

Discourse on Religion and Aging – Integrating Theological and Intercultural Perspectives

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Reflecting on aging and religion from a global perspective raises expectations that I will address the matter by examining some theoretical concepts. Of course, theories help us to better understand, especially as we come from very diverse contexts. Each of us associates religion and aging with our experiences, images, and imaginations. I am of the opinion that this also applies to theory. When we talk *with* older people and not *about* them, we eventually discover individual, cultural, religious, or social differences. What does ‘global’ mean anyway? And how can we attain an intercultural perspective?¹ I do not intend to climb all the mountains of theory that tower above our theme. The air up there is far too thin. I would like to concentrate on what happens when we allow ourselves to be irritated by the contextual differences.

1. Martha and Bob

In order to explain what I mean, let me ask one simple question: Who are we watching? What do we see when we watch 78-year-old Martha who lives in the slums of West-point Monrovia? Her daughter died from Ebola. Now Martha cares for her three grandchildren. Nobody really knows whether she is 78 years old or not, and she does not care because Martha is concerned with the survival of her family. In her situation, religion is an important resource for her, and she is the member of a church. The supportive community of the church gives

¹ The scientific study of aging is in general relatively young. Intercultural comparative gerontology is recognizable in its early stages in the German speaking world. Cf. their plea for a good life in old age: François Höpflinger, Zur Entwicklung (post-)moderner Altersbilder – Leitvorstellungen und Realität, in: Kulturen des Alterns. Plädoyers für ein gutes Leben bis ins hohe Alter, Harm-Peer Zimmermann et al. (eds), Frankfurt am Main 2016, 9-14.

her a grip on life, and the gospel message is her comfort and strength.² We can also take a look at Bob Delmonte. He is a gymnastics teacher in Key West, Florida.³ Bob teaches athletics and is a photographic model for the American Anti-Aging-Society. I do not know Bob personally, nor am I related to him. But he has been accompanying me in my thoughts on gerontology and religion for a number of years. Do you want to know whether Bob is religious or not? I doubt it. Bob looks like a god and is spiritual. He appears in ads practicing Yoga on the beach surrounded by young goddesses.

I agree that I chose bold case studies. Martha and Bob help us to realize that we are forced to be mindful of various contexts when we start to consider the religious aspects of aging and the function of religion for older people. Bob and Martha demonstrate that the discourse is fundamentally transformed and, thereby, the *horizon* of meaning is relocated depending on different life circumstances.⁴ Martha and Bob experience aging and religion in completely different ways. Martha lives on the horizon of survival and Bob on the horizon of the experiential. In order to say anything meaningful about the religious aspects of aging in a global perspective, such differences must be considered.

How can we discuss these differences from a global perspective? Integrating theological, intellectual, and global perspectives, among others, is truly a herculean hermeneutical task. If ‘global’ and ‘integration’ promise the possibility of a comprehensive perspective in which

² The details to “Martha” originate from a report about Monrovia, www.nzz.ch/international/gott-schuetzt-nicht-vor-ebola-1.18414251 (accessed August 10, 2016).

³ For more on Bob Delmonte: www.educoworld.com/dr-bob-delmonteque-tony-quinn-ireland/ (accessed August 10, 2016).

⁴ I am using the image of “horizons” according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, in: id., *Gesammelte Werke, Band 1: Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 2010, 310-312; a person sees and thinks within a certain radius in time and space. To put oneself into another point of view, whether in another time (history) or another place (culture) is to “fuse” horizons and “open” new horizons (307). The fusing of horizons also has a vertical dimension for Gadamer (312). One’s own and the foreign is lifted by a third transcendent thing. The metaphor helps to integrate the global vertical and the intercultural horizons – even if we have to do here with a certain fuzziness! Cf. Donatella di Cesare “Sicherlich ist das Wort ‘Verschmelzung’ keine glückliche Wahl gewesen” (*Gadamer. Ein philosophisches Porträt*, Tübingen 2009, 122). Also cf.: Stanley Rosen, Interpretation and Fusion of Horizons. Remarks on Gadamer, in: *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*, Stanley Rosen (ed.), New Haven, CT 1999, 182-201; Marina Vitkin, The Fusion of Horizons on Knowledge and Alterity, in: *Philosophy and Social Research* 21, 1995, 57-76.

all differences are considered, we are faced with an endeavor that only God can master.⁵

We cannot accomplish a global view unless we understand a global perspective as relinquishing a universally applicable and super-cultural theory. This is why an intercultural perspective corrects and relativizes the global perspective. We are reminded of how limited our horizon of meaning really is. Fusing horizons is a precarious business, but it cannot be avoided when different perspectives are bundled together. Therefore, it is all the more important to appreciate cultural, religious, and social differences, and to discuss the problems of communication. Still, to understand the global as the horizon of differences will not conquer the hydra. She is fascinated by her many heads. To put it less pictorially, those who do global research work comparatively and critically, but not encyclopedically. The bold contrast between two worlds in light of the discourse on interreligious and intercultural discourse demonstrates a principle I call *comparative-critical*.⁶ In the following, I will develop this notion.

2. The Critical Function of Theological Constructs

Even though I successfully minimalized the herculean task, the Sisyphus work remains to be tackled. Where to begin? Where to end? Which contexts should we fuse? What should be compared? In other words, every form of discourse begins with a selection according to the interests in knowledge that shed a certain light on the subject and determine which questions to ask. When I use the term ‘discourse’ I have the *academic discourse community* in mind.⁷ The connection

⁵ Following the myth, Hercules had to fulfill twelve tests in order to rise to god. In the second, he had to conquer the hydra – a monster, who grew two new heads whenever one of her heads was chopped off. Hercules not only accomplished it, he mastered all of the examinations, and, in the end, he joined the immortal. For a comparison between Christ and Hercules cf.: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke, Band 9: Ästhetik und Poetik II: Hermeneutik im Voll-zug*, Tübingen 1993, 10.

⁶ I recommend Klaus von Stosch, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser der Welt der Religionen*, Paderborn 2012; Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, New York, NY 2008; A. Bagus Laksana, *Comparative Theology. Between Identity and Alterity*, in: *The New Comparative Theology. Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, Francis X. Clooney (ed.), New York, NY 2010, 1-20; Reinhold Bernhardt and Klaus von Stosch (eds), *Komparative Theologie. Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie*, Zürich 2009; Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology. Deep Learning across Religious Borders*, Malden, MA 2010.

⁷ Kersten S. Roth, *Weltbildtransfer*, in: *Wissenstransfer und Diskurs*, Oliver Stenschke and Sigurd W. Lang (eds), Frankfurt 2009, 77-95; cf. Ralph Kunz, *Spiritualität im Diskurs*, in:

between religion and aging is bound to a more or less well-known group of themes and assumptions. What we are asking concerns the contribution of religion to *overcome* the specific burdens of aging. We assume that religion as a resource in conjunction with other resources can contribute to good aging. If we take a look at the results of research in religion and gerontology from the last ten years, there is a lot of evidence to support this assumption. The hypothesis that religion is a resource has been verified.

No argument against this. It is correct, but it is quite vapid in its generality. Therefore, I decided to add the global, intercultural, and theological perspective to it. Namely, that by applying theology one can better explain a comparative-critical point of departure. Theology brings a constitutive and not an uncertain perspective into play. In my case, I assume the position of reflected Christian faith, maintaining the biblical tradition as the authoritative religious tradition, and, by studying the biblical source, I am able to glean criteria to make critical comparisons in order to assess phenomena.

And I would again argue; if we are not lifting off into the lofty heights of abstract meta-discourse, we are disposed to the level of *particular universal claims*.⁸ Bluntly speaking, this means that I relinquish my right to speak as the one who observes the world, but I hold on tight to more than what is meaningful for me as a Christian, or Muslim, or Hindu. Here we have the reason for God-talk. It points to a higher authority, which I cannot empower without corrupting God's authority. As a representative of a discourse community, I can only *testify* of God.⁹ In my case, this means that I am not calling down the philosopher's god. As a theologian, I hold on to the God of Sarah and Abraham.

On Integrating Critical Religion's Perspectives

When we take an oath against relativism as well as absolutism, we end up with stories. The story of Abraham and Sarah tells of a family that

Spiritualität im Wissenschaftsdiskurs, Ralph Kunz and Claudia Kohli-Reichenbach (eds), Zürich 2012, 225-242.

⁸ Richard Amesbury and Hyun-Jeong Kim, Truth, Relativism and Religious Pluralism, in: *Compare Truth: Interdisciplinary Dialogues in a Pluralistic Age*, Christine Helmer et al. (eds), Leuven 2003, 197-213, 208.

⁹ For the hermeneutical and ethical dimension of attestation cf. Andreas Hetzel, Bezeugen, Vergeben, Anerkennen. Ethische Motive in der Geschichtsphilosophie Paul Ricoeurs, in: *Bezeugte Vergangenheit oder Versöhnendes Vergessen*, Burkhard Liebsch (ed.), Berlin 2010, 217-232.

left the Land of Ur in Chaldea because they heard God's call and obeyed – although they were over seventy years old! The motif of aging is woven like a red thread into the biblical story of the “fathers”. Let's take up this thread and follow the tracks through the labyrinth of history to a worship service in a run-down chapel in Monrovia.

The story allows us to be creative. What does Martha from Monrovia hear when she listens to the story of Sarah in the Bible, who laughed in the beginning, and then became pregnant at a ripe old age? What does she think of Abraham after Hagar was sent away? (Genesis 18 and 21) Is she reminded of the men who have left her? The children of her daughter, the children a 70-year-old grandmother is responsible for? Talking to Martha, the object I am facing becomes the subject of research. The stories start to speak. Of course, not all research takes place in this manner. However, I believe that discourse about aging and religion only gets interesting when the point of view becomes eye-level, when the perspectives of the person I am facing are included, when those involved join the discussion, and their voices join the conversation, when – in the case at stake – the connections between Martha's story and the biblical narrative are researched.

When I mention the integration of a theological perspective, I am considering an engaged way of doing research. The focus is on the good life, or to put it into gerontological terminology, what religion can contribute to good aging.¹⁰

Critical Religion

What is ‘good aging’? Other terms like ‘successful aging’ or ‘best aging’ are more appealing. These words sit at the positive end of the scale, while pathological aging is something negative at the other end of the scale. So-called ‘normal aging’ is in the “middle” – a precarious state of ambivalence.¹¹

The terminology of the aging discourse already shows us how much the transfer of values dissipates our perceptions. Is aging a dis-

¹⁰ Thomas Rentsch, Kultur humanen Alterns – Ethische Perspektiven, in: *Kulturen des Alterns. Plädoyers für ein gutes Leben bis ins hohe Alter*, Harm-Peer Zimmermann et al. (eds), Frankfurt am Main 2016, 257-267.

¹¹ In reply to this ambivalence cf. François Höpflinger: “Das traditionelle Doppelgesicht (Janusgesicht) des Alters wird durch die neuen Altersbilder nicht aufgehoben, sondern verstärkt in handlungstheoretische Leistungsnormen eingebunden” (Zur Entwicklung [post-] moderner Altersbilder – Leitvorstellungen und Realität, in: *Kulturen des Alterns. Plädoyers für ein gutes Leben bis ins hohe Alter*, Harm-Peer Zimmermann et al. [eds], Frankfurt am Main 2016, 287-302, 300).

ease? Is our friend Bob a best ager? Or does he simply have the luck to have inherited a pair of Herculean genes? One might look at the world this way. Discourse analysis pays attention to the lines of power in communication. A cynical analysis would actually come to the conclusion that there are a few Bobs and lots of Marthas. Few have the luck to land in Florida; others are unlucky and get stranded in Monrovia. These do not even get old. In light of this situation, exasperation is legitimate: it is a scandal. Bob could tell. And when Bob thinks that things ought to be the way they are, we have understood something about his religion. Actually, it is not important whether he prays our practices Yoga.

In critical gerontology, such distortions are made transparent by differentiating, examining, and sorting out the discourse. Yet, it does not lead anywhere to assume something behind the background that is not constructed. There is no neutral ground. Everyone who tries to *naturally* derive a positive image of aging is doomed to failure. Martha is a hero, but that does not mean Bob is a bad guy.

Whatever we have to say in opposition to a negative picture of aging can also be turned critically against a positive one. Whoever wants to find a path out of this continuous loop must name and own a reason to define the good. In other words, we depend on religion when we compare and differentiate between ideas about aging. Religion does have a critical function. Religion is not merely a resource to overcome fatal circumstances. From a biblical perspective, this is a completely abbreviated understanding of religion and represents a false naturalistic goal.

The key interest that lies behind a theological perspective should be clear. We are not talking about a moral judgment of good aging with a religious veil. Then, neither religion nor good aging is good or *per se* bad. We rather need to ask empathetically: what are people saying? How does God-talk help to discern perspectives and in some cases also to change directions? Which promises help and which are off the wall?

3. The “Religion” of the Ageless Ager

The integration of theology is no argument for religious gerontology. I prefer to talk about critical religious gerontology. A trip to the world of bio-gerontology proves the sense of this differentiation. This radical vision is obviously tinted with the religious.

Bio-Gerontology and Digital Aging

The religious is clearly visible in Aubrey David Nicholas Jasper de Grey's thoughts.¹² There are more modern and less crazy fans of this faith, but this man has an impressive name and is a sight for sore eyes. If Bob is like a Greek god, then Aubrey David Nicholas Jasper de Grey is his prophet.

Bio-gerontology is a variation and the quasi-religious peak of anti-aging precisely because it claims to be objective science. Bio-gerontology starts with the assumption that aging is not fated but rather a functional defect of the human machine. The defect frustrates the attempt to fulfill our vital potential. When we are able to solve this problem through technology and medicine, we no longer need to use our spiritual energy to attend to the uncomfortable detail that at some point our cells give up their spirit. Hypothetically speaking, in principle, the new person could live much longer if they wanted to. Or to put it the other way around, when one is able to live so long, then, the living person should be able to rejoice in the fullness of life. Therefore, humankind must achieve control over the biological processes of aging.

An interesting continuation of this theme is the *digital aging* process. The notion points to the cultural and media technological changes of aging within contemporary culture.¹³ A Swiss study titled "On the Path of the Ageless Society" claims that we can release our brain from the task of collecting memories.¹⁴ In this way, aging people remain open, attentive, and curious. They maintain the characteristics of young people. *Homo digitalis* is not the best ager – even better – this person is an ageless ager.¹⁵ The ageless ager wants to learn, uses technology to grow, and accepts help in order to exceed the limitations of the human body. Completely venturesome visionaries also see the possibility to network the brain directly to the Internet. Isn't that marvelous?¹⁶

¹² Aubrey de Grey, *Ending Aging: The Rejuvenation Breakthroughs that Could Reverse Human Aging in Our Lifetime*, New York, NY 2008.

¹³ Here I refer to digitalized data on aging. Cf. www.ageing-map.org/atlas/change/DAA766/ (accessed August 26, 2016)

¹⁴ Jakub Samochowiec et al., Unterwegs in die alterslose Gesellschaft, in: *GDI-Studie 44*, 2015, www.gdi.ch/de/Think-Tank/Studien/Digital-Ageing/681 (accessed August 26, 2016).

¹⁵ Höpflinger, *Altersbilder*, 294-299.

¹⁶ Cf. Sebastian Knell and Marcel Weber (eds), *Länger leben? Philosophische und biowissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Frankfurt 2009.

Let's ask Bob and Martha. They agree for once. Digital aging does not fit in the world of the body cult or in the environment of extreme poverty. Dreams of human enhancement may be fantastic – that does not mean that they are ridiculous. Money can be earned with them, and those who profit from the quasi-religious expectations have something to laugh about. The medical breakthroughs in this area remain outstanding. Anti-aging is therefore a sector of the cosmetic industry. As long as no formula against damn cellular aging is found, and no magical herb is discovered growing somewhere in Bhutan, only Botox will do. The snake venom works wonders. The resurrection of this injection is considerable, and I quote, “uncomplicated aesthetic treatment”, that “realizes the age-old dream of humanity to be without wrinkles into a ripe old age.”¹⁷

I don't dream this dream, nevertheless, I think it is noteworthy that the dream of a wrinkle free young face is set in relation to the term 'age-old.' In a certain way, this is true! But it is the dream of the gods and not people because per definition being a person means to be mortal.

The Theological Argument

The debate of how to overcome aging has been going on in gerontology discourse for a long time now. From the Stoa to disengagement theory, anti- and pro-aging are engaged in a controversy. The activation and continuity paradigms are dominating the last century. The theoretical plasticity approaches help to overcome negative stereotypes. Which role religion and spirituality play in this, or not, can only be answered by the scientific community on aging if we start talking with religion about religion.¹⁸ The notion that it is technologically possible to negotiate the contingencies reveals itself to be a quasi-religious fantasy. The God-talk of religion protests against this madness and demands that we can encounter the contingency.

An aside here: religion and spirituality are marked by differentiation in this discussion. But to call someone spiritual and the other religious blurs the conflict. To put it more distinctly: I am of the opinion that it is the responsibility of theology to discern the spirits and to provide resistance against the Botox-spirituality of the ageless ager.

¹⁷ Malena Ruder, So sieht Schönheit heute aus, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2015, 36-41, 36.

¹⁸ Ralph Kunz and Mike Martin, Seelsorge und Beziehungen in der späten Lebensphase, in: *Pastoralpsychologie und Religionspsychologie im Dialog*, Isabelle Noth et al. (eds), Stuttgart 2011, 221-235.

The construct of just such a floating spirituality without wrinkles and moles is not helpful. It widens the cleft in intercultural dialogue. It does not make people happy, and it deeply denies the humane.¹⁹

As you see, I have taken sides. Give me that old time religion! I must argue theologically to illustrate the gains. Such an argument is, naturally, contestable and can be discussed because it always only claims a particular universalism. The strongest rhetorical attack from theological discourse is therefore the appeal. And the most resilient reason for listening to an appeal comes from vivid stories. I will defend this by remembering an old story that unpretentiously – that is, critically – talks about the spiritual dream of eternal life. It is the story of paradise.

We will grab the proverbial snake by its tail and take its word for granted. The snake promises something that comes pretty close to the utopia of an ageless existence: “you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”²⁰ How does this dictum fit into the container-notion of spirituality? And what critical role does remembering an old religion play in the gerontological discourse on religion?

4. The Snake’s Venom: The Promise of Old Religion and Wrinkle-Free Spirituality

Consulting a narrative as if it were the foundation for a theological argument has its dangers. I am aware of this as I try to filter a certain motif out of the paradise story. Anyway, we need to consider that Genesis is predisposed to acquire additions to the story rather than an interpretation, as its history of reception proves. For instance, the banishment narrative became a sexualized story about “The Fall of Man” with a happy beginning which ended in a fiasco.

I think that this interpretation is skewed. The story lends itself to serendipity.²¹ In the beginning, Adam and Eve played like naked children – innocent and unaware. They have it all. In the end, Eve and Adam see each other as man and woman – as God created them in God’s image: as gendered, moral, and knowledgeable creatures. This is a revolutionary realization. Without it, people would not be higher than chimpanzees. Adam and Eve would in any case be king of the

¹⁹ Cf. also Kunz, *Spiritualität im Diskurs*, 233-237.

²⁰ *The Harper Collins Study Bible. New Revised Standard Version*, Society of Biblical Literature (ed), New York, NY 1993.

²¹ Cf. Meir Shalev, *Der Sündenfall, ein Glücksfall? Alte Geschichten aus der Bibel neu erzählt*, Tel Aviv 1999.

apes like Tarzan and Jane. After the so-called “Fall,” they both rise to become a different type of hominid. They are called *homo sapiens*: a hominid that has the ability to be wise, that is, having *sapientia*.

One silent detail in this story fascinates me. Adam and Eve (would) grow old and die. They are not ageless agers. They are not immortal. The protagonists realize this when they see their beautiful young bodies. It is a moment of knowledge, however, which comes along with desire (eros) and the fear of death (thanatos). The plot reveals just how ambivalent the eros-thanatos-motif is. The drama between the snake, people, and God leads the two to be excluded – expelled from paradise: on the one hand, it is punishment, but, on the other, it is also reasoned as the protective need to be on God’s side. God easily replies to this in that God thinks out loud and reasons: “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22).²²

What is remarkable here is that God suffers losses as well. God created human beings in the image of God with friendship in mind. But we might surmise that he created them without two characteristics: morality and immortality. That the snake and Adam and Eve met up at the tree of knowledge is incidental. However, we are left with two trajectories for interpretation: either the first humans become more God-like and responsible or they grow more distant from God in a palpable way. Mortality is the differentiating denominator.²³ The reader might assume that God needs to eliminate the risk before the crisis becomes a catastrophe. Now that people have a sense of moral sense and judgment, they also have a respective longing for valuation. The desire for immortality is part of the equation. The possibility of being God is irresistible. Paradise is lost.

What happens is irreversible. The movement toward the future in this story is noteworthy. God does not question the forward movement of God’s creation – one cannot turn back the wheel of Time. Shift happens. Now people are only a bit lower than The Most High or as Psalm 8:6 puts it: “You’ve made them only slightly less than divine, crowning them with glory and grandeur.”

²² *The Harper Collins Study Bible.*

²³ Rentsch, *Kultur humanen Alterns*, 256-259.

Is Eternal Life Worth Striving For?

The story continued to be interesting, and the myth grew beyond Eden. To detail each sin from the original to the demonization of death would be beyond our scope. I limit myself to one seldom spun narrative thread in the story of Eden. Adam and Eve grew old and died in paradise. What difference does this make? From a biblical perspective, it is no accident that we grow old. The children of the unions between the Adamites (Genesis 4:1f.) and the living grew weaker in order to one day bless everyone eternally and to become dust, which is no punishment. Aging is neither mere fate, nor pure grace; it is in order. An endless continuation of life on earth – and we know no other – would be “gruesome” as the philosopher Robert Spaemann pointed out.²⁴

When we interpret the story in this light, the narrative develops its own critical potential in the double sense of the word. The disorder caused by the snake’s intervention had an ambivalent effect: it awakened desire. In this case, it is the potential to know. This is the temptation one can hardly call reprehensible. If we were to do so, it would lead to a rather messy affair. In this effort, the upward desire is somehow similar to the first step of Aubrey David Nicholas Jasper de Grey’s program. It is the age-old effort to become like God. Whoever is not Hercules does better to hold on to the truth that *homo sapiens* must learn not to be overachievers and to count their days (Psalm 91:12).

Being Old – A Good Vision

Notice where my work on mythos is leading to, or, in other words, where I want to lead you. My goal was to guide us to the arguable truth that lies in the differentiation only found in the religious critic. At the core, it maintains the critical perspective of spirituality that brings us to see the universal truth of our wrinkled and blunt human existence as a serendipity. We are people not predetermined to be ageless agers. Only gods could be that.

Discussing Martha and Bob is only interesting when we listen and talk to them in light of religious traditions. Obviously, I am convinced that gerontological religious discourse cannot ignore the truth question. This, especially when we argue about what does us good, what pictures and imaginations help people to be more human. An Old

²⁴ www.folio.nzz.ch/2015/august/grauenhaft (accessed 31.03.2016).

Testament prophet deals with this in a vision. His name is Zechariah, and he may have had a beard that was longer than Aubrey David Nicholas Jasper de Grey's. His image is, however, definitely humbler and more personable. In it, the Lord of hosts proclaims:

The Lord of heavenly forces proclaims: Old men and old women will again dwell in the plazas of Jerusalem. Each of them will have a staff in their hand because of their great age. The city will be full of boys and girls playing in its plazas. The Lord of heavenly forces proclaims: Even though it may seem to be a miracle for the few remaining among this people in these days, should it seem to be a miracle for me? says the Lord of heavenly forces. The Lord of heavenly forces proclaims: I'm about to deliver my people from the land of the east and the land of the west. I'll bring them back so they will dwell in Jerusalem. They will be my people, and I will be their God – in truth and in righteousness. (Zechariah 8:4-8)²⁵

²⁵ Christian Resources Development Corporation (ed.), *Common English Bible*, Nashville, TN: 2011.