

Health-related religious rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church: their uptake and meanings

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Health-related religious rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church: their uptake and meanings

Aim To examine the uptake of religious rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church by relatives of patients in critical condition in Greece and to explore their symbolic representations and spiritual meanings.

Background Patients and their relatives want to be treated with respect and be supported for their beliefs, practices, customs and rituals. However nurses may not be ready to meet the spiritual needs of relatives of patients, while the health-related religious beliefs, practices and rituals of the Greek Orthodox Christian denomination have not been explored.

Method This study was part of a large study encompassing 19 interviews with 25 informants, relatives of patients in intensive care units of three large hospitals in Athens, Greece, between 2000 and 2005. In this paper data were derived from personal accounts of religious rituals given by six participants.

Results Relatives used a series of religious rituals, namely blessed oil and holy water, use of relics of saints, holy icons, offering names for pleas and pilgrimage.

Conclusion Through the rituals, relatives experience a sense of connectedness with the divine and use the sacred powers to promote healing of their patients.

Implications for nursing management Nurse managers should recognize, respect and facilitate the expression of spirituality through the practice of religious rituals by patients and their relatives.

Keywords: Greece, Greek Orthodox Church, intensive care, relatives of patients, religion, religious rituals

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Introduction

The relationship between religion and health has generated great research interest in recent years across a

variety of disciplines. Religiosity has been found to be an effective coping resource in a number of stressful situations (Kloosterhouse & Ames 2002, Holt & McClure 2006, Yick 2008, Plakas *et al.* 2011) and in

dealing with cancer among patients from different cultures, ethnicities and religions (Choumanova *et al.* 2006, Taleghani *et al.* 2006, Koffman *et al.* 2008). Religion can reduce adult mortality risk by promoting healthy behaviour (McCullough *et al.* 2000, Powell *et al.* 2003, Ellison & Hummer 2010), and religious attendance is associated with better self-reported health levels across Europe (Nicholson *et al.* 2009). Spiritual activities to improve and maintain health, such as yoga, have yielded positive effects and have become popular (Lee & Newberg 2005), while prayer can be considered as one among many alternative and complementary therapies used as adjunct to medical therapies (Heathcote *et al.* 2011).

The terms spirituality and religiosity have often been used wrongly as synonymous in the nursing literature. Spirituality is an umbrella term containing religiosity (McSherry & Jamieson 2011). A main component of spirituality is connection to, or communication with, the divine and adherence to religious rites and rituals fulfils the spiritual needs of patients (Burkhart & Hogan 2008). Patients have been shown to express a clear willingness to be asked about their beliefs and to be treated with respect and be supported in their beliefs, practices, customs and rituals by health professionals (Hilbers *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, fulfilment of spiritual needs is a central aspect of nursing care and can enhance the quality of nursing care provided (McSherry & Jamieson 2011).

Despite the evidence that spiritual activities improve and maintain health, only 5.3% of nurses reported that they were always able to meet patients' spiritual needs (McSherry & Jamieson 2011). Moreover, studies on religiosity and health are mostly based on prayer and church attendance; much less attention has been paid to the use of religious rituals for connectedness with God, particularly from the perspective of the Greek Orthodox Church (Mantala-Bozos 2003).

Background

Greeks are the most devout believers in Western Europe and eighth in the world (Voice of the People 2005). Religiosity plays a central role in the lives of Greeks; there are deep roots of religion in Greek culture as there has been traditionally a close connection between the official Orthodox Church and the State (Haland n.d.). For example, religiousness in a population of Greek patients with cancer was very high, especially among women who reported higher levels of religious beliefs and practices (Asimakopou-

los *et al.* 2009). Religiosity may therefore have profound implications for dealing with health problems.

The Greek Orthodox religious tradition is often misunderstood as one more Christian denomination similar to the Western traditions (Mantala-Bozos 2003). The Greek Orthodox Church, part of the Eastern Orthodox Church – thus divided from the West and its traditions – was not affected by the rationalizing reformations of the 16th century AD, which affected the Western churches (Badone 1990). As a result, while the Western churches regard only scripture as the ultimate authority for their dogma, the Greek Orthodox Church has kept the tradition of Christian antiquity.

Liturgical directives in the Greek Orthodox Church are based not only on the Holy Scriptures, but also on oral tradition, the apostolic tradition, Church customs, the writings of the church fathers and the canons of the seven ecumenical councils (Benz 1963). This constitutes a spiritual wealth because those elements have been kept alive by the body of believers (Benz 1963). Hann and Goltz (2010) have observed that the Eastern Orthodox Church is highly liturgical thus resulting in rich use of religious rituals.

Moreover practices that can be conceived as superstitions for the Western church constitute formal structure in the Greek Orthodox Church. Theology and mysticism are not separated but empower and complement each other (Meyendorff 1981). This is evident in the central position the Holy Spirit is given in the Greek Orthodox Church. All holy services and liturgies start with a wish towards the Holy Spirit and are performed through the energy of it (Meyendorff 1981).

In the main Orthodox liturgy, Eucharist, written by Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil, the congregation lives the miracle of the resurrection of Christ. Having this miracle so central in liturgy explains why the Greek Orthodox Church, in contrast to Western churches, does not allow the withdrawal and withholding of medical care when therapy may be futile (Bülow *et al.* 2008).

Finally another characteristic of the worshippers in the Greek Orthodox Church is that they are very autonomous regarding their participation in formal church. It was observed that worshippers were very creative with use of symbols and ritual practices to fulfil their spiritual needs in the Tinos shrine (Badone 1990). Consequently, Dubisch (1995) stated that: 'orthodoxy remains for the west an oriental

mystery because it is oriental in its rituals'. A number of such rituals are presented and explained in this paper.

Aim of the study

The aim of the present study was to examine the uptake of Greek Orthodox religious rituals by relatives of patients in critical condition for healing purposes. Furthermore, we were interested in exploring the symbolic representations and spiritual meanings corresponding to religious beliefs and doctrines of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Method

The study reported here is part of a large study that used the social constructionist version of grounded theory approach (Charmaz 1990, 2000) to explore the experiences of relatives of critically ill patients. This method allows all issues relevant to the experience to emerge and this was considered important, as this area of interest has never been explored before from a qualitative perspective in Greece. A particular value and strength of this method is that analysis of the data itself is used to guide further data collection and analysis, to enrich and refine the identified categories and the interrelationships between the categories (Charmaz 2000). The main categories and processes of the experience, including how religiosity was used as a coping resource, are published elsewhere (Plakas *et al.* 2009, Plakas *et al.* 2011).

This paper reports a detailed analysis and exploration of the religious rituals performed.

Data collection, setting, participants and process

Data in this analysis were generated in the period 2000–2005. Data (for the large study) consisted of 19 in-depth interviews conducted with 25 relatives (19 female, six male) of patients in the intensive care units (ICUs) of three main general district hospitals in the Athens area; the selection of the hospitals was based on convenience. Interviews were conducted in Greek and lasted between 17 and 150 minutes.

Every Greek speaking adult person visiting a patient in the ICU in the three study hospitals was eligible to participate (i.e. relatives as well as friends). Eligible participants were contacted either by telephone or in person outside the ICUs. People who agreed to participate were given the choice of place and the time for the interview.

General questions were asked such as 'Can you tell me about your feelings?', 'How do you cope?' and 'What helps you feel better?'. When the religiosity category emerged, sensitizing concepts were used in subsequent interviews to elicit religiosity information; a question was added 'Has your religiosity been altered because of this?'

Religiosity was discussed in 15 out of the 19 interviews. In 11 of the 15 interviews, religiosity was strongly mentioned as a source of emotional relief. In six interviews with female participants a number of religious rituals were reported and these form the data for this paper. These were relatives of young patients with a sudden need for ICU care caused by traffic accidents (4), infection (1) and stroke (1). Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic profile and illness characteristics of these six relatives. More details of the setting, the procedures and context for this study have been published elsewhere (Plakas *et al.* 2009, Plakas *et al.* 2011).

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim from recorded tapes as soon as possible following the end of the interview. All levels of analysis were performed in the original Greek language of the transcripts. Coding data line by line was the first step of the analysis. The second step was the selective or focused coding, where codes that reappeared frequently in the data were brought together, thus sorting and categorizing large amounts of data. Constant comparative analysis and memo-writing helped to discover any hidden or assumed processes and assumptions within the data. Memos were also written during the interviews: for example, the religiosity of an informant was so strong in the interview that a memo was written about this aspect.

Interviewing continued until the categories identified in this study were found to be saturated on collection of additional data, with no new categories or components of categories identified within the new data (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

Rituals were identified and agreed following discussion between the authors. We considered religious practices other than church attendance, prayer and lighting a candle, as rituals as these were considered as the basic expressions of religiosity within the Greek Orthodox Church.

As part of a validation process one independent researcher and the fourth author (both bilingual in Greek and English) cross-validated the coding and

Table 1
Participants' socio-demographic profile and illness characteristics

<i>Informants, age (years, range 36–70) and sex</i>	<i>Relation to patient</i>	<i>Patient Illness</i>	<i>Age (years, range 24–66) and sex of patient</i>	<i>Duration of hospitalization in ICU</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Educational level</i>
P4 (45, female)	Wife	Traffic accident	50, male	25 days	Housewife	Secondary (12 years)
P8 (36, female)	Wife	Infection	45, male	26 days	Self-employed (fish tavern with husband)	Primary and part – secondary (9 years)
P12 (70, female)	Sister	Stroke	66, female	1 month	Retired	Primary (6 years)
P16 (54, female)	Mother	Traffic accident	26, male	21 days	Retired midwife assistant	Secondary (12 years)
P17 (45 female)	Mother	Traffic accident	24, female	25 days	Private employee	Secondary (12 years)
P19 (50, female)	Mother	Traffic accident	26, male	52 days	Private employee	Primary (6 years)

categorizing of randomly selected data specimens, thus enhancing the reliability of the study. The fourth author also validated the translation of categories and their meanings into English.

Results

A variety of rituals were performed by the participants. However, there are probably many more variations of rituals from region to region across Greece and among class and gender, as Dubisch (1995) discovered in her ethnographic research with Greek Orthodox pilgrims. There were some differences by gender: men in our study did not perform any religious rituals, which were thus women's privilege; none of the six informants had higher education and were all working class people:

‘...the women, I mean my mother and my aunt, they have held religious services and these kind of things. I am more realistic I am not spending money for the priests. (Researcher: religious services?) Yes in the house, euxelaio (blessed oil), how do you call it?’

(P11, Male)

All rituals mentioned can be categorized into five categories. Only one of them (i.e. the ritual of blessed oil) belongs to the seven sacraments of the Greek Orthodox Church. The others, such as the blessing of the water and offering names for pleas, are holy services. The Greek Orthodox Church has a number of holy services performed for specific purposes; these are ecclesiastical rituals and not sacraments in the narrow sense of the word (Benz 1963):

- blessed oil and holy water
- the use of relics of saints

- holy icons
- offering names for pleas
- pilgrimages

The blessed oil and holy water

The blessed oil (‘euxelaio’ in Greek) is one of the seven sacraments of the Greek Orthodox Church. It has its roots in the gospel of Apostle Jacob and its purpose is to heal mental and physical illness. The main wish of this sacrament reads: ‘Father sacred, doctor of our soul and body, heal your present slaves, from their physical and mental illness’.

During this sacrament the oil becomes sacred and then worshippers use it for healing. If this sacrament is performed in places that are considered important for the orthodox religion such as the grave of Saint Mary's in Jerusalem, the sacred element is considered to be more powerful. As seriously ill patients cannot be physically there, relatives take the blessed oil in little bottles to the hospitals:

‘One of my costumers whose husband is a senior priest in Piraeus, brought me from the holy land, from Saint Mary's grave, oil, blessed oil, and holy water (‘Agiasmo’ in Greek), imagine they have brought me from everywhere, they brought it at the shop and everywhere I was going I was taking it’.

(P8)

‘If I was bringing oil and holy water (Agiasmo) from a Saint, I was also giving it to the others’.

(P4)

People often take blessed oil from churches and shrines and they draw a cross on the surface of the body or on the part of the body to be healed using a

piece of cotton gauze. Similarly holy/blessed water is drunk or sprayed onto the body. Oil and water are the means through which the sacred power of the Holy Spirit is mediated to the patients:

‘...I was crossing him with my oils every day, I was talking to him, talking every day and I was crossing him’.

(P8)

Special requests from relatives to the priests are usually accepted, demonstrating the autonomy and creativity permitted by the official church to worshippers’ spiritual needs:

‘...the oil was sent to me from Saint David, it was blessed on the head of the saint particularly for my husband, for his name’.

(P8)

The blessing of the water is not one of the seven sacraments but is a holy service of the Greek Orthodox Church to bless the water, which then becomes holy. During this service the priest asks God to give the water cathartic power and energy, to become the gift of holiness, eraser of the sins, healer of the soul and body and for any benefit able to be given.

This service has its roots in the gospel of Apostle John describing the pool of Siloam, the place where Christ sent the blind man who was then healed. The minor holy water liturgy is performed every first of the month, while the major one, being called major because more wishes are read during this service, is performed twice a year.

The relics of saints

In the Greek Orthodox Church people believe that several sacred items can mediate the grace of holiness of the Holy Spirit like the blessed oil and the holy water. Among such items are the relics of saints. The bones of saints are usually kept in a box and are displayed for adoration to worshippers in several churches or monasteries. Other items such as their clothes or other personal belongings are also believed to be sacred:

‘They brought him the bones of Saint Nicolas, my nephew the priest went to the monastery and brought the bones (Researcher: What did he do with the bones?) We crossed him together, we had them brought together because the priest did not know that I had the hat of Saint John’.

(P8)

Saints are usually buried in the grounds of the shrines or monasteries. A pleasant smell coming from the saints’ graves is considered as a special sign that would bring positive outcomes for the patient:

‘I went again when this saint had a feast ...the time I was leaving the grave smelt and I met another lady who asked me what was wrong and I was telling her about my husband and that I was optimistic, saying that everything will be alright and the God is big and I told her that the grave smelt and she told me: “Seriously? You know this will help you, I know someone whose child was cured”’.

(P8)

Holy icons

There is a special significance of the holy icons in the Greek Orthodox Church. They are usually worshipped; believers pay their respects to icons in the churches with a kiss, a bow and by making a cross, thus expressing their veneration for the icons. This same behaviour prevails not only in churches but also in homes.

In the Greek Orthodox Church, the object of adoration is not the icon itself as an object; icons are not considered works of men at all, but are regarded as manifestations of the heavenly archetypes. Thus the sacred image has a specific spiritual function within the Greek Orthodox Church, like a window between the earthly and the celestial worlds through which the heavenly beings manifest themselves to the worshippers and unite with them.

In a time of despair and pain for the imminent loss of a family member, relatives try to maintain a healing connection of the patient with the divine and the sacred by bringing and placing their icons in the ICUs next to the patients to look after them:

‘(Researcher: Have you placed icons in the ICU?) A lot yes, we had placed them at the bed side in a little box, they never told us to not bring them’.

(P19)

One icon had been the favoured icon for a patient and had accompanied her during her whole life. The patient had visualized this icon before she actually obtained it, as explained by her sister:

‘When we left in an emergency for the hospital her daughter took her icon with her and the icon went to the theatres with the bed and then the icon was lost and I went to the theatres and finally it was found and there was a lot of dis-

cussion for this icon in the hospital ...is not it a sign that Saint Mary "Panayia" wanted to be with her?'

(P12)

During the times of feasts for the saints it is believed that communication with them is enhanced; many believers make their offerings to the saints for gratitude for a favour performed or in anticipation for the favour to be performed:

'I also went to Saint Irene, I gave her my wedding ring, I put it on her icon the day of her feast, ...a nice icon with so many pearls for decoration...'

(P8)

The Greek Orthodox Church has a saint for almost every purpose. Apart from the saints that the tradition says can help with healing of diseases, there are saints to help in almost all aspects of social life:

'I had also found an icon of Saint Patience, I did not even know there was Saint Patience and seeing her (the mother of another young patient in the same ICU) was without patience ...so I said OK take this'.

(P8)

Offering names for pleas

This ritual is also connected with one of the holy services of the Greek Orthodox Church. This service consists of prayers, psalms, hymns and holy readings. This holy service is the appeal to Our Lady Saint Mary, the mother of God. It dates back to the early Christian era and is performed for special circumstances, with illness a common case. Prayers by the priest during this service ask Saint Mary to listen to people's requests and satisfy them. The names of the people the pleas are made for are mentioned during this service. Similar appeals can be made to any other Saint, especially during their feasts and festivals.

There is also another time that names of people seeking better health are mentioned by priests during divine liturgy. When the priest prepares the bread and wine (the holy gifts) for the holy communion, worshippers offer a specially made bread for this purpose and give the priest a piece of paper with the names of both living and dead persons of the family to be mentioned by the priest during the service. The priests pray for health for those who are alive and comfort for the dead. The offering of names for pleas is per-

formed by many people in several churches and not only by close relatives.

'I went and lighted the candles, the big candles everything ...the plea for her name ...everything ...everything'.

(P17)

'I have to tell you that everywhere there were pleas for my husband. In Eretria from friends and neighbours, my nephew who is a priest was saying nothing else but "for health of X" (her husbands' name), in my own village everywhere there was a church or a shrine my mother, my brother and my cousins went everywhere'.

(P8)

'I had no time (to go) and in the church of the hospital there was no service so I sent other people to light the candles and everything in the church to do for his name ...everything'.

(P16)

In addition to pleas performed in churches and shrines by priests another ritual was reading special wishes and pleas to sacred persons of the Greek Orthodox Church, who have become celebrated for helping people's health conditions. This was done normally when relatives waited outside ICUs.

'Leaving the church (Saint John the Russian) while I was crying, I saw a priest and I kissed his hand and I told him "help me, my husband is not well". He grasps my hand and takes me into the church and gave me a plea for the saint'.

(P8)

'I have a book here (outside the ICU) ...I have the plea for Saint Kyprianos with me to read'.

(P16)

Pilgrimages

Journeys to places of great spiritual significance are common in almost every religion. For the Greek Orthodox believers such places are the shrines, the churches and monasteries. Places where some monks and sisters, who became sacred or were declared saints by the official church, had lived and died are also considered important. In addition all places mentioned in the scriptures are considered holy (Holy Land) while, if a church or a monastery hosts sacred items or miraculous icons, this also attracts pilgrims. Tradition says that people who have been in such

places were healed or were helped with serious problems and even miracles were witnessed. Those places are therefore considered ideal for spiritual connection with the divine as they are places with special spiritual powers. Pilgrims usually stay there overnight to take part in special services such as *Vespro*, *Orthro* and *Divine Liturgy*, which usually start at night and end early in the morning, and make their offerings to their deities:

‘The first time I did not stay in the dormitories, I went to the other rooms, I went to the dormitories but were many, many women in there, many beds, anyway, I could not sleep’.

(P8)

‘The morning I came here (to the hospital) and then went again to Saint John. I did not go to my home at all, I went directly to Saint John and stayed there again. One day I was in Athens one day in Saint John’.

(P8)

Worshippers normally take their offerings to the saints with them. Offerings are given from the people to Saint Mary or any other Saint to ask for a favour, or are given for compensation after the favour is done. Examples of an offer can be the lighting of a big candle, flowers or decorations for the icons, but anyone can make their own offerings.

Figure 1 summarizes the rituals, their symbolic representations and spiritual meanings.

Discussion

The prognoses of the patients in all the cases reported in this paper were not favourable – the anguish for the final outcome and whether the patients would live or die, was devastating and unbearable for the relatives. Doctors found it difficult to inform relatives and make predictions about the outcome of the critical illness. Sometimes, doctors in their initial communication with the relatives said that although doctors would make every effort for their patients, after that it is the will of God.

Reliance for survival on God’s will might be a way for doctors to share responsibilities with God, however, it may also be because of the Greek Orthodox religion’s strong connection with health issues. Interestingly, the mother of a young man with brain injuries equally attributed the survival of her son to both Gods and doctor’s efforts. Many relatives also reported that in their prayers they did not only ask

God to save their patient, but also to help doctors perform better in their role.

Under such circumstances, the Greek Orthodox believers performed their rituals in accordance with their religious and cultural traditions. The sacrament of the blessed oil is a purely therapeutic one (Hill 2007) and is probably popular only in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It has its roots in the Old Testament and the tradition according to which the good Samaritan applied oil and wine to wounds.

Water plays a key role in religions all around the world (McIntyre-Tamwoy 2011). In ancient Greece, the basis for worship at the Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidaurus was the cathartic and healing capacity of the sacred water source. The Roman Catholic Church also regards water as a powerful symbol of rebirth which washes away sins and impurities in the sacrament of baptism (McIntyre-Tamwoy 2011). Islam attributes sacred qualities to water as a life-giving, sustaining, and purifying resource while to Hindus all water is sacred, especially rivers (McIntyre-Tamwoy 2011). At the pilgrimage of Tinos in Greece, the ritual of fetching of holy water and soil has its own legend of fertile power and curing sickness, and has a very long tradition (Haland n.d.). Similarly at the pilgrimage site of Lourdes in Southern France, there is a spring and a pool considered to have therapeutic and purifying properties and pilgrims take this water home (Haland n.d.).

Observing the festivals on Tinos island for several years Haland (n.d.) described the ritual connected with the bones of a nun named Pelagia who discovered the miraculous icon of Saint Mary and was declared a saint. Her holy skull is in a glass ornate box and is situated near the main church entrance. Haland (n.d.) observed that the pilgrims paid the same amount of devotion to the skull as to the icon itself. Pilgrims touched the top of the glass with objects they wanted to make holy such as cotton, flowers, green leaves, candles, bread or clothes. During the festivals the flowers decorating the box are thought to be effective amulets after being crossed three times over the skull of the saint (Haland n.d.).

This ritual is as old as the Old Testament where the bones of prophet Elisha touched a dead man who then regained life and stood up (Old Testament, 2 Kings 13).

The same ritual is also seen in the New Testament where miracles were performed linked with the shadow of Apostle Peter and the handkerchief of Apostle Paul (Archdiocese of Goumenissa, Axioupolis and Polykastro 2011).

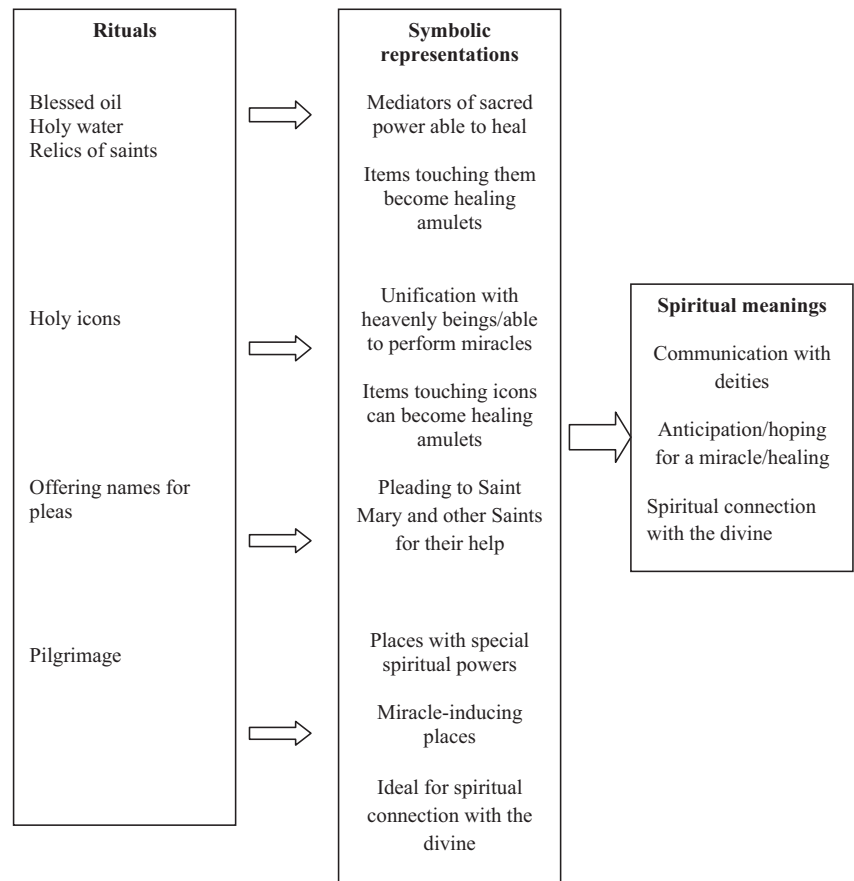


Figure 1
Symbolic representations and spiritual meanings of rituals.

Relics are considered holy and a means of communication with the divine by all Christians but the Protestant churches following the reformation denied this belief as superstition (Hill 2007). Some Catholics still believe in this; for example, pilgrims at the shrine of the Madonna of the Rock in Calabria, Italy, are observed to touch the rock where Madonna's statue is sited when praying as they consider it sacred (Krippner *et al.* 2004). Today, many Greek Orthodox monasteries display either bones or other items of saints considered holy, and these also carry the legend of being miracle-working items.

Another story also explains the strong veneration of the Greek Orthodox for holy icons. According to this legend the linen cloth with which Christ had dried his face, and upon which his portrait was imprinted, was sent to King Abgar of Edessa; this cloth is reputed to have worked many miracles. The picture of the Christ in this cloth was not made by the hand of man but by some miracle, as are many other icons (Benz 1963). As a result of this legend the painting of icons is considered a liturgical act – a holy procedure, where the brushes, wood and paints are consecrated before they are used. This is why all sacred images appearing on icons have a specific spiritual function within the

Eastern Orthodox Church (Benz 1963). Icons, like the relics of the saints are believed to perform miracles. Ventura's (2011) research with pilgrims of Greek and other Orthodox believers in Jerusalem (Holy Land) revealed a strong belief in pilgrims about the healing abilities of the icons of Metoxion and Gethsemane in Jerusalem. In Tinos when the icon of Saint Mary is circulated during festivals, passing it over the sick and women who want to conceive is considered important. People show their belief and appreciation by touching and kissing the icon (Haland n.d.). Haland (n.d.) further noted that many pilgrims touched the icon with items such as cotton wool, which are then considered holy and become important amulets, much like the bones of the saints.

The holy service of the pleas towards Saint Mary for health reasons is performed by the Greek Orthodox Church because Saint Mary is considered the most important intercessor and saint in the Greek tradition. Saint Mary or 'Panagia' in Greek (pan = all and agia = holy), as her name implies, is the holiest of the holy. In the Greek Orthodox Church worshippers believe that Saint Mary and the saints act as their mediators to God and ask from him to fulfil their prayers. Haland (n.d.) pointed out that several

miracles are said to have happened during the night-long prayers service that is held on 25 March during the festival for the Dormition (Assumption for the Western churches) of Saint Mary at Tinos island (Haland n.d.).

Elsewhere, in Calabria, Italy, there is a special church of Saint Mary where worshippers pray for people suffering from malaria; this is called 'Mary of the Fever' (Krippner *et al.* 2004).

For every religion there is a place where spiritual connection with the deities of the religion is more powerful. In the Roman Catholic Church, worshippers say that Rome is the head of the church and Lourdes the heart because pilgrims feel nearer to the celestial world at this place (Ventura 2011); Lourdes has over 4 million visitors a year. Klimova (2011) studied Russian Orthodox believers visiting the Greek Orthodox monastery in the desert of Arizona in USA. Pilgrims there reported they had a spiritual need to be engaged with the monastic traditions and practices in a place suitable for genuine worship and true spiritual work. There is a metaphysical connection between the earthly and the celestial world at holy sites and immediately the pilgrim arrives she/he connects with the saint of the site, and this is the religious importance of the journey (Ventura 2011).

Limitations of the study

The prolonged data collection time is a limitation, as social or cultural changes could have affected the results; however religious beliefs and practices are rather stable over time. Another limitation is the small number of informants; thus their views cannot be considered representative of all Greek Orthodox believers, although they represent our sample. In addition, questions were not asked about rituals – this emerged through their narration of their personal experiences and we cannot guarantee that all the rituals used were discussed.

Conclusion

Prayer and church attendance are the dominant religious practices in Western countries, and they form part of relevant religiosity and health studies. However, the Greek Orthodox Church has a number of religious rituals connected with miraculous healings, performed by relatives for this purpose. The Greek Orthodox Church with its rich religious tradition promises health and healing to the believers through various ecclesiastical rituals. Moreover, the Greek

Orthodox theological foundations provide many examples of miraculous healings. Consequently, the rituals performed by relatives are connected with body and soul healing, miraculous recovery through the connection with the divine world and divine energy transmitted to patients through sacred healing amulets. Through the rituals, Greek Orthodox believers experience a sense of connectedness with the divine and thus religious rituals provide a platform for the expression of spirituality for those in the Greek Orthodox Church. Spirituality can be expressed in several ways. For example, the Greek Orthodox believers fulfilled their spiritual needs by their adherence to rituals guided by the dogma and tradition of their religion. These practices clearly reduced the sense of loss of control over their situation and gave meaning in it by their connection to the celestial world and anticipation for healing. This study provides a useful understanding of the main religious rituals of the Greek Orthodox believers, their symbolic representations and spiritual meanings.

Implications for nursing management

As health care today is without boundaries, and there are many religions and denominations, it is important to have knowledge of the religious practices of all denominations. Manifestations of spirituality in the described religious rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church can provide invaluable knowledge for nursing management, who may be challenged by difficulties in meeting the spiritual needs of patients and their relatives. Other religions and cultures may have similar expressions of spirituality, where believers use religious practices and rituals to transmit divine energy to patients. Nurses should give relatives the opportunity to participate in religious rituals and respect religious items that may be used by relatives and left in patient's rooms.

Nurses could also explore whether religious practices and rituals offer support to less religious relatives by talking about the comfort felt by some from the practice of religious rituals, indicating the hospital's willingness to accommodate this where relatives wish.

In addition, managers should be knowledgeable and open-minded to religious practices and rituals serving as adjunct alternative therapies in various circumstances. Performance of special rituals for recovery of ICU patients would bring benefits to the emotional world of those relatives who wish to participate.

Moreover, delivery of spiritual care to patients and their families is not only a key aspect of holistic nursing but is also connected with better quality of nursing care (McSherry & Jamieson 2011). Spiritual care must be practised in a real and meaningful way to improve quality of nursing care and nursing management should promote more research on religious expressions of spirituality among different religions and denominations.

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