1 Spirited Ageing

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Introduction

A fundamental underlying theme of this book is that the later years are a significant time for the spiritual dimension of life, both as a resource for facing the challenges of ageing and for the potential it offers for growth and development. Spirituality is, of course, as much a part of human experience as any other normal kind of thought or behaviour, although this has not always been the view of scholars or practitioners. Furthermore, both spirituality and religion are widespread phenomena, being part of many cultures and of the lives of people of all ages and statuses. Spirituality continues to adapt and evolve new forms because it addresses people's human needs to connect meaningfully with themselves, with each other and to a higher power or larger source of meaning and purpose. Thus, the sources of spiritual inspiration and sustenance are internal, drawing on and making sense of experiences and interactions in the world as well as through any perceived transcendent connection.

However, until recently, this inner life of older people has been largely ignored or treated as problematic by gerontologists. Research is heavily directed towards physical and economic well-being and the political economy of ageing populations. The unseen dynamics of living are investigated principally in terms of physical and psychological pathologies within conventional disease paradigms or the policy challenges that they pose. This volume offers a more detailed map of the way individuals in later life experience and manage their psychological and spiritual self-identities, especially when finitude intensifies the process of life review.

Much of the current rise in interest in spirituality is related to its traditional link with health and well-being, making it a potential contributor to interventions or therapies that can improve people's lives. For instance, spiritual experiences and practices that are capable of helping establish an integrated personality are being recognised as playing a part in mental health. Older people with a developed spiritual dimension to their lives are said (in various experimentally established situations) to

1

deal better with negative life events and their attendant stress, and to recover more quickly from illness or trauma (Mohan 2001). Such research is based on, and gives rise to further investigation of, ideas about spirituality being involved in coping, adjusting, social inclusion, mature self-identity and esteem, meaning and purpose, death awareness and so on.

However, whilst much attention is devoted by governments and service providers to older people's health needs, the focus of that attention may not reflect the range of needs that trouble everyday life. Whilst increasing concern is exercised (rightly) in relation to dementia, by contrast the epidemic of depression in older age is widely overlooked and typically treated pharmaceutically. The same can be said generally of research and policy on the rapidly changing experience of ageing. Comparatively little attention is given to the psychosocial aspects of the end of lives. More specifically, the experience of long-lived individuals is only just beginning to be recognised for the unknown territory it represents. As a relatively 'new' stage of life, in terms of mass experience, we do not yet have adequate conceptual frameworks to describe its character and purposes, beyond the model of extended middle age that is the essence of 'successful', 'productive' or 'positive' ageing.

Despite the demographic impacts of ageing societies worldwide becoming well known, even outside the gerontological community, a less-understood aspect of population ageing is the impact of so many more elderly people needing to negotiate meaning and purpose in late life. The absence of a social understanding for this part of the life-course is unhelpful, both for the individuals living it and society's response to it. It adds urgency, and perhaps an additional rationale, to research that hopes to understand the world of older people from *their* point of view, as well as from the viewpoint of researchers or society at large.

Of course, many older people never enter the age of dependency and many have their continued contributions to family and society recognised, but the trend towards longer lives and pressures on families mean increasing numbers will risk entering and surviving longer in a dependency that is less than ideally supported. For their sakes, we do need to rethink our understanding of the life-course and meet the fears of the rising generations of older people concerning being resented as a leisured class in their third age, and as burdens in their fourth (Coleman 2009).

One of the chief roles of research into ageing and spirituality can be to inform policy responses to the demands and challenges of societies that are ageing. However, it should not be the presumption of social policy to cast the role of older age as one of continuing struggle against demise (Howse 1999). Rather, the true root of the 'problem' of old age is the

need for a shared value about what is desirable and possible beyond the third age (where older people's social contribution can be more easily recognised). If spirituality can influence the social construction of late life towards it being seen as a time of possibility for growth, service and fulfilment, then it will have contributed significantly to a broader understanding of old age (McFadden 1995). Thus, appreciation of a spiritual dimension for late life matters less because of how it might inform service provision for older people, and more for the way it shapes the value that is attached to particular stages of life.

The demographic projections for life expectancy and survival rates at increasing ages cannot be overstated for their impact on the scale of the spiritual understanding of later life that will be needed. Simon Biggs (1999) has written about the 'mature imagination' that will be required to re-conceive meaningful lives in old age, whose numbers will extend much further than in previous societies' experience. To borrow the observation that the cost of education is nothing compared to the cost of not educating, research needs to address itself to the (individual and social) costs of neither understanding nor attempting to support meaningful living in later life. It is the contention of this volume that spirituality in later life can address both the individual and societal dilemmas concerning the purpose and value of older age.

Aims of 'Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing'

The primary purpose of the book, and the symposium on which it is based, is to bring together an international group of leading researchers and writers on spirituality and ageing; to distil the latest advances in knowledge and thinking; and to engage in vigorous discussion about how we can interpret this learning for the benefit of older people and those who seek to serve and support them.

Despite the involvement of gerontologists in a bewildering array of issues related to age and ageing, researchers – with a few honourable exceptions – have avoided both spirituality and death. Yet the increasing presence of finitude as we grow older is an inescapable fact. Life review and reflection about personal pasts and diminishing futures are both well known to students of later life. Nonetheless, the focus on positive ageing appears to have all but eclipsed study of the inner life, both religious and non-religious. So the literature on ageing and spirituality is still relatively slender, especially outside of North America.

Similarly, the world of theology has witnessed a significant ageing of the membership of faith communities in much of the developed world, but it too has given little attention – other than to regret that the young

are conspicuously absent. There is a paucity of theology of age and later life and a continuing belief in the misguided truism that the young are the future of the churches, mosques, or synagogues. Some, however, do see the need not only to understand the way faith and beliefs come under new pressures as life moves into its later stages, but also the potential of the inner journey and later life spirituality. Occasional liturgies and innovative practices appear, but make no headway as faith leaders fail to understand the depth of need as well as spiritual strength amongst older people. Sociologists of religion continue to be observers of what they largely see as unstoppable secularisation.

A co-incidental rise in spirituality in recent times is seen as a related phenomenon, but not one that reverses the decline of traditional faith and religion. We see that in the stimulating accounts provided by Carrette and King (2005) of new spiritualities and their annexation by consumerism and business. Moreover such research appears to have no gerontological perspectives. For unaccountable reasons, one of the most spectacular developments of the twentieth century, the demographic revolution which saw life expectancy increase in developed societies by over half, has escaped attention. On the other hand sociologists have been deeply interested in shifting patterns of belief and unbelief. They have been active in exploring the cultural consequences in socio-political terms and in the search for new forms of spiritual practice. Today's older people are tantalisingly caught up in these changes at both levels, as their own life and faith dynamics move alongside the larger social and cultural changes in faith and spirituality.

Ageing, beliefs and the inner life are long-established features of academic psychology, sociology and the different worlds of clinical and professional practice. Here the literature is much fuller; ranging from the detailed studies of religious belief and psychological well-being, religion as a cause of guilt and anguish, and theorists who have attempted to formulate models, patterns and stages to deal with the exigencies of life as it progresses through the life-course. Chapter authors represent invited individuals from all of these domains. The selection was based on the principle of inviting those whose work has achieved recognition and which has impinged on our own attempts to understand better how human beings negotiate the meaning of their lives.

Themes

We take this opportunity to explore the main, interrelated themes that emerge from the rich resource of the contributed chapters. First, there is the nature of spirituality and its development in later life. This includes

the agentic and purposeful seeking of spiritual experience and knowledge, as well as the less consciously apprehended impacts of personal development and the practice of well-loved and meaningful ritual. Then, there is the relationship of later life spirituality to meaning and purpose, which is a key gerontological theme, encompassing psychological, sociological and theological approaches. Last, there is the question of how spirituality and religion respond to the existential issues of later life (such as diminishment and finitude), both at individual and communal levels, in theory as well as in practice. Although these cross-cutting themes are powerful ways of exploring the material, and we recommend you bear them in mind as you read, they are not the easiest way of presenting the material. So a four-part scheme will organise the contributions, as described below.

Personal Encounters with the Meanings of Old Age

We have titled the first part *The Spiritual Journey of Ageing*, since it deals with the inner journey of spirituality, which may become more pressing in later life, but which emerges and finds expression in different ways. The means by which such journeys can be understood are also a challenge when observation of private, or even less-than-conscious, processes are involved. Two 'traditional' scientific approaches are included here, from two of the seminal contributors to this field of study – Robert Atchley and Elizabeth MacKinlay. Based on their many years of research experience, their wisdom allows them to also admit into their discussions the need for humanistic practice and sensitive spiritual insight. They both lay out for the reader the fruits of their own understanding of how spirituality in later life is conceived and operates. The voice of the mind or soul is the focus for the other two chapters, with Harry Moody tapping into the rich 'data' that comes from dreams and Andrew Achenbaum drawing on narratives in the particular form of fables, by way of illustrating the stories we all live by. Tuning into these sources offers an alternative paradigm for the generation of knowledge and understanding on spirituality and ageing which, by its very nature, is a challenge for the earlier positivist approaches that supported gerontology.

Spirituality in a Changing Landscape: Believers, Doubters and Re-constructors

The second part, subtitled *Cultures of the Spirit in Modernity*, articulates the particular intellectual challenge that spirituality and ageing finds itself addressing at this moment in time. The tectonic plates of social and

cultural change that have transformed the developed world in recent decades regarding religion, faith and spirituality are providing a changed landscape to today's and tomorrow's older people. Cohort differences are currently apparent in the spiritual understanding of third agers compared to fourth agers. Within societies, the institutions of the family as well as religious communities are struggling to comprehend and act on the changes.

Vern Bengtson presents a broad population approach to exploring these changes, including the generational transmission of spiritual or faith values and practices. His signal study has attracted considerable attention in the US media and has served to undermine established interpretations of decline, such as Putnam and Campbell's (2010) *American Grace*. Drawing as it does on a 35-year-cohort study, his findings are all the more remarkable, in observing religious and spiritual resilience.

Peter Coleman's international experience has recently focused on the impact for spiritual belief and practice of major political and cultural change in Eastern Europe, and the role that older people have played in sustaining and adapting their spirituality, and that of younger generations. Ellen Idler's humane account of religious ritual and practice is woven with the life and ministry story of her father, but with sociological insight on the meaning and value in later life of spiritual practices that are still based in families, communities and institutions.

She illustrates Peter Coleman's often made point that religion is still the bulwark of many older people, providing a framework for life, the glue in many communities, and meanings through which experiences can be interpreted despite the changing landscape.

Paul Higgs, a cultural gerontologist, offers a re-orientation of spirituality in de-religionised modern and postmodern societies. He draws us into the discourses of postmodernity, with its emphasis on individualism and the claimed rejection of the old institutions of social control. Religion falls squarely into this analysis and has led one commentator to conclude that the new culture enables individuals to have 'A God of one's own'. Paul Higgs confronts writers about spirituality in old age with suggestions that the generational rationales of the old are completely at odds with the ego-centric values of later generations.

Grappling with the Inner Self: The Universal Quest for Meaning and Purpose

In this part, subtitled *Searching for Meaning in Later Life*, we have brought together material that features the age-old search for meaning and validation; for forgiveness and regret as well as thankfulness and completion.

Most of the chapters, if not all, also feature the absence of understanding about the fourth age, where dependency and loss may be taking people beyond their established retired or third-age identity and creating further challenges. Susan Eisenhandler takes as her motif the 'full hearted even-song' of the starling in a bleak winter setting who, despite his age and hostile environment, lets loose a wonderful song. Her interpretation of generational disjunctures about religion and belief reflect some of Higgs' analysis, but claims that 'generations and cohorts born after 1939 reflect different, "modern," structures and social worlds that by the mid 1970s, post-Vietnam for the sake of argument, begin to change dramatically at a pace which accelerates (circa the mid-1980s) with advances in cyber-technology. My sense is that present cohorts of older Americans have strong bedrock socialization in terms of religion, faith, and belief; how-ever, the bedrock becomes porous or is not found as uniformly among the "boomer" generation.'

Albert Jewell provides us with a thorough going analysis and account of the way that meaning and purpose has been studied and applied to later life spirituality, not least in his own research on older Methodists, whose resili-ence in later life first drew him to this topic. The challenge of ageing to people's meaning (reflection on the past) and purpose (hope for the future) is considered as a potential but avoidable crisis, through an increased understanding of the fourth age on the part of individuals, their faith communities and researchers developing better concepts and methods.

Malcolm Johnson's analysis of the need for better spiritual awareness and care has a more universal application; the vastly increasing numbers of both older and very old people point to current failings in policy and practice in our dealings with and understandings of late life. He offers a framework for representing the deeply anguished position of some older people at the end of life and counsels greater attention to their spiritual well-being and what he terms 'Biographical Pain'.

Ron Manheimer's exploration of spirituality as a lifelong process is a masterpiece of storytelling, using fictional characters to illustrate how the meanings and purposes that we hear debated are also profoundly influ-enced and played out against social change. Thus ageing itself may or may not reveal the fruits of spiritual development, such as the discovery of meaning, despite a potential 'inner' movement towards spirituality.

Enabling Older People to Address Their Spirituality

The last part, *Meeting Spiritual Needs in Older Age,* is more overtly based in practice rather than theory, although plenty of links to the findings and schemas of others are offered along the way. Applying the benefits of

narrative, as discussed earlier, Ann Morisy proposes a particular and tried method for enabling older people to do business with their spirituality.

She makes the case for facilitated group conversation that enables reflection to turn to resilience, through a process of encouragement, helping people to reaffirm or even reassemble their inner lives. Joanna Walker is also interested in the primary role of reflection and the spiritual development and learning what this can lead to, which she expresses in a mapping exercise for the different ways in which this might take place in later life. James Woodward takes a theological approach to exploring what spirituality and ageing have to say to each other, using terms such as redemption and incarnation, but also ones such as metaphor, narrative, fragility and dependency, to which theology has a particular voice to add. Keith Albans writes comprehensively about the derivation and application of a spiritual dimension to planning and delivering a residential care environment, such that the last part of life can be a significant rather than a neglected period. He brings to the reader thinking and practical experience of creating and delivering a service of 'chaplaincy and spirituality' to over 6000 older people.

The Book

The book sets out to provide a kaleidoscopic picture of an emerging field. We hope it will set a benchmark, as it maps the range of interests which are emerging from gerontology. But if it succeeds in enticing other researchers and thinkers it will certainly shift the debate into as yet unexplored areas. Clearly there is a debate to be developed about generations and cultural change; foreshadowed here by Vern Bengtson's research indicating the power of generational transfers of religious values within families and Paul Higgs' scepticism about the survival of these values as new generations take their place as social leaders.

A central area of research by gerontologists in the exploration of spirituality in later life is the documenting and interpreting what spirituality means for people in different cultures and religious dispositions born before the second World War. Social values and ways of thinking are influential throughout life and leave their imprint to the end. But there is strong evidence of varied patterns of re-evaluation over the life course. Beliefs are rarely static in the lives of individuals. These processes will also occur in the members of Generations X and Y as they progress through ages and stages. Sylvia Collins-Mayo's book (2010) *The Faith of Generation Y* reveals an open-minded cohort of people born 1982 onwards, for whom the cultural memory of Christianity is very faint

indeed. Simple comparisons at a point in time will inevitably provide marked contrast and may lead some to apocalyptic interpretations. Yet it is not unknown for young adults at later points on the age ladder to re-embrace the values and rationales of their parents, even if presented in novel ways. So we need a greater body of evidence and a wider constituency of researchers to fashion the character of tradition and change.

The authors, their interests and styles of enquiry are a reflection of the many dimensions of spirituality as a realm of human experience and its diverse manifestations in older age. They come from very different societies around the modern world. Such interests are yet to emerge in developing nations where world religions in all their sectarian diversity are still dominant. As better survival rates, improved healthcare, smaller families and globalised practices change population structures, the inevitable foci of attention are on healthcare and pensions. It will be some time before the nations of Africa, South America and parts of Asia turn attention to the inner lives of their longer-lived elders.

The chapters derive from psychology theology, history, philosophy, sociology and gerontology. This mix represents the present state of play. In the near future there might be contributions from computer science, neurology, economics and business studies. Ageing cuts across the whole swathe of academic disciplines, though only some are seriously present now. What links the chapters of this book and the scholars who produced them is the connection between the experiences of growing older and the way these are associated with faith, belief and spirituality. Not surprisingly most of those attracted to the field so far have preexisting interests in one or other form of spirituality or religious affiliation. This experiential foundation to their studies gives them insight, access and prior knowledge alongside their intellectual and professional skills. In turn these qualities will invite some to challenge their independence of view. But students of social class were largely the socially mobile offspring of working class parents' and researchers into family disruption and violence are often led there by experience and a sense of injustice. It would be a pity if serious scholarship was dismissed by ideological discomfort rather than the genuine discourse this volume invites.

Reinventing Spirituality

Ageing societies around the world confront not only unprecedented life extension, but also populations where the numerical balance between the generations is radically reshaped. There are fewer young people and many more who are deemed to be old. Instead of ideas and social movements being in the exclusive hands of rising generations as we have

been accustomed to for over half a century, there will be new eras of contested ideas and influence on what we think and believe. Generational differences are already in evidence and our book adds substance to these trends. What should remain in doubt is the thesis that any contest for what constitutes a good and worthwhile life will be trumped by the newer generations. There are no models or templates for a reshaped demography. We shall negotiate our way into an uncharted future all-age society.

As young people themselves age, they will reformulate their estimates of what a good life and a good society should look like, just as their parents and grandparents did. If previous experience is any guide there may well be what statisticians term 'regression to the norm'. Religious and spiritual values and practices will inevitably adapt to cultural change. But it would be an unwise foreteller of the future that presumed that established ideas will be squeezed out in the rationalism and individualism of postmodern society.

There is ample evidence of a desire to embrace spiritualities among the younger adult population. As they encounter ideas and precepts about living that derive from long-recognised philosophies, psychologies and religions, there is some possibility that established ideas about self-worth and the inner life will re-enter social life. In the meantime, growing numbers of already older people need their spiritual concerns to be understood and supported.

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