

# Excerpts

## Excerpt from the Preface: "Continuing the Conversation"

... In the 1980s, prescient gerontologists like James Birren and Barbara Payne encouraged several of us to undertake the challenging task of including the spiritual dimension in the study of aging and its meaning. The result was the exploration of some of the uncharted terrain of spirituality and religion and their impact on aging and older adulthood. Volume 1 of *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook* was published in 1995 at a time when there was still very little literature on spirituality and aging. This volume represented a unique collection of essays by a variety of eminent scholars and practitioners from assorted disciplines of gerontology, theology and pastoral practice. Although there was no apparent market for such a handbook, Fortress Press took the risk of publishing this volume. There was considerable surprise when the Academy of Parish Clergy in 1996 named this book one of the ten best books for parish ministry, and, perhaps, even more surprise when the handbook continued to record steady sales to both gerontologists and clergy.

The culture and climate for introducing spirituality and religion into gerontology have significantly changed since volume 1 was published. The inclusion of the spiritual dimension of aging has been widely recognized as evidenced by professional gerontological societies such as Gerontological Society of America and American Society of Aging creating study sections on religion and spirituality in gerontology. The spiritual dimension is increasingly cited as an important dimension in health today and as a critical component in "successful aging." The "red carpet" has been unrolled! Persons from the religious sector are now encouraged more fully to participate in presentations and symposia at national gerontological conferences.

Persons from the religious sector, however, cannot come empty-handed to this conversation. They must participate having done their own conceptual reflection and research in the areas such as theology, liturgics, psychology of religion, and pastoral care. Likewise, researchers and practitioners in the biomedical and social sciences need to critically examine their disciplines for their unspoken assumptions about the meaning of human longevity.

Some of the questions that need to be addressed include the following. How can a theological hermeneutics reshape the pervasive biomedical model of aging? What are the unique roles of the faith community in promoting

wholeness and health as well as spiritual growth and maturation for persons in the last stage of the life cycle? How do religious communities and pastoral caregivers respond to the implications of an expanding older adult population nearing the fourscore years envisioned by the psalmist? What are more creative ways to implement older adult ministries with both mobile and frail elderly? What metaphors and symbols are needed in order to emphasize the transcendent meaning for life at all stages including older adulthood? What forms do religious and spiritual development take in later life? How do faith and spiritual focus affect older adults' thinking, feeling, and acting? How are social behaviors affected by late life religious and spiritual commitments and what are the implications of these commitments for compassionate service to others? The findings from such research and scholarship must be disseminated in scholarly papers and publications that advance the understanding of the relevance of religion and spirituality in the field of gerontology.

Fresh breezes continue to blow in current gerontological theory, research, and practice that value and include spirituality and religion and their impact on aging. Because of the significant outpouring of interest, the editors proposed to the publisher a revised version of volume 1. It was suggested, however, that we keep volume 1 in print and publish a fresh collection of essays as volume 2 that would continue and expand the interdisciplinary conversation begun in the first volume. Therefore, a core of scholars and practitioners was enlisted to contribute essays to this new volume. This volume, although not without substantive theoretical essays, includes more essays that reflect praxis. It contains many examples of how religion and spirituality are encountered in the growth experiences and life crises of older adults and their families.

Interestingly, several new themes arise in this volume that were absent in the previous work. For example, very little mention was made of Alzheimer's and other dementias in the first volume. Volume 2 contains four chapters entirely devoted to issues related to dementia and others engage the topic by addressing concerns of caregivers. Similarly, the noisy Baby Boomers were relatively silent in volume 2, but now several chapters focus on the ways they are reshaping expectations about religion and spirituality in aging persons. Reflecting an emerging vision for inquiry in gerontology, the need for narrative explorations of late life emerges as a strong theme in this volume. Authors in this volume are also more ready to take on the challenging discussion of dying and death, topics that did not receive much attention previously. Finally, one finds in this volume a much stronger emphasis on older adults' opportunities

for service to others and the ways their love for their neighbors and for God may heal the brokenness in this world.

Although James Birren suggested that "aging is too important to leave to the scientists," he also wisely added, "but it is also too important to leave to the theologians and scholars in the humanities." He underscores the necessity for inter-disciplinary and multi-dimensional approaches. Spirituality at first viewing is an ambiguous, vacuous term open to range of interpretations and meanings. It is a part of the human experience that displays manifold facets that cut across many academic disciplines. The role of religion and spirituality in gerontology requires meaningful dialogue built upon mutual understanding and respect for disciplines that are usually not in dialogue with each other. ...