

Sacred Heart University

From the Selected Works of Christel Manning

November 27, 2017

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It's a simple question but, strangely, no one seems to have asked: How do the non-religious make sense of life in the face of death and dying? So, [Professor Christel Manning](#) is asking it, through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation managed by the University of Kent.



“In my first database research session on the subject, I typed in ‘religion and aging’ and got more than 1,000 results,” says Manning, who teaches religious studies at Sacred Heart. When she searched “atheism and aging,” she had “only two” results. Her searches showed disparities were similar across all facets of mortality.

Yet, the non-religious population (or the “nones” as they are known in this field of research) is growing, and significantly. And while there has been a decent amount of study on this trend and its causes and implications among younger generations, almost nothing has been done to consider its impact on the end of life. And since, as Manning explains, “providing meaning to people’s lives, especially in the face of death, is one of religion’s most important functions,” the question of meaning in the absence of religion seems a pertinent one to ask.

Manning has begun the pilot phase of her study. Working with an assisted living facility, she has identified 30 participants who are at least 75 years old and in full command of their cognitive faculties. Speaking with them, she practices the phrasing and order of her questions—aspects of this kind of research that require real care and nuance. She has to ask carefully structured, open-ended questions so as not to guide the interview subjects toward any answer other than their own, and yet not so open-ended nor general that they can wander off-topic.

Around the central question lie a multitude of qualifiers. For example, people really can only define for themselves if they are religious or not, but how does one account for the people who identify as religious (“I’m a Catholic...”) yet specify as something other (“...but I don’t actually believe in any of that”)?

The pilot phase also is helping Manning begin to identify trends and to adjust the working definitions of research. What is meaning making anyway? Is it looking back, making sense of a life lived? Is it looking forward, anticipating the unknown? Or is it both, and then how are they related?

Looking at the meaning-making narratives of the religious and the nones, how do sources of meaning differ, camp to camp, and is there any overlap?

Once Manning completes the pilot-phase interviews, she will have a year’s worth of work analyzing results and refining the process before beginning phase two on a larger population next spring. She expects to complete the project in 2019.

Already, however, some noteworthy discoveries are presenting themselves. For example, at the outset Manning was concerned the questions, if not the mission itself, might seem invasive, almost rude. It turns out people in their 80s and 90s are not only open to the discussion, but almost eager for it.

“When you’re younger, it’s not something you really consider,” she says. “There is that invincibility of youth. Even as an adult, there are life’s distractions. In the later stages, though, things slow down and people start to really think about it.”

In a sense, she’s only finally articulating the very questions they have been asking themselves all along—the professional interviewing the amateurs who are, in this case, the experts, whether they realize it or not.

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