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Religion and Aging

Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Explorations



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Religion and Aging in International and Intercultural Perspectives – Mapping the Field

Andrea Bieler and Matthias Stracke

This volume explores pathways into a new field of scholarly inquiry. Reflecting on religion and aging in international and intercultural perspectives is an endeavor that has been neglected in theological as well as gerontological studies. Demographic trends as well as experiences in particular contexts, however, exhibit the urgent need to engage this field of inquiry.

Gathering under the umbrella of the United Nations in 1982, the World Assembly on Ageing already stressed that the expected demographic shifts would affect the majority of societies all around the globe. In 2002, the UN passed The Madrid International Plan on Ageing which demanded major shifts in policy making and in socio-cultural attitudes concerning aging populations.

Statistics demonstrate the rapid growth of aging societies which predict the doubling of numbers of people older than 60 years by 2050. This development pertains to most regions on this planet and is accompanied with particular challenges that call for diverse political initiatives, especially in the areas of economic support systems, accessible health care, and diverse and flexible systems of social care for the elderly. Besides the demand for the shift in political interventions there is also a need for a critical reflection of the anthropological and religious assumptions that undergird prevailing attitudes towards aging populations.

So far, major distinguished research initiatives have not attended to the influence of religion on major demographic developments. Also, socio-psychological research that concentrates on the socio-emotional factors with regard to attitudes towards the elderly have neglected the religious dimension. Simultaneously, gerontological research with an interest in religious questions related to the aging

process has mainly focused on the European and North American context so far.

Taking these perceptions into account, this volume seeks to begin to attend to the gaps that emerge once one focuses on questions of aging and religion in intercultural and global contexts.

There are a variety of research questions that need to be addressed. First of all, on a global scale, we need to learn more about the diverse ways in which religious organizations and individuals respond to the complexities of aging societies. Assuming that aging is an intricate process that encompasses enrichment and loss, the gain of wisdom and the loss of memory, and the expansion as well as the constraint of agency, it would be crucial to analyze how these developments play out in different contexts.

Transformational processes related to aging need to be studied in an intercultural horizon that takes multidimensional and multidirectional dynamics into account. These dynamics play out on an individual as well as on a collective level. They find their particular expressions depending on the context. In addition, a culturally sensitive concept of vulnerability needs to be developed that considers the strengths and potentials that are unleashed in aging processes as well as the threats and endangerment that people are facing. These dimensions need to be addressed not only in empirical research but also in hermeneutical endeavors that seek to develop a theological anthropology that is sensitive with regards to the complex issues of aging persons. In this vein, it is important to explore the relevancy of religious practices and theological constructs in light of gerotranscendence. By gerotranscendence we mean the ability to see one's life in a larger context and horizon that might be nurtured by religious or spiritual insights or by understandings of the cosmological order. The question then arises to what extent such diverse ways of envisioning life in light of gerotranscendence supports aging people in developing resilient, hopeful, and at the same time realistic attitudes towards the challenges that growing old might bring.

The book is divided into three parts that provide a panorama of theoretical and practical approaches to aging and religion. The first sequence of articles opens the horizon by asking different disciplines for an account of the realities (and misperceptions) of aging from their perspective, be it gerontological, psychological, or anthropological. After this interdisciplinary part, attention is focused on theology and its self-critical reassessment of the role of age and aging in practical,

systematic, and biblical theology. Finally, the last part of the book asks for insights from the practice in diaconic institutions, in public policy making, as well as in an international community of churches.

Ina Voelcker and Alexandre Kalache, both working at the International Longevity Centre Brazil (ILC-Brazil), give an overview of demographic realities and changes on a global scale, such as dropping fertility rates, growing life expectancies, urbanization and technologization, and their implications on the lives of (not only) older persons. They show that there is no easy picture here, but rather point out the ambiguities of old age between the 'silver market' and age related poverty, marginalization, and vulnerability. In light of inter alia the neglect of older persons in humanitarian projects, they emphasize the need for a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons at the level of the United Nations that would exceed the existing instruments and plans. With the World Health Organization's Active Ageing Policy Framework, recently updated by the ILC-Brazil, there exists, however, a guideline internationally used in policymaking. It focuses on multisectorial action in different sectors and the empowerment of individuals to influence their lives directly as well as indirectly – via policymaking.

The gerontologist Hans-Werner Wahl rather focuses on individual developments of aging seen as a psychological and social process. He provides an overview of main themes of behavioral and social gerontology. Again, aging proves to be ambiguous and cannot be simply understood as a deterioration of social and cognitive parameters. Hence, for example, old people keep gaining so called crystallized intelligence (e.g., verbal abilities and life experience) while their fluid intelligence (e.g., processing speed) declines at a rate no faster than in earlier years. Similarly, gerontological research of the past two decades disproved the long assumed decline of subjective wellbeing in later life. And though older persons do indeed have less social relations, they remain proactive toward maintaining social relations, especially in their families. Research on AARC (Awareness of Age-Related Change) shows that stereotypes of aging not only do harm as external effects but, internalized, also affect, for instance, live expectancy. The author also includes an outlook on current efforts in gerontology to combine theology, diaconal studies, and psychology in order to provide suggestions on how societies can better provide opportunities for older persons.

From another psychological angle, Jenny Lee and Helene Fung deepen the understanding of aging as a multifaceted stage of life by debunking the myths of old age-related loneliness, depression, and memory loss. Against the background of church realities in Hong Kong and New Zealand and psychological findings they suggest steps to make churches more welcoming, inclusive, and empowering for old people – something, they assert, people of all age groups would benefit from.

Critically questioning whether mainstream scientific perceptions of and approaches to aging do good in neglecting cultural and especially religious factors, Peter van Eeuwijk focuses on the regulative, integrative, and interpretive influence of religion and spirituality and the respective practices on aging and elderly people's health. Accordingly, he presents insights from two case studies he conducted in Indonesia and Tanzania and underlines that "the belief in God, Allah, or Buddha represents meaningful 'explanatory models' for the elderly in Indonesia and Tanzania when they reflect good health, longevity, frailty, chronification of disease, changes in their body and mind, and pain and/or disability with regard to the aging process and old age." Prayer here is one mode of care among others. Van Eeuwijk then discusses the 'social body' of old people and the interwovenness of faith, individual behavior and lifestyle, and the societal (e.g., gender) norms ambiguously affecting inter- as well as intragenerational care in families (and beyond); care is both an interrelational social practice as well as a relational religious doing. In a third step, van Eeuwijk examines the under-researched role of faith-based organizations in social welfare for older persons and highlights their importance both for the provision of complimentary care structures as well as for the social life of elderly people, including their leisure activities.

Following on from these broad range of approaches to aging we put Ralph Kunz's article first in the second part of the book. He is likewise interested in the ambiguities of aging and introduces us to two very different people, Martha and Bob. He argues that adding a religious perspective does not mean having an easy assessment instrument, but rather calls for a comparative-critical approach that implies listening to these and other people and their religious stances between devoted church going and anti-aging campaigning. Yet, as a theologian, Kunz does not stop here, but brings into play the Christian particular universal claims and hence testimony of God in narrative

form showcasing the story of Adam, Eve, and the snake and its implications for our understanding of aging.

Ángel F. Méndez-Montoya takes the biblical narratives as a starting point to reflect on the paradoxes of life and the potentials of aging, contrasting the Bible's positive approach to aging and care for others with current forms of ageism. Asserting the need to think about aging beyond Western epistemologies, to hybridize it, he explores aging in the Mexican context, and underlines the need to also listen to voices from 'below' and the power that can be found at the margins, as becomes visible in the role of elderly people in the context of the 43 students made disappear in 2014.

From a postcolonial perspective, Musa Dube describes the Bible itself as an ambiguous resource. In the biblical texts and the communities reading and living with them, one finds voices resisting and embracing the empire and hence also different approaches to aging, the latter a largely neglected field, as she points out. She underlines the need for an intersectional analysis of the texts that, for instance concerning the person of Sarah, brings to light both the infirmities of old age as well as the power that older persons may use to exploit younger ones and how this relates to categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity. Dube connects her biblical reflections with the realities of displacement and migration in postcolonial contexts such as in Botswana: "Empire has had an impact on the quality of aging experienced by those impacted by colonialism."

Ending the sequence of these theological accounts, Drea Fröchtling focuses on dementia and the question how to think about the personhood of those who do not fully know who they are. She contrasts the widely prevalent 'biomedical reductionist paradigm,' qualifying dementia as a deterioration process and leading to a high prevalence of dementia-related depression, with what she calls a 'liturgical-reconstructionist paradigm.' Therefore, Fröchtling elaborates on different theological approaches to personhood and remembrance. Drawing on her own research in South Africa, Germany, and Ghana, she shows that people living with dementia often take their own approaches to an otherwise very word-centered religion. Fröchtling highlights the comforting and supporting dimension of religious activities and rituals that also make space for bodily sensations inclusive for people living with dementia. She argues for a ludic (e.g., a clownish) approach that allows us "to dance *coram Deo*, celebrating the

scope of freedom granted by a God who turned the logics of this world upside down.”

The articles opening the next part of the book both stem from the context of the United Evangelical Mission (UEM). Angelika Veddeler gives an insight into how aging became a topic among the members of the UEM through HIV and AIDS and the awareness that the elderly were not targeted in their programs. She describes the process of international exchange that led to identifying contextual challenges and opportunities, but also the need of better training and more research to support churches that, as became clear, play an important role in shaping perceptions of old age. Klaus Pöschel takes a closer look at the Philippines, Indonesia, and Germany, identifying contextual needs. He describes how diaconic institutions in the UEM exchanged answers regarding the needs of institutionalized care and related ethical questions, such as the modalities of a nurse exchange in times of care drain.

Ina Voelcker gives an overview on bottom-up approaches in policy making that involve older people in decision-making processes at all levels, for example, in the quest for age friendly cities. Campaigns such as Age Demands Action have both a local and international dimension as can be seen on October 1st – the United Nations International Day of Older Persons. Voelcker also fleshes out important parameters for participative approaches in policy making as well as future research questions.

Drea Fröchtling comes back to the topic of dementia and provides an overview of different therapy concepts from Reality Orientation Training, music and milieu therapy, to snoezelen. On the road towards more cultural sensitive approaches to dementia care, she pleads to start with the perspectives of people living with dementia and presents different illness narratives she derived from encounters in the field, such as demon-based, ancestor-related, and bio-medical interpretations of dementia.

This collection of essays is concluded by a conference commentary with a twist; Beate Hofmann introduces the perspective of diaconic science and a spatial approach to social work that aims at establishing caring communities in a region or neighborhood.