Transmission of Knowledge through Death Ritual

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Among life cycle events death appears to have a huge impact and the accompanying rites are often assigned great importance. This panel brings in the value of death studies for the study of religious transmission and the understanding of culture. In the face of death, the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences are conveyed and enacted in concrete practices, while at the same time religious identity is expressed and conveyed in ritual enactment of beliefs (Metcalf & Huntington 1991). By means of ritual enactment, death also is an area for construing meaning and creating community and myth (Garces-Foley 2006, Grimes 1995). As a result death ritual enables us to explore transmission of religious perceptions and behaviour.

Ritual is seen as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, as well as a mirror of people's lived religiosity and cultural memory. The ‘patterns of transcendence’ and ritual knowledge, which people express to rise above the reality of death, are drawn from cultural memory that has grown cumulatively over generations (Chidester 2002). Moreover, the particular context people live in influences practices and beliefs. Contexts change, rites are transferred and need to be ‘translated’ – reinvented and reimagined - into the new context. So does knowledge. Furthermore, development and retention of religious knowledge is heavily dependent on memory and prior learning, as well as on information we can recall, process and encode through our mental activity (Boyer 2002). Looking at the dynamic properties of ritual, considering both structure and meaning, illuminates substantial elements of conveyed religious knowledge, as well as the means by which transmission is influenced.

For a long time Western scholars did not study the actual death rites of ordinary people in their own societies (Grimes 2000), but it is exactly what our panel aims at. Through studies of these ritual practices core values of religiosity can be observed, making them an indispensable primary source for the study of religious transmission. Our threefold panel represents the interdisciplinary approach of the Nijmegen Centre for Thanatology, using different methodological and conceptual frames, and is comparative. Secular, Christian and Islamic rites are compared by individual papers: 1) The death of childhood beliefs in Denmark?, 2) Transmission of expert knowledge in Muslim death practices in a Dutch small town context, and 3) Transmission of religiosity in Dutch ‘secular’ and Christian funerals.


**PRE-ARRANGED PANEL SESSION – INDIVIDUAL PAPERS**

**The Death of Childhood Beliefs in Denmark?**

*Anne Kjærgaard Markussen*

The expected secularization has been cancelled. But for how long? According to Bruce (2011) we are only living on the capital of the coherent belief system of the past. However, Stringer (2008) has shown that religion as lived is situational and not coherent, and something that is not only believed but also done. This should also lead us to new understandings of the transmission of religious knowledge, how and where it takes place. Traditional Christian beliefs about life after death are normally rejected by most Danes (Zuckerman 2008), therefore it would be expected that these beliefs would not be transmitted to the next generation. But this paper shows how these traditional metaphysical beliefs are in fact passed on to children when visiting family graves. And importantly, this is not only done verbally but also by instructing the children in practices related to material culture, that is, material religion.


**Transmission of Religiosity in Dutch ‘Secular’ and Christian Funerals**

*Brenda Mathijssen*

Decline of religious affiliation seems to be rife in Dutch society. Cultural memory, a fixed element of our identity, is transforming and, as part of it, so is its religious component. Many people identify only partially with doctrines of faith, as religious knowledge is no longer routinised or transmitted to them. Ecclesial rites are often no longer practised and lived, but are merely reflected on and understood – if at all – from an outsider’s point of view. However, does this mean religiosity no longer plays a role? Does it mean people no longer employ belief systems to cope with moments of crisis and loss? The question is not easy to answer, as religiosity is complex and does not simply refer to institutional religious affiliation. This paper explores characteristics of religiosity in the Dutch ecclesial and non-ecclesial ritual field, and shows whether people still experience transitional moments in life in terms of religiosity.

**Motivation and authority in ritual roles**

*Transmission of expert knowledge in Muslims death practices in the Netherlands*

*Claudia Venhorst*

Death in a migration context is always challenging and Muslims in the Netherlands need to adapt their ritual repertoire to the given circumstances. To ensure the practice of their death rites a process of
reinvention is negotiated, and in the wake of this development we see the role of the ritual expert emerge. Ritual experts provide help and guidance in this dynamic, complex situation that challenges all the interrelated parties (the deceased, the bereaved, the Muslim community/communities, ritual experts and secular authorities) involved. How does this affect the ritual roles as prescribed by Islamic sources and how can these roles be unravelled and defined? This paper examines the world of Islamic ritual experts in the Dutch context. What motivates someone to become a ritual expert? And how does the role become authorised by others? Motivation and authority are studied on a personal, social and transpersonal level.