

## ESSAY REVIEW

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## Introduction

This book examines the basis for research methods used in the study of ageing and spirituality and outlines the process of the study of mapping the spiritual dimension of ageing in the 1990s. The in-depth interviews used in this study provide a rich window on the spiritual journeys of these older people. This study shows that this is a valuable means of tapping into the spiritual dimension of older adults and a way to enable mapping of this dimension. Since the first edition of the book, Mackinlay has used this method again, with frail older adults, to enlarge the profile of spirituality in ageing. Research using the model has also been done with people who have dementia, over a ten-year period of study. The use of in-depth interviewing allows the informants to express their own views on spirituality in ageing without the researcher foreclosing on possibilities. For this reason it provides a better basis for constructing assessment instruments than using a panel of experts, who do not include the study informants themselves.

Registered nurses responded that they benefited greatly from putting the spiritual dimension of care into routine practice. It was as a response to nurses' requests for knowledge and strategies to address this component of holistic care that a programme in continuing care was organized. It is vital, as the volume emphasizes, that health professionals, clergy and care workers for the elderly are familiar with the variety of ways that older people may respond to what is meaningful in their lives, both in religious and in other ways, such as music, art and environment.

## Intended audience

The Rev Professor Mackinlay suggests that the spiritual dimension constitutes a large part of what nursing is; that is the core of nursing. Nurses, whatever their religious outlook, can be part of giving spiritual care in nursing.

This dimension should be just as much a part of nursing as physical or psychosocial care. The need to understand more of what is happening in the spiritual dimension as people grow older is evident and important for clergy, social workers, activity officers and pastoral carers. Those who work with older adults need to be spiritually aware, avoiding projecting their own beliefs on to those they care for. Further, they need to be able to meet the individual at his or her point of need.

## How the book is organized

Chapter 1, "Ageing Societies and the Spiritual Dimension", explains that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Western societies are facing ageing populations of never-before-experienced proportions. There has been an increasing tendency in recent decades to classify groups of people according to generation or cohort determined by year born and to label these accordingly. Thus, we have 'the builders' (born approximately 1925-1945), the 'baby boomers' (born 1945-1965), the 'generation x' (born 1966-1980), the 'generation y' (born 1981-1994) and the 'generation z' (born 1995-2009), while the generation that follows being termed 'generation alpha'. At the time of writing, relatively few of the oldest generation, the federation generation (born 1901-1924), remain alive. Third agers are defined as those who are older and living independently, while those described as fourth agers are those who are older and frail, being unable to live independently without care services. It is important, as the book argues, to see generations within the contexts of the societies in which they live out their lives. However, classifications of generations can be both helpful and unhelpful; members of a particular generation will exhibit a number of commonalities with other members, such as culture, education opportunities and health resources, while at the same time being different in a number of other ways, influenced by personality and health potential

(genetic potential) and the ways these play out in individuals. In view of the continuing growth of the proportion of older people in many populations and changes occurring in societies, especially relating to technology and science, new ways of considering ageing are as the text is clear, needed. 'Baby boomer ageing' simply accentuates this need and as 'boomers' reach traditional historical retirement ages, policymakers are also concerned about future age-related health and social service spending. The traditional models of passivity and expected increasing dependency of older people are being challenged. It is anticipated that a much higher proportion of 'baby boomers' will be able to live longer and healthier lives, so the previous models of care and expectations of what ageing holds for future generations of older people is continually changing.

Chapter 2, "Religion, Faith, Spirituality and the Psychosocial Dimension", examines uses of the terms 'religion', 'faith' and 'spirituality' and choose to use the term 'spirituality' in this study. This choice is based on the chosen area for study, that of independently living older adults where the term spirituality seems to be more widely accepted and understood. In addition, the term spirituality is more widely understood within health, psychology, pastoral theology and pastoral care literature and practice. Spirituality is used in this study in a generic sense, but the focus of the study is on spirituality in Christians and other older people who do not acknowledge an affiliation with a faith group. The relationship between the spiritual dimension, ageing and health, has been well studied and it appears from an examination of empirical studies that much more is known of the psychosocial dimension of ageing than the spiritual. This is, therefore, an important area for further study.

Chapter 3, "Examining Spirituality and Ageing and the Relationship with Health and Well-Being", describes the process of mapping the spiritual dimension of independently living older people. This has included the choice of appropriate methods of research, how the participants were chosen and the process of the first study. The volume hopes that the process of describing the use of the SHIE, its administration and its comparison with the findings from the in-depth interviews through factor analysis, is helpful to readers. An important lesson from this work is, the volume contends, that we need to have a level of scepticism related to survey instruments in that they are only as good as the questions contained in them. It is only through going to the key people of interest, in this case older people, that it is possible to be certain that the right kind of questions are being asked in a survey instrument and the text describes how factor analysis has shown that issues around spirituality that were important to older people were not all reflected in the survey. Chapter 4, "Baby Boomer Ageing and Spirituality: Same or Different?", Chapter 5, "Building an understanding of Spirituality and Ageing", Chapter 6, "Models of Spirituality in Ageing" and Chapter 7 "Meaning in Life", build on and advance the thinking and discussion of the earlier chapters.

Chapter 8, "Types of Ultimate Meaning and Images of God", explains that images of God, or sense of 'other',

varied greatly among this group of participants. It is important, the volume emphasizes, not to make assumptions of the personal belief systems of others at any point in the lifespan, particularly so in older adults, given that each faith journey is an individual one and the way in which older people respond to the Ultimate depends on so many factors. These factors include the initial teaching within their family of origin, their experiences as children (including early formal education and exposure to religious education), their life experiences (including relationships) and their family experiences, work and leisure activities. And as important in forming their image of God as anything else are, the types of crises they have encountered in life and their responses to them must also be taken firmly into account.

Chapter 9, "Response to Ultimate Meaning in Life through Religion", discusses how no study of spirituality would be complete without a consideration of the religious dimension of spirituality. Religious practices form an important aspect of how people respond to the Ultimate in their lives. However, it must be stated that religious practices do not constitute the whole of human spirituality. Indeed, many people do not follow any overtly religious practices in their lives, but they may still acknowledge their spiritual dimension, worked out in other ways. How do people respond to ultimate meaning? Saint Augustine wrote that this search is ultimately one that culminates in finding God. Modern-day psychological study seems to recognize this same need for affirmation and completeness.

Chapter 10, "Ultimate Meaning Through Experience and Activity", investigates what these experiences demonstrate. The volume describes how they were obviously important to the participants who, in each case, seemed to look for affirmation and comments are recorded such as, 'I couldn't just talk to anybody about that'. As the book makes clear there is not a lot written about such experiences although there are some indications that those of higher social class and who are better educated were more likely to have religious experiences. This is an interesting area and one which may indicate that people do not always feel comfortable sharing their beliefs with others. Only two of the participants who spoke of 'otherness' regularly attend church.

The experiences described in this chapter outlines how various of the participants in this study have responded to the Ultimate, or connected with events or things that were particularly deep and significant for them. For some, the experiences were of joy, or of peace, of awe, of bringing fulfilment and meaning, or of a sense of connecting with something or someone outside themselves. Being in church buildings, particularly Gothic buildings, was described by some as being a special experience. Response through music, the arts and in particular painting, were important to a number of participants. Knowledge of this variety of ways of responding to the Ultimate in older people's lives may be of assistance in supporting them in responding to what is ultimate in their lives, be it church services, prayer, meditation, or music, art or the environment. Indeed, sensitivity to people's experiences of 'otherness' is also important in the work of pastoral carers and a number of

participants remarked that they would not share accounts of such experiences with 'just anyone'.

Chapter 11, "The Spiritual Journey in Ageing", 11 out of 24 participants of the 1998 study spoke of a conscious search for meaning as they grew older. A number were finding meaning through human relationships, particularly through grandchildren and did not seem to seek for any meaning outside of this. Why were not the others in the study conscious of such a search for meaning? Perhaps this could result from a society which emphasizes the scientific and technological at the expense of the spiritual and transcendent. One third (8) of the participants spoke about a spiritual journey or a changing relationship with God over the course of their lives. Important in the journey is the image of God held by each of the participants and how this has changed. The image of God held by participants becomes the place from which they respond to life and to others around them, so that it is, as the book discusses, an important aspect of the development of hope within the person. While a number of the participants noted changes in faith across the lifespan, three in particular held in recent years what could be properly termed conversion experiences. It is perhaps one of the myths of ageing that older people do not change and that people are not going to be converted in their later years. Two of these women were in mid-life, while one was 67, when they had this experience. Their experiences were noted to have made an important difference to their world view and to their sense of spirituality in ageing. These are pertinent considerations for clergy and pastoral care workers and are addressed in relation to the preparation for these roles discussed in the recommendations from the study described.

Chapter 12, "Self-sufficiency and Vulnerability in Ageing", looks in part at ageism. Ageism was not mentioned often by participants, but it was important to Doris, who although she was aware that it was a stereotype of ageing that was being applied, felt that her self-confidence was easily undermined. Doris felt certain pressures to act according to the expectations of other members of the community that locked her into a stereotyped and limited role as an older woman. George did not like the term 'senior citizen' and felt labelled by it. What roles, the volume asks, are appropriate for older adults? Should there be defined roles? For sure, we are living in a changing society, changing because it is an ageing society. The cohort of older people discussed in the chapter was, overall, healthier than previous cohorts of elderly people. It would appear that there are new opportunities and new challenges both for older people and for the whole of Society. Self-sufficiency was highly valued by the independently older people in the 1998 study as well as by the 'baby boomers' in the 2013 study. All participants expressed fear of a future perceived vulnerability as they grew older. Important changes in the ageing process, as the book records, includes transition from doing to being and transcendence of the physical decrements of ageing. Part of this includes learning to live with less energy, a feature of the frailty of old age, but experienced already in some of these independent living people. Most of these people lived with more than one chronic illness, but maintaining good quality of life. Fear

of developing dementia was prominent among older people and developing transcendence in the third age of life will be of value in preparing the person for further losses and disabilities of ageing. Those able to develop transcendence will become more resilient and be able, more readily, to live their lives to the full.

Chapter 13, "Wisdom and the Move from Provisional to Final Meanings Wisdom in later life", considers wisdom from a spiritual perspective and associated with the search for final meanings. Wisdom and integrity are selected as the final strengths to come to full maturity in old age. There is also the virtue of hope, but hope becomes vital for human wellbeing from infancy onwards; it is only in the later years that wisdom and integrity become, it is argued, paramount to ageing as well. Of course, there are, as discussed, close associations with the psychosocial dimension, but the spiritual dimension has its own contribution to make in the later years of human existence. Certainly, one of the themes evident in the data from in-depth interviews was that of wisdom.

Chapter 14, "Hope, Fear, Despair and the Final Life Career", includes material on dying and death which appears particularly relevant to the concept of wisdom in ageing. It may be that the individual's perception of dying and death are related to their development of wisdom and the final meanings of life and focusses on this idea and much else. Chapter 15, "Humour, Laughter, Spirituality and Ageing", deals with those very factors which give the chapter its title. It is most illuminating and worthy of particular attention. Chapter 16, "Spirituality Relationship and Issues of isolation in Ageing.", Chapter 17, "Living in a Hyper-Cognitive Society", Chapter 18, "A picture of Spirituality and Ageing" and Chapter 19, "The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing" are immensely insightful and, collectively, bring the volume to its natural conclusion.

## Conclusion

The independent living older adults in the research described within this book were able to address their own needs related to their individual response to what was ultimate in their lives. It was seen that non-organizational as well as organization in religious activities were important to these participants. A number of respondents were using spiritual strategies of a non-organizational nature on a regular basis, such as meditation and small study groups. The existence of these groups, as the volume describes, is probably widely known among this age group and it is likely that many more older people would benefit greatly from these activities. Such activities, the book suggests, could be more widely used and encouraged in parishes and other community settings. The spiritual journey is an important aspect of life for numbers of older people, especially as they review their lives and come to search for and find final life meanings. The nature of the 'baby boomer' study reviewed within the volume did not provide a window into individual spiritual journeys, since only qualitative data collected was from the focus groups.

The author of the volume, Prof. Rev. Elizabeth Mackinlay, suspects that if third agers do not make a conscious search for meaning, it may well be forced upon them when a health crisis emerges, perhaps tipping them into fourth age. It seems that those able to make this conscious search during the third age will be strengthened for further challenges of ageing in the life journey. How much social influence, the book asks, might impinge on a person's awareness of the *need* to find meaning and how much these participants might have been influenced by an inner longing to search for meaning? From the accounts in the volume of those who acknowledged the conscious search, it seems that there were bonuses and benefits to the person and, in some cases, important insights into the meaning of their lives, coming to resolution of past experiences and gaining strength for the future.

The author's purpose for this volume is clearly stated, with a suitably informative title and concise and relevant objectives. The discussion of the results and their implications are carefully presented and supported by an up-to-date bibliography. I can strongly recommend this book for its intended audience.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.