

Spiritual Pathways in Later Life: Is Religious Faith Irreplaceable?

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Issues: Religion, Spirituality and Ageing

- Religion in the study of ageing
- Expanding scope of research on benefits of religion/spirituality
- Non-linear relationships between religious faith and well-being
- Do people become more religious with age?
- 'Religion' and 'spirituality': changing meanings
- Theological debate on the 'benefits of religion to age' literature
- Comparison with non-religious based sources of meaning
- Diversity in the European situation

Religion in the Study of Ageing

- **Early US developmental theories of ageing included religion in their scope, but from 1960s interest in significance of religion faded:**

Erik Erikson – religious faith central to maintenance of intergenerational links;

David Gutmann – older people acquire ‘sacred power’ within a stable culture

- **Renewed interest in religion and ageing in the 1980s with research on sources of existential meaning in later life:**

Duke longitudinal study of ageing – “The issue for older people not just survival but meaningful and purposeful existence” (Busse, 1985)

Carol Ryff’s studies on dimensions of well-being highlighted tendency for perceived meaning to decline already from mid-life onwards in the US

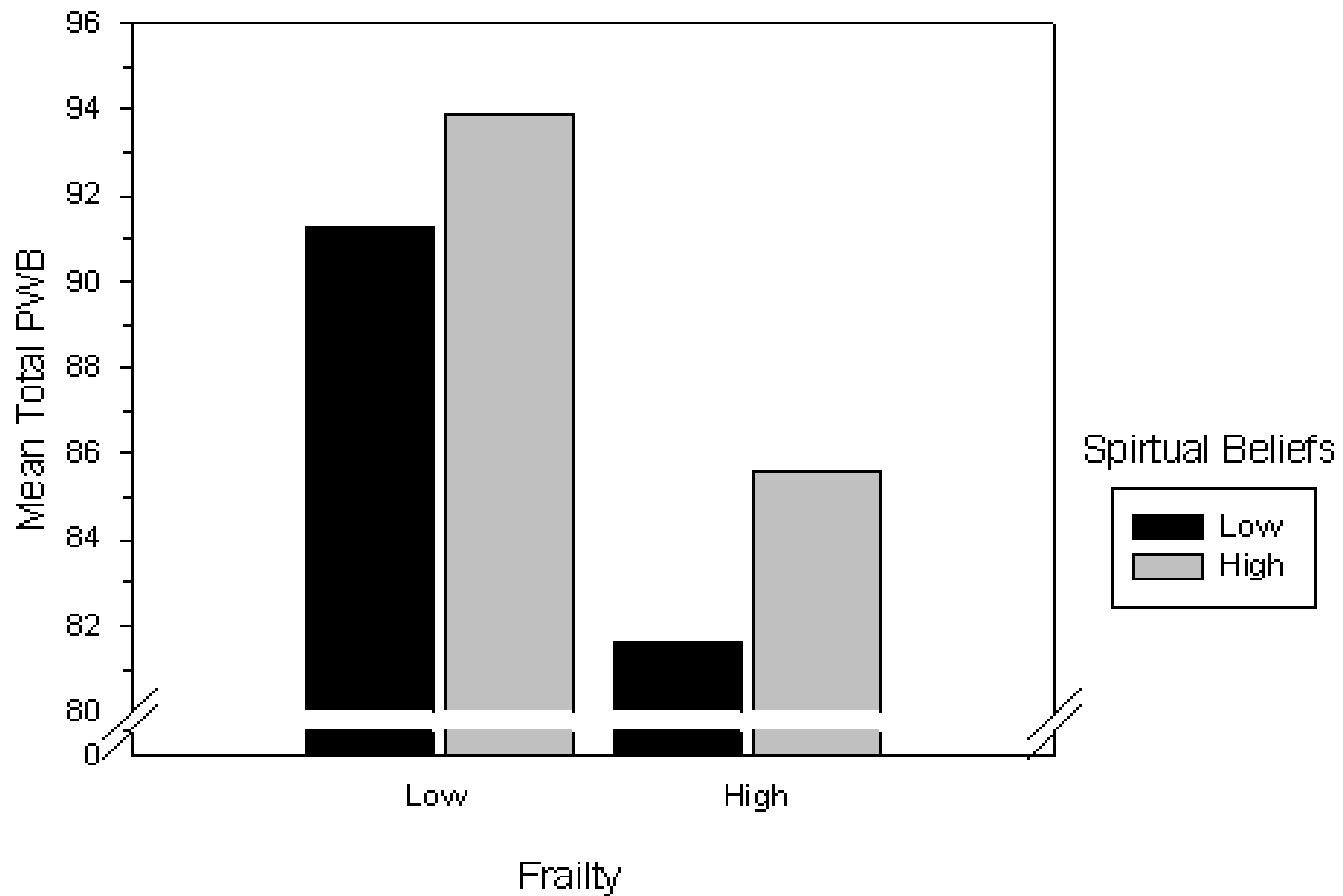
- **From the 1990s religious belief and practice more regularly included in health research. Stronger beneficial effects observed in older people. Greater integration of theorizing about ageing, meaning and health.**

Koenig, H., McCullough, M. & Larson, D. (2001) Handbook of Religion and Health. Oxford University Press, New York (second edition 2012)

Krause, N. (2009) Deriving a sense of meaning in late life – theorizing aging across disciplines. In: Bengtson, V.L., Gans, D., Putney, N. & Silverstein, M. (eds.), Handbook of Theories of Aging, Second Edition. Springer, New York.

Benefits of Spiritual Belief in a Sheltered Housing Sample of Older People with Higher and Lower Levels of Frailty

Kirby, S.E., Coleman, P.G. & Daley, D. (2004) *Journal of Gerontology*, 59B, P123-9.



Religious benefits following late life bereavement

- ***Benevolent religious cognitions***: provide positive perspective on loss, reassurance of meaning
- ***Biblical assurances***: able to draw upon various passages (gospels, psalms...) to reinforce acceptance
- ***Religious ritual***: prayer, church services regulate emotions and create sense of closeness to deceased
- ***Spiritual capital***: church itself provides opportunities for activities, contacts and taking on new roles

Spreadbury, J.H. & Coleman, P.G. (2011) In Coleman, P.G. and Colleagues. *Belief and Ageing: Spiritual Pathways in Later Life*. Policy Press, Bristol (pp. 79-96).

Expanding scope and discrimination of ageing research on benefits of religion/spirituality: Recent US examples

In the last year of life more deeply religious respondents were more likely to see friends, had better self-rated health & fewer depressive feelings.

Idler, E.L. et al. (2009) *J. of Gerontology*, 64B, 528-37.

Older Mexican Americans who used their faith to find something positive in pain and suffering rated their health more favourably.

Krause, N. et al. (2011) *J. of Gerontology*, 66B, 207-16.

Everyday spiritual experiences buffered negative effect of perceived stress on negative emotions and directly increased positive emotions

Whitehead, B.R. et al. (2012) *J. of Gerontology*, 67B, 456-9

Sense of 'God-mediated control' increased during older adulthood. More evident among American Blacks than Whites

Hayward, R.D. et al. (2013) *J. of Gerontology*, 68B, 49-58

Non-linear effects of religion upon well-being

“Firmness and consistency of beliefs and practices, rather than religiousness per se, buffers against death anxiety in old age.”

Wink, P. & Scott, J. (2005) *J. of Gerontology*, 60B, P207-P214.

“Strongly held beliefs associated with avoidance of depression following spousal bereavement”

Coleman, P.G., McKiernan, F., Mills, M. & Speck, P. (2007) *Ageing & Society*, 27, 869-890.

“Bleak or uncertain views about the afterlife associated with multiple aspects of distress post-bereavement.”

Carr, D. & Sharp, S. (2013) *J. of Gerontology*, 69B, 103-12.

“Relationship between organizational religious involvement and mental health mostly a non-linear one such that those with the highest levels of religiosity receive most of the benefits.”

McFarland, M. (2009) *J. of Gerontology*, 64B, 621-30.

Coleman, P.G., McKiernan, F., Mills, M. & Speck, P. (2007) In sure and uncertain faith: belief and coping with loss of spouse in later life. Ageing & Society, 27, 869-90.

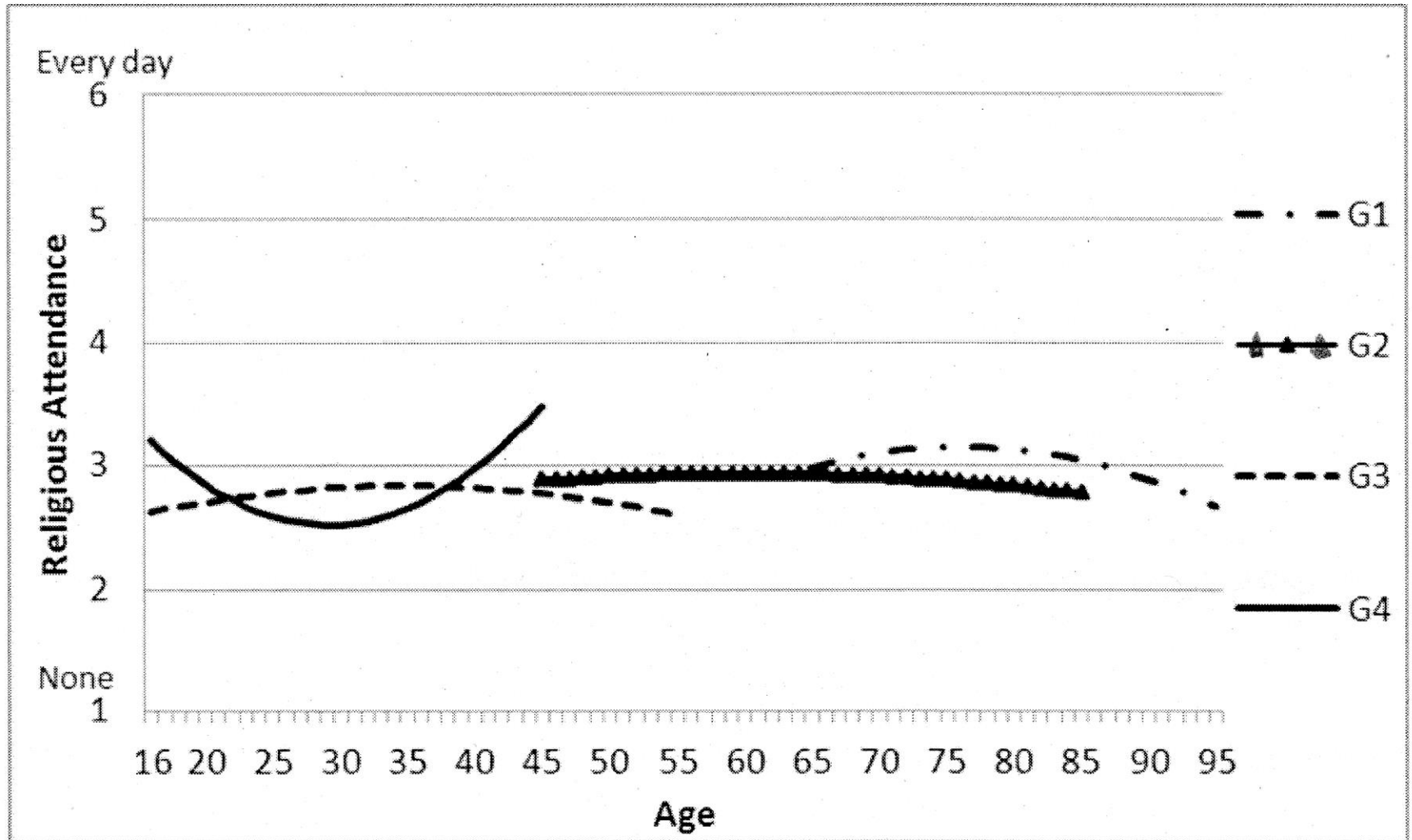
Respondent Number	Spiritual Belief	Church Attendance	Personal Meaning	Depression (GDS)
18	●	●	●	
13	●	●	●	
21	●	●	●	
3	●	●	●	
14	●	●	●	
7	●	●		
1	●	●	●	
8	●	●		
9	●		●	
19	●	●	●	●
24	●	●	●	
20	●		●	●
10	●			●
16	●	●	●	
27	●		●	●
11	●		●	
15	●		●	
25	●		●	●
23	●	●	●	●
4	●			●
2	●		●	
17	●		(-)	
26	●			
(5	●		●	●)
6	●		●	
12	●		●	
22	●		●	
28	●		(-)	

Do people become more religious with age?

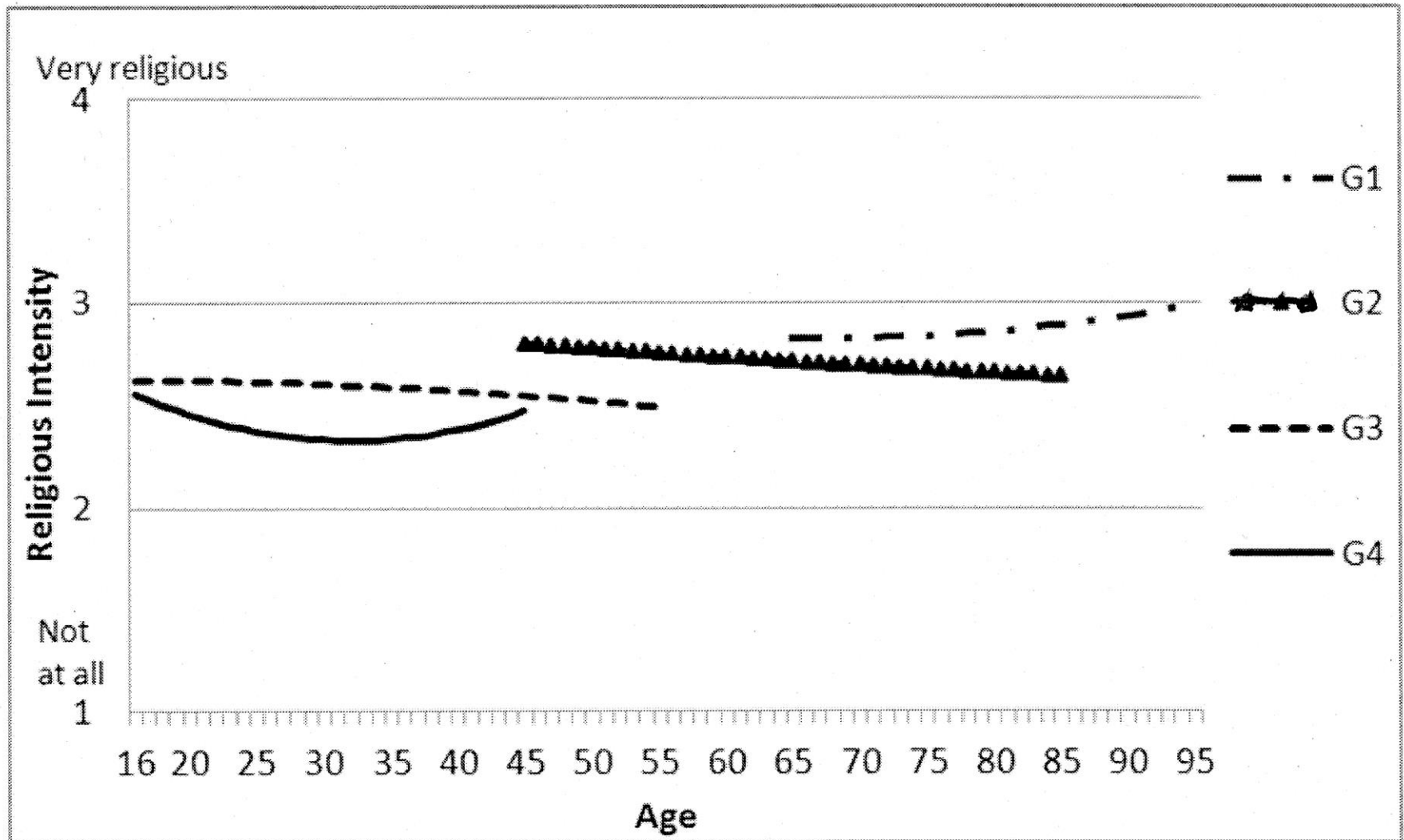
- Claims continue to be made for increases in religiosity in later life (eg. Moberg, D.O. 2001. *Ageing and Spirituality: Spiritual Dimensions of Aging Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*. New York: Haworth Press) mainly based on repeated US findings from cross-sectional studies.
- But a more definite answer needs longitudinal study of a multi-generation panel of families in diverse social contexts.
- There is now at least one such study published: the 35 year 'Californian longitudinal study of generations' of over 3,000 participants from 350 families with data now on up to four generations

Bengtson, V.L., Putney, N.M. & Harris, S.C. 2013. *Families and Faith: Generations and the Transmission of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Religious service attendance across four Californian age cohorts (G1 1888-1911; G2 1914-35; G3 1945-58; G4 1975-88)



Religious intensity of identity across four Californian age cohorts (G1 1888-1911; G2 1914-35; G3 1945-58; G4 1975-88)



Southampton Ageing Project (1977-2002)

- Studied pre WW I birth cohort (born 1895-1913)
- A declining proportion (71% to 48%) of the sample attributed personal significance to religion at the ten year follow-up (1988). Related in part to perceived changes in church life, especially following bereavement.
- In their 80s and 90s religious faith remained an important part of their lives for the approx. half of the sample who had retained it.

Coleman, P.G., Ivani-Chalian, C, & Robinson, M. (2015) **Self and Meaning in the Lives of Older People: Case- Studies over Twenty Years**. Cambridge University Press.

‘Religion’ and ‘spirituality’: changing meanings

‘Religion’

- external, institutional, conformist;
- static, substantive;
- dominated by priests, and doctrines, and rigid organizations;

‘Spirituality’

- individual, relational, personal
- affirmation of the transcendent
- dynamic, functional;
- about peoples’ own experience on the meaning of life, God, ways to live etc

- “Spirituality is now ‘cool’, religion is ‘uncool” (Marty 1996)

Distinction between 'religious dwellers' and 'spiritual seekers'

- **Religious dwellers** 'inhabit a space created for them by established religious institutions'
- **Spiritual seekers** 'create their own space by typically borrowing elements from various religious and mythical traditions'
(Wuthnow 1998)
- **Both relate to well-being but in different ways:**
 - **being religious:** to positive relations with others, involvement in social and community life tasks, and generativity;
 - **being spiritual:** to personal growth, involvement in creative and knowledge- building life tasks, and wisdom

Wink, P. and Dillon, M. (2003) Religiousness, spirituality and social functioning in late adulthood: findings from a longitudinal study. *Psychology & Aging*, 18, 916-924.

Religiosity in Californian Generations Study: Qualitative interview analysis

- For G1 (b.1888-1911) 'spirituality' either not understood or equated with religion; attending church and following church teaching main criterion of being 'religious'
- G2 (b.1914-35) distinguished more between going to church and leading a 'religious' life; expressed more internal understanding of God and religion
- G3 (b. 1945-58) begin trend to distinguish 'spiritual' as referring to a personal connection with the transcendent from 'religion' as an institutionalised practice (often too concerned with itself)
- G4 (b. 1975-88) show increased readiness to develop new concepts and contexts for religious and spiritual practice; but also showing more respect than G3 for what can be learned from religious traditions

Present day age comparisons in the UK

- **Aged 60s and older:** community 'parish' worship still dominant model, with shared beliefs in personal God, use of religious texts, and under a 'pastor' – practice is about seeking '*salvation*'
- **Aged 40s-50s:** transition group to different model of spiritual life now dominant among younger people
- **Aged 30s and younger:** greater emphasis on personal spiritual beliefs; meetings in small (but also very large) groups; declining belief in personal God, but continued belief in 'soul' and 'afterlife' – practice is about finding '*true self*'

Woodhead, Linda & Catto, Rebecca. *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*.
Routledge, London, 2012

Theological debate on the ‘benefits of religion to age’ literature

‘We refuse to die in Christ because we have been deceived and have ourselves been our best deceivers.... We embrace the therapeutic culture’s modernist assumption that well-being is achieved through an autonomous psychological self who trusts in the medical restitution narrative ... (rather than) ... the Christian story of suffering and hope ... Growing old is not an enemy in the story Jesus gave us”Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:38-9)’

Meador, K.G. Growing old in a therapeutic culture. In Hauerwas, S., Stoneking, C.B., Meador, K.G. & Cloutier, D. (eds). *Growing Old in Christ. Eerdmans, 2003*

‘... what is the telos of a faithful life? If the end of Christian practice is ‘salvation’, what exactly is this and what is its relationship to ‘health’? Indeed, what is ‘health’? – and why do the ‘health care’ disciplines have such a difficult time defining ‘health’, the thing or state to which they are supposedly striving?’

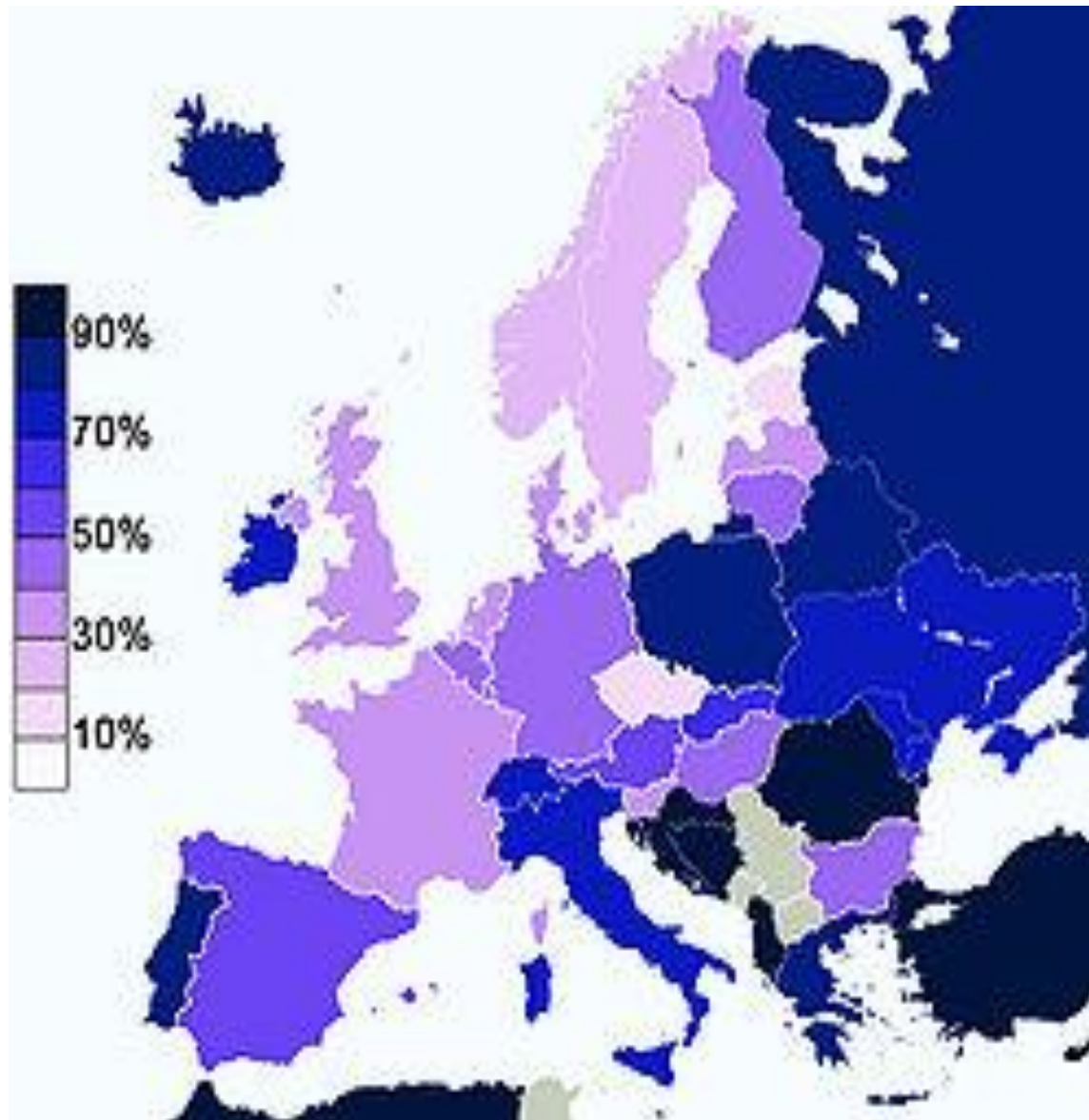
George, L., Kinghorn, W.A., Koenig, H.G., Gammon, P. & Blazer, D.G. Why gerontologists should care about empirical research on religion and health: transdisciplinary perspectives. *The Gerontologist, 2013, 53, 898-906*

Comparison with non-religious based sources of meaning

- Perhaps the most interesting research question about religious/spiritual coping is not whether strong religious believers do better than weak religious believers, but whether alternative ways of thinking and feeling ('psychophilosophies') are as effective in coping with loss as religious modes.
- Little or no comparative research of this kind conducted in the US, UK or elsewhere.
- A series of case-comparison studies of strongly religious vs. humanist older people facing similar challenges of bereavement, frailty, physical decline and impending death showed equivalent effectiveness of coping on Richard Lazarus' criteria (Lazarus, R. S. & Lazarus, B.N., 2006 '*Coping with Aging*').

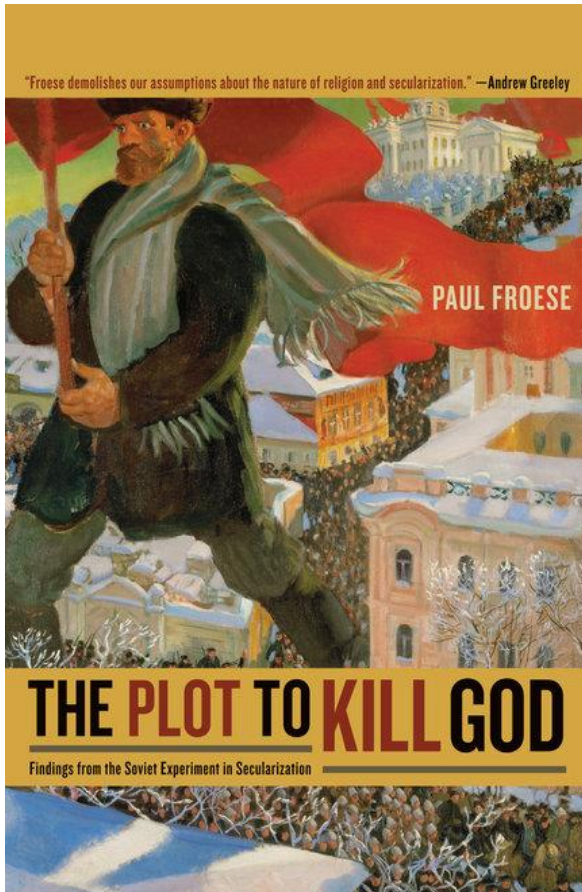
Wilkinson, P.J. & Coleman, P.G. (2010) Strong beliefs and coping in old age: a case based comparison of atheism and religion. Ageing & Society, 30, 337-361.

Diversity in the European Situation: Belief in God



20th century persecution of religion in Eastern Europe

USSR persecution in 1920/
30s of great severity
Stalin relented following
German invasion of 1941
Alternative forms of public
'devotion' insufficient?



Comparative study of ritual in Eastern and Western Europe

- Demonstrates strong contrast UK vs Bulgaria & Romania. Difference less than expected between Bulgaria and Romania despite more stringent post-war attempts in former to eliminate religious rituals other than as historical relics
- Communist governments attempt to replace religious ritual with secular ceremonies ineffective in both Bulgaria and Romania. Traditional religious rituals strongly favoured. Older people in both countries have retained role as custodians and transmitters of ritual practice
- In the UK new forms of secular ritual have developed both for funerals and marriages. Distress among significant minority of older people at loss of traditional ceremonies and changes in religious ritual.

Coleman, P.G., Koleva, D. & Bornat, J. (eds) *Ageing, Ritual and Social Change*. Ashgate, Farnham, 2013

Study of spiritual belief and depression among older people in Bulgaria and Romania

Study found, as expected, significantly lower levels of spiritual belief in the Bulgarian sample as well as significantly higher levels of depression than in the Romanian sample.

The higher levels of depression were attributable in large part of higher morbidity and disability rates, so less evidently to differences in strength of belief.

However one year follow-up data suggest that spiritual belief and practice may influence positively the course of mental illness

Coleman, P.G., Carare, R.O., Petrov, I., Forbes, E., Saigal, A. Spreadbury, J.H., Yap, A. & Kendrick, T. (2011) Spiritual belief, social support, physical functioning and depression among older people in Bulgaria and Romania. Aging & Mental Health, 15, 327-33

Assessing strength of spiritual belief

Royal Free Questionnaire on Beliefs and Experiences

(King, Speck & Thomas 2001) includes measure of strength of belief, with each item assessed on a scale of 0-10 (none – strong influence)

Examples:

Do you believe in a spiritual power or force other than yourself that enables you to cope personally with events in your life? Please circle the number on the scale which best describes your view.

Do you believe in a power or force other than yourself that can influence what happens to you? Can this power affect your day-to-day life, e.g. chance meetings, accidents, illness or unexpected opportunities?

Do you believe in a spiritual power or force other than yourself that influences world affairs, e.g. wars?

Assessing Existential Meaning

Life Attitude Profile-Revised (Reker 1992)

48-item self-report measure, intended to operationalize Viktor Frankl's concepts (*Man's Search for Meaning*, 1963)

Six Dimensions

- a) Purpose – sense of direction
- b) Coherence – sense of order
- c) Choice/Responsibility
- d) Death Acceptance – absence of fear
- e) Existential Vacuum – lack of meaning
- f) Goal Seeking – need for new goals