

Women and Religion in Britain Today

Rites and Rituals

Edited by

Yvonne Bennett

Independent Social Researcher

Women's Studies



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We wish to thank everyone who agreed to participate in this project; we could not do this without you.

As countless folktales and initiation rites show, often the real secret behind the mystery is that there really is no mystery; the real problem is to prevent the audience from learning this too.

Erving Goffman
The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life
(1959)

Foreword

Christina Stead

Independent Researcher

This is the second book in a series examining interactions between women and religion in contemporary Britain. It offers a range of perspectives on the development and use of religious rituals by women throughout the life course. Each chapter draws on the deeply personal to illuminate the ways in which ritual fosters connections between individuals and wider familial and community contexts. The book acknowledges the central role that tradition and history play in maintaining ritual practices, whilst encouraging the reader to consider broader significances, such as the tension between public acts of remembrance and private wishes of individuals.

When Yvonne Bennett and I conducted the fieldwork for our book *Stories from the Front Line: The People Behind the NHS Headlines* (Bennett and Stead, 2025), we heard powerful narratives from the bereaved. Those narratives spoke of the value and comfort of rituals connected to dying and after death, and the challenging (and often distressing) after-effects when they could not be performed during the 2020 global pandemic. Participants were particularly upset by the restrictions on the number of people who could attend funeral services, feeling that it had not been possible to honour their deceased relatives' lives in a way that reflected cultural and religious traditions. As explained in the book, the rituals that follow a death are designed to acknowledge the permanent change in a society (however small or large), as the composition of its membership is now irrevocably different.

As our book went to press in 2024, my own mother died suddenly and, with other members of my family, I was plunged into planning a funeral. As my mother had requested a non-religious funeral, we were free from many of the rites and rituals that I had hitherto associated with death. There were many possibilities for the structure of the funeral service, and we had to navigate a delicate and complex emotional landscape. It was necessary to strike a balance between celebrating her life, honouring her memory and acknowledging her contribution to our lives alongside the grief and sadness. This provided a very personal reminder of the power and importance of ritual in carrying out some of this emotional work.

Whilst death, alongside birth and marriage, is often the primary focus of public ritual, the book argues that there are other significant life events, such as the advent of motherhood, that foster ritualistic behaviour on a more personal

level, as women search for meaning in a new phase of life. The book highlights that the landscape of ritual constantly shifts, is developed through lived experience, and is often gendered in nature. Whilst acknowledging the importance of communal acts, it encourages the reader to consider how women develop their own personal practices that may then take on the characteristics of rituals.

Many of the scholars who have contributed to this book work independently and have not, therefore, followed the traditional route of employment by an academic institution. Whilst this is indisputably a reflection of current precarity within the sector, it does add welcome diversity to published voices and perspectives. As the book demonstrates, the development and practice of ritual can unite the public with the personal, for it is in the performance of ritual acts that we locate and connect ourselves to society.

Christina Stead
BA MA PhD
Independent Researcher

Introduction

Yvonne Bennett

Independent Social Researcher

This book is the second in a series in which we, the authors, explore religious diversity and the manner in which women interact with religion and religious groups. Through this book, we are investigating the importance of *rites* and *rituals* in the lives of women living in Britain today and the impact these have on religiosity.

We acknowledge that neither *religion* nor *women* commands a definitive definition. For the purposes of this book, we have defined woman using a combination of factors; these encompass biological aspects, gender identity, and socio-cultural influences. These facets reflect both individual identity and social constructs. We use definitions of gender in the way that the various authors frame the terms according to how their research participants understand and use them. We recognise that across the different social and religious cultures that co-exist in Britain today, there are different perceptions of women, their role and place in society.

We remain steadfast in our understanding of religion as a “social construct, one which changes and adapts over time” (Bennett, p. ix, 2023). Today, religion is recognised as having specific, traditional values and practices ascribed to certain groups with a particular belief in a God or Gods. However, I was also drawn to Weyel et al.’s discernment of religion as being “a discourse rather than an isolated phenomenon” (2022, p. 15); a discourse that remains relevant in British society today. Discussions around religion include secularisation and the decline in religious affiliation, religious diversity and integration, along with religious extremism and radicalisation.¹ Although it has been said that religion and spirituality are different entities (Paul Victor and Treschuk, 2020) we have determined that, in this work, religion will continue to include spirituality within its parameters. The decision to do so was centred on the view that spirituality “is increasingly used to describe religion as a form of life

¹ At the time of writing, July 2024, Britain was undergoing a period of civil unrest largely driven by the killing of three young girls at a dance class in Southport on July 29th 2024. The assailant was wrongly identified on social media as being a Muslim immigrant. He was subsequently named as a young male British-born Christian with immigrant parents. This disinformation led to anti Muslim and anti-immigration protests, with a Southport mosque being the target of an arson attack.

interpretations” (Weyel et al. 2022, p. 170). This correlates with the awareness that “spirituality is associated with quality and meaning in life” (Paul Victor and Treschuk, 2020, p. 107), taking into consideration that both religion and spirituality are associated with specific rites and ritualistic behaviours.² As with our previous book, *Women and Religion in Britain Today: Belonging*, we are examining religion as a lived experience, focusing on the religiosity of women in terms of their knowledge, faith, and the rites and rituals they incorporate within their lives.

Rites and Rituals

Rites and rituals are embedded in every religion, be that through a traditional organised religion or a spiritual dimension, playing a part in all of our lives (Durkheim, 1912; Geertz, 1973). Though we may place different importance on them, they cannot be totally avoided. While the terms rites and rituals are often used in an interchangeable manner, they are nuanced, holding specific meanings and features. They are things we partake in and do so using a series of words, symbols, actions and music, akin to a performance. Although both are characterised by a sequence of actions that convey a meaning to both an individual and a group, rites commemorate important life milestones, such as bar mitzvahs, weddings or funerals. These tend to be formal, prescribed ceremonies and are used to celebrate or commemorate an individual within a community.

The esteemed anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) viewed religion and ritual as being embedded within all societies. He proposed that, within communities, the position and individual may hold, be that as a mother, a priestess, a teacher, or a leader, “has some sacred characteristics.... acquired by the incumbents of positions *during rite de passage*” (1969, [2017], p. 97). Within today’s scholarship, Weyel et al. add to Turner’s view by suggesting that the use of rites in marking a life’s turning point is about gaining “reassurance about personal identity and the experience of social recognition” (2022, p. 178). Traditional organised religious rites such as baptisms, confirmations or weddings have not changed over the years, and this evokes memories for both the individual and

² Following any period of unrest or a tragedy, such as the murders in Southport or the bomb attack in Manchester, religion becomes part of a public discourse as people attempt to make sense of what has occurred. After such tragedies, many rituals are carried out, such as laying of flowers at the scene of the attack or attending vigils; most of which are led by a religious leader, such as a vicar.

the group, strengthening bonds with the group.³ For many communities, the Aqiqah or the baptism of an infant, for example, is the start of a long relationship with that community, “where the child can grow” (Ward 1999, p. 300). At the opposite end of the life spectrum, the rites surrounding death and funerals also work to strengthen community bonds in a time of grief.

Rituals, on the other hand, can be both formal or informal and are carried out on a regular basis, be that daily, weekly or monthly. Roy Rappaport (1999 [2004]) proposed that the term ritual denoted “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (1999 [2004], p. 24). Ritualistic behaviours involve repeated actions carried out in a specific order, for example, Roman Catholics making the sign of the cross when entering a church or a public observation of a minute silence as a mark of respect for someone who has died. At this juncture, it is important to differentiate between ritual and superstition. Superstitious acts have no balanced reasoning behind them, being viewed as either lucky or unlucky, such as when football players touch the grass when they step onto the football pitch before a match. Interestingly, many players also then make the sign of the cross, interlacing the superstitious and the religious. As not all rituals are religious, one must not overlook Rappaport’s view that “not all religious acts are rituals” (1999, [2004] p. 25). However, as I wrote my own chapter and read through the work of the other authors, I have found myself at odds with Rappaport’s view and failed to discern one religious action that does not have a ritual aspect to it. I would ask that, as you read this book, you keep that thought in mind.

Having taken into account the views of other academics, particularly the opinions of both Rappaport and Turner, we chose to utilise Prickett and Timmerman’s more nuanced description of rites as being “transitional rituals” (2021, p. 247) and, from this point, will simply use the term ritual.

Two of the founding fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, wrote of the importance of rituals. D’Orsi and Dei (2018) are of the opinion that Durkheim’s perception of these religious acts remains as relevant today as they were in 1912 when his eminent book, *Les forms élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, was first published. Durkheim’s view was that for a behaviour to be considered religious it had to have three distinct characteristics: “a public dimension; a *sacred* one.... and a certain degree of solemnity and emotional involvement of the social actors” (D’Orsi and Dei, 2018, p. 116). This illustrates the difference between sacred ritualistic acts and habitual routine. Durkheim also hypothesised

³ I am referring to the religious element of the ritual. Sociologically, things have changed. Fewer are baptised as infants; many do not wear traditional christening robes. Many brides do not cover their shoulders, and some churches allow the service to be filmed.

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List of Contributors

Dr Yvonne Bennett: I obtained my BA and MA through the Open University. On leaving school, I trained as a nurse and, after having my children, retrained as a nursery schoolteacher. I have completed a PhD at Canterbury Christ Church University. My research area of interest is conservative Presbyterianism in the Gàidhealtachd (Highlands and Islands) of Scotland. In 2021, I published a book which examines the ways in which churches in Britain help the vulnerable in their communities. The book *The Church Who Needs It? We Do!* examines the difficulties a group of South London women experience with Universal Credit and life under lockdown during the Coronavirus pandemic. In 2022, I edited a book, *Women and Religion in Britain Today: Belonging* with Vernon Press. 2024 saw a different genre with *Stories from the Front Line: The People Behind the NHS Headlines*, a book I co-authored with Dr Christina Stead.

Miles Greenford researches and inquires, as a special (autistic) interest of his, into spiritual health promotion alongside spirituality and health within public health. Working outside dominant and traditional social structures to practice and promote public health and, in so doing, simultaneously engages himself as a theoretical and applied research subject to practice and promote his own public health, sharing these with an intention for others to consider applying and possibly also resiliently healthily benefit from doing so. Miles has a dedicated spiritual health promotion research and inquiry responsible social micro enterprise using its website to engage (eventually) and communicate. As a current member and Fellow of the Royal Society for Public Health, Miles also has an interest in emerging as a catalyst between self-prescribing and social prescribing to attempt to promote health through engaging and cultivating Complex Reflective Technê. Miles professional background was initially catalysed through his time in the Territorial Army Royal Army Medical Corps (1982 – 1991) which opened his experiences into the possibility of training (commencing 1986) and becoming a general nurse in the NHS involving an eventual hybridisation with environmental activism, social community development and public health nursing (Registered Health Visitor) and becoming one of the first Public Health Practitioners (Caithness & Sutherland – 2001 to 2011) recruited when rolled out as a new initiative across Scotland.

Miles was diagnosed later in his life with an Autistic Spectrum Condition in his 50s (2016), and following this was able to make sense of meaning and life, historically personal and professional autobiographical narrative. This accounts for much of his continually lived experiences of extreme relapses into emotional

dysregulation, which includes clinical levels of anxiety and depression. Trying not merely to survive when in these but also to attempt to avoid them and live continues to remain a vital part of his life. In this, Miles is acutely aware that his domestic canine companions he had throughout much of his life, have each been, until recently, undervalued for the amount of support they have provided over the decades.

Dr Nicole Holt is the Course Director for the Global Public Health Master's programme and a Senior Lecturer in Public Health and Wellbeing within the School of Allied and Public Health Professions, part of the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Social Care at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Her professional background includes roles at Canterbury City Council, a children's charity, and within the care sector. Nicole has been involved in a range of research projects, from supporting children with additional needs to introducing therapy dogs into courtroom settings. She has a particular interest in social prescribing and leads the Social Prescribing module at Canterbury Christ Church University. Much of her research focuses on holistic health, and for her PhD, she explored the reported relationship between spirituality and public health among individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious.

Nicole is currently engaged in several research projects. These include a collaboration with a national charity to investigate the support available for former Jehovah's Witnesses. Together with Miles Greenford, she is co-leading a project titled *Inspiring Spiritual Health Responsibly*, which explores the connection between natural environments and the promotion of spiritual health. Additionally, she is researching religious and spiritual coping strategies across different populations with Dr James Murphy.

Dr Sharon Jagger is Associate Professor of Religion at York St. John University. Her PhD was gained at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York. Author of *Women Priests, Symbolic Violence and Symbolic Resistance*, Sharon draws on sociology and feminist theory to explore the relationship between religion and gender. Her current projects focus on women's non-traditional spirituality, including goddess worship and witchcraft. She is co-lead of the Interdisciplinary Witch research group at York St. John.

Clair James' early years education experience is extensive and centres around mothering four incredible humans, whilst playing, learning, and running human-scale, alternative, early years settings within England. Having returned to study in 2019, she is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Winchester. Clair has articles pending with the Froebel Trust and other academic publications focusing on early years education, sustainability, and spirituality.

Dr Amanda Norman is a Senior Lecturer in Education (Early Years) at the University of Winchester, UK. She is an author of several books about the earliest years, as well as published works on infant care pedagogies in academic peer-reviewed and professional practice articles. Her research specialism has stemmed in part from being a parent to four children and focuses on play, family, and infant attachment-led care, within and beyond the home, researching the nexus between historical and contemporary perspectives.

Pip Wylde is a Senior Yoga Teacher, Yoga Teacher Trainer and Mentor, Ritualist, Vibroacoustic sound bowl therapist, and sacred circle facilitator. She hosts yoga retreats and trainings internationally.

She began her love and exploration into rituals and holding ceremonies after witnessing the reverence and beauty of ceremony in India. She had visited India annually for many years, practising yoga with her teachers. It was her visit to the oldest city in the world, Varanasi, where she was completely captivated by ritual practices. It was there that she had a profound experience receiving a sadhu blessing during a vibrant Ganga aarti, which moved her greatly.

Pip's knowledge of Pagan practices and British Folklore blossomed from being held in ceremonies, guided by revered healers and teachers in Dorset and Somerset.

Pip created her healing practices Inner Alchemy and Alchemy Flow and has shared these powerful practices online, on retreats and at festivals, guiding souls in creating radical change and healing for themselves.

Emily Louise Wain obtained her BA in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic from the University of Cambridge in 2016, and her MA in Cultural Heritage Management from the University of York in 2021. Her academic focus has been on historical funerary practices and death rituals in medieval Britain, with a special interest in the Plantagenet Dynasty. Her MA thesis examined the reburial of Richard III in the modern era within the global context of the growing call for repatriation of historical human remains from museums to be buried in their own nations. She has worked in the funeral industry for a number of years, and currently provides support as a Death Doula for those facing the end of their lives.

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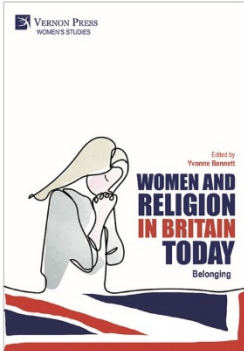
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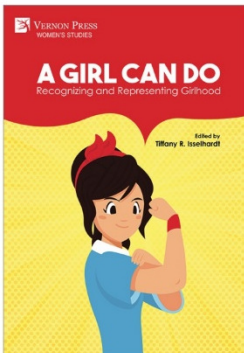
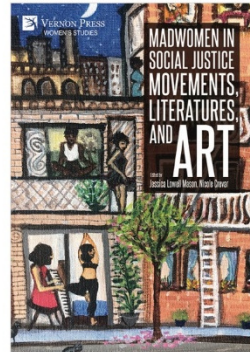
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