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## Religion in Times of Change

The Effects of Aging on Religious Lives  
Editors' Commentary

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## Religion in Times of Change

### The Effects of Aging on Religious Lives Editors' Commentary

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Anthropologists have long noted that transitioning from one stage of life to another stage—or from one role or status to another—has often been marked by religious rituals. We can easily think of baptisms, confirmations, and bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs. There are other transitions that may be marked by religious rituals as well, such as the loss of a loved one, which may take place more often in old age. As one ages, they may also grow increasingly aware of their own mortality. Religion may then be used to give meaning to arguably the most drastic and universal transition one makes: the transition from life into death. The anthropological literature has sharply recognized that there is an intricate relationship between religion and aging. Religious faith and practices, as well as the meaning of religion for a person, may transform as individuals enter later life.

The literature in public health and social work has shown that enhanced well-being and positive health and psychosocial outcomes are associated with different aspects of religious participation. We recognize that religion does not have one universal meaning and that having one definition of religion would discount many of its nuances and various expressions in different cultural contexts (Asad 2003). As adults age, religion—in whatever form—may become more salient parts of daily life and conversations. One study (Azzi and Ehrenberg 1975) found that time devoted to religious services and prayer will be higher among those with “low value” of time, such as older individuals who are retired. Being part of a religious community may be a means to combat social isolation and promote interaction among older adults, especially among those that have left institutions that facilitated social connections. Religious institutions may also provide services, such as food programs and basic medical care, useful to those afflicted by age-related illnesses.

Sarah Lamb (2018) recently wrote an article that analyzes the meanings of ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ aging among older white Americans from different social classes—phrases that we hear more often not only in the academic literature, but in policy debates, the media, public health, and popular culture as well. One older student who audited a course focused on the anthropology of religion in Fall 2018 at George Mason raised his hand when talking about the relationship between religion and aging to say that at his age, he reads more about what it means to lead a purposeful and meaningful life and how to keep busy, and religion may be a way for older individuals to feel fulfilled and wanted, particularly as they become older. Surveys in the United States and United Kingdom found that aging adults tend to affiliate with a religion more frequently, but the extent to which they actually physically practice may differ due to health status or ability limitations (Nelson-Becker 2018). The later stages of life may include times of self-reflection and greater self-understanding, which are conditions prime for religious engagement.

Two articles in this issue of *Anthropology & Aging* aim to explore the nuances surrounding the intersection of religion and aging, given that it is an area that warrants further investigation in anthropology and the social sciences more generally. This is essential, given that in many parts of the world, the population is aging at a relatively steady pace (He, Goodkind, and Kowal 2016), although some regions

are still younger than others and have yet to experience a rapidly aging population. Nonetheless, the two articles included here, Kang *et al.* and Bafford, interrogate the role of religion in older individuals' everyday lives through qualitative and ethnographic research in Southern California and in Appalachia and South Africa respectively. Although they approach religion and aging through two different lenses—the first through the use of technology among older adults and the second through a cross-cultural analysis of how Christian ideology helps practitioners address the daily physical and social effects of aging—both address the ways that the relationship between religion and aging is developed within particular social and individual contexts. The authors also address how religion can provide meaning to older adults' in their daily lives and make them feel connected to each other.

Many in the United States assume that the use of technology is more common among the youth and young adults and that older adults are at a distinct disadvantage in adapting to new technology. To an extent, this is true as the formative years of younger generations were spent learning how to use rapidly advancing technology like computers or smartphones. But, the article by Kang *et al.* counters this claim by investigating what scholars have termed 'gerotechnology.' Kang and colleagues, through presenting data collected from interviews with seniors in three cities in Southern California, analyze how their older participants use technologies, such as religious apps on smartphones and tablets and social networking sites, as part of their religious practice. While the adults discussed a wide variety of ways that they use these technologies as part of their religious lives, the authors categorize them into two realms: "compensating for age related changes and capitalizing on unique opportunities for growth in later life." Kang *et al.* demonstrate that as adults' roles, status, health, and physical abilities change as they grow older, so do their religious lives. Older adults use technologies to enhance or strengthen their faith in part because they are trying to better manage the larger social and physical changes that go along with aging.

In his ethnographic research in Appalachia and Johannesburg, South Africa, Bafford also addresses how older evangelical Christians negotiate the effects of aging and changes in society. Bafford points out that even though there is a scholarship on the relationship between health and religiosity among aging populations that spans disciplines, less attention has been given to cross-cultural understandings of this interaction and how social contexts inform it. Instead, he examines how Christian "end-times" ideology is shaped by historical factors and the local environment by illustrating its meaning and significance in two distinct contexts: Kentucky and South Africa. Ultimately, he makes the argument that further anthropological research is needed into the "malleability of evangelical ideas," which can result in some issues or needs being prioritized over others by a faith group or a society.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) showed that the Trobriand Islanders used magic to cope with the stress they experienced during sailing due to unfavorable weather conditions. Jean and John Comaroff (1999) showed that magic is not a retreat to tradition in South Africa, but rather being re-tooled and used to cope with the impacts of capitalism and modernization. Anthropologists have long highlighted how religion, and the belief in the supernatural, can be given great meaning by individuals in their everyday lives as well as during times of transition, need, or hardship. Kang *et al.* and Bafford focus on how physical changes to the aging body, coupled with changes in social roles in later life, structure religious practice and beliefs. But in doing so, they also consider how changes in the contemporary world, and older adults place within it, affect their religious lives. This is an exciting area of research, and a theme that we at the journal hope to explore more in future issues.

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