

Article

Pilgrimage and Purpose: Ancestor Research as Sacred Practice in a Secular Age

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which ancestor research has become a replacement for religious community and practice in a post-religious world. We explore the parallels of popular present-day family history pursuits with traditional religious practices, noting the similarities in how the practices are used to foster and strengthen feelings of identity, purpose, and belonging. We look at three particular customs that are common to those interested in ancestor research: the handing on of ‘sacred’ stories and objects with familial significance; acts of pilgrimage to ancestrally significant places; and engaging in ‘ritual’ gatherings, either with extended family or with others who share the interest of ancestor research.

Keywords: secular rituals; post-religious; sacred stories; pilgrimage; family ritual; ceremony

1. Introduction

For Western, English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, and Australia, the practice of religion—Christianity in particular—was long taken for granted as central to the culture and to public life. Going to church on Sunday was once something most families simply did each week, and to stray from this cultural norm would make one stand out in the community. However, since the latter half of the twentieth century, the religious landscape has changed drastically in these Christian-majority countries. To some extent, this has been a result of wider immigration and a broader acceptance of other religious traditions. Furthermore, much has also been made of the rise of what has been termed the “nones and dones”—people who do not attend church or identify with religion of any kind.¹ A recent report by the American-based think tank [Pew Research Center \(2019, p. 568\)](#) describes the religious landscape in the US as changing rapidly, with the percentage of adults describing themselves as Christian dropping from 77% in 2009 down to 65% in 2018–2019. Those identifying as non-religious (atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”) have risen from 17% in 2009 up to 26%. Pew Research Center comments specifically on the striking growth of adults in this category over the past thirty years, noting that the University of Chicago’s first General Social Survey in 1972 reported only around 5% of adults as non-religious.

In Australia, from the time of British settlement up until the 1950s, the influence of the Christian church wove its way into the fabric of the culture, influencing politics, education systems, morality, and social customs, with the Billy Graham crusades of 1959 giving that decade a particularly strong emphasis on evangelical Christianity. Up until this time, professing atheism or agnosticism would have been seen as highly unusual in Australian society. In the nineteenth century, it was common to assume that “an inability or a refusal to believe in God was a form of mental illness” ([Frame 2009, p. 395](#)), and even in the early half of the twentieth century, “anyone who refused to profess religious belief was consciously standing apart from society and popular culture” (p. 91). From the 1960s onwards, however, Australia began its transformation into what some have termed a post-Christian society. By the 1970s, [Carey \(1996\)](#) tells us that “nominal belief coupled with a secular lifestyle”



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(p. 176) had become a far more acceptable option in Australian society. Census results in 1971 showed for the first time an increase in the number of people declaring themselves to have no religion (p. 174). In 1991, the census layout was changed to add a “No religion” box for respondents to mark, rather than having to explicitly write “none” (Frame 2009, p. 142) and Carey notes that, by this time, “the combined forces of the two categories ‘no religion’ and ‘no reply’ were almost a quarter of the entire population” (p. 174).² Carey describes this progression as marking the beginning of a new era, noting that in the past “the decision to stop church attendance, choose a civil rather than a church wedding, or declare a state of unbelief was a major life decision. At the very least it involved a family confrontation” (p. 176). However, the Church no longer retains the level of control it once did over what Frame calls “transcendent experiences” (p. 120). Australians’ official beliefs, says Frame, are “essentially humanist” (p. 104).

Such a trajectory is not unique to Australia, with much of Western society having undergone a similar shift over the past century. Canadian philosopher Taylor (2007) describes this change as being from “a condition in which belief was the default option” (p. 12) to one in which unbelief is considered far more acceptable, and in many contexts even assumed as standard. Not long ago, it was accepted without question that the church would in some way be involved in the major events in a person’s life—birth, marriage, death—performing sacred rituals (christenings, baptisms, weddings, funerals, last rites) to mark such events, but also maintaining official records and registers of births, deaths, and marriages. Typically, religious officials would create these records and they would be recognised by the state as official documents. Nowadays governments tend to adopt this role in society, divorcing the rituals somewhat from any sense of sacredness, and leaving them more in the domain of administrators and bureaucrats rather than spiritual leaders.

While religion’s role in society may be diminished from what it was, it leaves a notable gap in its place, what Roof (1999) describes as “wholeness-hunger” (p. 62) and Taylor describes as the “search for fullness” (pp. 14, 19)—a longing for something beyond our everyday lives, some activity or condition through which “life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while [sic], more admirable, more what it should be” (p. 5). Taylor describes how religion, in times gone by, has been seen as the means by which this sense of fullness is achieved—or, alternatively, granted to us by some force beyond ourselves. Bouma (2006) also argues that, within the Australian context, secular humanism “has not proven as satisfying as many thought it would be,” and that instead we are moving towards a more varied approach to spirituality in our culture, “in which the religious and spiritual have moved out from the control of both the state and such formal organisations as the church” (p. xiv). Roof corroborates this observation from the US perspective, noting poll results from 1994 report that while 65% of Americans believed “religion was losing its influence in public life”, still almost the same number, 62%, claimed “the influence of religion was increasing in their personal lives” (p. 7).

The search for meaning persists, even in the absence of a common acceptance of formal religious belief and practice. Jenkins (2016) argues that “even when people reject or challenge religious traditions, they are often engaging with symbolic religious worlds as they shape identity and interactions with intimate partners, parents, and children” (p. 220). This is what Dissanayake (1988) refers to as “making special”, where rituals, ideas, and artifacts are bestowed with unique value and significance, placing them “in a realm different from the everyday” (p. 92). While many ancient religious rituals and beliefs may no longer be seen as relevant or credible in modern society, Jenkins notes that “religiosity and wider cultural beliefs about kin come together in everyday encounters” (p. 222). We still feel a need for ceremony, community, the infusing of the sacred into our life’s rituals—things that church and religion once delivered. With the rise of this secular age, many are finding new ways to search for meaning and fulfilment. Taylor describes this as “the sanctification of ordinary life” (p. 179).

In this paper, we explore how practices adopted by family historians might serve to fill some of the gaps left by the decline of religion. We consider how involvement in family

history research might provide a less institutionalised approach to pursuing meaning, belonging, transcendence, and sacred practice, in ways that align with the humanist values of modern secular Western culture. This is not a new idea, with [Ashton and Hamilton \(2007\)](#) asking whether family history might “be a substitute for being in heaven” (p. 32), and [Jacobson \(1986\)](#) suggesting that genealogy might form a “substitute or surrogate” for religious practice, particularly for those with a religious upbringing who rejected formal religion later in life (p. 350). [Lambert \(2002\)](#) has explored the idea within a distinctly Australian context, noting how certain secular shifts within the culture have prompted some to look more deeply into their ancestry, such as a rise in multiculturalism, and a decrease in the stigma associated with finding convict ancestry.

Here, we examine the hypothesis specifically within three contexts: firstly, discussing how shared *stories* of importance to family become like sacred texts handed down, and objects with familial significance take the form of sacred talismans. We then look at sacred *places*, specifically the practice of pilgrimage: engaging in a journey quest, whether literally or metaphorically. While this has always been a practice intertwined with spirituality, now we see it becoming more freely adopted, particularly among those who seek to connect with their ancestors and their geographic origins. Finally, we explore the idea of sacred *gatherings* within a family history context: the significance of ritual family celebrations or commemorations, as well as the way in which the gathering of communities who share an interest in ancestry can, like religious groups, take on caring and mutual support roles.

2. Sacred Stories

Storytelling is an essential part of many religious traditions. In times past, intergenerational stories were woven into religious and spiritual practice in such a way that it was an accepted part of life. Stories were handed down from one generation to the next so that people would continue to have a sense of who they were, where they were from, how they belonged, and what kind of lasting significance their lives had. In the Hebrew Bible, the God of the Israelites is often specifically referenced as being the same God worshipped by their ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,³ reminding the hearer that their relationship to God is one that sits in the context of history and of the many generations who have come before. In fact, long genealogical listings permeate the pages of many books in the Hebrew Bible, used as sacred texts by Jews and Christians alike, in some cases serving meticulous records of each person’s tribal inheritance and perhaps eligibility for priesthood or kingship, in other cases telling a deeper story about a particular person and their heritage.

Sacred stories continue to be a part of many different kinds of religious practice today. The oral tradition of handing down stories through poetry, chanting, song, and other forms, is common across many different cultures, for example:

- During the annual Passover *seder*, Jewish families traditionally gather together around a meal and retell the account of the Exodus, to commemorate their ancestors’ release from slavery in Egypt and teach the story to the next generation. As part of the ritual, the youngest child present must ask four questions throughout the ceremony, which prompt the telling of the story. The answers are recited in unison by the other guests.
- Ancient writings continue to be read, spoken, and heard by Christian believers today, both as part of personal spiritual discipline and as part of the liturgy in corporate worship. In certain denominations, a particular pre-appointed passage of Scripture (the *lectionary*) is read and preached on each week in every participating church throughout the world. The individual worshipper—aware that other believers all around the globe are hearing the same readings, perhaps in different languages, but containing the same essential message—thus gains a sense of being one part of a larger body (the “Universal Church”), and of being connected to something greater than themselves. There is the knowledge, too, that these texts have been read again and again by hundreds of generations before the present one. In this sense, the believer

becomes a part of something greater not just in space, but also in time—part of a “great cloud of witnesses”, as it is poetically expressed in the biblical book of Hebrews.⁴

- Such traditions are not limited only to Western culture. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, there is a strong oral tradition, where after dinner the villagers will congregate around a fire to listen to the storyteller, or *griot*, whose role is both to educate and to entertain. The griot was traditionally a role passed down from one generation to the next (although one could also formally train for the role at griot schools), and would serve as storytellers, musicians, historians, genealogists, and counsellors to kings ([Encyclopedia Britannica 2014](#)).

Religious writings use the power of story and of narrative to tell tales of identity, heritage, belonging, and redemption. These are stories that have been handed down from parent to child, over and over again—essentially, these are ancient, long-enduring, intergenerational narratives whose meaning and influence has seen them persist through centuries, even millennia, continuing to build a sense of belonging and kinship in each new generation who receives them. However, with what has been termed the “rise of the nones”, an increasing number of people do not feel such an attachment to any particular set of ancient sacred texts. [Roof \(1999\)](#) notes that such “grand narratives, handed down through history with appeals to universal truth” (p. 56) are no longer compelling to many of the younger generation. In part, an increased sense of scepticism and a greater familiarity with other cultural backgrounds has perhaps propelled this generation towards more relativistic and individualistic attitudes regarding spirituality. However, Roof also claims that many younger people are simply not as familiar with traditional religious stories as in previous generations, often having been raised without any connection to a formal religious community. In many cases their experience of church attendance may have been limited to weddings and funerals, giving them relatively few opportunities to hear such stories.

It seems that individual family stories and narratives can, and often do, continue to serve a similar role of building a sense of identity and belonging in much the same way as religious texts. As [Shaw \(2020\)](#) describes, telling family stories provides a way for individuals to explain who they are, both to themselves and to others, fulfilling a common desire to “belong to something larger than their singular ‘self’, [to be] positioned and represented within the broader narrative of humanity” (p. 110). [Smith \(2006\)](#) recounts her experience of hearing her own family stories passed on in such a way that brought to mind a sense of the sacred (pp. 12–13):

Listening to the senior women telling stories to younger women about the place we were in, or events that were associated with that place, I thought of the stories that members of my own family had told me, and that I would now pass on to my own children. I realized, too, that the meanings I drew out of those stories, and the uses I had made of them, would of course be different to the meanings, and uses, the generations both before and after me had and would construct.

Smith notes that physical, tangible objects such as family heirlooms could be associated with the stories, for example, special table decorations, ornaments, or artworks that have their own family history. Such objects may not be valuable in monetary terms but are precious within the family, taking on their own spiritual significance because of what they represent historically and ancestrally. Handing down these sacred objects to the next generation thus contributes to a person’s sense of generativity, of leaving a legacy that has lasting significance.

A survey conducted by [Moore et al. \(2021\)](#) of amateur family historians revealed that “honouring those from the past” is often a key motivator for genealogical research. Moore et al. comment on the “mystical—almost spiritual—feelings” respondents reported regarding this act of paying tribute to their ancestors by learning their stories and writing them down (p. 55). They discuss how the sense of responsibility family historians often feel to hand these stories down to the next generation can propel their research. Such stories can then serve to establish a strong family narrative, something that [Feiler \(2013\)](#) asserts is

an essential ingredient in making families “effective, resilient [and] happy”. Referencing work from Dr. Marshall Duke, Feiler reports that children with a “strong intergenerational self” who “know they belong to something bigger than themselves” show higher levels of self-confidence.

Driessnack (2017) talks about the importance of intergenerational narratives in providing an “expanded” sense of self that exists in context within a particular time and space, and in relation to family. She notes that the development of this intergenerational self may provide health benefits and contribute to resilience throughout all stages of life. Driessnack observes that the intergenerational self “grounds an individual” and “provides a larger context for understanding and dealing with life’s experience(s) and challenges.” Moore et al. note that such intergenerational narratives are often shaped by family historians based on stories they uncover through their research about the “struggles and successes of their ancestors” (p. 30). Such narratives serve then to help the researcher find their place in the “grand scheme of things” and become “part of the great narrative of history” (p. 30), thus working in much the same way that religious narratives do.

Moore et al. discuss how family history research can result in anchoring the sense of self more securely through connection to ancestors within a historical context, even resulting in positive attitudinal changes such as increased tolerance, empathy, and self-esteem, after researchers gain knowledge about their ancestors and greater understanding of family members. The researcher becomes “part of a long line of people who have, for example, been resilient, or creative, or struggled but overcome” (p. 24). This construction of a *narrative identity*, a life story placed into context over an even larger story, encompassing many generations, has been shown by researchers such as McAdams and McLean (2013) to have a positive effect on mental health.

Family history research can sometimes uncover “redemptive stories”, where a positive outcome, such as a sense of closure, ultimately emerges from the experience of some unpleasant or distressing event. Moore et al. describe stories of this kind from their survey sample, where the family historian recounts challenges and hardships that their ancestors have overcome with fortitude and resilience, expressing astonishment and thankfulness for their persistence in the face of such challenges. They point out that learning such stories about our ancestors can serve as a reminder that “we, like them, can overcome hardship and prevail”, promoting a sense of gratitude for our mere existence as a result of their tenacity, but also for the likelihood that those traits which enabled their survival “may well have been passed to us, either genetically or through family influences” (p. 55).

This relationship between participation in family research and an increased sense of gratitude might be compared to a similar correlation observed among people with religious belief, as discussed by Krause (2009) in his study demonstrating that increased church attendance and stronger God-mediated control beliefs are associated with positive changes in gratitude over time. Emmons et al. (2008) note that gratitude is an attribute that is highly valued across the world’s major religions and that believers are encouraged to develop the quality. They describe it as a “recurrent religious sentiment, often reflected in gift giving and other social exchange between humans and their gods”, and comment that some of the most profound gratitude experiences can be “religiously based or associated with reverent wonder and an acknowledgment of the universe, including the perception that life itself is a gift” (p. 646).

This sense of *reverence* that comes from connecting ourselves to the “whole of time”, as Heintzman (2011) puts it, allows us momentarily to overcome that very human frustration with the transience of time, by recognising that “the past is still alive in the present, and the present . . . is already ‘pregnant’ with the future” (p. 21). The storytelling tradition inherent in so many religious traditions has served, and across many communities still does serve, as a way of engendering this reverence, of bringing the past to life through the power of narrative. However, apart from these communal rituals that exist within organised religion, storytelling traditions can also evolve in a more localised setting within

each family, through the individual pursuit of family history research, where perhaps it becomes its own, even more immediately relevant form of sacrament.

3. Sacred Journeys

The concept of a spiritual journey, or *pilgrimage*, is an important part of many religious traditions. The ancient site of Magadha, in north-east India, was the destination of many early practitioners of Buddhism, eager to visit the place where the Buddha was said to have lived. In Islam, faithful adherents are expected to undertake the *Hajj* at least once in their lifetime, a journey to the sacred city of Mecca that demonstrates their submission to God and solidarity with other Muslims. For Jewish people, one of the dominant stories in their sacred writings is that of the Exodus, the forty year long quest of the Israelites as they emerged from slavery in Egypt and wandered through the wilderness, searching for their promised land. Much of Jewish tradition and liturgical practice is centred around expressing this “yearning for Zion” (Langer 2018). Heintzman (2011) describes the spiritual journey at the heart of this tradition as a *mutual* quest—“the quest of God for his wayward people, and the quest of the people of Israel for their God” (p. 76).

In the Christian tradition, too, pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and other holy sites connected with the apostles, saints, and Christian martyrs, have been an important part of the religious landscape from as far back as the fourth century. Perhaps one of the most well-known Christian pilgrimages is the *Camino de Santiago* (“Way of St. James”), a set of pathways that lead to the Santiago de Compostela cathedral in Galicia, Spain, where the shrine of St. James the apostle is located, and his remains supposedly buried. Each year, hundreds of thousands of people set out to make the pilgrimage to this Cathedral, by foot, bicycle, or even on horseback (Buen Camino n.d.). Many of the travellers are of Christian background, and consider the location to be of particular religious significance. However, others simply consider the expedition to be a more generally applicable type of spiritual journey, an experience through which they can retreat from modern life and achieve inner growth.

Bowman and Sepp (2019) describe the Camino as the “prototypical” pilgrimage, particularly popular among pilgrimage first-timers. They coin the term *Caminoisation* to describe a growing set of beliefs and assumptions about pilgrimage, common among contemporary Camino pilgrims, that are increasingly becoming “transplanted and translated to other pilgrimage sites, routes and contexts” (p. 75), for instance, the idea that “the journey is more important than the destination”, with pilgrimages that are undertaken on foot being considered more authentic in some sense. Bowman and Sepp comment that, in Europe particularly, the pilgrimage is seeing a revival, accompanied by a “spiritualisation of heritage” and “heritagisation of religion”—an amalgamation of the literal, physical pilgrimage with a more metaphorical kind: an internal, spiritual quest of sorts. They quote a pilgrimage service provider’s observation of the modern pilgrim (p. 84):

... while many people no longer take part in organised religion they still recognise a spiritual dimension to their lives. They don’t want the commitment or the formality of going to church but are happy to pop into a cathedral or say a quick prayer. A pilgrimage is the perfect opportunity for this sort of informal spirituality.

Heintzman also examines the idea of pilgrimage applying both internally as well as externally, noting that the entire life of religious practice can itself be construed as a journey “in search of something . . . that is never completely found”, but in which the search itself can nonetheless “give direction and shape to a life” (p. 74). The *narrative* of the pilgrimage, he writes, is about learning to live life as a “journey of faith”—continuing to persevere in hope through “valleys of sorrow and loss, of doubt and despair, to the other side” (p. 83). The quest for information undertaken by family historians aligns with this notion of an internal, metaphorical pilgrimage, including the sense of it never being quite complete. Bottero (2015) notes that framing research activities as a “personal journey of self-discovery” (p. 540) is a common theme among family historians.

The “external” pilgrimage has become popular for family historians through the growing field of genealogical tourism. Shaw (2020) notes how, with “increasing globalisation, transnational migration, greater social class mobility, and what can be viewed as a depersonalized modern society, many people are exposed to a sense of social dislocation and seek to discover where ‘they belong’”. A literal, physical journey to uncover one’s “point of origin” is one way in which this search for rootedness can take place.

Such journeys might combine historical sight-seeing with visits to more personally significant sites. Sanchini (2010) notices this diversity in the pilgrimages described by her interviewees, who “would visit the Fountain of Trevi one day and the family plot in the village cemetery the next” (p. 237). Nash (2002), too, in her work on genealogical tourists in Ireland, describes the wide variety of motives cited by her interviewees: some looking for citizenship or tax breaks, some looking to “satisfy intense longings”, others with a more easy-going spirit of inquiry. She probes how questions of identity and belonging are bound up with genealogy, noting that most visitors seemed propelled by a desire to know more about “who they are” and to explore their Irishness, often hoping this desire will be satisfied through some physical experience of connection to the land (pp. 36–37).

Basu (2005, 2007), in his studies of the Scottish heritage community, found that for many people of Scottish ancestry living in other countries, visiting Scotland as a tourist allowed them to gain a sense of connection to their ancestors, thereby strengthening their own sense of self in the process. In many cases, the place they were visiting may not have been visited for generations, and yet, for the tourist, there is still a sense of ‘returning home’, in which the visit “offers the dislocated self an opportunity to relocate itself both spatially and temporally” (Basu 2007, p. 9).

Moore et al. note that among their interview sample of family historians, a common theme came through of wanting to literally “walk in their ancestors’ footsteps” (p. 27), seeing the things they had seen and experiencing what they had experienced. Again, we see the parallels between pilgrimages motivated by ancestry research and those journeys which might be motivated in some way by a religious belief—bringing back to mind Bowman and Sepp’s notion of the “spiritualisation of heritage”, as well as discussion from Taylor (2012) on pilgrimage’s “malleability” (pp. 209–10):

The plasticity and relative malleability of pilgrimage, the space it often leaves for individual and collective agency, and its ambiguous character as religious or secular activity all contribute to making it a uniquely potent way of maintaining or asserting a moral geography that reconfigures the world for personal and collective purposes.

Smith (2006) also notes this malleability of pilgrimage sites, writing that while “places, sites, objects and localities may exist as identifiable sites of heritage . . . these places are not inherently valuable, nor do they carry a freight of innate meaning. Stonehenge, for instance, is basically a collection of rocks in a field” (p. 13). The value and meaning in such heritage sites, she argues, is instead bestowed by the surrounding culture and by those who visit the sites, the “activities that are undertaken at and around them, and of which they become a part” (p. 14). Through becoming connected with a culturally and socially significant event or practice, these sites symbolically take on a spiritual significance. So too for a person visiting the town their ancestors lived in, walking the streets they walked on, visiting the graveyard they are buried in—while the sites themselves may be historically unremarkable, they carry meaning and sacredness for the visiting descendant.

4. Sacred Gatherings

Sacred gatherings, involving singing, dancing, chants, and other kinds of rituals and ceremonies, have always been a part of religious practice. In ancient cultures, such rituals might be used to ward off evil spirits or appease the gods. Heintzman notes that in more modern times, while religious gatherings might retain some of the original elements of “mystery, awe, and fear”, they are also more inclined to involve “elements of celebration, joy, understanding, thankfulness, and identification with the external world” (p. 25).

Adherents to religion today regularly take part in gatherings and ceremonies, usually meeting together on a weekly basis at a church, synagogue, or mosque, to connect with their community and to take part in traditional rituals that have been passed down through generations. Such rituals are known as *liturgy*—literally, “the work of the people”—an embodied participation in the sacred through collective activities such as singing, recitation of prayers and holy writings, “call and response” style readings, chanting, performing certain physical actions (such as crossing oneself in the Catholic church, or the iteration of repeated bowing in supplication in the Islamic *raka’ah* ritual), or even observing a period of silence (such as in Quaker meetings).

However, the practice of observing these types of religious ritual is waning in our modern culture. Roof notes the changing norms of society even towards the end of the last century (p. 57):

... many people never exposed to a religious culture, or who dropped out of churches and synagogues when they were quite young, report that when they go to religious services they often feel awkward, not sure of what to say or how to act ... [This is] less a protest of religion in the deepest sense of its meaning than a response to institutional and cultural styles that are unfamiliar or seemingly at odds with life experiences as these people know them.

While the ritual of weekly church attendance may be less common than it once was, certain kinds of liturgical practice nonetheless persist in our society. The tradition of gathering together to remember an event or mark a particular occasion is something that remains embedded in our culture. Many who no longer observe a particular religion still search for a way to regularly integrate this kind of ritualistic gathering into their lives, but without the prerequisite of belief in any god. Some research on secular Jews, for example, has demonstrated that families often still gather for Passover and Hanukah (Creese 2019; Reingold 2021). Frame (2009) comments on the tendency for secular societies to borrow religious customs in situations where they might give comfort. He discusses the example of Anzac Day commemoration services in Australia, describing them as “civic liturgies” that hold “very broad notions of the divine identity and human destiny”, nonetheless leaving participants with “a reassuring sense that they have engaged in a virtuous event and rendered some spiritual service to those they commemorated” (p. 304). Taylor (2007), too, notes that people continue to be drawn to such ritualistic ceremonies both when disaster strikes and “when people feel a desire to be connected to their past”. He gives the example of the mourning and funeral for Princess Diana in 1997 as an event which combined both of these motivations.

While Frame is concerned that such broadly accessible approaches to liturgy “unintentionally belittle conventional religion” and serve simply as a “veneer used to bring a little transcendence to what would otherwise appear morbid” (p. 305), the appeal of these secular/humanist liturgies seems to remain, even as participation and involvement in more formal religious rites and practices declines. Perhaps it is the sense of community and connection they bring with them, or perhaps it is the sense of awe, of observance and acknowledgement of something higher than oneself that comes with adhering to a ritual of some kind, of following a tradition observed by countless others across generations.

The family unit is perhaps one of the most natural communities among which to recreate and evolve these sacred rituals. Families most often come together to mark a celebration of some kind, for example, birthdays, weddings, graduations, and Thanksgiving. Heintzman notes that families are likely to have a favourite set of rituals and ceremonies with which to mark their shared celebration (p. 17):

... lighting and blowing out birthday candles, giving Uncle David the wishbone, parading from the kitchen to the living room ... [singing] “Happy Birthday,” “For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow,” carols, campfire songs.

Such practices become their own “work of the people”, their own form of liturgy. However, Heintzman also points out that not all family rituals take the form of celebration (p. 18):

For it's in the family, above all, that we experience the most profound mysteries of life, those [that] rational thought is often helpless to explain, much less for which to offer us any real comfort: the mysteries of life and death—especially death. At funerals, wakes, and during shivas, we summon all the resources of custom, ceremony, and ritualized family behaviour to help us bear the burden of the greatest and most painful mystery of all.

The process of learning more about our heritage through family history research can strengthen the connection we feel to family members, both past *and* present. It can increase the sense of meaning and fulfillment found by taking part in family gatherings, whether they be celebratory or mourning events. Both [Kramer \(2011\)](#) and [Shaw \(2020\)](#) discuss how family history research can provide a way to work through grief from the death of a family member, “rearranging and regenerating the meaning of the past” ([Kramer 2011](#), p. 382), and allowing the researcher to forge and maintain a connection with those who have died.

Moore et al. discuss how sharing family history stories contributes to this strengthening of family relationships, referring to a quote found on a family reunion flyer which exemplifies the concept well (p. 52):

Have you ever wondered why we hold family reunions? The theme for our next reunion is 'Let's Stay Connected'. That is the major reason we hold reunions. Our family has grown so much and we need to get together regularly to show our mutual connection and support.

As well as connecting more strongly with family members, family historians often find their own communities in the course of their research—whether previously unknown distant family members or simply others who share an interest in genealogy. Moore et al. comment on how an interest in family history can often result in new connections to “other passionate historians”, with many of their study participants having reported the friendships they had made through this shared interest, and how this had contributed to a “more positive sense of self” (p. 28). One example of such a community is the popular annual conference RootsTech, a family history convention hosted by the non-profit organisation FamilySearch. Held as an online event in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year the conference attracted over a million participants from all over the world, eager to connect over their shared passion ([Toone 2021](#)).

[Hackstaff \(2010\)](#) describes how taking part in such gatherings where stories and histories are shared can help to create new social and collective memories, allowing for the diverse representation of voices that exists among genealogists to provide “a fuller accounting of experiences that can guide our future” (p. 667). Whether it be through strengthening the existing bonds of kin, finding previously unknown family members via online searching, or forming a new kind of “family” in the form of those who share a research interest, ancestry research brings many opportunities to gather meaningfully with community.

5. Conclusions

Although in many parts of the world, over the last few decades, we have seen a clear disenchantment and disidentification with organised religion taking place, [Roof \(1999\)](#) comments that this is just one side of the coin. The other, in his view, is “the turning inward in search of meaning and strength” that is occurring outside the context of formal religious structures. Roof argues that many of those who have left the traditional faith of their childhood are nonetheless searching inwardly for a new sense of the sacred, “in hopes of finding a God not bound by older canons of literalism, moralism, and patriarchy, in hopes that their own biographies might yield personal insight” (p. 57). In some cases, it might be that these questioning folk look a little further afield to gain such insight, broadening their search to explore the biographies not just of themselves, but of their ancestors.

To connect with family is, as Heintzman puts it, to connect with “something larger than our individual selves, something to which we belong, and to which we have obligations, even though it’s not the result of our own free choice . . . one English word that covers most of this territory is ‘reverence’” (p. 18). This is all the more true for the family history researcher, whose awareness of “family” widens to include far more than their immediate kin, extending outwards both spatially and temporally to gain an understanding of different eras and different cultures from their own. A kind of reverence is experienced as a result, as new connections are found and formed between the ‘other’ and the self. Because this reverence comes from a sense of connectedness that is “built into all human experience”, Heintzman says, “it cannot, by its *own* dynamic, stop at the boundaries of the family . . . but spreads outward to the surrounding tribe, community, culture, nation, and eventually to humanity as a whole” (p. 24).

Whether through the telling and retelling of ancient stories, embarking on historical quests, or taking part in rituals and ceremonies with our kin and with like-minded people, the embodied practices that have become a part of the life of the everyday ancestry researcher are creating new understandings of the sacred, new contexts for encountering spiritual experiences, and new ways of making meaning, even through a secular lens.

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Notes

- ¹ The moniker partially comes from the box labelled “None” on censuses and surveys that ask about religious belief. It refers in part to those who are consistently nonreligious, but also captures those people who once identified as religious but no longer do, i.e., those who are “done with church”.
- ² It is worth noting that these numbers may well represent an under-reporting of non-religious people in Australia. Those who do mark a religious box on the census do not always do so because they currently believe or practise that religion, but may instead respond based on the religion of their family upbringing (Nicholls 2021). In recent years, a number of secular organisations in Australia have campaigned to encourage people who do not currently consider themselves religious to tick “no religion” on their census (see censusnoreligion.org.au, accessed on 18 August 2021), in a bid to see the census data more accurately reflect the beliefs of Australians.
- ³ See Exodus 3:6, for example.
- ⁴ Hebrews 12:1.

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