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ENTERING THE SABBATH OF LIFE: THEOLOGICAL MUSINGS ON GERASSAPIENCE

Homo senescens – The Problem

Growing old nowadays is unlike anything that has gone before. According to UN estimates, there are more than 850 million people aged sixty or older in the world today – that is, more than 12 pct. of the world population. By 2050, this number is expected to nearly triple, growing to over 2 billion, representing more than 21 pct. of the world's population. As for the tipping point, that is, the point when the number of older people will exceed the number of children, this will most likely occur in the year 2047¹.

Needless to say, although on the positive side these changes are remarkable, for they are pointing to the impressive improvements in human longevity made during the last decades, population ageing is in fact a major issue of concern because of its immediate consequences – the continuous falling of old-age support ratios and the related socio-economic strain. It is expected that, as fiscal pressure on support systems for the elderly will continue to increase, the number of old people

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Ageing 2013*. ST/ESA/SER.A/348. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2013.pdf> [accessed 10.10.2015]. See also, OECD/European Commission, *A Good Life in Old Age*. Policy Brief, June 2013. <https://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/PolicyBrief-Good-Life-in-Old-Age.pdf> [accessed 10.10.2015]. On the estimates given here and for further projections on world population aging, see also the following website: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population>.

living on the brink of poverty will grow. In light of such projections, it would then seem that nowadays, more than ever, the so-called “golden years” have the potential to turn into a period of misery and self-pity. Adding to that the typical physical and psychological challenges characteristic of old-age, there seems to be virtually nothing to look forward to for the aging person, that is, nothing but pain, poverty, bitterness, frustration, loneliness and the such. Or is there?

Over the years, there have been various approaches to the study of aging – medical, economic, sociological, psychological, historical, political and cultural² – each of these with good justification and each bearing rich results. In fact, even the simplest library search for “aging” yields thousands of entries, covering all disciplines listed above and more. It is therefore quite surprising to find that, in recent years, the topic has received considerably less attention from theologians. Barring a few minor exceptions – several short studies³ and a couple of monographs on gerassapience in the Bible⁴ – systematic theological reflection on “aging” in the contemporary context is virtually inexistent. It is, therefore, in an attempt to address, at least in part, this gap that I offer the following thoughts.

A Theology of Aging?

Can there be such a thing as a “theology of aging”? If “yes”, what would such a theology entail and how would one go about it?

The task set in this paper has both a descriptive and a prescriptive role. First, it is descriptive for it requires a certain amount of conceptualization – before developing a “theology of aging”, that is, before juxtaposing two terms and, consequently, all that they represent, one needs to define what “theology” and “aging” stand for. Here such defining is done having in mind the particular needs of the present discussion – that is, it seeks to identify a particular interpretive framework within which “theology” and “aging” can and should be related.

² See e.g. S. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*. Trans. Yael Lotan. London 1997; *Handbook of Theories of Aging*. Eds. V.L. Bengston, K. Warner Schaie. New York 1999; *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences*. Eds. R.H. Binstock, L.K. George. London 2006; *Handbook of the Biology of Aging*. Eds. E.J. Masoro, S.N. Austad. London 2006; *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*. Eds. K. Warner Schaie, S.L. Willis. London 2011; P.G. Coleman, *Belief and Ageing: Spiritual Pathways in Later Life*. Padstow 2011.

³ Here are a few examples, selected out of a pool of a few dozen articles: R.C. Crossley, *Aging with God: Old Age and New Theology*. “Church & Society” 1999, vol. 89, p. 9–16; K.P. Minkema, *Old Age and Religion in the Writings and Life of Jonathan Edwards*. “Church History” 2001, vol. 70, no. 4, p. 674–704; M. Ardel, *Effects of Religion and Purpose in Life on Elders’ Subjective Well-Being and Attitudes Toward Death*. “Journal of Religious Gerontology” 2003, vol. 14, no. 4, p. 55–77; P.G. Coleman, *Ageing and Personhood in Twenty-First Century Europe: A Challenge to Religion*. “International Journal of Public Theology” 2009, vol. 3, p. 63–77; T. Nguyen van, *Biblical Perspectives on Caring for the Aged and the Sick*. “New Theology Review” 2010, vol. 23, no. 4, p. 5–12; G.L. McKeivitt, *The Gifts of Aging: Jesuit Elders in Their Own Words*, “Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits” 2011, vol. 43, no. 3.

⁴ See J.G. Harris, *Biblical Perspectives on Ageing: God and the Elderly*. New York 2008 (2nd edition); J.A.A. Ajayi, *A Biblical Theology of Gerassapience*. Studies in Biblical Literature 134. New York 2010.

Second, the task is prescriptive in as much as the very juxtaposition of “theology” and “aging” creates new meaning and therefore compels specific responses. To explain, I see such juxtaposition as an instance of performative rhetorics, that is, an act of communication which not only transmits information, but also changes the reality of both speaker and hearer. Concretely then, the phrase “theology of aging” does more than simply convey one’s attempt to interpret “aging” from a particular “theological” perspective. When appropriated, it in fact redefines the parameters of one’s experience of aging in light of one’s theological stance. Therefore the necessity of definitions below.

Aging – A Working Definition

Although “aging” is a commonly used notion, defining it is far from being a straightforward exploit. In most studies, “aging”, as applied to humans, describes the deleterious biological process that brings about a gradual functional decline of one’s physiological functions and the equal increase of his/her vulnerability, ultimately leading to physical death⁵. It seems to me, however, that limiting the definition of “aging” to biological processes, regardless of how prominent these may be, does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. A better definition, I submit, becomes available when “aging” is understood in its wholeness, as the bio-psycho-socio development that takes place in the life of individuals within their social-cultural contexts. Thus, “aging” is undoubtedly biological, for physical change plays a big part in its definition. However, it is also psychological in as much as there are behaviours specifically associated with the process of growing old. Furthermore, since any such changes result in relational modifications, altering the way people interact with their environment, aging is also a social process.

It follows from the above that “aging” is a dynamic reality that affects one’s entire existence. It operates both diachronically, as a cycle within the chronological development of one’s life, and synchronically, as the sum total of the various facets one’s life has at each given point in this development. As such, “aging” is necessarily related to the notion of personhood and consequently to how one’s identity develops. It is a unique process – perhaps as unique as the individual experiencing it is, and therefore any definition “aging” receives will necessarily pertain to the life-story each person tells about him/herself.

Theology – A Working Definition

The term “theology” was first introduced by Plato (*Republic*, 2.377e–3.386a) to

⁵ For the definition provided here, besides the works listed in no. 2 above, see also: T. Flatt, *A New Definition of Aging?* “Frontiers in Genetics of Aging” 2012, August, vol. 3, Article 148, p. 1–2.

speak of a rational conception of the divine as a desirable alternative to the poetic mythology that dominated the religious thought of his age. Within the present argument, however, such etymological connotations do not satisfy. Nor do the typical dictionary definitions, which describe “theology” along similar lines, as reasoned discourse about God and religion and as the discipline whose objective is to study and pass on information about the divine by means of enunciating belief systems⁶. A more felicitous alternative becomes available, I propose, if we take into account how faith in God operates in the life of the believer. As I have shown elsewhere, “theology” requires a believer’s total involvement as he/she approaches God intellectually, emotionally and practically⁷. As such, “theology” impinges on each of the three dimensions of Christian existence: the private, the ecclesial and the public. It is a private/personal endeavour in as much as an individual experience of God is in view. In terms of praxis this refers to what one does on her/his own in order to connect, and live out a relationship, with God. It is an ecclesial endeavour in as much as one also engages in a collective experience of God. Here it refers to what one does as a member of a community of faith, in pursuit of a shared relational knowledge of the divine. And it is a public endeavour in as much as the societal implications of one’s relationship with God are in view. This refers to the covenantal role one has of being a blessing for the other.

Evidently, such an approach to “theology” requires a broadening of the typically limited perspective on religion, within which Christian faith is perceived as a private Sunday-practiced Church-bound affair, toward a holistic understanding of Christian spirituality as integration of faith within all facets of human life: the spiritual, the physical, the intellectual, the emotional, the aesthetic and the social. Consequently, within this view, the pursuit of “theology” becomes a quest for a holistic development of personhood with all that it entails: identity development in light of one’s participation in the divine–human–creation relational nexus implied in the Biblical notion of “covenant”⁸.

Karl Barth, in an address given at the meeting of the Goethe-Gesellschaft, in Hanover, on the 8th of January 1957, has described theology in a similar fashion. He affirmed that “theology” is “the commerce and communion between God

⁶ E.g. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. L. Brown. Vol 2. Oxford 1993, p. 3273; *Encarta World English Dictionary*. Ed. A.H. Soukhanov. New York 1999, p. 1848; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Ed. J.P. Pickett. Boston 2000 (4th edition), p. 1794; V. Anić, L. Jojić, R. Matasović, *Hrvatski enciklopedijski rječnik*. Zagreb 2002, p. 1318.

⁷ M.V. Măcelaru, *Theology Encounters Globalization*. “European Journal of Science and Theology” 2014, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 67–78.

⁸ On these, see further: A.I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships*. Cambridge 1990.

and man"⁹, by this implying that it is not about static definitions of God and religion, but rather about one's very "life with God". For if "theology" entails divine-human interaction (commerce) within the context of divine-human fellowship (communion), then its operation is not limited to conceptual analyses of divine matters, but it encompasses the entire relational dynamic that becomes accessible within one's encounter with God.

To conclude then, "theology", from this perspective, refers to an existence characterized by ordered continuity and dynamism (process), in which one's identity is shaped towards fulfilling the divine vision for humanity (personhood development), as he/she grows from knowing o f and a b o u t God, with an emphasis on the intellect, toward k n o w i n g G o d, with an emphasis on covenant (relational revelation). Thus, "theology" is a transformational journey – the life-long process of becoming Christ-like, within which relational revelation takes place. It is the "living out" of the covenantal relationship established by God between God-self and man.

Entering the Sabbath of Life – Toward a Theology of Aging

In light of the above, what then does a "theology of aging" entail? It should be evident by now that the definitions of "aging" and "theology" offered above have the human agent, and more specifically, personhood development and identity, as points of commonality. As such, a "theology of aging" will necessarily explore what growing old means in light of the divine-human relational nexus implied by the Biblical notion of "covenant". As "explication of the divine welcome" and "effective participation [...] in the story of Christ"¹⁰, Christian theology is a matter of Christian living, with all the felicitous consequences that entails. It is about an existence "beneficial and conducive to human flourishing"¹¹. Therefore, it is incumbent that a "theology of aging" will provide for ways to conceive of well-being and flourishing in relation to growing old.

The reference to "human flourishing" and its association here with aging should not surprise. An ideal present across cultures¹² and studied in most disci-

⁹ K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*. Fontana Library of Theology and Philosophy. London 1967, p. 9.

¹⁰ C. Constantineanu, *Welcome: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Mission and Hospitality with a Child in the Midst*. In: *Theology, Mission and Child: Global Perspectives*. Eds. B. Prevette, K.J. White, C.R. Velloso Ewell, D.J. Konz. Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series 24. Oxford 2014, p. 148.

¹¹ Idem, *Postmodernity, Religion and Human Flourishing*. In: *Postmodernity – Friend or Foe? Communicating the Gospel to Postmodern People: Theological and Practical Reflection from Central and Eastern Europe*. Eds. A. Neagoe. H. Zorgdrager. Utrecht – Timișoara 2009, p. 33.

¹² *Happiness Across Cultures: Views of Happiness and Quality of Life in Non Western Cultures*. Eds. H. Selin, G. Davies. London 2012.

plines of human knowledge¹³, “human flourishing” bears implications in terms of emotional, spiritual, social, cultural and professional fulfilment¹⁴. Within Christian circles Nicholas Wolterstorff has associated human flourishing with the biblical concept of *shalom*¹⁵. In his view, to live a flourishing life is to live in right relationship with God, with neighbour, with creation and with self.

The implication this carries is that “flourishing” is dependent on spiritual well-being. As beings intended to bear, in a sense, the image of God, all humans can potentially experience *shalom*. However, such an existence becomes a reality only in as much as one lives life as God intended it, in harmonious conscientious relationship with the divine. As Creator, Ruler and Sustainer of all things, the triune God is necessarily the source of all “flourishing”. Consequently, it is only by drawing closer to God that we are gradually transformed into his likeness and are empowered to live life to its fullness, uninhibited by sin, filled with meaning and crowned with gladness. Following from this, we may conclude then that “God’s relation to human beings and human beings’ relation to God [is] the condition of possibility for human life and flourishing in all dimensions”¹⁶. That is, provided that the needed relational conditions are met, flourishing is definitely a possibility in all circumstances, at all times and, evidently, at all ages.

The biblical support for the perspective presented here is quite overwhelming. Starting with the Old Testament covenantal (relational) notion of “knowing God” and the effects of such knowledge upon the human–human and human–creation relationships, and finishing with the New Testament ideal of communal sharing of permanent divine presence expressed in such metaphors for the Church as “a body that has Christ as its head” (Col. 1,18; Eph. 5,23) and “a temple that is indwelt by the Holy Spirit” (Eph. 2,19–22), the Bible speaks of such an existence. Even more, the Bible announces that the eschatological culmination of this relational development is the divine Sabbath rest to which we are all invited. No wonder then that within Jewish theology the process of aging is metaphorically pictured as “entering a Sabbath of life”¹⁷.

This notion evidently challenges the gloomy view on aging noted in the introduction above, for “Sabbath” is associated in the theology of the Bible with

¹³ *The Practices of Happiness: Political Economy, Religion and Wellbeing*. Eds. J. Atherton, E. Graham, I. Steedman. London 2011.

¹⁴ On these, see M. Volf, *The Crown of the Good Life: A Hypothesis*. In: M. Volf, J.E. Crisp. *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life*. Minneapolis 2015, p. 127–136.

¹⁵ See N. Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*. Grand Rapids 2005; idem, *God’s Power and Human Flourishing*. http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/nicholas_wolterstorff_-_gods_power_and_human_flourishing.0.pdf [accessed 10.10.2015].

¹⁶ M. Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*. New Haven 2015, p. 9.

¹⁷ E.g. R.L. Katz, *Jewish Values and Sociopsychological Perspectives on Aging*. In: *Toward A Theology of Aging*. Ed. S. Hiltner. New York 1975, p. 135–150.

“enjoyment”, “evaluation” and “community”. That is, enjoyment of one’s deeds, evaluation of one’s actions and communal remembrance of God’s gifts of provision and protection. In Brueggemann’s words, it is “the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God”¹⁸. Seen in this light, then, “entering the Sabbath of life” may come to be a liberating notion for the elderly. It points to the blessings one’s extra years of life may become – a blessing for the elder person to enjoy but also a blessing for the community such person may still serve. Undoubtedly, as is the case with everyone else, the aging also have basic needs that must be met. These are: safety, socialization and economic security. However, when old-age is perceived as a matter of blessing rather than the cursed consequence of the human condition, the elderly may also feel free: free to pursue self-realization, to develop new skills, to fulfil unrealized dreams and, most of all, to serve the community in new, creative ways. Theologically speaking, therefore, old age can be a time of flourishing – a time spent in pursuit of communion. It can be a time defined by love of God, fellowship with the neighbour and care for the creation. For the one living theologically, old age may indeed become a “Sabbath of life”.

Wkraczając w szabat życia — teologiczne refleksje dotyczące mądrości podeszłego wieku

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Obecny stan badań ukazuje, że starzenie się jest postrzegane jako negatywne doświadczenie obarczone problemami związanymi z brakiem finansowego bezpieczeństwa oraz tymi, które dotyczą fizycznych i psychologicznych ułomności. Jednak z teologicznego punktu widzenia, gdzie „teologia” jest postrzegana w kategoriach relacyjnych jako „życie z Bogiem”, starzenie się można definiować z perspektywy holistycznego rozwoju osobowości i w rezultacie mówić o starości kategoriami pomyślności oraz rozkwitu osoby.

¹⁸ W. Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. Louisville 2014, p. xiv.

