

**Ageing, Ritual and Social Change  
Religious and Secular Rituals and Beliefs in a Comparative  
Perspective in Eastern and Western Europe**

*Ionela Florina IACOB*

**Keywords:** ritual, religion, ageing, secularism, social change, communism

**E-mail:** freyatudor@yahoo.com

\*

*The* first impression on reading the book *Ageing, Ritual and Social Change*<sup>1</sup> is the multidisciplinary nature of this ample research: the list of authors draws together experts of multiple fields, such as social and cultural anthropology, gerontology, psychiatry, psychology, sociology and history.

Due to the chosen field of research, the project is a complex comparative endeavour. First, it is a comparison of some of former communist countries of Eastern Europe, in this case Romania and Bulgaria, and Western Europe, represented by Great Britain. Second, it is also a comparison between a country with high living standards and the eastern countries with much lower living standards. And last but not least, the main focus of this research subject was the comparison of countries with high religiousness (Romania) and moderate to low religiousness (Bulgarian and Great Britain).

The focus of the research maps the complex significance of religion and religious ritual in the lives of people above the age of 60, a timely subject mainly due to the social and cultural changes of the present in terms of spreading secularism. The choice of this subject is also accounted for by the psychological and social role of religion in the lives of the elderly. As the authors of the introduction claim, religion most often contributes to maintaining a well defined social identity in the last years of one's life and a continuity regarding the meaning of life. On the other hand religion also ensures certain material benefits, especially by supporting eldercare institutions. In this context one of the central questions of the study discusses how far non-religious life philosophies, as choices much more accessible to the young generations, can offer the same degree of support to the elderly as religion used to.

Another stronghold of the book is that it highlights the influence of the political and historical context on the current level of religiousness in the aforementioned countries. The repression of religion in communist countries in the eastern block was followed, after 1989, by the revival of religious practices and participation. Still, there are significant differences between former communist countries in the current degree of religiousness: Romania and Bulgaria are good examples in this respect. Although the

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Coleman, Daniela Koleva and Joanna Bornat, eds. *Aging, Ritual and Social Change. Comparing the Secular and Religious in Eastern and Western Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 302p. ISBN 9781409452164 1409452166

Church has regained its ceremonial and symbolic status after communism, the social and intellectual influence of religion is much lesser in Bulgaria than in Romania. One of the main causes of this situation is the different degree of repression of religion in Bulgaria. Communist authorities in Bulgaria were much more persevering in forbidding religious rituals and attempting their reconceptualization by new meanings attributed to them; in Romania, the situation was significantly different. After the first wave of repressions in the 1950s, the policy on religious life became much more permissive, many churches and monasteries were still functioning, and religious rituals were performed in an almost non-restrictive way. These aspects are analyzed in detail by Simina Bădică in the third chapter of the book, to which I shall return later on.

Unlike in the countries of the eastern block, the lowering level of religiousness in Great Britain had different reasons. This country has had a long tradition of secular thinking, beginning with Enlightenment philosophy. However, religion continued to be a significant force until 1960s, when the sexual liberation movements were associated with religion. Researches conducted in this country show that, despite our assumptions, the reason for the decline of religious faith was not the atheist movements propagating the belief in scientific knowledge. The trust in religion and the trust in rational, scientific thinking are both declining, and are more specific to older people than to the young. It is rather about the rising forms of individual spirituality with emphasis on personal spiritual experience and refusal of any external moral or religious authority.

It has been a multiply justified choice to place the analysis of religious (or secular) rituals at the centre of this research. First, the ritual represents the midpoint of the social phenomenon of religion, indicating the fact that a person belongs to a particular religion, determining group formation and being a means of differentiation from the *Other*. Second, researchers can identify and analyze in detail often hybrid manifestations of religious life due to the ambiguous content of most rites, open to multiple interpretations. On the other hand, the research also involved passage rites which mark the main stages of a person's life (birth, marriage and funeral), as the occasions for most of the non-religious ritual alternatives.

The second chapter of the book, edited by Joanna Bornat, offers a thorough presentation of the methodology, research questions, design and main focus points of the research. The choice of oral history as the dominant research method, less employed in religion research, is another special merit of the work. This method allowed for the exploration of the personal meanings that the elderly give to religion or secularism in a particular historical, social and cultural context.

The research questions are ambitious; they cover a large variety of topics. The first two questions focus on how the elderly remember and conceptualize the changes in the use of rituals throughout their lives, as well as the positive and negative impact that these changes had on their subjective experiences. The third research question has the purpose to explore how far the secular forms of rituals have been satisfying in the stages of birth, marriage and funeral. The last and in my view most interesting research question focussed on the reasons why religious rituals continued to appeal to people who lost their faith or had always been non-religious.

The sample of interviewed people consisted of 20 participants from each of the three countries (Romania, Bulgaria and Great Britain), men and women born before 1935, from urban environment, religious and non-religious, and belonging to different

confessions (predominantly Orthodox from Romania and Bulgaria and adepts of the Anglican Church from Great Britain, and some of them Catholic, Jewish and Muslim).

The interview grid used was structured as a life-story interview, the participants were prompted to speak freely about their early memories, focusing on the role of religion and secular ceremonies in the key experiences of their lives: their first experience of death, graduation, marriage, feasts, Christening of their children, mother's and father's role, death of the parents or their partners. These were completed by questions on how the religious beliefs of the subjects have or have not modified during their lives, trying to identify the context-based factors that have determined this change. The interviewing researchers paid great attention not to influence the answers of the interviewed, showing preference for indirect questions and avoiding terms like "religious repression" in order not to impose a prefabricated line of reply. The discussions with the participants used information from data of a comprehensive quantitative study (European Values Study – 2012) started in 1981, repeated at intervals of 9 years.

Starting from differences in the level of religiousness between Romania and Bulgarian, Simina Bădică analyzes, in the third chapter of the book, the relation between religious identity and national identity.

One of the top religious countries of Europe, religiousness in Romania is based on a series of historical and political factors, most importantly the strong incorporation of religious identity into national identity. The overlap between the two types of identities started with the formation of nation states, and highly encouraged in the inter-war period. Despite the first wave of repression in the post-WWII period, religion was used later in Romania as propaganda for enforcing national cohesion and supporting nationalistic policies initiated by Communist leader Gheorghiu-Dej and continued by Nicolae Ceaușescu. The nationalistic discourse of the Church supported the attempts of these two leaders to pull Romania off Soviet influence. While at the end of the 1940s and 1950s religious ceremonies were forbidden and were only held in secret, they became public again in the 1970s and 1980s, records existing even of cases of funerals of important politicians or their relatives following the Orthodox rituals. Moreover, no strong state policy has ever existed in Romania to implement secular ceremonies that would replace religious ones. Even more, the majority of respondents did not recall any serious religious persecution, even if they admitted not being allowed to go to church or to perform any rituals. After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, religion has become a hallmark of anti-communist ideology, even if, as said above, it was never completely forbidden and later permitted again, but remained continuous throughout the various political systems in Romania.

Due to the strong connection between national identity and Orthodox identity in Romania, even for people who declared themselves to be atheists or lacking personal religious faith, Simina Bădică proposed the model "belonging without believing". According to it, religion is a means of identification with a group, in this case an ethnic group. The Christian=human synonymy, often found in Romanian villages of previous centuries, has been replaced by a Romanian=Orthodox synonymy. The case of Margareta analyzed by Bădică is a good example for this. Although she considered herself an atheist, she declares that she has lived all her life as an Orthodox and she wants to be buried after Orthodox ritual. Cases similar to hers often appear in the

interviews. Orthodoxy appears thus a family inheritance which cannot be given up, as it is not a choice, but an innate quality.

Unlike in Romania, the symbiosis between national and religious identity in Bulgaria was much weaker, even before the Communist regime. As long as in Romania public religious rituals became more frequent in the 1980s compared to the 1950s, Bulgaria witnessed a successful introduction of secular ceremonies while religious ceremonies continued to be forbidden and their number decreased. The Church preserved its apolitical attitude throughout the entire Communist period as well as after the regime fall in 1989.

Chapter four, entitled “<God Can Wait>: Composing Non-Religious Narratives in Secular and Post-Communist Societies”, edited by Hilary Young aims at the analysis of the relationship between narratives of individuals regarding their religious affiliation (or non-affiliation) and the culture and informs and shapes these narratives. The research of the British scholar starts out from the observation that “within any culture a range of possible identities will exist for interviewees to use when they compose their life stories or try to make sense of the past”. However, the context of performing a narrative significantly influences its content, as people shape their stories according to their discussion partner, cultural values, the time of narration, etc.

The author’s objectives were: analysis of religious practices in the context of secularization and their impact on memory, the exploration of emerging secular alternatives and the way old people experience this phenomenon, the identification of the extent to which religious rituals are still an attraction for old people lacking personal religious beliefs.

As for Great Britain, it has been observed that the values of individualism and humanism form a solid basis for non-religious individuals to make sense of their past. Nevertheless, non-religious people suggest that religious practices can acquire alternative meanings, insofar as belonging to the community and the faith of the family are ways of making sense of participating in various religious rituals in their own past.

The revival of Orthodoxy after 1989 in Romania and Bulgaria and the attempt to present religious values as the hallmark of anti-communist ideology brought difficulties to the lives of atheists with active communist past. These people found themselves in the position that they had to compose their own narratives on religious and non-religious ceremonies to be comfortably told in post-1989 pro-religious context.

Sidonia Grama’s article, chapter four of the book, analyzes the profoundness of religious beliefs and meanings that people transmit both by verbal discourse and especially by meaningful silence directly related to the experience of the sacred: “ineffable silence pertains to the impossibility of naming what is transcendent, sublimed, sacred.” Another important aspect discussed by the author is the relationship established between the researcher and the respondent, which significantly shapes the discourse of the participants, depending on the degree that they share or not various religious or secular values. Proposing the expression “dialogical silence”, Sidonia Grama explains the way in which “this genre of silence was part of the interviewing encounter and was triggered by a complicity established between the actors of the dialogue, based on the tacit assumption <I know that you know>. [...] Therefore, despite the difference in age and life experience, the dialogical couple interviewer-interviewed tacitly yet knowingly shared the same reference system and meaningful reverent silence.”

Daniela Koleva's study (chapter 6) focuses on the cases when the interviewed consider themselves non-religious but declare to have been involved in various kinds of religious passage rites. The author's objective was to identify the reasons why they take part in such rituals despite their religious beliefs. The findings of this study reveal that there are forms of social normativity which serve as guidelines for the participants of rituals, regardless of their personal degree of religiousness. First of all, it is conformity as an inarticulate ethos lacking reflection, or the embracing of religious rituals on the basis of the "This is how it's done!" imperative. The social norm gains here a moral connotation: respecting tradition even if it lacks intrinsic meaning, becoming thus a true moral principle. Second of all, social normativity gains thus the aspect of solidarity with other members of the group, as taking part in rituals is conceptualized as a duty towards family members. Ritual is here rather a pretext for maintaining strong family relations. Finally, the ritual allows the identification with a larger community, since religion as tradition becomes part of national or ethnic identity. Furthermore, religion seems to be a key narrative resource for a person's coherent life story and a psychological resource to handle radical changes in one's life, such as the experience of the communist regime.

Noting that many of the people who took part in religious rituals failed to sense any inherent meaning in them, Daniela Koleva concludes that "rituals are viewed not as *symbolic* practices, whose meanings have to be decoded, but as symbolic *practices*, behaviours, where the performance itself is important, rather than the meaning".

The next two chapters follow the role of religion as well as its secular alternatives in how old people accommodate the idea of death. In chapter seven, Galina Goncharova compares various methods of mourning found in the three countries, with varying intensity of secularization and de-secularization processes. The author proposes as a theoretical research instrument the concept of "personal ideology of death" with the purpose of grasping the interdependence between the personal existential meanings of mourning and the social-cultural roots of the religious ideas about the end of life and afterlife.

Analyzing three representative interviews with one person from each country, Galina Goncharova observed that the loss of someone they loved stimulated the development of new cognitive paradigms and social competences. In the first case, that of the Bulgarian woman Ivanka, mourning was a means to reinforce religious identity and internalize Orthodox values. At the same time, she also became an expert in performing religious funerary rituals, a person known in the literature as "death expert", earning the respect and appreciation of the community. Harold is an Englishman who was religious as a child, but got disappointed with religion and the Christian funeral ritual because of its impersonality. Specializing in the organization of secular funeral rituals, he emphasizes the beauty, profoundness and fullness of human life, encouraging relatives and friends to make speeches on the life of the deceased. Florina, an intellectual from Romania, offers the example of personalized religiousness, as the death of her husband made her ask whether there was a force beyond man, which governed man's destiny. Respecting rituals without associating them with religious meanings, the mourning period made Florina develop an intimate relationship with God, beyond religious doctrines.

Galina Goncharova's conclusions regard the differences between Great Britain and Romania/Bulgaria with respect to funeral rituals, observing that the biography and

post-mortem reputation of the deceased is treasured more in the western country, while the afterlife of the deceased is a greater concern in Orthodox countries. Another important observation of the author is that individuals with strong faith and those who are completely unreligious are less afraid of death than people with moderate or less configured beliefs. The major influence of the social-cultural system of dominant norms and discourses on the meaning of mourning and loss when choosing a secular or religious funeral ritual has been observed in all three countries.

The author of the eighth chapter, John H. Spreadbury, discusses the beneficial effects of religion in the context of mourning, noting the fact that these effects can appear on several levels (emotional, cognitive, behavioural, or of social interaction) depending on the private life history of the interviewed.

In the first part of his study, John Spreadbury conducts a trans-cultural analysis of mourning and the characteristics of religious rituals based on the 60 interviews taken in the project. In all three countries, the life events most often told were the mourning because of the death of parents and grandparents, while memories connected to the death of the life partner appeared in more than half of the interviews in Romania and Bulgaria and only three people in the interviews from Great Britain. Asked what times of their lives they perceived as most difficult, the respondents from Romania and Bulgaria talked about mourning, while the British were more concerned with illness or regrets regarding their earlier lives. People from Romania and Bulgaria offered much more detailed description on mourning and taking part in a great number of religious rituals than the British (lighting candles, communion, confession, using holy water, kneeling, penitence, worship of icons, celebration of saints' days, charity, consecration of the house, periodic commemorations, preparation of religious food, etc.).

Talking about the religious manifestations which seem to have the most beneficial effects in time of mourning, the author highlights faith in a personal relationship with God and the belief in life after death. The personal relationship with God attained by prayer and other rituals help in easing the feeling of loneliness, vulnerability and abandonment. The faith in life after death ensures the subjective experience of communion with the dead who are considered to be aware of the existence of the living and accessible in some indirect form which can be felt by those close to them. This faith leads to a feeling of responsibility towards the deceased, especially in Romania and Bulgaria where there are numerous rituals by which the living try to help to dead in their travel to the life beyond, becoming active means to handle death and grief.

Chapter eight and nine highlight certain aspects on the differences of how men and women handle old age and coming death in relation to religion, focusing on the totality of factors that shape their wellbeing in the last part of their lives.

The article by Ignat Petrov and Peter Coleman analyzes the wellbeing of Bulgarian men in relation with social changes they experienced in their lifetime, especially regarding religion. The findings of this study proved that the majority of men, both religious and non-religious, seemed to be relatively well off. It is important to note that their wellbeing is influenced especially by positive experience of their early family life, education, satisfactory relations with family members in their adult life, and stable social and health conditions later in their lives. Evidently, religiousness seems to enhance the positive feelings on old age and death, but due to the lack of other factors

that might ensure social and emotional stability, simple religious faith may not be enough in some of the cases.

Despite the social changes that these men had to confront, the religiousness ingrained at an early age, especially under the influence of children, seems to stay on with the passage of time as well. Those who took part in religious rituals before the war, did the same during Communism and also after 1989.

In chapter ten, Teodora Karamelska analyzes the role of religion in the life of elderly women in the three countries on the basis of 12 interviews taken in Romania, 10 in Bulgaria and 12 in Great Britain. The women selected for the study were born between 1915 and 1937, having university, high school and primary school studies, one of them still living with her husband, children or other family members, the others living on their own. Teodora Karamelska's study starts from two central research questions: 1) Does religiousness increase with age and the loss of social stability? 2) In which cases is religion adopted in the process of family socialization and in which cases does it follow a personal crisis?

The author identified three major turning points in the life of women which are often handled with the help of religion: 1) starting a family and reducing or renouncing one's professional career because of raising children; 2) the end of one's professional career due to retirement and leaving of the children (sense of uselessness); 3) gradual loss of close relatives (risk of psychological dependence, loss of the meaning of life).

The results of the research demonstrated that the biographic relevance of religion manifests itself on two levels: 1) its importance as a ritual, its social and normative functioning; 2) religious experience in the context of particular life situations launching the process of self-reflection and self-knowledge (illness, loneliness, widowhood, etc.)

In what regards the first level of religiousness, the social and normative one, Teodora Karamelska showed that the participation of women in religious rituals meets their need of social affiliation and affirmation. Moreover, some women become experts in performing various rituals, which gives them a meaning in life. The personal dimension of religion responds to an intimate side of the human being, penetrating the entire life of the person. Most often this type of religiousness is amplified by situations of major suffering, such as illness, the death of someone close, financial insecurity, loneliness and physical disabilities at old age. In some cases people who embraced this kind of religiousness reject the doctrine of institutionalized religion, but these women "do not reject the idea of a transcendent reality and are not indifferent to religion. For them the transcendent does exist, independently of its empirical concrete manifestation and the symbols, ritual and performatives relate to it." (p. 218.)

The eleventh chapter of the book, edited by Peter Coleman, Sidonia Grama and Ignat Petrov, analyzes the subjective religious experience of the oldest people taking part in the study, over the age of 85, raised and educated in the strongly religious society before the war. One of the significant limitations of the research, presented by the authors themselves, is that the people who accepted to take part in the interviews were in general extroverts, non-depressive, and in relatively good health. Consequently the findings regarding the wellbeing of very old people are not quite representative for this age group.

The respondents seemed in general to maintain the level of religiousness they got accustomed to in their childhood, only very few of them converting during their life to secular humanistic values. Religious socialization in the family is the most important factor, especially for people from the eastern countries (Romania and Bulgaria). As the authors show, attachment theory can be applied in this case, which claims the need to relate to a figure who suggests safety, usually a parent, transferred to a religious level, where the divinity plays the role of the protective parent. In some cases religious socialization in the family was replaced in Great Britain by Sunday School courses to which children participated.

The difference in religiousness between eastern countries and Great Britain can also be explained by the fact that the association of family relations and religious rituals is stronger and deeper with the Orthodox compared to the Protestants.

One of the most important benefits of involving very old people in religious rituals is that they become thus representative figures for continuing tradition and inter-generational transmission of religious values.

The last chapter contains a well structured synthesis of the results of the entire project, clearly formulating the main conclusions of the research. The authors have identified four central topics, each with some relevant aspects to them: the importance of the historical context with respect to the level of religiousness and its forms of manifestation, the important role of religion in transition periods (passage rites), the role of religious beliefs in (re)configuring the meaning of life at old age and some problems connected to the relationship between religion and the gender of the respondents.

As for the historical context and its influence on religion, the researchers have taken into account the fact that the participants have lived through wars and major social changes, as well as the overthrow of norms of religion and secularism. They lived a significant part of their lives in a time when religion was the norm, but the norm has changed with the exception of Romania. In Great Britain to speak about religion is not a dominant social expectation. Things are different in Romania and Bulgaria, despite the common Communist past. The policy of “repression” of religion differed according to the confession: in Romania, the Greek-Catholic Church was forbidden, in Bulgaria there was a movement against Catholic priests in 1950 and an attempt to eradicate the Islam in 1980. At the same time, in Romania Orthodoxy was an organic part of national identity throughout the most significant socialist period, whereas in Bulgaria was downplayed to a simple cultural heritage with no political value. After 1989, the choice of Orthodoxy became in both countries a way of displaying anti-communism and national identity (more in Romania than in Bulgaria).

The role that religion plays in key periods of human life, birth, marriage and funeral, is also different in the three countries. Especially in Romania and Bulgaria family life seems to be strongly connected to the use of religious rituals and very important in transmitting religious knowledge and practices. In both countries, the attempt to replace religious rituals with secular ones seems to have been unsuccessful, unlike in Great Britain where the secular alternatives have been adopted independently from political choices. Furthermore, the popularity of rituals is also determined by their symbolic ambiguity giving way to multiple and personalized interpretations. Last but not least, the performative and aesthetic dimension of rituals has become much more important lately to the detriment of their inherent meanings.



In what regards the role of faith later in life, it has been observed that both religion and the attachment to secular humanist values positively influence the social and psychological life of the elderly. From a social point of view the involvement in rituals provides important social roles to old people who can thus earn the respect and appreciation of the community, while in terms of psychology religion may ease feelings of loneliness, suffering and vulnerability. Although it may seem that religious beliefs are increased in the context of particularly painful events, the dominant feature is keeping the same level of religiousness throughout one's life.

The studies that also focused on the problem of gender, have reached to the conclusion that for men religion is more important in an ideological perspective as an "ethos of patriotism" or a means to proclaim their anti-communist orientation. For women, the faith in God and mourning rituals represent an instrument of handling the hardships of life. Sometimes, religion becomes a means of women's social mandating, who thus become informal experts in rituals, gaining authority in the community and the feeling of belonging to parish life.

The multidisciplinary character, the dialogue between specialists of various fields in this research, the qualitative methodology based on comparative life-story interview represents only some of the strongholds of the book *Ageing, Ritual and Social Change. Comparing the Secular and Religious in Eastern and Western Europe*, published at Ashgate Publishing in Great Britain in 2013. We hope that this initiative will be followed by many others, especially since this is a period when forms of spiritual experience begin to surpass the dichotomy of religion/secularism.

Translated by Emese Czintos