16 Reimagining the Theology of Old Age

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Introduction

In this chapter we shall explore how best to put theology to use when considering the nature of age and ageing in both ourselves and other people. The main body of this chapter consists of sketching out the shape of how theology might hold a number of important questions in order to both imagine age and seek a deeper and more insightful sense of the role of older people in both church and society (Woodward 2008). It continues a significant theme of this volume which is, that in imagining age, we cannot claim any complete or absolute framework of theology. Rather, these questions are scaffolding that support an exploration of how theology might be put to work in relation to our growing older. I begin with a story from my own experience. The reader is invited to enter imaginatively into this short narrative. This is followed by an intriguing extract from an interview with Carl Gustav Jung, which acts as a starting point for considering what we believe might help good ageing.

Who Is That in My Mirror?

I used to live in an affluent part of the West Midlands in the United Kingdom. Solihull was a borough full of affluent communities housing high achievers. The culture was busy, demanding and life could be stressful for these families. For some, the constant activity was chosen but for many it was deeply woven into the fabric of modern life. The constant flow of information and the need to be always on the move have the power to both satisfy and frustrate. In this culture, age and ageing have been marginalised such that older people seem not to be part of it.

Let me take you back to the local town where I shopped, or rather drove through, on my way to somewhere else. I am late for a meeting in Birmingham and I cannot find my mobile phone to let my colleagues know that I am behind. I negotiate a busy junction and then meet a

pedestrian crossing. There are three cars in front of mine. My eyes catch the sight of an old man waiting to cross. He hesitates and then moves back while none of the cars ahead let him pass. I decide to let him cross even as my anxiety levels about the meeting continue to rise. I stop. He hesitates. Then slowly and laboriously he takes several steps from the curb. He is frail and the journey across the road seems to take forever.

The man seemed so alone and so vulnerable. I see his weakness and his pain. He had probably crossed that road for many years but suddenly that path had become treacherous and strange. How many minutes did I wait as he slowly placed one foot in front of another? How much longer would he be able to do this? Was he at the end of his life? Where was the man going? Who was he becoming? Was anyone helping him on his way?

As I drove off something very profound and disturbing struck me. He was me! The thought preoccupied me for the rest of my journey. The day would come when I, threatened by a jungle of cars, would hesitate and wonder how the familiar had become so foreign, how and why my body had become so heavy and difficult, and how my reactions had become so tranquilised. The old man had become a stark foreshadowing of what I would become. His vulnerability would become mine with all its dependence and imperfections. His appearance challenged the mask of my illusions. His ageing reflected my own. I both sympathised with that old man and hated him. His presence spoke about my passage through time, my own physical changes and my own inevitable death. I did not want to receive this message but it was written very clearly on the page of my busy day. It made me sad and gave me hope. He exhibited patience that reminded me that we all have to slow down.

This disposable person is the product of our culture, a bundle of experience, knowledge, life, concerns and wisdom. Who is he? I do not see him in my car wing mirror – he disappears strangely into the landscape. This man's story is important, as is your story. They belong together. These are the tales of unique human existence; fabric that took years to weave. We are all worth something.

What Do Older People Need in Order to Live Properly?

In 1959 John Freeman, the famous BBC journalist, interviewed Carl Gustav Jung when he was an old man of eighty-four, two years before his death in 1961. Jung was still working and his mind sharp, his concentration focussed. Here is an extract from the transcript:

FREEMAN: 'You have told us that we should regard death as the only goal.'
JUNG: 'Yes.'

FREEMAN: 'and to shrink away from it is to evade life and to make life purposeless?'

JUNG: 'Yes.'

FREEMAN: 'what advice would you give to people in later life to enable them to do this...?'

JUNG: 'I have treated many old people and it is quite interesting to watch what the unconscious is doing with the fact that it is apparently threatened with a complete end. It disregards it – life behaves as if it were going on, and I think it better for old people to live on – to look forward to the next day, as if he had to spend centuries, and then he lives properly. But when he is afraid he doesn't look forward, he looks back, he petrifies, he gets stiff and dies before his time; but when he is living on, looking forward to the great adventure that is ahead, then he lives ...' (Freeman 1989, p. 60)

Putting Theology to Work

Much of the research that has taken place in North America over the last twenty to thirty years has indicated that people beyond mid-age (fifty-five for sake of argument) become more spiritual, and therefore more open to some of the religious questions that theology asks. Amongst the many reasons for this increased 'religiosity' are two core realities. The first is that beyond mid-age people are closer to their deaths than their births. This increased sense of awareness of mortality is linked with a second feature of the second half of life. This is preparedness to face up to one's limitations, deficiencies and disappointments that both hurt and threaten us. As individuals face their failures and mistakes, questions emerge about what makes for human flourishing and well-being. Mid-age might be viewed as a time of opportunity and even preparation for what shape older age might take in us. What might these years look like as an individual reflects on their experience of relationships made and lost, the establishing of home and family, the nurture of children and career? An intensified and deepening sense of the spiritual is forged out of life's failures as well as its successes (Bianchi 1990, Coleman 2011).

It is against this background that the remainder of this chapter explores some of these theological themes. Though some of the questions that follow are not limited to or confined by old age, they seem to take on a particular significance during the processes of maturity. What follows are eight sections of 'scaffolding' that form part of a theological exploration of the process of ageing for others and ourselves. The reader might be more drawn to some sections of this framework than others and should be encouraged to consider how theology may help us to navigate this particular stage of human experience.

What Is the Relationship between Being and Doing?

In an age where communication and information are fast and immediate it is sometimes difficult to keep up with the sheer activity, driven by tasks that so many of us are bound up with. Work for many people has become more demanding and less stable. It is a rare employer who values pace and perspective, time and relationship, as well as trust and some readiness to accept human vulnerability and even mistakes.

Add to this the demands of bringing up a family including perhaps looking after older parents, the responsibility of exercise, sensible eating and some balance between the public face of work and the private world of living and loving and it is easy to see why, despite the enormous benefits of modernisation, we seem to be less content.

Every human life might ask itself about the source of its worth and value. For many, our worth and sense of value itself is derived primarily from work and the work role. While we should acknowledge here that the shape of retirement is in the process of rapid change with many enjoying longer working lives, most people still aspire to a time of withdrawal from the pressures and demands of work to enjoy some freedom and space (Rohr 2011).

Older people then have to live with the inter-relationship between being and doing that reverberates so profoundly in all of our lives. Some cope with old age by 'just keeping on going on' and certainly a feature of good ageing can be the maintenance of an active, engaged and flexible living. For some older people there can be more space and time to reflect. This space offers an opportunity to have a richer sense of time and within that space to look at life more closely. Indeed many older people choose to give something back to the community through voluntary work. Some of this engagement takes place in the family in caring and supportive roles especially for grandchildren (Kroll 2006, p. 39).

Our Need for Redemption?

The place of both scripture and tradition in a reimagining of a theology of age remains problematic. Too much of the spiritual exploration of ageing has rested on simplistic dichotomies that stereotype older people, either as decrepit, dependent and demanding on the one hand, or as vigorous, autonomous and full of saintly wisdom, on the other. Surely older people need redemption as much as younger ones, and if this is true then questions of sin and judgement should find a place in any vision of ageing as well as wellbeing for the self. Put another way, in old age, as through the rest of the life space, humans are called to serve

God and not the self. Simply to be is not enough; being does not supplant doing in later life (Gunton 1988).

The family is a primary location for service to one another to be played out, but the relationship between children and parents is often complex. There are indications that many children feel much more ambivalent about their responsibility to care and support parents and older generations. This may be to do with past estrangements and also due to the reality that both generations may find it difficult to accept the role reversals that come about in the mature families. The adjustments and negotiations attendant on the new stages in family relationships can bring strain and conflict. The uncertainties of these transitions are natural but can give rise to misunderstandings and resentment. They can call up long forgotten grievances and lead to struggles for dominance.

From the perspective of theology, if family relations in later life are marked by failure it follows that a theology of ageing must take account, not only of the sinfulness that can mark family life, but also of the forgiveness and redemption that empower people to make new beginnings. In this sense the doctrine of redemption in Christ embraces both of these mysteries (Hauerwas 2003, p. 202).

Made in Whose Image?

A central focus of any theology of age must be the affirmation that human beings are created in the image of God. This does not refer to a physical representation; rather it goes beyond the physical by definition. Like God, the human species is able to create, albeit on a significantly more limited basis. Human beings are mortal but they approximate or imitate immortality and the ability to create through the act of creation and procreation (Baker 1970, p. 40).

Old age can sometimes be haunted by twin fears: fear of abandonment and fear of dependence. When Christians affirm that human beings are made in the image of God there is a declaration that all of God's creatures are dependent on the divine goodness for their existence. All creatures owe their being to God. Their very existence, all that sustains them, everything that helps them to flourish, all that they are and can be comes from God.

This belief is especially important to hold onto when the vulnerabilities of old age take the shape of the accumulation of losses. Dependence and disability are difficult to adapt to. Despite these losses and the even more challenging changes that age may bring to the memory through dementia there continues to be a unique value in every human being. Some older people have borne witness to the intuition of sheer gratuitousness, which

discloses their belief about being made in the image of God, which speaks of the mystery of their lives as creatures of God. Even at their most dependent human beings are still receiving and being made. There is a spiritual maturity that comes from the realisation that existence is not in one's own hands (Koenig 1994; Tournier 1971).

The Power of Metaphor and Story

In the reimagining of age, I continue to be both committed to and energised by the importance of the integrative power of metaphor and story. If we are to take the work done in this area seriously then any reimagining of theology in the ageing process requires the convergence of multiple points of view.

We need stories of growing older, stories of transformation, self-transcendence, humility and wisdom not limited by a denial or physical decline and mortality. We need communities capable of hearing these stories, and of viewing these time-travellers not as fearful, alien old strangers but as pilgrims and children of hope, as ourselves. We need to revalue ageing, to also embrace the ageing body as a sacred space, and to emphasise the spirituality of nurturing in all the ways that this is both given and received through our lifetimes.

We need the books that flow from lived lives, in particular Christians need the elder tales of older Christians that reflect both the hope and the gift that are present in those narratives. Reinstating moral agents as concrete, embodied cells reasserts the inter-subjective nature of morality, thus redefining the second half of life as a moral category, not primarily a biological or psychological one.

Certainly the story, like all good stories, will require many tellings. The telling of any story will intersect in different ways with the grammar of the reader and the reader's tradition. Mired as we are in the modern tradition, captive to its images of ageing, and chained to its charting of life's course, is it possible to re-imagine age in a different narrative or with a different story?

We should remind ourselves that we do not learn to know God any other way than through the story. The story is the way we come to know the deeper meaning of living as expressed through the Christian tradition. The Bible as literature shares a range of stories. The teaching ministry of Jesus as narrated in the gospels is communicated through story (Burridge 1992).

In the Jewish tradition much has been made of a blessed old age. Amongst the features of such blessedness is a lack of infirmity, the presence of children and economic success but above all being afforded

with respect. There is an assumption that an older person has learned a great deal from the wisdom of living and the Jewish tradition that therefore forms an ideal state of wisdom with old age. A Yiddish proverb says, 'Old age to the unlearned is winter. To the learned it is harvest time' (Chittister 2008).

With this perspective in mind it may follow that, if we are to learn the wisdom of old age, then older people themselves must become more visible and their voices, their stories and their experiences find expression. A practical example of this in my own experience relates to work in the Foundation of Lady Katherine Leveson, which embraced a church primary school and a centre for the care and housing of older people. We were keen to promote understanding between the generations and especially to find a role for older people in the nurture of children. Some of our older residents offered their time to support children who needed help with reading. A group of our residents engaged with learning about life during the war by sharing their own experiences and stories both from home and abroad. An old soldier talking about his medals and experiences in Italy; a farmer's wife sharing her experience of the bombing of the city centre of Coventry and others showing photographs, explaining rationing all served to bring the reality of war into the classroom in a vivid and moving way. This is one small example of the power of story.

If it were to be possible to reconstruct a more positive, inclusive narrative of ageing then this work must be done between and across the generations. Young people and those in middle age must consider what ageing means to them and be prepared to name some of the fears associated with older age. The language and metaphors used for this purpose will be a key means of embracing all of the possibilities of ageing and the shape of its meaning for us.

Nurturing the Possibilities of Wonder

It is interesting to ask how many individuals, particularly younger individuals, regard old age as a culmination of living – a highpoint. Consider this reflection by the theologian Karl Rahner: 'The real high point of my life is still to come. I mean the abyss of the mystery of God, into which one lets one's self fall in complete confidence of being caught up by God's love and mercy forever' (Rahner 1990, p. 38).

The challenge here is that it appears that technological society so insulates modern day people from the contingency of human life that they come to lose the capacity for wonder that moved earlier generations to search for God and surrender in worship. Perhaps in living we have

become less accustomed to wonders because there seems to be very little space in this technological world where humans do not seem supremely in control. It may be for this reason that the sense for primal religious experience has been dulled. The occasions in which the intuition arises that human beings participate in a vast, complex world not of their making, one in which they play an exceedingly minor role but in which they are nonetheless highly valued, seem to have become more rare. Does it follow that technology obscures the mystery at the heart of human life? (Moody 1992)

Holding Fragility and Diminishment

We have noted that old age brings one face to face with mortality but we should also remind ourselves that the religious virtualities of old age are of a more subtle and intimate nature. As we grow older we experience a succession of transitions and crises at a whole number of different levels. Over time, these force the tension to consider ultimate realities. In this sense, the trajectory of ageing has changed. Traditional views of preparation for death have generally regarded death as the end of a process, either of ageing or illness. However, in more recent times ageing has changed for many older adults in so far as a relatively long period of active life is often followed by another long period of declining health and disability.

We should not underestimate the frailty of this period of life. Ageing tends to restrict mobility, diminish senses and impair speech and thinking. It can lead to a withdrawal from active public life forcing one, in time, to rely on the help of others to carry out most of the basic activities. The loss, suffering and diminishment of old age with its disengagement, isolation and dependence are opportunities to experience the precariousness of human existence – the graciousness of human life and the transcendent greatness of being. While to some this analysis may seem to place excessive emphasis on the negative aspects an infirm, late old age, one should not underestimate the opportunities that diminishment and dependence give to individuals which allows them the freedom, and possibly wisdom, to pose and explore very important ultimate questions of living and dying. We should question, then, in these circumstances whether our pastoral theology and practice provides a framework and a commitment to older people to assist them into a new and deeper human existence.

It may then be possible to support the view that the process of diminishment (which is the inward experience of loss undergone in old age) awakens the soul to the giftedness of life and makes it receptive to grace (Jewell 1999). For us to accept our limitation and, even more, diminishment, recognises a particular virtue of ageing that Erikson calls wisdom,

and Ronald Blythe refers to as the willingness to bless life in the face of one's own suffering and mortality (Kimble et al. 1995).

From the point of view of Christian theology, dependence in old age, whether it takes the form of reliance on family members or on professional helpers, is an instance of the profound dependence at the heart of creative existence. When Christians confess their faith in the creed, they are declaring that all God's creatures are dependent on the divine goodness for their existence. All creatures owe their being to God. All that sustains them, everything that helps them flourish; all that they are and can be comes from God. The accumulation of losses persons suffer in old age, together with the deepening vulnerability that advanced ageing carries with it, opens the mind and heart to the sense of absolute dependence. As noted earlier, even at their least active, humans still have the potential to be recreated by life, by a hope in something beyond the material limitations of life and a sense that existence is not in one's own hands (Koenig 1994).

Modernity: Friend or Foe?

In the reimagining of age, it will, no doubt, be important to contextualise where and how theology is done in relation to old age. In other words, attention needs to be given to the way in which age is socially constructed in modern times. In the last analysis, some of these issues of construction should be firmly grounded in the realities that we ourselves face. Although, for example, I do not regard myself as especially old, the reality of my age is that I am coming into mid life and I am genuinely curious about what this period of my life will give birth to. Despite my prolonged exposure to older people and reflecting upon age, I cannot get away from a predominant sense that the gift of years is so often feared rather than revered. It is maybe to do with the losses of a certain sense of youth and a fear of encumbrance. Certainly the years do encumber us with wrinkles, sags and grey hair but we also have to recognise our complicated, peculiar and distinctive histories. As we face our histories, this is when the question of what kind of power we have to solve life's enigmas and complexities, through our own wisdom or life experience, comes back to confront us (Madsen et al. 2002).

What Are Older People For?

I want to make a plea to support the development of very different ways for speaking about what we struggle with, as we grow older. How ought

we to grow old? Or what does it mean to grow old? How these particular questions overlap with families and generational relations and gender are also important. Like other aspects of our biological and social existence, ageing has been brought under the dominion of scientific management, which is primarily interested in how we age in order to explain and control the ageing process. How do we find a way of giving voice to the things that really matter? And if we can find a voice, who will listen to us? This is an arduous and at times frustrating task where we need to recall deep cultural assumptions radically into question. But in order to do that, we need to break out of ageing as an engineering problem to be solved or at least ameliorated. Even theologians who have focussed on ageing have often viewed it as simply a matter of social policy: unemployment, poverty, disease, health care, retirement and pensions (Vincent 2003). The point here is that Christian theology should have something more to offer.

The issue of ageing goes hand in hand with the cultural and symbolic impoverishment that has beset the last half of life since the late nineteenth century. Anyone who takes the time and effort to listen to the particular stories of ageing will understand that the phenomenon of ageing is not just a matter of making generalisations about the status of old age, attitudes towards ageing, class or gender differences or the treatment of the poor or frail old. While these are important issues, they will not be resolved through modernity's traditional dissociation of ideas, images and attitudes from the facts of ageing and an epistemological stance that denies the experience and cultural representation of human ageing. This dissociation makes ageing an abstraction and places us a comfortable distance away. It treats ideas, beliefs and feelings about ageing as if they were merely subjective reactions to an objective reality. The dissociation impedes a richer understanding of growing old. When internalised, it feels like a kind of false consciousness; a separation of body and self that is so common in our culture (Cruikshank 2003).

If the only narrative that we have for understanding the public discourse about ageing is that of statistics or science then we fail to develop a critical vision or a larger story within which people's experience makes sense. The narratives that surround our understanding of old age are many and complex. I write as a practical theologian but my understanding of ageing needs to be shaped by and appreciation of other faith traditions and their approach to older people; and understanding from science, gerontology, psychology and sociology. There needs to be a richer inter-professional approach to this subject where individuals and groups can make a contribution to our understanding

of the meaning in the second half of life. Only through this kind of broader multidisciplinary approach might we be able to conquer the paradox that lies at the heart of a growing dominance of the mythology of scientific management (Woodward 2008, p. 116).

There can be no denying that in the last fifty years the central goal of the modern scientific enterprise – the conquest of premature death from acute disease and the prolongation of healthy vigorous life – has become a realistic expectation for most people (at least for white middle-class Westerners). Ironically, the very success of this enterprise has also created a new fate for the developed world: a longer old age and all that this might mean. Put rather crudely, what is the purpose of old age and what are older people for? This has in part something to do with how we all engage and embrace the unmanageable and ambiguous aspects of our existence (Small 2007).

As T.S. Eliot once remarked, 'There are two kinds of problems in life'. One kind provokes the question 'what are we going to do about it?' the other calls for different questions: 'what does it mean? How does one relate to it?' (Cole & Winkler 1994, p. 204) The first kind of problem is like a puzzle to be solved with appropriate technical resources and pragmatic responses. The second kind of problem poses a deeper range of challenges, which no particular strategy, policy or technique will overcome. This all points to a society that detaches persons from their own histories, from the meaningful performance of ageing within our bodies; an alienation and a kind of desperation which serve only the political economy in which we live.

This, then, is simply a plea to understand ageing in the context of moral and spiritual commitments, in the context of connectiveness and away from understanding it primarily as a scientific problem amenable to technical solution. Why strive to see the moral and spiritual possibilities of ageing when, given enough basic research and medical intervention, we can eliminate (or at least manage) physical decline? The modern shift cannot contain and does not allow the paradoxes of later life: ageing is a source of wisdom and suffering, spiritual growth and physical decline, honour and vulnerability (Atchley 2009).

Conclusion

We may ask our theological questions in different ways. This chapter has raised some of them and there certainly are others. I end with a reflection on one of the most obvious features of longevity – the shape of wrinkles as our skin ages as a symbol of moving beyond the superficial signs of old age to a more positive and imaginative view of the meanings of ageing.

The profit motive, the mass media's love affair with the new, and the anxiety provoked by growing old in a youth obsessed culture has led millions to surrender their faces to the war on wrinkles. We are being asked to unmake what we have spent a lifetime making. What do we receive in return for this sacrifice? Not youth. Instead we are given, at best, the facsimile of youth. Passion and history are pillaged in the pursuit of youth's fresh blankness. Do people fear wrinkles because of what they seem to say about us? They are the sum of all the days we have lived and will never live again. They tell us our story even when we do not want that story told. Even the attempt to erase them becomes part of what is written on our faces. We – the doers, the movers, the shakers, the achievers, the rocks of our families and communities – are being written upon. It shocks us to see ourselves, for the first time, as paper and not the pen we imagine ourselves to be.

Wrinkles are painless and harmless. They are us and we are them. What would it be like to live in a society that adored wrinkles? The idea may seem laughable at first, but for millennia, living to a ripe old age was an exceptional achievement and was often recognised as such by society. All this self-induced anguish might serve some purpose if it prodded us towards a re-examination of our longevity. Wrinkles give us a way to begin such a conversation, but it is just a start; plumbing the true nature of our longevity presents a much more exciting and demanding challenge.

This playing around with words asks us to imagine growing into an old age defined by full development, maturity, awareness, readiness and advancement – this really would be an opportune time. Instead we are mired in a highly negative view of ageing that envisions a one-way trip down the long road towards disease, dementia, disability and death. Peaches ripen, but human beings, it seems, cannot. Though we are all aware of the real and often unpleasant changes that come with advancing years, we lack a concept that fully recognises the positive elements of ageing. It is as if our longevity consists solely of deep, forbidding shadows. This emphasis is perhaps the most damaging consequence of contemporary society's glorification of youth. Those who seek a more complete understanding of longevity, an understanding capable of embracing both light and shadow, conduct their search within a culture that rarely misses an opportunity to emphasise the negative aspect of ageing. The positive dimensions of our longevity remain, for now, present but largely unseen.

References

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