

**THE LEVESON CENTRE**  
**for the study of**  
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**IS RELIGION THE FRIEND OF AGEING?**

**Peter Coleman**

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# Is Religion the Friend of Ageing?

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With responses from  
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## About the Author

Peter Coleman studied psychology and philosophy from 1966 to 1969 at Queen's College, Oxford followed by a PhD on the psychology of ageing at London University and five years at the Gerontological Centre in Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He took up a joint appointment between medicine and social sciences in gerontology at the University of Southampton in 1977 and is now professor of psychogerontology there, heading up the health psychology division in the School of Psychology. He has a longstanding interest in the study of religion and spirituality, particularly in regard to ageing, and is carrying out a 20-year longitudinal study whose participants are now in their late eighties and nineties. He has recently concluded a study on 'Spiritual beliefs and existential meaning in later life: the experience of older bereaved spouses' which was part of the ESRC-funded Growing Older programme. He is a member of the Russian Orthodox Church.

## Foreword

We were fortunate to have a psychogerontologist to deliver the Third Leveson Lecture. Peter Coleman has given much thought to the nature of religion within the process of ageing. Also he has a personal sympathy, understanding and experience of Christian life. The lecture captures his professional skill as an academic teacher alongside his self-evident human sympathies and openness.

Coleman's critique of psychology and its dismissiveness of religion are acute and deserve further debate and reflection. It is ironic that many Christians draw heavily upon the discipline of psychology for their thinking and practice about pastoral care. Is it possible that, uneasy or insecure about theology and its discourses, too many have sought refuge in psychology? Coleman reminds his audience that in a world of fragmented knowledge and isolated disciplines we need to develop an approach to knowledge and learning which is interdisciplinary. This is especially important for those of us involved in thinking about and responding to older people and their care.

Coleman's interest in and sympathy with institutions and communities of care is also to be commended. It reminds us, as Professor Malcolm Johnson, our second Leveson Lecturer noted, that religion is not just personal but corporate and communal. Religious affiliation and social care have often gone hand in hand throughout Europe and North America. One possible future for the church is to abandon some of the traditional structures of ministry and mission and through the provision of social care to recover the church's engagement with people and their aspirations. Building and developing alternative communities of friendship might offer religion a possible creative way forward in a world so dominated by materialism and its values.

As the Director of the Leveson Centre it is a real pleasure and privilege to commend this lecture to you and formally to thank Peter Coleman for his presence and engagement. If there are particular questions or issues which you would like to follow up with us, please contact the Leveson Centre via e-mail, telephone or even in person.

I take this opportunity to thank the Governors of the Foundation of Lady Katherine Leveson for their on-going support. Thanks also to Alison and Colin Johnson who have overseen the production of this publication; to Jen Jones, the Leveson Centre administrator, who worked so hard to ensure that the day ran smoothly; and to all those who continue to support our work here.

The Lecture is printed as delivered and we are publishing with it three very different responses from members of the audience. I have added my own reflections pointing to matters which might stimulate further thought and dialogue between you, the Leveson Centre and others in the future.

*The Rev Dr James Woodward, Director, The Leveson Centre*

## Is Religion the Friend of Ageing?

Thank you for doing me the honour of inviting me to deliver the Third Leveson Lecture. I greatly admire the mission of the Leveson Centre to link together the study of ageing, spirituality and social policy. This has helped provide new perspectives on ageing in this country. I also admire the commitment of the Foundation of Lady Katherine Leveson to good quality residential care.

Especially challenging to me was the invitation to speak as a psychologist about the possible contribution psychology could make to this arena. But I think I have to start with a disclaimer on that front. Certainly, psychology should be able to engage with these subjects – ageing, spirituality and social policy – but, in this country in particular, psychology is remarkably uninvolved in each of them. The study of ageing is still not part of the standard psychology undergraduate curriculum or postgraduate (apart from clinical psychology) despite increasing publicity about the consequences of living in an ageing society. The fact that ageing only tends to be discussed in courses relating to psychopathology and clinical psychology makes one think that ageing itself is purely a negative or pathological phenomenon. In the 35 years since I studied psychology as an undergraduate little or nothing has changed in this regard. Developmental psychology as practised in Britain remains focused on child development with little or no attention to the repercussions of childhood experience for the rest of the life-span. Genuine conceptions of adult development are little mentioned, and those that are, such as Erik Erikson's concepts of 'generativity' (the capacity to give of one's self to the next generations) and 'integrity' (acceptance of life in the face of death), were for the most part formulated more than fifty years ago (Erikson 1950), and have been little updated to contemporary conditions and more paid lip service to than incorporated in contemporary research.

British psychologists also continue to eschew social policy – to the dismay of organizations like the Economic and Social Research Council that funds the bulk of social science research in the country, including a substantial amount of psychological research. Policy makers and planners find it very hard to involve psychologists in debate about the social implications of their research findings. Most psychological researchers adopt the attitude that their task is to produce high quality research, and that it is up to others to interpret them. Quite understandably psychologists often appear very sensitive about any unjust extrapolation from their work into the arena of social policy debate. But often this appears as a shirking of responsibility, because they do not engage themselves in the issues.

But if psychology is neglectful of phenomena related to ageing and to social policy issues in general, its attitude to religion and matters of spirituality is downright dismissive. Again this is a more pronounced attitude in Britain than elsewhere. The psychology of religion as such is considered to have little or no intrinsic value, a subject matter that has failed to produce worthwhile findings,

and one that needs to be taken over by other fields of psychology such as social psychology. It goes without saying that the psychology of religion also has no place in the psychology curriculum.

Fortunately for this lecture, only the most recent part of my career has been spent in a psychology department in this country. My first real job and the most formative period in my career were spent as a researcher in the Gerontological Centre in Nijmegen, The Netherlands in the 1970s. Dutch culture has a long record of psychologists' involvement in public policy, also in politics and government, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad (Verwoerd, the Africaner instigator of apartheid in South Africa was a psychologist). Holland has for long had the highest proportion of employed psychologists per head of population. It is perhaps an over-psychologised society.

At the time I worked there, the Netherlands was one of the few countries in Europe that had taken seriously the ageing of its population and had developed a highly sophisticated welfare state and pension provision. Psychologists were actively involved in all areas of elderly care work, especially as practitioners working with older people in institutional care settings and day centres. This inevitably involved working with other professions and institutions, including the Christian churches which dominated residential and nursing care provision. Most of Dutch social care provision, as well as other features of life, were divided along confessional lines with, for example, Catholic, Protestant and Humanistic homes for older people, just as there were Catholic, Protestant and Humanistic television stations, proportional to the numbers of members of that group in the population.

For me this emphasis on institutional care was a real culture shock, used as I was to the British legacy of the poor law, the workhouse, and generally low standards of institutional care for elderly people. This was at a time when Peter Townsend, the most eminent British social policy academic interested in ageing, was advocating the closure of British old age homes as irredeemably bad institutions and wholesale replacement by a system of sheltered housing, domiciliary care and nursing homes for those who could not be cared for at home. That there could be continuity between the medieval charitable tradition of almshouses and rest homes provided by monastic orders and the modern form of residential home was something new to me. After a time I learned to stop expressing surprise at Dutch apparent 'backwardness', and to understand the benefits of good quality residential care especially where it is based in a supportive culture within the local community, and on returning to Britain I have also been an advocate of forms of community living for those who desire it in late life. Although subsequent Dutch policy has put greater stress on caring for older people in their own homes, there was much to learn from their system of residential care. As a nation I continue to think that we should look more to our European neighbours in matters of social welfare policy rather than only to the United States (Coleman 1984a).

The connection between religious affiliation and Dutch social care provision was also interesting. Dutch older people of that generation who had come to adulthood in the first half of the 20th century readily identified themselves with a particular religious tradition of care, whether in home birth delivery, community nursing or residential and nursing home care, and often put their names down for the particular religious home of their choosing years in advance of actually needing the care. Entry to a home, far from being the traumatic experience it has long been in Anglo-American culture, was a positive experience for most elderly people. I was involved in studies on relocation which demonstrated that the self-esteem and well-being of the elderly person increased on entry to a home, quite contrary to the standard US findings of the time. The characteristics of the homes they entered, including the close identity with their own religious background, were often spontaneously mentioned by residents themselves as explanations for the success of the transition (Coleman 1984b).

## **Psychology and religion**

For most of my life religion has been a subject of absorbing interest, and it is good at last to be able to spend more time relating together my interests in religion and spirituality with my work on ageing. My earliest academic study was in the classical languages. I loved the old Greek and Latin texts and for a long time wanted to become an archaeologist. In fact when my Jesuit headmaster learned that I wanted to change to psychology and philosophy at university he became very concerned that I would lose my faith and did some background investigations on the kind of teachers I would have at the University of Oxford. As a result of this change of plan, I found myself not at the original college I had hoped to attend but at Queen's. It so happened David Jenkins was chaplain, before he moved on further eventually to the bishopric of Durham. I remember vividly the active discussion of philosophical, psychological and religious themes which he promoted at college between people from all disciplines. Some of the specialist teachers in these areas were offended by his entry into their own fields of expertise, but most of us I think were sympathetic to someone who still believed that knowledge was unitary, not separate and disciplinary. He supported the founding in the college of a Roman Catholic society named after the sixteenth century martyr Saint John Boste, who had been a fellow of the college before his conversion to Catholicism. The first Roman Catholic mass since the Reformation, I believe, was celebrated in 1968 in my own rooms by the current Bishop of Portsmouth, Crispian Hollis. However I remember with embarrassment another meeting of our society in those rooms where I had had the temerity to offer to give a paper on free will and determinism. I think my presentation was particularly tortuous, but David Jenkins listened to it all, his head cocked to one side, with patience and good humour.

Certainly those discussions offered some protection against the fierce materialism of the environment of the psychological institute itself. The late Michael

Argyle, who was one of the few practising Christians in the Oxford psychology department, liked to say that most people who studied psychology did so because they wanted to obliterate their religious upbringing and any lingering traces of religious hold on their thought and emotions. Psychology offered the prospect of an alternative understanding of human nature in which religious faith would be superfluous.

Psychology's discomfort with the study of religion is deeply ingrained. It is changing now, at least in the United States. It is hard for psychologists to continue to deny the significance of religious affiliation in the contemporary world. Religion is a powerful motivating influence on self-sacrificial behaviour. The behaviour of terrorists comes immediately to mind. But there is also increasing recognition of the positive associations that religion has with health and well-being. In a recent (2002) special issue of the journal *Psychological Inquiry* on religion and psychology, the editor Baumeister in his introduction provides some possible reasons for the neglect of religion. The first is a rather demeaning observation. Religiosity, he states, tends to have a strong negative correlation with education. Researchers are themselves highly educated and therefore tend not to be religious. They spend most of their lives at universities where they are surrounded by other highly educated and thus irreligious people. This causes such people to get the false impression that religion is a rare, marginal phenomenon. Moreover those who are religious in an academic environment tend to conceal it to avoid the negative judgement of others.

Another reason for the neglect, he suggests, is that the psychology of religion has got a bad name because it tends to be practised by those with vested interests, either in favour of or hostile to religious belief. There are few people interested in studying religion out of pure curiosity. In fact one of the other contributors to this special issue (Funder 2002) argues that the recent growth in study of religion is based on a mistaken rationale. The justification researchers give is in terms of religion's positive links with health, identity, well-being and so on. But if that is really the reason, the author argues, it is surely better to focus on the factors mediating these influences, such as peace of mind, positive health practices, social relationships and so on, rather than focusing on religion itself. However he suspects that the real reason people claim religion to be important is in fact none of these empirically examinable subjects; rather it has to do with questions of ultimate value and meaning. But these questions have nothing to do with psychology. No empirical study, he argues, will ever inform us about issues of right and wrong, the nature of good, or what we should strive for.

One can justifiably answer this criticism by pointing out that we cannot understand religion's influences on positive psychological processes or promote such processes if we do not understand the phenomenon of being religious in itself. Psychologists have to learn from religious practitioners themselves about the nature of religion, its function, the costs and benefits of membership. They have to take the risk of becoming involved with this 'dangerous' phenomenon.



Why is religion thought to be so dangerous? I think part of the answer is given by one of the great pioneers of the study of psychology at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, William James of Harvard University, brother of the novelist Henry James. James was an exception among psychologists, in that he was very interested in religious or more properly what we would call now spiritual phenomena. His classic text *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* should be one of the landmarks in psychological history (James 1902). That it is honoured more outside the discipline of psychology than inside is a good subject for analysis in itself. James was living at a time when the prestige of science was growing, and religious belief increasingly disparaged. I think it is also important that James did not have all the evidence we now have on the beneficial social, health and psychological effects of religious membership. So he was not distracted away from his central task of examining the core meaning of spiritual experience and practice.

James was counteracting a very strongly expressed view at the time that to engage in religious belief was not only unscientific, but dishonourable. He quotes William Clifford on *The Ethics of Belief*: 'Belief is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements, for the solace and private pleasure of the believer ... Whoso would deserve well of his fellows in this matter will guard the purity of his belief with a very fanaticism of jealous care, lest at any time it should rest on an unworthy object, and catch a stain which can never be wiped away ... [Illicit belief] is sinful, because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town ... It is wrong always, and everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' (Clifford [1879] 1947, cited by Taylor 2002, 45). Thus we have one of the first enunciations of the scientific creed that we 'can win the right to believe a hypothesis only by first treating it with maximum suspicion and hostility' (Taylor 2002, 46).

James opposes this view with his own principle that there are some domains in life in which truths will be hidden from us unless we go at least halfway toward them: love, friendship, social trust. Preliminary faith is what helps bring such goods into being. Significantly, development of trust is described as the first psychosocial task of life for the young child or baby to develop in Erik Erikson's well-known account of the life cycle (Erikson 1950). Erikson is another of the few great psychologists sympathetic to religion. He describes religious faith as the mature adult virtue which grows out of trust.

James parodies the stoic values of his opponent: 'When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what choking down of preferences, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its very augustness – then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes

blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream' (cited by Taylor 2002, 44).

In this lecture I cannot afford to spend more time on James's considerations of the importance of belief in human life, but I do strongly recommend his writings and also the very instructive recent commentary on them by the philosopher Charles Taylor (2002) entitled *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited* also published by Harvard University Press. One can see in Taylor's analysis how James is also a pioneer in the modern emphasis on private or personal spiritual belief rather than shared religious belief (note the emphasis on 'private' dream in the above quote). What James gives emphasis to is the spiritual experience of the individual person as the starting point of religious belief rather than the community expression of faith more common in the Catholic tradition. There are strengths and weaknesses on both sides but James was one of the first scientists to point attention to the widespread existence of spiritual experience and to its consequences for the person's life. This distinction between private and shared spiritual experience is one of the themes in our current research programme in Southampton on ageing and religion.

## Gerontology and spirituality

When I moved into the field of gerontological study, it was with some relief to find in gerontology an absence of this enmity, even a welcoming of the place of religion in older people's lives. The United States had taken the lead in developing gerontology as well as psychology and already by the 1960s the importance of religion in older people's lives had been emphasised in White House conferences on ageing, particularly by the sociologist David Moberg, who has continued to promote disciplined studies of religion and well-being in later life throughout a very long career. I recommend his recent book *Ageing and Spirituality: Spiritual Dimensions of Aging Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* (2001) for a general overview of the field. His career has been long enough to see religious gerontology develop as a recognised sub-speciality in the United States with its own flourishing interest group within the Gerontological Society of America.

So, is religion the friend of ageing? I take this use of the expression 'friend' in the title of this lecture from one of the most vibrant debates in current gerontology, which has to do with our failure to pay sufficient attention to the needs of the growing numbers of the very old (Coleman and O'Hanlon 2004). The last decades have seen the apparent triumphal entry into human history of the 'Third Age', a time of life when people are free to be themselves, to pursue their own chosen interests, not necessarily for selfish ends. Given reasonable health and economic conditions, this can be the optimum time of life. US studies on self-esteem across the life-span demonstrate the seventh decade of our 60s to be the peak time of high self satisfaction, rather than youth which is still dogged by excessive self criticism. For many people the third age can begin in the 50s and continue well into the 80s and perhaps beyond if they are

fortunate. But the third age comes to an end, often abruptly as the result of a severe health event like a stroke or a key bereavement, such as of one's spouse. Older people are often not prepared for the dramatic changes in their lives, and perhaps because the preceding period has been so positive, the latter stages of life, the fourth age, when control is increasingly taken away from the individual, can be experienced very negatively. The sense of loss of meaning and purpose which this engenders can cast a shadow over the preceding years as people begin to envisage a bleak future.

Paul Baltes who is one of the most prominent gerontologists in the world today and director of the Max Planck Institute of Human Development in Berlin, argues that human culture has failed to keep up with changing life expectation (Baltes 1997). As a result the negative features of ageing have been enhanced rather than counteracted. Comparatively speaking, we live at a period of history when ageing has lost much of its earlier dignity. Although older people were a small proportion of the population in previous societies, they were a significant part of most cultures that have existed in historical time. They preserved the memory of the people's history and experience, and adaptations were made within the culture to ensure their continued viability. They were removed from natural competition over resources, protected and nurtured. Culture – considered broadly as what human society itself has created in order to support human life – has therefore always been the friend of ageing. Without it older people's lives would have been wretched and miserable in most societies as they gradually failed to compete for food and shelter. But thanks to culture, older people in most human societies have flourished – not in large numbers as today but in significant numbers – and they have had an influence on society that far outweighed their numerical limitations. The archetype of the older person is a strong one in all societies – one only has to think of the many prophetic and other figures of advanced age in the Old Testament.

Although it is misleading to paint an over-idealised picture of the past, there is strong evidence that in traditional societies older people had more valued roles as tenders of the family, community and culture, and their mental health was better as a result (Gutmann 1987). But the more important point is that personal well-being, the pursuit of individual happiness, was not the objective of such cultures, rather the well-being of society as a whole, and in this older people were seen to have a vital role to play. Thus whereas one can depict biological change as the natural enemy of ageing (or as Indian religion would have it [Tilak, 1989], with its greater appreciation of the double-sided character of experience, a friend in disguise who awakens us, by means of the problems and pains it brings, to give more attention to the spirit), culture has always been the natural friend of ageing. Culture has provided the social and environmental means whereby older people have been enabled to continue functioning and contributing at a high level.

Our failure in the twentieth century has been not to develop the means by which an increasing proportion of older people can continue to function well

and meaningfully into late life. We need in this, the early part of the twenty-first century, to catch up before the pressures for other solutions to the issues of old age, like euthanasia, become greater. It is significant that the developmental theorists in central Europe and America who challenged the negative picture of ageing that was afflicting western society in the twentieth century, psychologists such as Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, David Gutmann, took their inspiration from observations in earlier and more traditional societies.

As they realised, religion was the central part of the cultural support of ageing in the past. In these former societies, older people's role was to engage more fully, more deeply with religious practice, to become often the very voice-piece of the deity. So the failure of western post-enlightenment culture to adapt to the rising tide of older people in its populations could also be understood as a failure of religion. Some authorities have even attributed the problem to Christianity. Christianity of all the great religions gives apparently little significance to ageing. Partly this is because Christ died in early adulthood at an age that came to be seen as the perfect age, and also because Christianity compared with Judaism gives much more attention to continued life beyond death. The length of one's life ceases to be an important matter. Wisdom also is no longer the prerogative of the old. Although this argument is crudely put – and it is important to recognize the witness that older figures such as Simeon and Anna do give in the New Testament, and that Christian churches, as most other social institutions, have functioned as gerontocracies up to the present day – the relative lack of privilege given to age by Christian churches deserves further consideration.

As the centre of gravity of the Christian church moved away from the middle east and took over the thought and culture of the classical world – which was itself ambiguous in its attitudes to age – it gradually lost some of its earlier, more eastern, features including respect for age. One can observe a negativity creeping into depictions of age in Christian societies, certainly by the middle ages, and a loss of force of some of the biblical injunctions surrounding age. In paintings, specifically family portraits of the eighteenth century, construction was hierarchical in age composition – the paterfamilias was enthroned above the family. By the nineteenth century he was sitting on the same plane with the rest of the family, egalitarian in age composition. A striking example of loss of privilege is the practice in New England churches and meeting houses after the revolution of ceasing to give the places of highest honour within the church to the oldest parishioners, and rather putting the seating up to auction to the highest bidder (Fischer 1978). Today the very term 'elder', despite its New Testament Christian roots, has ceased to be a term of reverence – one I have recently been told we must eschew in the politically correct language of our age.

### **Religion, psychology and ageing**

The evidence from America still provides a consistent picture of the increasing importance of religion with age. Religious beliefs and behaviour and experi-

ences that reflect spirituality all increase with age. The only exception is diminished attendance at religious services among the very old and this is understandable in terms of reduced health and mobility, but this is often compensated by increased rates of other forms of religious and spiritual activity. In his recent book Moberg emphasises that this pattern of results has been consistently found over the last fifty years as successive generations have aged and died, despite the predictions that it would diminish as secularisation sweeps through society. Therefore it cannot be considered only as a cohort or period effect. Also other US evidence suggests that the processes involved in ageing affect people's interest in religion. Most hospitalised patients for example say that religion has become more important to them (Moberg 2001).

However our own observations of a decline in religious affiliation in a longitudinal study of ageing in Southampton conducted over 20 years indicate that what is true of America may no longer be the case in Western Europe (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian and Robinson, 2004). Although religion continued to have considerable importance in the lives of up to half of our participants, approximately one-quarter of the sample expressed a declining commitment to a religious faith and to church membership. Most of the decline had occurred in our sample during the 1980s. Although this is only one study in one part of England, it does suggest – in the absence of any other evidence – that the secular decline in church attendance and membership has also affected the older population. It is important to point out though that the study investigated religious allegiance, not the more general importance of spiritual questions in people's lives.

## Conclusion

From what I have said so far, it will not be a surprise that I think psychology in itself has so far little to offer to people struggling with these issues both within and without religious organisations. But I will pick out four strands of thinking which I think are worth reflecting on.

- 1 The first I have already referred to. It is David Gutmann's psycho-anthropological work in traditional societies (Gutmann 1987). In a series of longitudinal studies in societies around the world, he demonstrated the important role of transmission that older people played in demonstrating religious practice and communicating religious injunctions. There seemed to be a moment of transition, particularly in older men's lives, when they came to take on the role of elders, often dressing and shaving differently, spending more time in prayer, ceasing to be involved in practical matters, but by their change of behaviour and their more passive orientation becoming persons of greater respect and even awe. Gutmann's descriptions of the older Druze are particularly interesting, given the rising importance of Islam in our own society.

'Allah is all and I am nothing; I live only in his will, and by his will ...  
I do not question his will ... I do not complain about my illness,  
because this is from God; and to complain about my illness is to

question God ...' Allah is for them an intensely felt and loving presence: as they talk of God their eyes shine, and the voices of these old patriarchs tremble with emotion. (Gutmann 1999, 4-5)

It is interesting that as part of the recently completed ESRC-funded national programme of research on enhancing older people's quality of life, some of the most striking illustrations for the benefits of religion are provided by older British people from religions other than Christian. Despite scoring lower on other indices of quality of life, such as income, housing and environment, minority ethnic groups scored higher on indices of community and belonging. An older Muslim for example may have been involved in the building of the mosque in his local community in earlier adulthood and in later life continued to have a meaningful role in opening and tending the mosque every day (Nazroo *et al* forthcoming).

The study of other religions also provides an important corrective to assumptions that we make too readily on the basis of study only of Christian populations. For example a PhD student of mine from Iran has demonstrated that North American scales of existential meaning that we currently use in Britain are in significant part not applicable to Muslim samples. For example, the sub-scale about choice and responsibility has statements like 'I determine what happens in my life,' and 'My life is in my hands and I am in control of it,' which in western society are meant to be indicative of high levels of well-being but are not so among devout Muslims. Similarly the dimension 'death acceptance' has items like 'the thought of death seldom enters my mind' and 'death makes little difference to me one way or another'. These questions are answered very differently by Muslims, brought up as they are – and Christians perhaps once were – to have thoughts of death and judgement to come as an ever-present admonition.

- 2 The second strand of interest comes from life-span psychology. To psychologists interested in making links across the life-span it is important to identify theoretical concepts which can help us understand variations in behaviour throughout the stages of life. One of the most significant concepts is 'attachment', which is best known through the work of John Bowlby on children's reactions to loss of parents (Bowlby 1969). Children develop distinct patterns of attachment, which are most discernible when threatened by loss, whether the reaction is one of secure trust, denial and avoidance, or anxiety and preoccupation. As already mentioned, Erikson suggested that religious faith develops first as an aspect of basic trust, generalised from the parental figures, then on to faith in a caring God. In our Southampton research we have been able to observe apparent associations between parents' faith and that of their children, which perhaps become more evident as the children themselves age (Coleman *et al* 2002).
- 3 The third point of interest has to do with cognitive development. A number of theorists have argued for forms of cognitive development in adulthood

that allow for a more unified picture of the world, less discriminatory and more unifying, more able to tolerate contradictions, more willing to incorporate contrasting points of view, more synthesising, more unifying (Sinnott 1998). This is observed to find expression in states of greater openness and not-knowing, and desire for a more global community. It is hard in practice to demonstrate such changes concretely in statistical samples, but the observations continue to be made. One of the key points to make about ageing is that it is often misleading to generalise. People become more and more different from each other as their life paths diverge, so it is not what is common between people of the same age that is the point of interest, rather what explains the differences. What it is possible to achieve in later life is more interesting than what is the norm, what is normal. What is exceptional today can become commonplace tomorrow.

At the same time there is a danger of foisting elitist perspectives on older people, expecting them all to reach exalted standards of serenity and wisdom. As Georges Minois, the distinguished French historian of ageing, has pointed out, some of the cruellest societies to older people have been those that demanded the highest standards of them (Minois 1989). A good example of this argument is perhaps provided by Fowler's well-known stage theory of faith development culminating in a universalising faith (Fowler, 1981). Gerontologists such as Moberg and Koenig query the wisdom of applying a cognitively based model to measure faith in older adults, many of whom have limited education, chronic physical illness or cognitive dysfunction. The key is the person's relationship with God, and the extent to which this becomes their ultimate concern (Koenig 1994 cited by Moberg 2001, 45). It is interesting to observe how the concerns of the gerontologist conflict here with those of the developmental theorist.

- 4 In our recent work at the University of Southampton we have focused on assessment of older people's strength of belief, difficulties they incur in their journey of faith, and the support they receive from their churches when they incur difficulties. Perhaps the most promising psychological approach to research on religion is to study faith in the midst of daily life, and particularly in times of crisis (Pargament 1997). The previous study I mentioned, which highlighted decline in religious affiliation over a period of 10 to 20 years in a sample of older people living in Southampton, provided some pointers to the factors involved. Bereavement of spouse emerged as a major crisis of later life, one which often shook a person's faith, and a situation in which they felt insufficiently supported by their church.

As part of the ESRC Growing Older Programme we therefore went on to investigate in depth a sample of bereaved spouses, following them from the first to the second anniversary of death. The pattern we showed of more uncertain and unsupported belief being associated with poorer outcomes in terms of depression and low levels of personal meaning, we have also found in a study directed by Marie Mills with a much larger sample of SAGA

readers who responded to our request for participants to describe their own experience of religious institutions. This study's findings confirm a number of points I have already raised, including that, for this generation of British older people at least, personal spiritual experience appears more significant and indeed more frequent than communal church life, and that spiritual questioning increases. This greater individualising or rather personalising of faith is accompanied by greater needs for spiritual education, but involving not only religious instruction but also open discussion with peers as well as church authorities. Many hold reservations about many of the tenets of the Christian creed.

If I have one final consideration as a result of formalising my thinking for this lecture, it is the contradiction between the reality of the spiritual uncertainty, questioning and lack of rootedness that we have observed in so many British older people we have interviewed in recent years, and the cultural ideal of the older person as the reliable transmitter of traditional religious models of thought and practice, where profession of one's own faith and responsibility for handing the faith on are in harmony. It is also a contrast between a shared faith and an idiosyncratic belief system. The traditional model requires a community (or communities) of faith, stable and intergenerational in character. That is now fast disappearing.

We have been privileged in recent years to have been able to conduct research on people's faith histories also in Moscow, seeking to record the survival of religious life under the 70-year-long Soviet persecution. What is so apparent, besides the vicious record of destruction, murder and imprisonment, is the stubborn faith of Russian older people, particularly older women, who were less subject to surveillance and were more able to persist in religious practices which they had learned from their parents and grandparents – taking their children and grandchildren to church and giving them basic instruction, often protecting the adult men by keeping this secret from them. The present generation of older people who attend church in Russia did not do so when they were younger adults because it was not allowed, but they do have the memory of the example of their mothers and especially grandmothers, and therefore they are able to continue where they left off (Coleman and Mills 2004). As a result religious practice has survived relatively intact from an unprecedentedly long period of persecution. Whether it can now survive so well the pressures of liberal democracy bearing down from western Europe and transmit as effectively to the next generation is another matter.

A contrasting model of Christian religiosity is provided by the United States. There Christianity has adapted well to a much more consumer-oriented and individualistic society with a wide range of different brands of spiritual, doctrinal and liturgical life on offer to suit each person's preferences. It is a society of choice with which American older people themselves are well acquainted. In contrast to both these models, the present generation of British older people seems caught between an apparently dying older traditional



model of a uniformly accepted church life and a plethora of alternative spiritualities to choose from, a situation for which they have not been prepared. The future holds interesting possibilities, but I am concerned for the plight of the many current older people who have witnessed the declining influence of the Christian religion in British society and appear to have less access to spiritual resources than their parents and grandparents.

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## Response by Revd Albert Jewell

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### Ageing and coping

It is always good to hear first-hand from researchers in the gerontological field in the presence of a good cross-section of concerned 'lay' people, especially those who are themselves elderly, who have much to contribute out of their own experience and common sense. Research always needs to keep its feet on the ground! As someone currently carrying out a study of older Methodists in the Leeds District, I was fascinated by the way in which Peter Coleman addressed the question: 'Is Religion the Friend of the Elderly?' I offer the following reflections.

- 1 It was good that Peter shared with us something of his own life story and evolving interest in the psychology and spirituality of ageing, especially about his time in the very different culture of The Netherlands in the 1970s. Too often researchers remain shadowy figures without real personalities whereas, as Peter made clear, we are all unique individuals whose consuming passions will have emerged through our own particular journeys in life and these will inevitably drive, colour and potentially bias the investigations we pursue. Those of us who are 'religious', just as much as those who are atheist or agnostic, need to acknowledge the impact of our own convictions and values.
- 2 The study by Peter Coleman and his colleagues of older people in the Southampton area through a twenty-year period is a rare example of longitudinal study. The great majority of research is necessarily cross-sectional, that is, made at one particular point in time on a 'dip-stick' basis. There has been important longitudinal work in USA, such as the Duke University study, but not so much in this country. My own study of Methodists aged 60 and above presents a good age spread but does not allow me to track how individuals change over time. Longitudinal research is therefore invaluable but one of its difficulties (apart from the cost) is that inevitably the sample group diminishes over time!
- 3 Finding the sample group is nearly always problematic. In answer to questions, Peter shared with us the rather unusual way in which his subjects had been recruited and was honest enough to say that this might account for his finding of a significant decrease in religiosity in a good number of them over the time period of the study – which flies in the face of almost all other studies, certainly in the USA. But, of course, most gerontological

research has been American and we know that we cannot just transfer the findings to the very different UK scene (very different patterns of church-going being but one example). There is a great need for more British research. Completely random studies are likely to be the 'purest' but it is not easy to persuade such subjects that they want to take part! We all strive, with varying degrees of success, to find a really representative sample.

- 4 A more radical reflection concerns the limitations of what is called 'empirical research', that is research based upon the application of scientific measurement in gerontological studies. If religion and spirituality are to be taken seriously by the psychological community then they need to be open to such tests. But there are at least two major difficulties. Firstly, the available instruments often leave much to be desired. Peter points out that the usual kind of questions about control of one's life or the acceptance of death have altogether different connotations for Muslims. Secondly – and more radically – it is highly questionable whether such things as religious beliefs, personal values, and meaning and purpose in life are capable of being measured by such means at all. A number of scales to gauge religious experience have been created derived from William James and other sources but can they truly measure such inner phenomena? Qualitative research is potentially a better method but it lacks the statistical precision of quantitative studies. Peter's study of the same people over a long time period did lead to a build-up of personal rapport and pastoral concern, and this is admirable.
- 5 What does seem to be the verdict of the vast majority of ageing studies is that religion is good for one's health. Harold Koenig, referred to by Peter Coleman, gives a most impressive list of benefits in his book *The Healing Power of Faith* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999) including, amongst many others, greater longevity and life satisfaction, protection from depression, heart disease and various other illnesses, and coping with stress. However, it may be argued that this begs important questions such as 'What kind of religion?' There are oppressive and liberating forms of religion, and various sorts of faith (implicit, explicit, questing and so on), and some are arguably less beneficial than others. Or is this not for us to judge?
- 6 Peter Coleman suggests that one of the acid tests of faith is the degree to which it enables a person to meet the challenges of life, which can be very traumatic as for example in post-revolution Russia. Old age almost inevitably brings its peculiar crises such as the loss of loved ones and the increasing dependency of 'the fourth age'. The work of Coleman and Marie Mills has pinpointed how lack of appropriate pastoral support makes coping all the more difficult. In my own study I hope to discover the sources of older people's resilience and the degree to which it is dependent upon their personality type, the honing of their life experience, the support of the faith community, and the spiritual resources drawn from their faith in God. As I myself grow older this may be a matter of enlightened self-interest but I naturally hope it will be rather more than that!

## Response by Revd Rob Merchant

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... friendship is among the most indispensable requirements of life: it is, in fact, valuable not only as an end, but as a necessary means to life. (Percival 1940)

By its very nature friendship is the means through which we are able to traverse the journey of our lives. Friendships that last through times of trial and joy can develop an indispensable quality, which sustains us as we deal with fundamental questions about our existence. But can we apply this principle of friendship to concepts rather than people? I believe we can, for if religion is not a friend of ageing it instead becomes a stranger, a passer-by, even an enemy. Perhaps we could suggest that if the contact of friendship no longer exists between religion and ageing then the two must be considered estranged, for there was once friendship, connection, and a mutual journey.

This was the challenge that I took away from Peter Coleman's excellent lecture at the Leveson Centre. Identifying the way in which his own discipline of psychology had demonstrated a neglect of religion particularly in the UK, Peter made connection with his work as a young researcher in the Netherlands. Here, where older people pre-selected their residential care choice partly on a religious basis, he was to see the potential value that the friendship of religion and ageing can bring to life, both in terms of identity and well-being.

His discussion of the nineteenth century psychologist William James and more recently Charles Taylor's revisit of James' work was particularly illuminating on the subject of personal and public belief. Peter's comment that, '... James gives emphasis to ... the spiritual experience of the individual person as the starting point of religious belief rather than the community expression of faith more common in the Catholic tradition' is clearly born out of his recent research where he and Marie Mills found distinction between private and shared spiritual experience.

I find this starting point of belief found in the individual rather than the religious institution tremendously encouraging as I can think of no other contemporary institution so blinded to its own rampant ageism than the current Christian Church. Peter highlighted the way in which 'we live at a period of history when ageing has lost much of its earlier dignity'. As a church minister and member I find it a tragedy that we are failing to give voice to the men and women who hold the memories of experience and adaptation, and failing to reconnect many people who are ageing to the friendship of religion. Though when I look at the institution representing that friendship I confess I become reluctant as I wonder if I really want to introduce this embarrassingly ageist 'friend'!

My reluctance saddens me for there is much within the tradition of the Christian church that speaks of the value of the older person, and this is the only point at which I must take issue with Peter's lecture. Whilst it is true that there is little biblical material dealing purely with ageing itself, there is a wealth of narrative and history that expresses the friendship of God in the life of the older person. In the earliest centuries of the Christian church there existed regard for age, though as time has marched on this regard has waned to the point we have reached today where the Church has forgotten its memory of the regard of age as it has embraced the supposed fullness of youth. In doing so the friendship between religion and age has deteriorated to such an extent that we now struggle to justify the desire to reconnect the two once more.

However I am not left without hope in this situation of estranged friendship, for there exists today a spiritual quest in our society demonstrated by Peter's reference to the response of SAGA readers to a request to describe their spiritual experiences. Neither should we be surprised by such a positive response – in reality the impact of secularisation in the UK has been less significant than its threat. The greater challenge now comes from generations of ageing people who embrace their own spirituality while rejecting institutional forms of religious expression. In re-introducing ageing to religion, we may well find that ageing no longer has any interest in this friendship as it has now moved on with its new friend 'spirituality'!

But I believe that we can find an answer to this dilemma within Peter's lecture and his own journey of faith. Early on he observed that, 'There are few people interested in studying religion out of pure curiosity', and here I believe rests great hope and challenge. For too long religion has been about either proving or disproving, whether outside or inside of the church, and we have lost the ability to engage with the idea of mystery or wonder – quite simply 'curiosity'.

Religion has a great potential friendship to offer ageing, but first it must sit down and examine its motivation for that friendship. Is it purely for the benefit of proving itself right, filling itself up and feeling (self) satisfied, or will it be prepared to engage and join in with ageing's curiosity? Can religion start once more to wonder at its existence as ageing has started to wonder at its own and enjoy being curious purely for the sake of curiosity? It need not fear the onslaught of academic opinion, for academics come and go as do their hypotheses, but the curiosity of the human nature – that has existed since the very beginning of time itself.

To conclude, if religion, and those who represent it, can do all this, then there awaits a splendid journey of exploration for two friends long separated – religion and ageing.

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## Response by Janet Parker

*Janet Parker is advisor for SCOP (Spiritual Care for Older People) in the Diocese of Oxford. She recently completed research on services to meet older people's spiritual needs at Oxford Brookes University.*

Peter Coleman in his lecture defines culture as 'what society itself has created to support human life' with, in the past, culture adapting to ensure the well-being of society as a whole rather than that of the individual. Within such traditional societies the role of the elder is still valued with adaptations being made to enable older people to live successfully and remain as participants. In previous generations, although fewer in number, older people have been respected, cared for and have flourished, forming part of the aggregate of community.

Since the time of 'enlightenment', an emphasis on individualism and reason rather than tradition, co-incident in part with increasing longevity and consequently numbers and, more recently, the diminishing attendance at religious services, has meant that regard for the older person has waned. Today we hear much of the 'burden' of our ageing society. Here Peter Coleman sounds a warning shot: our twenty-first century culture needs to adapt, so that once again those in the fourth age are able to retain, or if necessary regain, a positive attitude and meaningful role within society.

Throughout his lecture it is obvious that the practice of religion has been an important aspect of how traditional societies have worked; both as a whole, and as his own work still shows, for the individual.

Over the years other countries would appear to have been more prepared for demographic changes at a national level. If, as I understand Peter Coleman to be saying, the means were to be found whereby social policy could be developed to ensure appropriate changes are put in place, then those who form strategies need, urgently, to engage with both the worlds of psychology and religion in all their forms. It would also seem important that any assessment tool of quality of life must allow for the cultural differences within our wider community.

Even if such dialogue is not yet in place, with both religion and psychology being tardy at a strategic level, my own experience within the work place sees the two coming together on the 'factory floor' – and many a revolution has started at this level. I hope I may be excused if I turn from a response to Peter Coleman's lecture and reflect on this for a moment. As a Care Advisor for Huntington's Disease, even as a Christian, I was so often amazed at the help those with a religious faith found within it. Not all were over pensionable age, though many were. Through the hurt, pain, fear and anger brought about by being affected by such a devastating disease, many found a degree of comfort by the practising of their religion and later where attachments were maintained through this. It was also noticeable that many working within this caring world had a religious background. Whenever we spoke about this there were no certainties as to why. For some it was simply the support received from being affiliated to a particular community, for others the reasons

were more profound. For both the professional and the cared for, religion was a friend particularly as the sufferer came to the end of his or her life.

The lecture notes the difference between America, with its increasing importance of religion with age, and a decline in religious affiliation within Peter Coleman's Southampton study. Quite rightly it is pointed out that this is only one study but I feel that many of us would anecdotally support similar findings within our own experience and varied localities.

With such decline occurring mainly within a single decade (the 1980s) questions tumble out: Why then? What was happening here? Was it only the church in Southampton? Was this cohort of people just too busy being Third Agers? In the modern western world could the words of psychologist Michael Argyle ring true in the wider society? As we heard in the lecture, he liked to say that most people who studied psychology did so because they wanted to obliterate their religious upbringing and any lingering traces of religious hold on their thought and emotions. Is church attendance being adversely affected by the dispersal of family and communities? Could it be that William James's emphasis on a private, personal spiritual belief caused this group either to dismiss or to be frightened away from religious belief?

The death of Ronald Reagan in June prompts another question. Why has the death of this particular ex-President, who has so long been out of public life, elicited such public sentiments of grief? The media suggest his popularity lay in the fact that his Presidency heralded a return of confidence in public life. If there had previously been a lack of such confidence, did the same apply to religion either coincidentally or could it be that people's feelings about one sphere of public life spill over into another?

Finally, in light of the strength of faith during the communist era, there are questions around the taking for granted and dismissal of what might be seen as easy. Whatever the reason for this decline in religious attachment, its loss is shown to adversely effect older people at a point of crisis in their lives, most significantly when there is greater uncertainty and unsupported belief.

In answering the question 'Is religion the Friend of Ageing?' Peter Coleman successfully argues that in the past and within traditional societies it most certainly has been or is. I wonder if in fact the Dutch model that divides all-age social care along denominational or other faith lines may also lead to increased feelings of well-being in a greater sense of identity for both the group and the individual. A place where differences can be celebrated. America would seem to have integrated the wider changes within modern day living into their religious life where older people have found a comfortable place.

Here in Britain it would seem that the principal challenge for responsible religion, in all its various hues, is to respond to the wider cultural changes at two levels. Firstly to offer support and encourage individuals to wholeness through their own enquiry. Secondly to break the comfort barrier and, like David Jenkins, take a risk in order to make that engagement, even take responsibility for bringing together the other bodies so that all are fully involved in helping society adapt to the end that once again its integrity is ensured.



## Concluding reflections from Revd Dr James Woodward Director of the Leveson Centre

It is my purpose here to provide a range of reflections covering some important issues and questions arising from the lecture that I believe deserve further work and attention.

- 1 Peter Coleman's personal disclosures about his own religious journey and the religious discourse as being a subject of absorbing interest seemed particularly relevant. Perhaps it is a reminder that religion best influences us all through the personal humanity and integrity of other people. Religion is caught through our being drawn into an environment or community of life, engagement and challenge. It is rarely apprehended as an ideology or a removed academic truth. Religion shapes our thoughts and emotions in very unpredictable and surprising ways.
- 2 At some point the ways in which religion might be destructive to human well-being need to be articulated and explored. What are the legitimate objections to belief as they shape an individual's self-image and sense of destiny? Is religion enabling of a fundamental self-love? In relation to our work with older people, does religion help them cope with diminishment, change and death?
- 3 There is some research which suggests that there is plenty of evidence that religion has a positive contributing influence on well-being. In the light of this, is it possible to make a distinction between good religion and bad religion? Might we learn from older people themselves and their experiences of community, faith and pilgrimage as we gain a greater sense of the limitations and possibilities of religion?
- 4 In this lecture, but also in many other places, including the Leveson Centre, there remains a lack of definition of the concepts of both religion and spirituality. Are religion and spirituality the same? Is it possible to define religion given its sheer diversity of shape? How relevant is the work of William James given the different cultural, social and religious environment within which he was nurtured?
- 5 Peter Coleman articulates the themes of love, friendship and social trust from James' work that are fundamental to what older people need from both life and religion. Could it be that the more complicated life becomes in this modern age of fragmentation and the breakdown of community, the more religion might have to offer in these areas?
- 6 The difference between private and shared spiritual experience is a significant one and picked up by those offering comment on the lecture. Is it really ever possible to make a judgement about what is authentic, shared spiritual experience?

- 7 I remain convinced that we underestimate how difficult the process of ageing is in our modern world. Is it possible to articulate the pain and impossibility of ageing in a way which informs and liberates?
- 8 The issue of Christianity giving apparently little significance to ageing is absolutely fundamental and hugely interesting. Perhaps Christianity is in the end the religion of the young? What are the dangers of imagining that wisdom can only be something that emerges out of age and experience? The point that Coleman makes is that the relative lack of privilege given to age in Christian churches deserves further consideration and at some point we might pick this up in the Leveson Centre. Is there a need for a research project which examines this lack of privilege in the social attitudes of Christians or churches?
- 9 I am intrigued by the reality that many ministers and priests find older people difficult in their churches. There has been some interesting research about the kind of people who are attracted to religious belief, suggesting that those individuals who need certainty and absolutes tend toward religious adherence and belief. Perhaps this is part of the reason why ministers wanting to engage in change and development find older people in their rigidity so difficult to deal with?
- 10 I think it is probably very hard to overestimate the sheer effect of the decline of religious affiliation. Perhaps it simply will not be possible to conduct Coleman's kind of study amongst my generation? The 1980s and 1990s therefore have become a very significant period of difficulty in relation to the shape and influence of religion over people. Churches must bear some responsibility in the strategies that they have employed to cope with this decline – especially in the emphasis on work among young families and children. Is it possible to be objective about the marginalisation of older people as a result of these mission and evangelistic strategies?
- 11 Finally, surely in spite of this decline there is still some measure of authenticity about the kind of spiritual questions people ask in old age. There are of course interesting issues about whether religion in the end answers our needs and yearning and spiritual questionings. Do we need to liberate religion from structure and institution (as suggested above) into a more radical counter-cultural movement? Will it ever be possible to do this without the baggage of ideology and fundamentalism?