

Ageing & Spiritual Growth

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Ageing Today

We have entered the age of longevity. The demographic revolution we are currently experiencing is well documented. It has been described by the United Nations (2007) as at least as powerful as the industrial revolution; transforming societies, families, and the individual; demanding alterations to our societal construction and expectation. However the experience of demographic revolution is not limited to a fortunate few living beyond their anticipated years, the change in demography has meant that age is now the experience of the many not the preserve of the few. In his 2001 Reith Lectures Tom Kirkwood described the affect of this change starkly in his opening statement, "Never in human history has a population so wilfully and deliberately defied nature by surviving as long as the present generation. We face a revolution in longevity... profoundly altering our attitudes to life and death" (Kirkwood, 2001). Kirkwood's 2001 assertions appear to suggest a societal commonality of purpose to overcome ageing, the reality is that through a complex accident of medical advance, political process, and societal change we have moved from an era of acute disease to an era of chronic disease (Fries, 2005).

In this age of longevity an ever-growing list of statistics declares a remarkable litany of change. In the UK alone the number of centenarians has more than tripled in the last 25 years and is projected to reach 87,900 people by 2034. By 2034 the number of people aged under 16 will have declined to 18% while those over 65 will have increased to 23% of the population. The fastest population increase in the UK has been in those aged 85 and over, in 1984 there were approximately 660,000 people aged 85 and over, reaching 1.4 million in 2009 and projected to reach 3.5 million in 2034 and accounting for 5% of the total population. Increased longevity brings increased risk of dementia as it is anticipated that 1 million people will be living with the disease by 2020. Over the last ten years sexually transmitted diseases have more than doubled amongst the over 50's and more than 80% of people aged 50-90 are sexually active.

Attitudes to age are being continuously challenged and the process of ageing itself is coming under increasing scrutiny as a language of 'agelessness' emerges. The survival of ageing populations and the desire for agelessness comes with an important condition; a condition expressed in *Beyond Therapy* (2003) the report of the USA President's Council on Bioethics, "The desire for ageless bodies involves the pursuit not only of longer lives, but also of lives that remain vigorous for longer. It seeks not only to add years to life, also to add life to years." The same theme of the conditionality of extended life spans was repeated in the 2005 House of Lord's report *Ageing: Scientific Aspects*, "We believe that increases in life expectancy are truly to be welcomed only if the 'added years' are of relatively good health." The conditionality contained in both these reports is a rejection associated with the fear of growing older. Katrina Bramstedt (2001) asked an important question an important question in her exploration of the rule of double affect in the biomedicalisation of

ageing, "Have we defined aging in such a manner that we 'need' technological breakthroughs in order to fight the problem of a soaring geriatric population." Bramstedt later observes, "It surely seems that society's construction of what it means to be elderly now fuels the current immortality revolution." Yet this desire for agelessness has a significant consequence that the gerontologist Molly Andrews (1999) identified when she observed that agelessness is itself a form of ageism, "... as it denies the old one of their most head-earned resources: their age."

Ageism and its effects

The dread and fear of growing older of has echoed down the millennia, Tim Parkin quotes the philosopher Seneca as stating, "I shall not abandon old age, if old age preserves me intact as regards the better part of myself; but if old age begins to shatter my mind, and to pull its various faculties to pieces, if it leaves me, not life, but only the breath of life, I shall leap from a building that is crumbling and tottering." (Parkin, 1998)

A term first coined by Dr Robert Butler in the 1960's ageism is a pernicious form of discrimination. Butler (who died in July 2010) revisited his description of ageism in his 2008 book *The Longevity Revolution* where he described the underlying basis of ageism as, "the dread and fear of growing older, becoming ill and dependent, and approaching death. People are afraid, and that leads to a profound ambivalence. The young dread aging, and the old envy youth. Behind aging is corrosive narcissism, the inability to accept, for indeed we are all in love with our youthful selves (Butler, 2008). Andrews (1999) put this in a simpler statement when she wrote, "Perhaps what sets ageism apart from sexism and racism is the potent element of self-hatred."

This is a profound dissonance residing at the heart of growing older, as Simon Biggs (1999) observes, "...older men and women are left with little option but to identify with and simultaneously resist the ageing process". Andrews (1999) has observed that, "People regularly do all sorts of things to prolong their lives... and perhaps at some level believe that extended life will not encompass old age. How can these thoughts exist in the same person?" An answer to Andrews question may be found in the development of mortality salience theories analysis of ageism by Martens et al (2005) who suggest, "...ageism exists precisely because elderly people represent our future in which death is certain". This representation of the future is an echo of a challenge that Peter Laslett in his book *A Fresh Map of Life* made when he wrote, "Neither philosopher, nor social scientist, nor individual at large has yet begun to recognise the force of the command in which will be insistently be repeated: Live continuously in the presence of all your future selves!"

Ageing & the Church

We live in an age when ancient resources such as religious belief are no longer held by the majority of people in the developed world to hold ultimate meaning. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) observed, "When belief in an afterlife is lost, health acquires a new meaning and a higher value; it becomes a secular expectation of salvation." This religion of health or "will to health" as Higgs et al, (2009) have described it is a period when health has become a fundamental and required goal of the individual, has become the new interpretative paradigm for people seeking to experience as much of life for as long as possible.

Lucian Bioa encapsulated this movement in his book *Forever Young* when he observed, "The fact is people will never abandon the project to reinvent the human condition. Our desire is deeply ingrained in our spiritual structure; it is an archetypal constant; we are programmed that way.... Longevity was and will always be a crucial element in the interminable confrontation between men and God, the human struggle to appropriate a piece of divinity." (p213)

However our ageing generations, particularly those described as baby-boomers, have broken with the religion of their parents and grandparents. Callum Brown described this breakdown of religious transmission in his book *The Death of Christian Britain* observing, "Whereas previously men and women were able to draw upon a Christian-centred culture to find guidance about how they should behave, and how they should thinking about their lives, from the 1960's a suspicion of creeds arose that quickly to the form of a rejection of Christian tradition and all formulaic constructions of the individual." In the midst of this rejection, we may have seen the decline of the religious, however we have also witness the advent of spirituality in its broadest sense.

In a society which is recognised as increasingly spiritual, churches have struggled to engage with the lives of older people in the area of discipleship & spiritual growth, mission, and the value of care. In 1990 the report *Ageing* by the Social Policy Committee of the Board for Social Responsibility provided a ground-breaking response to the challenges of an ageing population. Unfortunately, the report has never been revisited. *Ageing* contained 28 recommendations across social policy, the church, and faith. Taking just four themes from the report, it is possible to see the challenge it gave to start building multigenerational churches as it identified the need for:

1. Leaders who are reconciled to their own ageing journey and who understand that ageism starts with our own fear of death and change as we grow older.
2. Theological colleges and CME courses engaging with issues around ageing. Clergy need to understand how to encourage change in our churches as they work with faithful older people who are worried about who will continue the church and what will sustain their personal journey of faith if everything changes around them.
3. Church and mission organisations to apply the same expertise of cultural understanding of generational differences amongst younger people to those of older people.
4. People in the local church learning one another's stories of faith, about how God has journeyed with people over 30, 40, 60 or more years sustaining faith, and those stories need to be shared and celebrated with one another.

Perhaps it is indicative of the extent ageism exists in the Church that *Ageing* was never fully implemented by a Church of England unable to act upon the reports recommendations. UK policy makers, academics, and older people's organisations are working to create age-friendly cities, housing, jobs and health service. Is it time for the age-friendly Church, celebrating the diversity of age and experience that holds the history of our journeys of faith? Age is not a barrier to being used by God.

Towards a theology of ageing?

The challenge of a long life will be 'how' will we live? With what mind will we walk our journey of life? Simon Biggs (1999), drawing on the work of Erik Erikson, observed that the great challenge of late life is to maintain a sense of personal integrality, "Integrality would seem to include two simultaneous themes: an ability to keep body and soul together in the face of physical ageing and the loss of significant others; and the development of a convincing life story which sums up an individual's life experience". As much as Biggs' analysis is compelling, from a Christian perspective it is incomplete for it cannot encompass the theme of salvation at the heart of the story of faith. That the one who holds integrality for the Christian is the one who integrates us as his children into the story of eternity.

The challenge of a theology of ageing, is one which is beginning to find attention. Stephen Ames in *Finding the way: A theology of ageing* (2012) writes, "There are different understandings of ageing – medical, economic, sociological. A 'theology of ageing' is an understanding of ageing in the light of belief in God. This understanding engages with but is not controlled by the other understandings of ageing. Indeed a theology of ageing casts its own light on the other approaches to understanding ageing".

Returning to the early fathers casts some semblance of light upon the endeavour at hand. The writings of the 4th century saint John Chrysostom provide a lens through which one might view the way a settled church viewed the subject of growing older. The biblical texts contain wonderful characters of age and attitudes towards ageing, however they are not concerned, particularly in the New Testament, with the needs of a settled community of faith. The gospels are concerned to present the person of Jesus, his life and teachings, the declaration that the Kingdom of God has broken into this world, and that Jesus is the Son of God, the redeemer of humanity. The epistles are focused on the mission and activity of the early church, trying to resolve conflict and provide encouragement in the face of growing opposition. However in the fourth century with the conversion of Emperor Constantine, Christianity flourished as a faith with Imperial support. The concern is provision for the faithful and the needs of settled congregations. Here Chrysostom provides a helpful insight about how to live as an older person and the need for virtue in the life of those growing older.

In his focus upon the virtue of the person, Chrysostom focuses on two elements for the older person, firstly regarding purity and secondly regarding witness. For Chrysostom it was the quality of a person's life that mattered to him. His concern was to distinguish that living a long life was not in itself evidence of living a honourable life, "I say not these things as accusing the old, but the young. For in my judgement they who act thus even if they have come to their hundredth year, are young; just as the young if they are but little children, yet if they are sober-minded, are better than the old" (Chrysostom, Vol 14, Homily 7[9]). Chrysostom's guiding influence in this is his study of biblical texts as he draws on both the gospel of John and the letter to the Hebrews enabling him to tackle the issues of age, "...this doctrine is not my own, but scripture also recognises the same distinction. 'For, it says, 'honourable age is not that which standeth in length of time, and an unspotted life is old age'. For we honour the grey hair, not because we esteem the white colour above the black, but because it is a proof of a virtuous life; and then we conjecture

therefrom the inward hoariness”(Chrysostom, Vol 14, Homily 7[9]). Chrysostom sought to ask what does the outward appearance of age represent to those who look on? His concern for virtue and his emphasis that older people did not automatically present a virtuous life appears to have led him away from the use of old age as signifying that, ‘an unspotted life is old age because it is proof of a virtuous life.’ Instead he employs the term ‘full age’ to identify those who by the quality of their lives display virtuousness in old age, observing that ‘full age’ as, “not of nature, but of virtue” (Chrysostom, Vol 14, Homily 8 [6]&[7]).

Perhaps in our new age of longevity it is time to consider again the essence of virtue; how do we nurture virtue in our lives throughout the lives that we live? As we develop a theology of ageing, we are engaging with the totality of life and the reality of death as ageing represents the gradual failure of the body and the end of our earthly life. Could Chrysostom’s use of the term a “full age” enable us explore how we might live as we grow older?

Enabling and recognising spiritual growth

“The care of the old for the young is no different from the care of the young for the old. Real care takes place when we are no longer separated by the walls of fear, but have found each other on the common ground of the human condition, which is mortal, but therefore, very very precious.” (Nouwen & Gaffney, 1974). When older people are abused, neglected, harmed then we have forgotten the common ground of mortality that we share with one another. Enabling people who are older to flourish involves recognising who we are and who we will be. Spiritual growth is to be sought at all stages of life, however much has made of the value of spiritual reminiscence with older people, but what about spiritual anticipation as we age? Anticipating our nurturing growth in Christ Jesus as we make our home through our life’s journey.

The gerontologist Peter Laslett suggested that there is a form of suffering to be encountered as we age that is thrust upon the person like a crown of thorns made up of physiological, demographic change, and current social attitudes. Gerontological thinking has split age into two points of experience, the first, the third age is a period of a form of retirement, with reasonable health and mobility that means the person is still able to be out and about. The fourth age is a period in which the person enters a period of chronic illness, limited mobility, unable to engage in activities in the way they once did, it is a time of increased frailty and vulnerability. In our modern world the third age is embraced with a certain ‘joie de vivre’ but the fourth age is something to be resisted. However, all of us at some point will be dependent upon the care of another person whether we want that or not. It may be for a few hours, a few days, or extend over a period of months or years but it will come. Our choice is how we are within that time; our attitudes to those with us and around us at the time. Most of us will be unable to decline that time, but we can prepare ourselves for how we will witness to others about Christ in that time. In his letter to the church in Philippi, written as an older man, St Paul uses the phrase “our citizenship is in heaven” as he described the disciples life of waiting for the saviours return. For the person of faith, in our fourth age we are citizen’s of heaven with the dignity that affords, when we face cognitive loss we are still citizen’s of heaven with the dignity that affords, when we face having to receive help to dress or remain clean we are still citizen’s of heaven with all the dignity that affords. No one and nothing can strip of us of our citizenship. St Paul summed it up in his letter to the church in Rome, “For I am

convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor the things present, nor the things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NRSV). Nothing can separate us from the love of God and nothing can strip us of our heavenly citizenship.

How will we anticipate age? And how will we make this journey of anticipation in the midst of bodily loss? For the person who follows Christ Jesus the growing anticipation is one of heaven, yet do we truly enable the ageing person to flourish in their discipleship, their spiritual growth?

Older people enabling the mission of the church

Older people remain the faithful core of the Church of England nationally. However, the majority of those people are aged over 65. The 2010 report from the Church of England *Celebrating Diversity* contained the age distributions of church congregations by diocese. It reported that in every Church of England diocese, except for two, people aged 65 and over formed more than 40% of congregations. In 25 diocese people aged 65 and over formed over 50% of church congregations. The two exceptions were the Diocese of London with 28% of congregations aged 65 and over, and the Diocese of Southwark with 39% of congregations aged 65 and over. It is little wonder there has been a considerable effort from the Church of England to communicate with younger people. The tendency is to view older people in church as ‘the problem’. However older members of our congregations in an age of longevity are the volunteer back bone of the church and need to be encouraged, envisioned, and inspired.

But how much younger do we need to look before we find the true demographic crisis of the Church of England, 18-35 years of age? Perhaps 35-44 years of age? The distribution statistics are indeed low for these age groups varying from 4% to 21%. Prof. Tom Kirkwood wrote, “We face a revolution in longevity... profoundly altering our attitudes to life and death” that profound change is evidenced in the 55-64 age distribution of Church of England congregations which drops from the 40%-50%+ zone to between 18%-26% across every Church of England diocese. The Church of England is not just struggling to connect with young people; we have failed to connect with generations of people who are growing older now. Over the next decade the Church of England’s volunteer back-bone will be diminished by the affect of people entering their fourth age, and there is little evidence of the younger older people needed to replace them.

There are churches, diocese, and mission agencies who are beginning to meet this challenge, however there is an urgent need to give a national vision; to consider mission to generations of people growing older; to encourage and uphold the many faithful communicants of the Church of England who are entering their fourth age; to develop a theology of ageing that communicates the richness of a life lived in the light and presence of God.

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Note: All references to Chrysostom's writings are from the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, available via www.ccel.org/fathers2 (accessed 28-02-13)

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