

<SHORT COMMUNICATION>

Spread of COVID-19 and Elderly People Living Alone in Hokkaido

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Introduction

This paper aims to clarify the transformation of religion during the COVID-19 crisis and the significance of religious rituals among the elderly living alone. I have been interviewing elderly people living alone in Hokkaido, Japan. In recent years, I have specifically worked to elucidate, from the perspectives of Religious Studies and Death and Life Studies, the problems faced by the elderly people during the COVID-19 crisis as well as the issues that must be resolved.

This paper comprises three chapters. Chapter 1 discusses perspectives regarding the relationship between COVID-19 infection and religion and the prospect that this infection may fundamentally alter the nature of religion. Chapter 2 discusses the simplification of funeral rites, a trend that was already apparent in Japan prior to the emergence of COVID-19. However, this trend has been accelerated by the spread of COVID-19. In contrast, there was also a movement against this simplification. In Chapter 3, we will explore the impact of the simplification of funeral rites on individuals based on the interview survey results while considering the contents of Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 1: Novel Coronavirus Infections and Religion

The novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19) is affecting all aspects of life, including religion. In what ways has it significantly impacted religion? In a few words, it has resulted in “not being able to gather.”

Before proceeding, I would want to provide a brief description of religion. First, religion has the elements of ideology. These elements include views of humankind, the world, and ultimate reality, such as God and (Buddhist) Dharma. However, having such views and believing in them (i.e., faith) is not sufficient to qualify as a religion. Several rituals and ceremonies, festivals and prayers, and actions, such as ascetic practices and pilgrimages, are also fundamental elements of religion. Additionally, religion is considered to have a group element. In other words, individual belief or having one’s own way of life

scarcely constitutes a religion; however, when these beliefs are systematized and transmitted by a group, that phenomenon is considered as a religion. We may include “involvement with the sacred” in this phenomenon; however, this article will not address that issue. After emphasizing the importance of the group element to religion, I want to confirm that this element has been critically impacted by the current COVID-19 epidemic.

Why is it essential to “gather?”

Why is it important to gather and pray together as a group in religion? If all we wanted to do was pray, we could do so from the comfort of our homes without having to gather. However, by praying as a group, one can feel a sense of belonging and unity in the community, thus strengthening the community’s unity. Furthermore, by being in such a group, one can accept one’s existence and actions positively. When many people hear the word “religion,” they may think of faith; however, faith is primarily maintained through actions, such as attending places of worship. Therefore, collective prayer is a fundamental component of religion.

Religion is a World of “Three Cs”

However, religions that emphasize “gathering” exist in a “Three Cs” world (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings). Rituals and ceremonies are frequently held in “enclosed” spaces that are isolated from regular life because religion frequently entails extraordinary values.

Moreover, whether at a festival or a congregational meeting, they are often “crowded” into a small space. Religion stresses human interaction; hence, it is natural for people to converse and sing at a “close” distance so that they can communicate with each other. Thus, it is clear that the coronavirus has dealt those religious activities a significant blow.

Religion and Education, Arts, and Sports

Obviously, the “inability to gather” has had repercussions for religion, as well as sports, education, and artistic activities, such as theater and music. If we merely consider the group element, it would appear that this is not a problem that is specific to religion. Compared to other activities where the purpose is to gather and “do something,” and further, where people are exploring for ways to fulfill that purpose without gathering, “gathering” itself is meaningful in the case of religion; hence, it is pretty challenging to promote such a groping.

Religion and Science

Why then should people risk so much by gathering? Religion has traditionally represented values that differ from those of scientific and rational thought. On the one hand, one might say, “God may be called upon in times of distress.” On the other hand, by convincing the afflicted persons of their guilt, scientific and rational responses and irrational actions, despite their irrationality, can bring peace of mind in times of distress. A religious response, such as “gathering and praying together,” could have offered emotional stability for other problems. I believe that in the past, nonbelievers have viewed such behavior as

legitimate, regardless of its effectiveness, so long as it does not cause harm. However, approval would be difficult if the religious act posed a high risk of spreading the infection and aggravating the situation. During the initial outbreak of COVID-19, the mass infection at a Korean religious group's mass worship service was extensively reported in Japan. Consequently, the nature of mass worship in various religions worldwide is currently being reexamined. Even religious groups will be obliged to adopt a lifestyle based on scientific and rational assumptions when this occurs. If they do not adhere to this lifestyle, they will not escape from society's censure. Thus, the spread of the coronavirus is a significant "test" for religious groups, and one could even argue that religion's *raison d'être* is being questioned in the midst of "not being able to gather."

Transformation of Funerals

Funeral services have been greatly affected by this situation. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the media has reported and discussed instances of people being cremated without a proper funeral service (wake or farewell ceremony). Perhaps some of you who are listening have had a similar experience.

This research investigated the impact of this funeral rites transformation on the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the elderly. Before presenting the survey results, I would want to provide a preliminary sketch of what we anticipated prior to conducting the survey.

Several possibilities come to mind when considering "the transformation of funerals." However, two key areas can be considered: (1) the simplification of funerals as practiced in the past and (2) the search for alternatives to traditional funeral practices.

Simplification of Funerals

Presently, (1) the simplification of funerals is frequently reported. Numerous funeral service providers offer plans and facilities for family funerals and direct funerals, which involves the casket being cremated immediately after the funeral without a wake or farewell ceremony. According to media sources, there appears to be opposition to not holding a wake or farewell ceremony. It would be difficult to accept a person's death if his or her remains were delivered abruptly and without ceremony.

From the Perspective of the Bereaved

Death is not a point but a line. Bodily functions gradually deteriorate in most cases (except in that of instant death), and death is considered to have occurred upon crossing a certain line. Where that line is set varies from era to era and from region to region. For example, there has been much debate on the issue of brain death.

I want to highlight that even if a person is medically determined to be "dead," it will be difficult for the people around him or her to accept that situation immediately. The person's "death" is gradually accepted through the execution and participation in rituals and ceremonies. In this instance too, death is a "line" and should be regarded as a process.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis deprived us of this process and precipitated a circumstance in which we were forced to accept "death" abruptly. We must evaluate the significance of this.

From the Perspective of the Departed

The trend to hold family funerals and direct burials existed even prior to the COVID-19 crisis. This may be because the declining birthrate, trend toward nuclear families, and weakening of ties among residents have made it difficult to hold large-scale funerals unlike in the past. However, it also seems to reflect the elderly people's desire not to have their funerals held ostentatiously. Some surveys have revealed that elderly people do not want to inconvenience their bereaved family members after their death.

In conclusion, it was anticipated that there would be less resistance to the simplification of funeral rites, although some are saddened about the inability to say goodbye to a deceased loved one properly.

Search for a New Way of Funeral Service

Regarding (2) the search for alternatives to funerals, specifically, the question is to what extent the use of the internet for online services is acceptable. Streaming of funerals and online memorial services are reportedly occurring (Aki Miyazawa and Terumi Okaku, 2021). According to the same paper, "In many cases, these technologies existed before the outbreak of COVID-19, but their existence has been brought to light again in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Japan, where curfews and restrictions on the number of people at gatherings were imposed to prevent the spread of infection, and their use is on the rise" (p. 210). Particularly, "as mass infections at funerals were reported in the early stages of the outbreak, bereaved families increased their requests for online funerals, and funeral homes and temples began live-streaming wakes and funerals" (p. 211).

On the Possibilities and Challenges

To consider online religious activities, such as funerals and memorial services, it is useful to compare them to other activities that are not "religious." For example, online university classes, conferences, and academic meetings have been partially accepted because they are less physical and more focused on the transmission of information. However, sporting events, such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, are physical activities that are difficult to organize online.

In the future, it will also be necessary to consider the physicality of religious activities, such as funerals. When people participate in funerals online rather than in person, visual (visual) and audio (auditory) information is transmitted, but these are only a cutout and composed part of the scene. What the camera cannot capture, such as distant figures, and what the microphone cannot pick up, such as whispers, cannot be conveyed online. The same holds true for the feeling of heat or cold or the odor of a place. We wish to determine, through research, the extent to which online funerals will be accepted, given their limited amount of information.

Small Conclusion

In the first half of this part, I discussed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on religion from the perspective of a "group crisis resulting from the inability to gather." In the second half of this part, I explained the problematic situation of the transformation of funeral rites

from two perspectives: (1) downsizing and simplification and (2) onlining. While the significance of religion will not be lost, the COVID-19 crisis has imposed restrictions on traditional activities. The extent to which the transformation will be accepted in the future will be a concern. In the following section, we will discuss (1) the downsizing and simplification of funeral rites.

Chapter 2: General Research on the Simplification of Funeral Rites

In the previous section, based on various surveys, we discussed the trend toward downsizing and simplification of funerals in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, I considered that the trend had existed even before the COVID-19 crisis, and that it was accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis, given that many individuals said they did not want to burden the bereaved with their funeral rites (the result of previous research).

However, there is a contradicting study result: The following content was broadcast on NHK Today's Close-Up on September 16, 2021 (Thursday), under the title "Wanting to say goodbye to family members without regrets." The program's featured message was as follows: "Today, funeral rites are becoming simplified due to the trend toward nuclear families and economic factors. Currently, a movement seems to be growing in opposition this trend. A "bone burial" or "reburial" is a funeral service in which the deceased's remains are buried after they are no longer required. There has been an influx of requests from bereaved families wishing to have their funerals redone, as temples across the country have begun to offer this service. In addition, "home funerals, in which the deceased is sent home for a week, are also gaining popularity. The families of those who lost relatives during the COVID-19 crisis and were unable to adequately visit them have gradually accepted death by spending their final hours together in their familiar homes." One of the participants stated "We want to say goodbye without regrets, so let us consider a new way to send them off." (<https://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/articles/4584/index.html>.)

Quantitative surveys can reveal the trend toward simplification to a certain extent (the program's website introduces a survey conducted last year by a funeral service company, which involved men and women aged 40 or older who had experienced a funeral service. According to the survey, for the first time, the percentage of so-called "simplified funerals," such as "family funerals," where only family members attend, "one-day funerals," where no wake is held, and "direct funerals," where only cremation is performed without any ceremony, exceeded that of "general funerals" for the first time.

In contrast, 45% of respondents in a 2017 survey conducted by the same funeral service firm reported no mourning following the funeral. Given these data and the program's content, it is reasonable to conclude that, in addition to the trendiness revealed by the quantitative survey, there is a broader spectrum of attitudes and approaches to funerals. Therefore, this qualitative survey is essential to comprehend this diversity. (<https://www.nhk.or.jp/gendai/articles/4584/index.html>.)

Concerning this interview survey

As the primary purpose of our interview survey is to learn about the lifestyle of elderly

people living alone, the challenges they face, and the steps undertaken to overcome these difficulties (i.e., how they should live), it is challenging to ask elderly people in such a survey, “What kind of funeral would you like when you die?” Therefore, we questioned whether their awareness of weddings and funerals had evolved due to the COVID-19 crisis, but we could not find an answer. This is because, during the COVID-19 crisis, people are so preoccupied with living in the present and dealing with issues, for instance, those pertaining to their finances and relationships, that they are unable to contemplate their demise. Those who have experienced funerals may have noticed and thought about them in their own way; nevertheless, for those who have not, it may be “hurriedly unnecessary” to consider weddings and funerals. Therefore, it would be necessary to determine whether the research on the theme of religion during the COVID-19 crisis does not diverge from the general public’s awareness.

Interviews with funeral directors

We would like to share the findings from our interviews with funeral service providers before presenting the survey results.

The frequency of occasions when “wakes” and “farewell ceremonies” were held separately in the past has increased, but only “farewell ceremonies” are now held, according to a Corona survey. The ceremony increasingly involves just family members. The use of a dinner is another significant change in the format of funeral rites. At the farewell ceremony I attended, a box lunch was served, but it was mostly a “silent meal,” with almost no conversation.

According to the funeral directors we interviewed, the disparity in awareness between the hosts and guests of a funeral service is detrimental. Although the hosts are eager to extend hospitality to those who have made the effort to attend a funeral, many guests are hesitant to participate in such dinners. We have not been able to confirm this, but it is possible that the local people may have a certain sense of “hospitality” because of the strong bonds between the residents and the old customs that remain in the area. However, those who attended the funeral of diverse regions may not share this sense of hospitality.

In the recent coronary disaster, the virus did not spread uniformly across the country, and each region responded differently. Additionally, there are substantial regional variances in awareness, which is why these points are expected to emerge. Funerals and weddings are gathering occasions (even if it is online). The more diverse the people who gather there, the more difficult it is to manage. In a situation where a minimalist consensus must be reached, the presenter assumes that there are many differences in consciousness, but he believes that the significant shift will be toward downsizing and simplification.

Supplementation.

The interview with the funeral directors mentioned above discussed the topic of “kaishoku” (a dinner). Even though it is a “religious act,” the act itself (here, “kaishoku”) is a daily occurrence. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, it must be treated without distinction between ordinary and extraordinary situations. While the “dinner” at a farewell ceremony may have been given an appropriate “meaning” (e.g., mourning for the individual),

the religious meaning (i.e., importance) cannot precede the act in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. In such a case, we would like to consider whether simplification should be regarded as a decline or loss of religion, whether new “meaning” can be found in the acts performed there, and whether such simplification can bring about changes in people’s consciousness.

Chapter 3: Results of the Interview Survey

Changes in Lifestyles and the Transformation of Weddings and Funerals

In Part III, we would like to propose a discussion based on the results of our interview survey. Our research group (Funaki Shuku, Yamamoto Takeshi, Miyajima Shunichi, and Awaya Tsuyoshi) performed an interview survey of elderly people living alone in the community in order to clarify the mental and social situations of elderly people living alone during the COVID-19 crisis [“An Empirical Study on Isolation of Elderly Persons Living Alone under the Spread of New-Type Coronavirus Infection” Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research, Basic Research C (2021-2023) (Project No. 21K01836 PI: Funaki, Shuku)]. In this part, we will analyze the engagement of elderly people living alone in weddings and funerals, especially funerals before and after the emergence of COVID-19.

General Life Changes

Various measures have been taken in Japan, which is a hyper-aged society, to prevent the elderly who live alone from becoming socially isolated through human connections. Prior to the spread of coronavirus infection, interviews were conducted at clinics and non-profit organizations engaged in health promotion to assess the significance of the activities in which the elderly living alone participated.

During COVID-19 outbreak, measures were taken to discourage gatherings or face-to-face meetings. As a result, a situation was created that forced a reversal of the conventional approach we have been studying. Therefore, it was expected that an increasing number of elderly people would feel estranged and isolated due to the spread of coronary disease.

However, the interview survey results indicate that for many elderly people, the changes caused by the pre- and post-corona periods were not as significant as the researcher had expected. This is because, unlike office workers and students, the elderly were not required to go out daily. On the other hand, neighborhoods were less affected by the spread of corona infection. Therefore, it seems that daily relationships with neighbors have been maintained. Even if the frequency of these relationships is somewhat reduced, they can be maintained if they see each other from time to time and say hello to each other. This interview survey revealed such a picture of elderly people living alone.

Downsizing and Simplification of Funeral Rites

Subsequently, we would wish to consider the transformation of funeral rites based on the interview survey results. As a result of Corona there has been an apparent change in funeral rites. Funeral rites have been downsized (e.g., reduced in scale) and simplified (e.g.,

reduced in the process).

The purpose of religious rituals, including funeral rites, has been to strengthen group cohesion. The term “strengthening rituals” has been used to describe the characteristics of such rituals. For funeral rites, the purpose of the rites is to mourn the dead. However, due to the gathering of many people, especially family members and relatives, funeral rites have strengthened the bonds of kinship.

For the elderly people who live alone and have no family or relatives nearby, funeral rites and other legal events are meaningful opportunities to meet with family and relatives. However, the COVID-19 crisis deprived them of such opportunities. The following is what Mr. A, an 87-year-old man, said when he lost his spouse during COVID-19 crisis two years ago.

Q: So, what was it like when you said goodbye, whether you were able to call a lot of people in Corona or not?

A: Yes, that is right. It was just me. My children could not come either.

Q: If you could have had many people come, you would have wanted them to come to Corona, wouldn't you?

A: Yes. I would have been happier if they had come, but I could not do it anywhere else. Nothing has changed in the last two years. I look at the pictures, I feed them morning and night, and nothing else has changed. I miss her, but I always have a picture of her smiling. When I see it, I feel relieved.

Q: Do you still feel that you are with her in your heart?

A: Well, well, yes. My feelings are the same as when I was healthy, but when I go to Buddha's place, I feel that I am alone. I do not feel like she is dead yet.

Of course, the funeral itself is taking place, albeit in a simplified form. However, they are not fulfilling their purpose as a reinforcing ritual. Although it is important for elderly people who live alone to interact with others, it is unfortunate that the opportunity to meet with distant family members is lost in this manner.

The statement, “I would be happier if they came to see me, but I cannot go anywhere” suggests that they felt they could not adequately say goodbye. Perhaps as a result, his comments, such as “Nothing has changed in two years” and “I do not feel like she is dead yet,” suggest that he has not yet come to terms with reality.

Contents of Downsizing and Simplification

Nevertheless, there were both unfavorable and positive sentiments regarding the simplification of funeral rites (because this is not a quantitative survey, we cannot discuss the ratio of each).

However, we would like to consider whether downsizing and simplification are good or bad, as well as “how it is downsized and simplified” in this survey. Among the responses we received, there were several that said that “at the funeral, we just said goodbye at the door, which we were able to do” (to be precise, the responses were from within the same neighborhood, in which the simplification was uniformly conducted in that manner). The

following are the words of Ms. B (a 75-year-old woman) and Ms. C (a 78-year-old woman), who attended their neighbors' funerals.

Ms. B (a 75-year-old woman)

Q: Now, I hear in Covid-19 Crisis that weddings, funerals, memorial services, etc. are not easy to do, but did you have any opportunities to do so during this period?

B: Yes, there was. This year. We mostly just visited at the entrance, delivered incense, so it did not take much time, and we greeted people at the entrance and visited them. On the other hand, I thought it was good.

B: In the past, it would have taken a lot of time to have dinner together or to spend time together, but it would have been better if you had just handed over the incense and said goodbye at the doorstep of the home?

B: Yes, I think so.

Mrs. C (a 78-year-old woman)

This story describes her shock at the sudden death this winter of a 92-yearold man who lived alone in her neighborhood.

Q: I know it was very shocking that a neighbor of yours died suddenly, but it is difficult to have a memorial service or funeral, but do you think you were able to say goodbye or something like that properly?

C: Since we were right next door, I went to the wake and saw his face, and at the wake I burned incense in front of the entrance. But every day when I woke up in the morning and looked out into the garden, I felt a sense of loneliness that my neighbor was gone.

Q: I see. If you had not lived in the Covid-19 Crisis, you would have been able to have dinner with him in the evening, but this time you said goodbye at the doorstep, right?

C: Yes.

Q: But did you feel that you were able to say goodbye to him?

C: It was sudden. So, when I saw his face, I said to him, "Hey sir, you passed away without saying goodbye."

Funerals are still occasions for bidding farewell, and this part of the ritual cannot be omitted no matter how simplified they are. Religious scholar, Hideo Kishimoto, once said, "Death is the time of parting." In the COVID-19 funeral rites, it is evident that death is still considered "parting," and that the funeral is still a ceremony of "parting."

In the case of Ms. C, she did not have a proper funeral for her neighbor but only "burned incense in front of the entrance at the wake." While there was no sorrow over the simplicity of the funeral, Ms. C remarked, "When I wake up and look at the garden, I feel sad that the old man next door is no more." It was apparent that he had not yet entirely accepted the death as a reality.

However, the funeral rite is more than just a "farewell" ceremony, but also consists of other elements. The anthropologist van Gennep explained this in his book "Rites of Passage," where he analyzed various rites of passage, especially those experienced at various stages of life. He found that they can be explained in three stages: separation, transition,

and integration. Thus, according to van Gennep, a funeral rite consists of a rite of “separation” from the world where one has lived, a rite of “transition,” and a rite of “integration” into the new world (the other world). For example, van Gennep states that mourning is a “transition” period for the bereaved, who enter the transitional period with a rite of separation and return to society at the end of this period with a rite of reintegration (the mourning rite). Hence, the transitional rite is performed during the mourning period. During mourning, both the bereaved and the deceased constitute a particular group, and the dead are in between the world of the living and that of the dead.

Furthermore, while separation rites are generally considered to be the norm in funeral rites, van Gennep emphasizes the significance of transition rites or rites that integrate the dead into the world of the dead. In the integration rite, the dead are helped to pass on safely to the next world. It is crucial that the living prepare everything necessary for the journey, both material, such as clothing, food, weapons, and tools, and magical or religious, such as amulets, emblems, and passwords for passage, because the dead must make the journey. With these things, the dead are guaranteed safe travel, passage, and a warm welcome, precisely as the living travel. However, when rituals were downsized and simplified during the COVID-19 crisis, the elements of “transition” and “integration” were “reduced.” As a result, the funeral was limited to a rite of “parting.”

4. Conclusion

What are the consequences of this downsizing and simplification of funeral rites? First, from the perspective of the lives of the elderly who live alone, we may identify the loss of “interaction” opportunities with relatives and neighbors. Funerals were once occasions for elderly people who lived alone to interact with distant family members and relatives they did not regularly meet up with. Even if they did not experience much change in their daily interactions, the impact of the loss of such exceptional occasions should not be underestimated.

Second, in response to van Gennep’s theory, a possible party discourse is the expression of concern that the deceased may not be able to attain Buddhahood. Van Gennep’s description of “integration into the next life through funeral rites” is probably not shared by a great number of individuals in the modern society. However, it should be noted that some respondents in this survey also stated they had not yet realized the person’s death.

Third, due to the inescapable downsizing and simplification of funeral rites, the accumulation of experience in “getting by somehow” and further simplification of funeral rites, as well as a rise in skepticism toward religious funeral rites themselves, are to be anticipated. This trend, which began before the spread of coronary disease, may be further exaggeratedly reinforced by the decline of religion.

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Reference

Aki Miyazawa and Terumi Okaku (宮澤安紀・尾角光美) (2021) 「死をめぐる新型コロナウイルス感染症の影響—葬送文化と死別・グリーフサポートの観点から—」『現代宗教2021』国際宗教研究所 p.203-234 (<https://www.iisr.jp/journal/journal2021/P203-P234.pdf>, 2023.02.27)