures (Delamont 1995).

Today, however, the resurgence of ethnicity in these areas has prompted a very different formulation. Significant numbers of young people are turning to religion as a positive expression of their ethnic identity. The 'young Turks' of ethnic nationalism – young educated people who combine an active ethnic loyalty with a desire for modernisation and regeneration – use religion as a resource for mobilisation and solidarity (Vincent 1982). In consequence, religion, ethnicity and age inter-relate in new and different ways, nowhere more so than in the former Yugoslavia.

The same active role for religion in matters of identity is true for migrant populations. Religious organisations provide an institutional focus in the alien environment of the host society, offering cultural support and continuity. In Britain, for example, two thirds of older

Afro-Caribbean's attend church regularly, a far higher proportion than the host community. Once again gender is important; the church becomes a particular focus for older women (Blakemore and Boneham 1994). Chester and Smith's study of older people and their places of worship includes, amongst others denominations, a Muslim congregation; once again the authors indicate the centrality of the mosque to community life (1996). To lose contact with the ritual associated with a place of worship implies the loss of those things which provide meaning and purpose to life.

A final example of the connections which can be constructed between age and spiritual maturity comes from Japan:

The religious image of *okina*, the symbol of an old person's wisdom and mental and spiritual maturity, lies deeply embedded in the Japanese unconsciousness, and may well exercise a similar function to the Jungian archetype of the 'wise old man'. This positive image of the Japanese old was inculcated by the post-1868 Japanese governments through moral training at primary school (Wada 1995: 57).

This citation resonates well beyond modern Japan and underlines once again the potentially positive nature of religion for elderly people in modern societies. It is taken from an excellent set of recent studies concerned with images of ageing and with the cultural representation of old age (Featherstone and Wernick 1995; see also Vincent 1995).

### **Traditional, modern and post-modern life courses: changing interpretative frameworks**

#### *Traditional views – the journey through life*

Historical understandings of the life course are dominated by the role of religion in structuring the transitions between one stage of life and the next. Some of these accounts go back as far as classical times, to Greek and Roman religions (Aries 1981, Minois 1989). More of them, however are concerned with modern history and with those pre- and post-Reformation ideas and practices which defined the 'ages of man'. For example, in Anglo-American Protestantism of the colonial periods the meaning of old age was firmly linked to the idea of life as a journey (Cole 1992). One's later years were the final steps in this journey. A life successfully accomplished led not only to a healthy and fulfilled old age but to a 'good death' in the arms of the family. In contrast death in poverty or isolation was interpreted as a just reward for a dissolute life.

The nineteenth century, however, marked a turning point; the

moment when the status of old age and the role of religion in defining and bolstering that status began to be undermined. No longer did ministers of religion focus upon the older person's role as a repository of wisdom or a keeper of sacred traditions.

Indeed, nineteenth-century experts often challenged the assumption that the old possessed valued skill and experiences. In a rapidly changing society the old only gave voice to a universe that had long passed; they knew nothing of the demands of the modern world (Haber and Gratton 1994: 151).

*Modern life courses – we die when we are old*

Old age and death become much more closely associated in modern societies. As a result of demographic change, the need to confront one's own mortality can be safely deferred until old age; we expect to enjoy a full life course. This demographic change (known as the rectangular survival curve) leads to other changes: not only to the specialisation of medical knowledge regarding old age, but also to a view of old age as a series of solvable biological problems which the current application of scientific endeavour will resolve. Thomas Cole (1992), amongst others, documents the transformation of the traditional view of ageing, contrasting this with a period in which science and medicine have come to dominate the scene.

Certain kinds of research into religion and ageing adapt to this model, by suggesting that religious belief and practice can produce added longevity. For example, church-related activity may prevent illness both by its direct effect, using prayer or scripture-reading as coping behaviour, or by its indirect effect through its influence on health behaviours (Levin 1994, Koenig *et al.* 1996). Such conclusions are spread through sections of the Christian media and exemplify a potent combination of scientific and moral discourse within a modernist framework.

Of particular interest to an article devoted to religion and ageing in modern society is Rory Williams' monograph on attitudes to death and illness among older Aberdonians (Williams 1990). Williams looks at a generation of Aberdonians brought up in a strongly Protestant tradition. He examines the links between personal biography (including religious biography) and the way in which people deal with illness and death within a particular section of the population at a given moment in its economic, social and religious evolution. The Protestant legacy is one element in this complex picture; still important but distilled by the specificities of Scottish history including the emergence of currents which run counter to the teaching of the sixteenth century Reformers.

This is sociological investigation at its most insightful. Hazan's study (1994) reinforces the complexities of Williams' conclusions. Writing from an ethnographic, and indeed post-modernist viewpoint, Hazan concludes that old people just as often abandon as accept the path of religion and are as capable as younger people of adopting cynical and secular ways of looking at the world. There is no necessary connection between religion and old age.

On a broader canvas, a crucial chapter in Walter's *Revival of Death* typifies attitudes to death in traditional, modern and neo-modern societies (1994: 47–65). Its significance lies in the shift from a society in which death is associated with the vulnerability of childhood to a society in which death is seen as the inevitable sequel to old age. A second re-arrangement follows on: the gradual emergence of social death as a state of affairs which precedes rather than follows physical death. Older people are transformed from the venerable into the vulnerable, as they become first economically, then socially, less and less important (Vincent 1995). Conversely, the relative rarity of the death of a child renders this experience one that society as well as the individual finds hard to bear. In short, modernity's emphasis on progress and an orientation towards the future leads to value being given to those groups within the population for whom death can safely be put on one side; elderly people are – almost inevitably – excluded from this category.

A final point concerns the degree of attention paid to the study of death which has occurred across a wide variety of disciplines in the last decade or so. This is best illustrated by the appearance of a new academic journal under the title *Mortality*,<sup>3</sup> which exists to promote the interdisciplinary study of death and dying. The journal

aims to demonstrate the relevance of human mortality in personal and social life, in economic and institutional activity, and in systems of beliefs, ethics and values. It is also relevant to those involved in the practical preparation for, and consequences of, death in health care and counselling, in religions, in the funeral directing industries and the services which provide burial, cremation and memorialisation facilities. (*Mortality*, publicity flyer 1997).

The emphasis on praxis as well as theory is important. The journal will become required reading for anyone involved with death in their academic interests or in their working lives. It brings together contributions from the major writers in the field: Paul Badham, Paul Ballard, Douglas Davies, David Field, Glennys Howarth, Peter Jupp and Tony Walter. The sheer quantity of the work in this field is the first thing to remark on; the second is the sustained high quality of the academic input.

*Post-modern uncertainties – life choices and death choices*

If religion structured the traditional life course, the exigencies of the state structure the modern form – in the spheres of school, conscription, work and retirement. The post-modern view shifts again, exemplified by a loss of order and increasing flexibility in life styles, both within families and at work. We can choose whether or not we ‘act our age’ both in life and in our preparations for death. The link between social and physical death is weakened. In terms of funeral practice, for example, there is considerable debate concerning the appropriate disposal of the unborn child. Not only does social death precede physical death for the older person; it is almost the case that social birth precedes physical birth for the unborn child. Conversely people in terms of their images and performances can take on a continuing social existence after death, in the new world of the electronic media – video, film and the web.

Many lifestyles are consciously chosen despite their risk of mortality, lifestyles typified by drugs, solvent abuse and certain kinds of sexual behaviour. In post-modern discourse, moreover, science can play a very different role, evoking the spectre of a Frankenstein monster. In this perspective, tinkering with old age and death moves from the confidence of the modernist view of science as progressive, to a profound unease about the undead – those preserved from death by scientific manipulation. It opens the prospect not only of medically-manipulated longevity but of contrived immortality, cryogenics. More profoundly it raises the question of choosing one’s death. Do we wish to be preserved as living flesh for ever? Or do we look for voluntary euthanasia when pain and discomfort reduce the quality of life below that which we feel is acceptable? In the latter case a clean scientifically-controlled death through injection or the oral administration of lethal drugs is a potential option. The media promote this kind of debate, anticipating the day when a new genetic manipulation will bypass mephistophelian pacts to achieve immortality – a quick fix down at the gene workshop will do.

The young, however, are happy to experiment in religion as they are in everything else. At the extreme edge of this experimentation can be found cults in which the search for salvation lead to mass suicide, for example at Jonestown, in the Solar Temple movement (1995), and in the California mass suicide by a group seeking a rendezvous with the Hale-Bop comet (1997). In no way should these movements be seen as typical. They remain, nonetheless, a marker which indicates the extent to which the links between religion, old age, death and



immortality can become decoupled in late modern societies. Almost anything *can* happen, though in practice rarely does.

Or, to put this in a different way, post-modernity deconstructs religion just as much as it deconstructs modern science. In Europe – if not so much in the United States – traditional denominational life has been considerably weakened in the twentieth century. It has been replaced by two tendencies: the first characterised by the New Age which takes the form of a confusing mass of movements and quasi-religious manifestations (Heelas 1996); the second provides a powerful counter-trend in which traditional religions regroup behind strong barriers ready to resist the onslaughts of the modern or post-modern world. Within the framework of this article, both tendencies illustrates an important shift: the dissociation between religion and old age, though not – it should be noted – between religion and gender. New just as much as old forms of religion are disproportionately practised by women. Such changes should not, however, be exaggerated; it remains the case that the great majority of older people in the West continue to live conventional lifestyles and to invoke traditional forms of religion – albeit with increasing innovative elements – at the ‘hour of their death’.

## References

- Aries, P. 1974. *Western Attitudes Towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- 1981. *The Hour of our Death*, Allen Lane, London.
- Barker, D., Halman, L. and Vloet, A. 1992. *The European Values Study 1981–1990. Summary report*. Published by the European Values Group, London and Tilburg, Netherlands.
- Bauman, Z. 1992. *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*. Polity, Cambridge.
- Blakemore, K. and Boneham, M. 1994. *Age, Race and Ethnicity*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Chester, R. and Smith, J. 1996. *Acts of Faith: A Study of Older People and Their Places of Worship*. Counsel and Care, London.
- Cole, T. 1992. *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Davie, G. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1994: Believing Without Belonging*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Delamont, S. 1995. *Appetites and Identities: An Introduction to the Social Anthropology of Western Europe*. Routledge, London.
- Featherstone, M. and Wernick, A. 1995. *Images of Ageing: Cultural Representations of Later Life*. Routledge, London.
- Haber, C. and Gratton, B. 1993. *Old Age and the Search for Security*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana.
- Hazan, H. 1984. Religion in an old age home: symbolic adaption as a survival strategy. *Ageing and Society*, 4(2), 137–56.

- Heelas, P. 1996. *The New Age Movement*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Ingrisch, D. 1995. Conformity and resistance as women age. In S. Arber and J. Ginn (eds), *Connecting Gender and Ageing: A Sociological Approach*. Open University Press, Buckingham, pp. 44–47.
- Jacobs, E. and Worcester, R. 1990. *We British: Britain under the MORI-scope*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London.
- Koenig, H., Larson, D. and Matthews, D. 1996. Religion and psychotherapy with older adults. *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 29(2), 155–84.
- Levin, J. S. (ed.) 1994. *Religion in Aging and Health: Theoretical Foundations and Methodological Frontiers*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Minois, G. 1989. *History of Old Age*. Polity, Cambridge.
- Moberg, D. 1993. Religion and aging. In J. Johnson and J. Slater (eds), *Ageing and Later Life*. Sage, London, pp. 221–7.
- Pincher, J. 1995. *Age and Generation in Modern Britain*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Phillips, D., Vincent, J. and Blacksell, S. 1988. *Home from Home: Private Residential Accommodation for Elderly People in Devon, England*. Sheffield University Press and Community Care, Sheffield.
- Vincent, J. 1982. Differentiation and resistance: ethnicity in Valle d'Aosta and Kashmir. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 5(3), 313–25.
- 1995. *Inequality and Old Age*. UCL Press, London.
- 1996. Reason and Death: accounts of supernatural events in old people's homes. Paper presented to the annual conference of the British Society for Gerontology, University of Keele.
- Wada, S. 1995. The status and image of the elderly in Japan: understanding the paternalistic ideology. In M. Featherstone and A. Wernick (eds), *Images of Ageing: Cultural Representations of Later Life*. Routledge, London, pp. 48–60.
- Walter, T. 1994. *The Revival of Death*. Routledge, London.
- Weller, P. (ed.) 1997. *Religions in the UK: A Multi-faith Directory*. University of Derby in connection with the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, Derby.
- Williams, R. 1990. *A Protestant Legacy; Attitudes to Death Among Older Aberdonians*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

## NOTES

- 1 The best sources on quantitative data for the Christian churches in this country are those published by the Christian Research Association; these publications are extensive but mostly catalogued under the name of the Association's director, Peter Brierley; the other faith populations are covered in *Religions in the UK: A Multi-faith Directory* (Weller 1997).
- 2 A summary of the intentions and findings of the European Values study can be found in Barker, Halman and Vloet (1992).
- 3 Published by Carfax, 1986 on, edited by Glennys Howarth (a historian) and Peter Jupp (a sociologist).

*Address for correspondence:*

Department of Sociology, University of Exeter,  
Exeter EX4 4QJ, UK