

# Aaaaagh! I'm getting OLD!!!

## The World's Attitude to Aging

by Johan D. Tangelder

I am 68 years of age and retired, so I suppose I am considered old. In our politically correct times, I am called either a "senior citizen" or "chronologically gifted."

What is aging? How do we react to it? These questions are no longer academic for me. When I was in my teens, I thought that people in their fifties were old. At this juncture in my life, a fifty-year-old seems relatively youthful. So aging is ambiguous. Bernard Nash describes aging as a paradox: "Does it not strike you that we all want to live longer but none of us want to grow old?"

Throughout our lives we think *other* people grow older until we gradually realize that we ourselves have aged. Some say that aging can be compared with the fall season when the fruits ripen and the leaves fall; others claim that the moment of aging has arrived when the sum total of memories has become greater than our expectations. Aging, says the American gerontologist Howel, "is not a simple slope which everyone slides down at the same speed. It is a flight of irregular stairs down which some journey more quickly than others." To grow old means to lose acquaintances and lifelong friends to distance, illness, and death. Obituaries testify that life is the process of aging, and aging is the steady progress of dying within us. Every moment we are alive, we are aging. Life and death are intimately linked. The day is coming when all our earthly possessions will be swept away, including our ability to enjoy them. This is not a morbid view of life – it is simply reality. As the 17th century poet Robert Herrick wrote,

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying.  
And this same flower, that smile today,  
Tomorrow will be dying.

So how do we cope with aging? We live in a society that has shown little understanding of growing old, and valued it even less. Most literature on aging is written in the language of the academy: sophisticated and complicated. Christian literature on aging is sparse. What is available generally confines itself to giving information and practical advice. Christian media and education about family life have focused primarily on child-rearing. Little attention has been given to caring for aged parents.

### Fear of Aging

Aging confronts us with our mortality. I look in the mirror and see my graying hair and wrinkles. Should old age be feared? Even the most cursory survey on contemporary literature on aging reveals fear to be a dominant motif. When I read the novel *Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbygaan* (Of old people, the things that pass by) by Louis Couperus (1863-1923) I became saddened by the real fear of aging expressed by Lot, one of the main characters. He is obsessed by his fear of growing old. He talks about

it constantly. He says to his fiancée Elly, "I hope never to become old. Elly, don't you find it terrible to become old, every day older?"

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86), who was associated with the French existentialist Jean Paul Satre, had an extremely negative attitude toward aging. She summed it up with the words "decrepitude, ugliness, and ill-health." In her monumental work *Old Age*, her major concern was with the social aspects of old people. She put aging within the context of a Marxist class struggle. She says that it is the fault of society that the decline of old age begins too early, that it is rapid, physically painful and, because they enter in upon it with empty hands, morally atrocious. She dreamt of an ideal society where old age would be virtually non-existent. According to her, old age exposes the failure of our entire civilization. In her book, de Beauvoir viewed age as the worst time of life. She paints its portrait in severely gloomy tones and remarks, "the vast majority of mankind looks upon the coming of old age with sorrow and rebellion. It fills them with more aversion than death itself." Later, she intensifies this viewpoint when she observes that age is "a degradation or even a denial of what (previous life) has been." She writes with a sense of despair: "When memory decays...former happenings...sink and vanish in a mocking darkness; life unravels stitch by stitch, leaving nothing but meaningless strands of wool in an old person's hands."

### **I'm not old!**

The fear of aging has contributed to a denial of reality. A common goal among many aged is to stay young. In contrast to the past, youth is now the ideal. In the past to be an adult was the ideal. Now the older generation wants to look as young as possible. Some try to camouflage their age by dressing like teenagers. In his own inimitable and not very flattering way, British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge reported on a month he spent at a resort in Florida. He said that everything was done to make senior citizens feel that they were not really aged, but still full of zest and expectations; if not teenagers, then keenagers. These seniors, he said, had withered bodies arrayed in dazzling summer wear, hollow eyes glaring out of garish caps, skulls plastered with cosmetics, lean shanks tanned a rich brown, bony buttocks encased in scarlet trousers. Muggeridge's description may be exaggerated, but it does say something about the affect contemporary youth culture has on our society. It has a negative and morbid view of aging. And the advertisement industry contributes to this mood.

### **Forever on earth?**

We not only want to avoid suffering and decline, both physical and mental, but we also expect to retain the strength to accomplish the same things as the young. Our hidden hope is that physical immortality can be achieved. New Agers have developed "human-potential" programs for seniors. It includes techniques for enhancement of physical functioning and mental skills, through yoga, martial arts, proper nutrition, and aerobic exercise. Furthermore, we mirror a society that has encouraged our youth to think of growing old not as part of the human condition but as a solvable scientific and technical problem. Hence, scientists search for a solution to the "problem of old age."

This secular hope to extend life expectancy appears to come down to one simple idea: more time in our lives is sought by almost everyone; science can bring it about; therefore science ought to bring it about. What are the chances that scientific advance will find a way to extend life indefinitely? A number of investors have paid large sums to have their bodies frozen at death by means of cryogenics, which is used to freeze beef and vegetables, as well as people. But as Dr. Russell points out in his secular work *Good News About Aging*, those who cherish dreams of being defrosted and living forever sometime hence are probably cherishing an implausible dream because freezing destroys human body cells. "Further, even if we can overcome this and other problems, no scientific evidence suggests that we can expect to eliminate death now or in the future because all things break down over time."

What if we could live forever in a fallen world? Would we really want to? In his 1922 play *The Makropulos Secret*, Karel Capek probes this issue with the 337-year-old character Emilia, who notes:

... no one can love for three hundred years – it cannot last. And then everything tires one. It tires one to be good, it tires one to be bad. The whole earth tires one. And then you find out there is nothing at all: no sin, no pain, no earth, nothing.

What a hideous future! To be given an everlasting longevity without being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, without hope to be with the Lord in the new heaven and earth, is a dismal prospect. It is to live under a curse.

If we could live on in this world with all its pain, conflicts, without solving the immense human problems, a medically expanded life would simply set the stage for more of same human conflicts and social injustices.

## **Death and Aging**

Not everyone experiences the aging process the same way. Some accept their twilight years of life with grace; others can't imagine that death will come for them. Yes other people die...but not *them*.

Thus some find visiting a nursing home for the elderly a burden. They can't imagine themselves ever being there. Because they know that it is old people who most often die, they fear becoming old or being long in the presence of those who are old, for they fear death. The denial of the reality of aging and the suppression of discussions about death go hand in hand. We view frankness about death as deviant, a subject not to be discussed in polite company. Unable to face the brute finality of death spawned by atheistic philosophical naturalism, and an unwillingness to return to a biblical perspective, a new generation puts faith in reports of out-of-body experiences and New Age mysticism. For a while, death was the last taboo in Western culture, and for many it still is; for others it has become an exploited sentimentality. Our society has struck death from their vocabulary. People don't attend funerals anymore, but instead "celebrations of a life lived."

But try as it might, the world cannot keep death out of sight and out mind. The moment we are born, we begin to die.

## **Generational Conflict**

What are the expectations of being able to age gracefully in our therapeutic culture? Aging frustrates modern youth. It interferes with their desire "to get things done." Have you ever noticed the impatience shown in a lineup at the bank when a senior is trying to carry out a transaction? The slower pace often exasperates the clerk and the younger customers waiting for their turn.

The conflict between the generations is a subject of much discussion. Many seem to view aging as a process to endure and suffer through, rather than a temporally contingent gift from God to be approached with gratitude. The Canadian philosopher George Grant observed that old age is more and more seen as an unalleviated disaster, not only for those outside of it but by those people who are old themselves. And he noted that we do not see age as that time when the eternal can be realized, and we therefore pity the aged as coming to the end of historic existence.

Sociologists even refer to ageism, which can be defined as a general distaste for the elderly in our culture – equivalent to racial prejudice, but in this case unfair generalizations are made about any who are old: "all elderly people are forgetful," "all elderly people are ill-tempered," "all elderly people suffer from depression," or "mental impairment is endemic to aging." Old age is seen as a time of weakness, sickness, and dying. Ageism also comes about because people know little about old age, and because what they know is based on myth and fear.

People even talk about generational wars. In recent years, the conflict between the generations has become most noticeable due to the decreasing ability of government to pay for health and pension benefits. The conflict is entirely seen within the realm of economics. The American Senate Special Committee on Aging argued in a 2002 report that without significant reform "the United States could be on the brink of a domestic financial crisis." According to financial guru Alan Greenspan, America "will almost surely be unable to meet the demands that the retirement of the baby boom generation will make."

The pinch is already provoking generational conflict in the ambitious welfare states of Northern Europe, where birthrates and immigration rates are lower than in the United States and where the elderly wield considerable political clout. Young Europeans are complaining about the high cost of healthcare for the elderly, and are resentful of fees that are eroding the tradition of free university education. One German youth leader gained notoriety by suggesting that old folks should use crutches rather than seek expensive hip replacements.

Unfortunately, this generational conflict is also seen in churches today. Seniors don't like to call their dominee "pastor Jack" and they certainly don't like his casual appearance when he comes visiting. But when a vacant church thinks of calling a pastor there is a strong emphasis on youth. It seems that some search committees look for a twenty-five-year-old man with thirty years of experience.

## **A Christian Alternative**

The differences between the generations don't need to lead to conflicts. Christians can offer alternative understandings of aging. The Bible views the conflict between

generations as abnormal. Yes, youth is a wonderful thing, but it is not the only thing. It is a blessing in many ways, but it can, on some occasions even be a curse. When Isaiah pronounced judgment on Jerusalem and Judah, he said, "I will make boys their officials; mere children will govern them" (Isa.3:4).

Young and old can come to mutual understanding and appreciation of each other. In the Kingdom of God, "Children's children are a crown of the aged, and parents are the pride of their children" (Prov. 17:6). Old men dream dreams and young men see visions (Joel 2:28; cf. Acts 2:17). And God promises that He will be with His people of every age bracket. "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He, I am He Who will sustain you" (Isa. 46:4).

**Next Month "Wow! I'm getting old – Christian aging in hope!"**