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The Dignity of the Old: Towards a Global Ethic of Ageing

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Abstract

How does globalization affect the lives of older people? Developments in demography show that the world population is rapidly getting older, and not only in affluent societies. Politically, economically, socially and culturally, the elderly are in a vulnerable position. Is a global ethical response possible? Christian theology should actively support the human rights discourse that pleads for non-discrimination of the elderly in society. Yet, a human rights ethic is unable to account for the stages of life and the specific role of the elderly within communities; these are highlighted within more communitarian approaches. Communitarianism however, has its limitations as well. A global ethic of ageing should not fix the elderly within closed traditions and communities; rather, it requires openness towards other cultures and ways of life. 'Dialogical contextualism' should be the method, and its main question should be: can people globally learn from one another about how to live in dignity into old age? This article concludes with some European reflections on the dignity of older persons, in which a hermeneutic of the concept of human dignity and empirical findings are brought together. The results may function as an impulse for further intercultural conversation on a global scale.

Keywords

ageing, globalization, public theology, human dignity, human rights, liberalism, communitarianism

Introduction: The Demographic Transition

Globalization makes the world a single place. It facilitates communication not only between technologies and economic markets, but also between cultures and people. Political structures and religious world-views clash together, and so do life-styles and moralities. Globalization can be defined as 'the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a

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whole'.¹ We have to ask what ageing and being old mean in a world in which relatively closed cultures, traditional life-styles and family structures are opened up and are overruled by new global economic and cultural interdependencies. Growing (very) old often means becoming physically and socially fragile and dependent on others. We have to ask what care for the elderly means in a world in which there seems to be no common moral ground for treating the weak and marginalized in a humane and just manner. The need for a global ethic of ageing is developing.

To raise the question of ageing to a global level seems appropriate for another reason. Not only does ageing occur globally, but the globe is also ageing. Developments in demography show that the world population is rapidly getting older. This 'demographic transition' is driven by two factors: increased life expectancy and declining fertility rates. The world's total number of people over sixty years of age is expected to double within the next twenty-five years, from 606 million in the year 2000 to more than 1.2 billion by the year 2025. While the global population will increase from around six billion in the year 2000 to nine billion by the year 2050—an increase of fifty percent—the world's elderly will experience a three hundred percent increase in numbers. In developing countries where mortality rates are rising and contraception is available the increase may be as high as four hundred percent; in fact, already over sixty percent of the world's aged population lives in developing countries, and this will increase to seventy-five percent by 2025 and eighty-five percent by 2050, according to the United Nations Population Division.² The 80-plus age group makes up the fastest growing segment of the population; its share of the over-60 population will increase from twelve percent to nineteen percent by 2050.³

In western countries this 'greying of the world' is sometimes presented as a temporal and rather local phenomenon that will end after 2040, when the baby boom generation (born shortly after World War II) will have left the scene. However, old age, according to demographers, 'is here to stay', permanently and globally. One might speak of an anthropological revolution in the history of humankind. While the decline in fertility is global, its speed varies. Due to

¹ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1992), p. 8.

² Alexandre Kalache, Sandhiu Maria Barreto, Ingrid Keller, 'Global Ageing: The Demographic Revolution in All Cultures and Societies', in Malcolm L. Johnson, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 30–46 at p. 30.

³ Serdar Sayan, 'Globalization in an Ageing World', *Korea Herald* (20 August 2002), *Global Policy Forum*, <<http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/econ//2002/0820ageing.htm>> [accessed 14 January 2009].

improved access to quality health care and better living conditions, average life spans in rich countries are still much longer than in the developing world, but it will only be a matter of time before the rest of the world catches up. Substantial increases in life expectancy have been registered globally over recent years, except in sub-Saharan Africa, where the HIV/AIDS pandemic has reduced mortality.⁴ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 1950 and the late 1970s life expectancy increased on average by fifteen years in every developing country in the world.⁵ The fastest growing age group in the world is the oldest of the elderly—those aged eighty years or more—who are also the most vulnerable and frail category of elderly. By the middle of this century one-in-five older persons will be eighty years or older, with the majority being female due to the lower life expectancy of males.⁶

The demographical disproportion between the north and the south of the world will be significantly reduced in the years to come. Looking for a metaphor for global ageing, a Dutch demographer uses the image of a rising flood at the beach (to represent the greying of the world population), in which only one big wave (that is, the baby boom generation in western countries) is on its retreat.⁷ The United Nations (UN) concludes that the ageing of the world population is unprecedented, without parallel in the history of humanity; pervasive, as a global phenomenon affecting every man, woman and child; profound, having major consequences and implications for all facets of human life; enduring and irreversible, old age being here to stay.⁸

How Globalization Affects the Lives of the Elderly

Globalization has been called a ‘second modernity’, or a ‘hypermodernity’, to indicate that it not only simply represents the powerful prolongation of

⁴ Kalache et al., ‘Global Ageing’, p. 31.

⁵ Chris Phillipson, ‘Globalisation and the Future of Ageing: Developing a Critical Gerontology’, in *Sociological Research Online*, 8:4 (2003), <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/8/4/phillipson.html>> [accessed 14 January 2009]. Life expectancy remains below fifty in more than ten developing countries, and since 1970 has fallen, or barely risen in a number of African countries, due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Fifty percent of the children orphaned by HIV/AIDS are now raised by their grandparents (ibid.).

⁶ Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA): Population Division, ‘World Population Ageing: 1950–2050’, (2001), *United Nations*, <<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/worldageing19502050/index.htm>> [accessed 14 January 2009].

⁷ Gijs Beets, *NRC-Handelsblad* [Dutch Newspaper] (28 August 2008).

⁸ DESA, ‘World Population Ageing’.

one-sided western colonialism and imperialism, but also has to be regarded as a new phenomenon, wherein decentred cultures have a criss-crossing influence on one another.⁹ Unprecedented demographic changes will affect the structure of all societies and the position of the elderly. How these changes work out will depend on the political, economic and cultural dynamics of globalization. These dynamics however, are no Juggernauts. The emerging new world order is not the result of a combination of ruthless capitalism and revolution in information technology. New transnational political associations, like the European Union and the United Nations acquire political authority, new human rights regimes and networks of co-operation between international actors (such as non-governmental organizations) try to protect citizens from the abuse of power by national and transnational authorities by putting pressure on them in the emerging sphere of global public opinion. They are part of the driving force of globalization.¹⁰ Globalization is not a blind process, but the result of, admittedly complex, human decision making procedures, in many countries of the world open to democratic policy. Global ethics can be understood as a moral reflection on the dynamics of the globalizing process, in its outcomes and consequences for specific communities and groups. Global ethics has, as globalization itself, no centre or power, but can only be developed in a normative dialogue between groups, individuals, institutions and the ‘powers and regencies’ of the emerging ‘network society’.¹¹

Before exploring the implications of such an ethic and the contribution of public theology to it, we need first to gain an impression of how the lives of the elderly are affected by globalization. Globalization has to be understood as a multileveled process, economically, politically, socially and culturally.

Economically, the rise of one world market implies the emergence of fast international come-and go-markets. Big international corporations require flexible and vital work forces, ready to move and change, but ageing reduces people’s capacity for physical work and increases their risk of debt, hunger, illness and isolation; indeed, eighty percent of older people in developing countries have no regular incomes and live in poverty. Approximately a

⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 16.

¹⁰ Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Max Stackhouse and Don Browning, eds, *God and Globalization: vol. 2: The Spirit and the Modern Authorities* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age, vol. 1: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1996 and 2000).

hundred million older persons live on less than a dollar (US) a day.¹² Though this is contrary to the facts, older persons are considered to produce little of value to society. In reality, old people are often highly productive, even if their economic contribution is not always paid in cash and they have stopped being active in the labour market. The elderly often support their children and grandchildren materially and immaterially, and/or are involved in voluntary work.¹³ In the 'visible' economy however, older people are often excluded from educational and vocational training programmes and restricted from receiving credit or loans.

Older people in developing regions are also often excluded from basic health care opportunities; they have been amongst those most affected by the privatization of health care, and the burden of debt repayments to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁴ The elderly easily become victims of the stranglehold of transnational financial regimes. It might seem as if, in affluent societies, most elderly people do not have those worries: they share a relatively stable state pension system and enjoy the rights to guaranteed minimal health care provision. However, occupational and private pensions rely heavily on investments in global stock markets; the monetary crisis of 2008 showing how vulnerable the system of pension provisions actually is, and how the economic future of old age worldwide will become risky.

Politically, in the process of globalization the role of nation-states is reduced and sometimes undermined by transnational actors, and taken over by international organizations and inter-governmental forms of co-operation.¹⁵ This 'deterritorialization' has far-reaching consequences for the shape of the welfare state; its splendour has been progressively weakened in many European states. Ageing is increasingly presented as a risk for the individual, as much as a collective responsibility, given the questioning of the centrality of state provision.¹⁶ Young people in their twenties and thirties no longer assume an indefinite

¹² For relevant data about poverty and old age, see the instructive website of Helpage International, <<http://www.helpage.org/Researchandpolicy>>.

¹³ This is not only evident in developing countries. In Germany for example, the population aged 60–85, produces nearly 3.5 billion of hours of (usually unpaid) goods and services a year, estimated to be an equivalent to about 21% of the public pensions in that country. Cf. Harald Künemond and Frank Kolland, 'Work and Retirement', in John Bond, Sheila Peace, Freya Dittman-Kohli and Gerben Westerhof, *Ageing in Society* (London: Sage, 2007), pp. 167–85 at p. 178.

¹⁴ Phillipson, 'Globalisation and the Future of Ageing'.

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 11.

¹⁶ Phillipson, 'Globalisation and the Future of Ageing'.

supply of social security from their national government to support them during tough transitions in the course of their life. Young people are encouraged to reckon with and prepare themselves for ‘lifelong employability’, not necessarily in their country of origin, and financial independence. Similarly, many adults from the ‘baby boom generation’ are already caught up in this shift in attitude towards lifelong work, some now thriving in employment up to seventy years old and sometimes beyond.

Socially, the opening of economic borders and the rapid coming and going of labour markets stimulates millions of people to move to big cities or more developed, and thus more aged, countries.¹⁷ Globalization incurs rapid urbanization and migration, but older people often stay behind in their rural areas. As traditional family life erodes, organizations such as Helpage International report that the chance of elder abuse (ranging from neglect to physical violence), especially of women, increases.¹⁸ Globalization incites social individualization; hence, a successful construction of identity relies increasingly on an individual’s ability to make a meaningful whole of their personal life story; in Giddens’ words, it relies on the ability ‘to keep a particular narrative going’.¹⁹ Consequently, many elderly persons, no longer performing and integrated in a work environment and living far away from their children, are endangered by social isolation and solitude.

Nevertheless, globalization is not merely one-way traffic; it also triggers social counter-practices. The retreat of the welfare state revitalizes old forms of solidarity and stimulates new social support structures: ‘blended’ families, friends and neighbours provide networks of mutual support and informal care to vulnerable and frail elderly persons, despite the pressures towards individualism. While local spaces and cultures are still strong and vibrant in many communities, especially in multicultural urban contexts, diasporic communities provide models for host communities when it comes to the care and support of the elderly.

¹⁷ Sayan notes that Japan’s population, for example, is expected to decline by 17.9 million by 2050, while the share of its 60+ population will climb to 42 percent, and the share of its 80+ population will be more than 10 percent. The ratio of workers to retirees will fall back to about one. Japan would need 10 million immigrants per year until 2050 just to maintain the ratio of workers to pensioners that it had in 1995 (Sayan, ‘Globalization in an Ageing World’).

¹⁸ Lia Susana Daichman, ‘Elder Abuse in Developing Nations’, in Johnson, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, pp. 323–31.

¹⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 54.

In general we can assume that old age policy, for a long time depending on state interventions with governments as the only responsible actors, will increasingly be embedded within civil society, with many different civil parties developing initiatives. Globalization does not have the extreme homogenizing effect that has sometimes been ascribed to it; rather, it produces localness, even in the attempt to erase the local: it creates forms of interconnectedness, inviting coming generations of the elderly to ‘comparative interaction of different forms of life’,²⁰ either concrete and physical or mediated by the internet. With globalization, monocultural definitions of growing old are undergoing ‘relativization’ and alternative visions of old age, from diverse parts of the globe, are being considered and tested.

Culturally, globalization communicates an idealized, consumerist life-style, via the media (television, the internet, popular music and so on). The ‘realization’ of the individual self is becoming a global value, even in traditional, community oriented societies like China, whereby identity is not a given but has to be redefined in every stage of life. Likewise, the meaning of being old has to be reinvented. Ours is ‘a society after the end of tradition’, sociologist Anthony Giddens states, writing about the new global culture of reflexivity that is emerging.²¹ This does not mean that traditions disappear, as European Enlightenment thinkers hoped; instead, globalization leads to the revitalization of old and the invention of new traditions. The internet, television and tourism open up dialogues that stimulate creativity towards developing new images of old age. Moreover, traditions are no longer legitimated on unquestioned internal claims to truth; they are supported (or even ‘invented’) on external, pragmatic grounds. The once self-evident reverence in many cultures and communities of old people as wise representatives of traditions, near to archetypical origins of truth and meaning, is rapidly diminishing.

Globalization implies a complete reorganization of the life-course and a redefinition of the traditional stages of life. The various risks attached to the life-course in the global village are no longer locally assured by traditional communities, or nationally mitigated by providential nation-states, but individualized and put on the account of personal responsibility. Especially in traditional communities, this shift toward individual accountability has a revolutionizing effect on social structures. Hence, the economic mechanism of the global labour market takes over the function of blood ties and the different ages of life as a first principle of social organization, and the family becomes a

²⁰ Robertson, *Globalisation*, p. 27.

²¹ Giddens, *Runaway World*, p. 43.

private system and is liquidated as a social institution.²² In traditional societies, the elderly are the transmitters and guarantees of the relationship with a transcendent origin; global culture, however, is future oriented and that future has to be guaranteed individually: it is not the elder, but the child who represents its openness and promises.

The impact of detraditionalization; the increase in the level and intensity of risks through the life-course; the collapse of lifetime jobs, hastened by the globalization of finance and the mobility of capital; increased rates of human migration—all of these affect the organization of the life-course and the lives of the elderly in particular. Until now, social gerontology, as a discipline, has developed in western societies, focusing on the idea of an orderly life-course developed through chronologically defined, subsequent phases of education, work and retirement. Globalization however, challenges every notion of a linear ‘normal biography’.²³

The Human Rights Paradigm: Justice for the Ageing

As they grow in number, the economic, social and cultural well-being of the elderly is at risk, especially in developing countries. We have to consider, therefore, whether public theology can be of any help in supporting and guaranteeing the role of the elderly as full participants in a global society. We must ask how the moral and spiritual sources of the Christian tradition can inspire the global discourse on what it means to live a worthy human life at an old age.

First, Christian theology should actively support the human rights discourse that pleads for equality, security and non-discrimination of the elderly in society. Human rights culture, or as Jacques Maritain would put it, the ‘new civic faith’ of the post-war world, seems to be the only available candidate for the foundation of a global ethic in the twenty-first century.²⁴ Christian faith and practice, as one of its millennium long historic origins, should not stand aside in the further development of human rights culture, but must be drawn into a constructive alliance with its discourse.

²² Marcel Gauchet, ‘La Redéfinition des Âges de la Vie’, *Le Débat*, 132 (November/December 2004), 27–44.

²³ Chris Phillipson, ‘Ageing and Globalization’, in John A. Vincent, Chris R. Phillipson and Murna Downs, eds, *The Futures of Old Age* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), pp. 201–207 at p. 205.

²⁴ John Witte Jr, ‘The Spirit of the Laws, the Laws of the Spirit: Religion and Human Rights in a New Global Era’, in Stackhouse and Browning, eds, *God and Globalization*, vol. 2, pp. 85–90.

The ethical gain is obvious, albeit (as we shall see) limited: human rights ethics puts a strong emphasis on distributive justice. Old people, as full members of society, should have equal access to the basic public goods of society, such as work and health care, and discrimination on the simple ground of their advanced age ('ageism')²⁵ must be combated. Ageism seems to be a perennial vice in developed as well as in developing countries, where the elderly are discriminated against in the labour market. Though living longer, economically speaking, humans are ageing earlier, since after forty the chance of getting a new job rapidly decreases. In developing countries, the scarce public health resources are understandably focused upon improving maternal and child health. Caring for women and children is rightly considered to be an investment in the future, but this has also meant that social programmes and health care services for older people are often viewed as too costly and burdensome for already constrained resources. Hence, policymakers forced to choose between the needs of multiple vulnerable groups are inclined to prefer the young to the old.²⁶

In defending the rights of the elderly as a matter of global justice, one stands for the recognition of their equal human worth, irrespective of the culture they live in. Within the framework of a global theory of justice, the elderly can be considered as 'the least well off', in John Rawls' theory of justice.²⁷ His theory, that socio-economic inequalities are acceptable only to the extent that the prospects of the least well off are as optimal as they can reasonably be expected to be, has strong affinities with Christian theology. It has been welcomed by liberation theology as a philosophical foundation for the biblical intuition that God has a 'preference for the poor'.²⁸ In many developing countries, elderly are the poorest among the poor. Thus, a human rights ethic defending the equality of all human beings will contest ageism. Health care

²⁵ 'Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old... younger generations... subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings'. (Robert N. Butler, as cited by Bill Bitheway, 'Ageism', in Johnson, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, pp. 338–45 at p. 338.

²⁶ Michal Engelman and Summer Johnson, 'Population Ageing and International Development: Addressing Competing Claims of Distributive Justice', in *Developing World Bioethics*, 7:1 (2007), 8–18 at 9.

²⁷ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

²⁸ Larry Polivka, 'Globalization, Population, Ageing, and Ethics', in *Journal of Ageing and Identity*, 6:3 (September 2001), 147–63 at 160–61. Cf. Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburgs Publishing House, 1987) and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Vorrang für die Armen: auf dem Wege zu einer theologischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1993).

should be equally distributed, and if there is inequality, the most vulnerable should have priority, regardless of their age.

In its emphasis on justice and equality, the human rights paradigm can give a vital moral impetus to a global ethic of ageing. The UN already took the initiative, by announcing, in 1991, the Principles for Older Persons; a declaration of rights, focusing on the elderly.²⁹ It states that older persons should have access to food, water, shelter, clothing, health care, work and other income-generating opportunities, education, training and a life in safe environments (otherwise known as the ‘right of independence’). Secondly, the elderly should remain integrated into community life and participate actively in the formulation of policies affecting their well-being; the ‘right of participation’. Thirdly, the elderly should have access to social and legal services so that they can maintain an optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being; the ‘right to care’. Fourthly, older persons should have access to educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources and be able to develop their full potential; the ‘right to self-fulfilment’. Finally, older persons should be able to live in dignity and security, free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse; they should be treated fairly regardless of age, gender and racial or ethnic background: the ‘right to dignity’. The Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002, claimed the human rights of older people and called countries to end age-based discrimination. The Madrid Plan asserts that ‘persons, as they age, should enjoy a life of fulfilment, health, security and active participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of their societies’; furthermore, it aims to ‘enhance the recognition of the dignity of older persons, and to eliminate all forms of neglect, abuse and violence’.³⁰

Though The Madrid Plan is a non-binding set of recommendations, it can function as the bottom line of a global ethic for the ageing. In its emphasis on the equal worth of every human being, especially the least well off, the foundational role of the human rights paradigm in an ethic of ageing deserves Christian support. It should be nurtured and developed further within Christian communities, in accordance with the Christian belief that every human being is created in the image of God and that God has a preference for the poor.

²⁹ General Assembly Resolution 46/91, ‘United Nations Principles for Older Persons’ (16 December 1991), <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/olderpersons.pdf>> [accessed 14 January 2009].

³⁰ United Nations, ‘Report of the Second World Assembly on Ageing’ (Madrid, 8–12 April 2002), *United Nations*, <<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/397/51/PDF/N0239751.pdf?OpenElement>> [accessed 14 January 2009].

Communitarian Critique: Growing Old Within Communities

However, though a human rights approach is necessary, is it doubtful whether it is sufficient as a global ethic of ageing. First, within theories of justice the human rights of elderly have to compete with the rights of other, equally vulnerable groups (women, children and the poor in general). We need to know how we are to decide who is the worst off and whose rights should be respected in case of conflict.

In western moral philosophy, a much debated question is how limited resources in health care should be allocated between the young and the old. Policymakers are faced with the difficult issue of defining intergenerational justice. Proposals, such as Norman Daniels' 'prudential lifespan account' and John Harris' 'fair innings argument',³¹ have been put forward. Both scholars conclude that all people have equal rights to basic health care resources, but most older people have already had their share. That is, in the case of limited resources and life threatening situations, the young should have priority, not only because it is better to invest in the future of the young (at least according to Harris' utilitarianism), but also to safeguard the right of every younger person to live the life that the elderly have already lived (at least, this is Daniels' Kantian and Rawlsian line). This discussion makes it clear that vulnerable elderly persons are not always protected by human rights based theories of justice.³² Elements of ageism easily slip into debates involving hard cases and scarce resources.

In addition, it should be clear that the above theories fit a specific western context, whereas in developing countries intergenerational justice often means something different. The actual and potential contribution of older people to these societies and the interdependence of generations within non-western households is easily overlooked and not taken into account.³³ The retired white male individual, enjoying his social pension after a life-long working career, tacitly serves as a model in western countries, instead of the poor and jobless grandparent caring for an orphaned grandchild. Globally, not only the question of

³¹ John Harris, *The Value of Life: An Introduction to Medical Ethics* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); Norman Daniels, *Am I My Parents' Keeper? An Essay on Justice Between the Young and the Old* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³² 'Being able to live to the end of a human life' is one of Nussbaum's central capabilities in her neo-Aristotelian approach. (Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 76).

³³ Engelman and Johnson, 'Population Ageing and International Development', 13.

intergenerational justice (between young and old within societies), but also intra-generational justice (between the old and the old throughout the world) should be noticed: despite their frail bodies, many older persons in the north belong to the rich and powerful, globally speaking, thus we have to ask whether they can claim the same rights as their poorer counterparts elsewhere in the world.

Clearly a human rights approach has limitations; hence, the communitarian critique of rights-based moral theories.³⁴ Communitarians propose their alternative by starting with a relational anthropology, instead of individualism. While the point of reference within a liberal ethic is the individual as a transcendental subject, radically disembodied and timeless, communitarians think of an intergenerational community. Whereas liberals defend a ‘thin’ theory of the good, concentrating on justice and equal opportunities, communitarians have a ‘thick’ theory of the good. Respect for the elderly is an important element of communitarianism, whereas liberals might consider it to be an extraordinary good (*donum superadditum*). Liberals defend freedom of choice and self-fulfilment over the life-course, but communitarians emphasize taking up social responsibility and the finding of one’s calling and destiny. Community holds, for liberals, instrumental or sentimental value, while it represents, for communitarians, something of intrinsic value. A liberal justice theory stresses one-way entitlements for the elderly (such as pensions and health care), whereas communitarians make reciprocity central taking account of the care and wisdom that older persons can give. Ageism is an important feature of a liberal ethic of ageing that deems age to be morally irrelevant. Communitarians, on the contrary, maintain that a ‘natural life span’ has a moral value, that older persons are rightly disengaging from life and receiving reverence from the younger generations. Whether an older person wants to go on living is, for liberals, a matter of personal autonomy; contrastingly, communitarians argue that the value of a life, however old, depends on one’s role within the community. Extension of biological age is not intrinsically valuable in itself, unless it supports our contributions to a communal life. In other words, after having lived a ‘natural life span’, one cannot claim the right to go on living at all costs. The real ethical challenge for ageing societies, therefore, should be how to improve the conditions for life as a life in community, and not how to stop ageing as such.³⁵

³⁴ ‘[T]here are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns’ (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth 1981), p. 69).

³⁵ Cf. John Harris, *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

A communitarian approach in an ethic of ageing compensates for some of the limitations of the human rights paradigm.³⁶ It puts forward an encumbered self, embodied in time and space (in a body, society, history); it values tradition, as the hermeneutical context in which the meaning of personal identity, age and ageing is discovered; it has a sharp eye for the social merit and status of the elderly within community. Moreover, from a theological point of view, communitarianism's relational anthropology, with its emphasis on personal responsibility, social vocation and mutual care, and its valuing of reciprocity and the common good (*bonum commune*), stands close to important strands of the biblical and Christian tradition. It should be supported wholeheartedly by Christian communities that nurture a sense of personal calling, social responsibility and neighbourly love.

In its turn, however, the communitarian approach may also have limitations regarding the elderly. While communitarianism is right to be suspicious of the universal pretensions of human rights theories, acknowledging instead that ethics cannot be abstracted from its embeddedness in particular contexts and that concrete communities provide the hermeneutical grounds for reflection on the good and the right. By stressing the particularity of cultural traditions, however, dialogue with others across the borders of the community is not intrinsic to the communitarian search for the good, but becomes additional and secondary, and might even threaten the stability of one's moral identity. 'Communitarianism' as a political ideology might lead to social and cultural isolationism and xenophobia, whereas globalization requires openness towards other cultures and ways of life. 'Dialogical contextualism' within the polycentric world of the emerging global order needs to underpin ethics. The subjects of global ethics, being conscious of their local roots, should not be afraid of exposures to cultural differences, but should welcome them, asking whether we can learn from one another about how to live, how to grow older and how best to treat the elderly.

Nonetheless, both the human rights discourse and its communitarian counterparts, despite their limitations, bring in valuable elements for an ethic of ageing that searches for the good for older persons in the emerging global context. For Christians, this should be supported by and integrated in a public theology that believes that human beings are created in the image of God, that God has a preference for the poor and vulnerable and that during their

³⁶ My argument is indebted to the seminal book of Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

lifespan, until their old age, people are called to be a witness of the coming of the Kingdom of God (cf. RSV, Lk. 2:22–39).

The Dignity of the Old: A Contextual Dialogue

In the attempt to nurture a human rights culture for the aged and honour the role of elderly within communities, churches and Christian communities throughout the world are invited to give their support. Thus, we need to consider what specific contribution public theology can make to the development of an ethical discourse on ageing on a global scale. In my opinion a further conceptual and empirical exploration of the notion of human dignity will be helpful here; defending the ‘dignity of the old’ sounds promising, since human dignity represents a central notion in Christian theology. In the *imago Dei* tradition—humans being created in the image of God (RSV, Gen. 1:26)—all human beings hold an inalienable dignity, bestowed on them by a divine creator. The notion of dignity can function as a common ground for a critical dialogue between different religious traditions, and also between secular philosophy and theology.

We need, therefore, to understand what dignity means for older people themselves, what dignified ageing in our cultures looks like and how the young are to treat the elderly with dignity. These questions cannot be answered in abstract ethical theory or by top down systematic theologies; rather, they have to be explored and elaborated in concrete projects of participatory research, in which a hermeneutic of traditions is brought into dialogue with the empirical actuality of concrete social practices. A contextual and interdisciplinary dialogue around these questions could be arranged in criss-crossing projects between local cultures and communities in different parts of the world asking what the dignity of the old stands for and how diverse persons do (or wish to) practice it.

Such a dialogue sounds promising for several reasons. At first, it can bring human rights discourses and communitarian discourses together. In both discourses, dignity plays an important role. In human rights discourse human dignity, whether understood in a more Kantian way as autonomy or in a more Aristotelian manner as the sum of human capabilities, has to be ‘respected’. It functions as a moral and spiritual foundation for the legitimacy of negative liberties and positive claims for rights. In communitarianism dignity stands for social merit rather than for a personal quality, such that dignity is not the basis for subjective claims, but for political ‘recognition’. This diffuseness and

polarity within the concept of human dignity may lead some ethicists to the conclusion that it would be better eliminated from the ethical debate. I think, on the contrary, that its rich texture of meanings across different world cultures and political-philosophical paradigms (such as liberalism and communitarianism) provides ethical reflection with a fertile hermeneutical soil.

As a positive contribution to such a dialogue I shall present, in the remainder of this article, some European reflections on the dignity of older persons, in which I put the hermeneutics of the history of ideas (*Ideengeschichte*) and empirical findings into dialogue with each other. This may function as an impulse for a further inter-cultural conversation on a global scale. Though there is a rich literature on the historical and philosophical background and meanings of the concept in European culture as such, it is only recently that empirical research into the meaning of dignity has been carried out among the elderly. I present only a short, tentative reconstruction of some outcomes that may be used as intuitions to be tested in further research. Congruencies become visible between systematic surveys of the effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the notion of human dignity on the one hand, and the outcomes of empirical research among the elderly on the other.

Simplifying its complex history, one can distinguish three broad strands of meaning in the human dignity tradition. First, there is dignity as humaneness—the value of being human—which is closely linked to Stoic philosophy and Christianity. Christians hold that every human being, regardless of his or her social status, has an equal worth as a creature of God, because she or he shares in God's dominion, Trinitarian relationality and incarnational bodiliness; while Stoic philosophy claims that each human is equal as a participant in the world of rationality, as emphasized by Immanuel Kant. However broadly or narrowly it may be understood to be treated according to one's human dignity means having equal opportunities and not suffering discrimination. In this sense, ageism violates the dignity of the elderly. In a European Commission research project 'Dignity and Older Europeans', Lennart Nordenfelt speaks of universal dignity as the value of being human (*Menschenwürde*), which is attached to the property of being human.³⁷ In empirical research among older adults in the US participants referred to 'philosophical dignity': 'the value one

³⁷ Lennart Nordenfelt, 'Dignity of the Elderly: An Introduction', *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 6 (2003), 99–101. See also Lennart Nordenfelt, 'Dignity and the Care of the Elderly', *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 6 (2003), 103–110 and Lennart Nordenfelt, 'The Varieties of Dignity', *Health Care Analysis*, 12:2 (2004), 69–81.

has by simply being a human being'.³⁸ To be respected and to have self-respect as a human being are closely linked together.

Secondly, the same older adults distinguish a 'behavioural dignity'; that is, having been role-players in society for a whole life-course, the elderly describe their social roles as an important source of dignity. Those interviewed in the US research considered dying with dignity, as well as 'being polite, not complaining, not swearing, accepting help gracefully, and being self-directing' to be the 'socially correct' behaviour of a dignified elder person. In the project 'Dignity and Older Europeans', we meet this sense of dignity again as 'social merit' and 'moral stature'. Historically, this field of meaning is closely linked to Cicero, who related human dignity primarily to the social and political position a person occupies and the reputation associated with it. Cicero defines dignity as what merits respect, whether mediated by an office or by the sheer excellence of virtue. In turn, dignity defines justice: 'Justice is a habit of mind which accords to every man his proper dignity while preserving the common advantage'.³⁹ I think this is an important strand of meaning in the context of old age, better supported in the communitarian discourse than in human rights discourse. The dignity of older persons (and their self-esteem) depends a great deal on who they are now and who they have been during their life-course. To respect the dignity of older persons means that others in society should have reverence for their long standing life experience, achievements and efforts.

Thirdly, the elderly talk about dignity as an attribute of the self, connected to a sense of individual self-worth, even pride. Nordenfelt, in his European research project, speaks of the dignity of identity, and considers it to be most important in the context of the end of life. He states: 'It is the dignity that we attach to ourselves as integrated and autonomous persons, persons with a history and a future with all our relationships to other human beings'.⁴⁰ I think that this meaning of dignity can be linked to a relatively late strand of thought, brought in by Boethius in European history that refers to dignity as beauty or 'glory'. This ethical-aesthetic meaning perpetuates the tradition of antiquity with its emphasis on the combination of the good and the beautiful

³⁸ Cynthia S. Jacelon, Thomas W. Connelly, Rana Brown, Kathy Proulx and Thuy Vo, 'A Concept Analysis of Dignity for Older Adults', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48:1, 76–83.

³⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, as cited by Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, vol. 1: Stoicism in Classical Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), p. 86.

⁴⁰ Nordenfelt, 'Varieties of Dignity', 74–5.

(*kalogathia*).⁴¹ Further, it is able to integrate Christian connotations of human beings crowned by God ‘with glory and honour’ (RSV, Ps. 8:4). Dignity here stands for the mystery of someone’s unique individuality, his or her irretrievable, personal creation by God that needs to be respected even when, as in dementia, one’s mental abilities are diminished and disappearing. This notion of unique personhood became common only late in European history (via Romanticism), but it has strong roots in Christian faith.⁴² People may lose their personal dignity in the social sense of the word, yet their mystic worth as a creature, having developed an authentic (conscious or otherwise) human history with their creator, cannot be lost.

These three fields of meaning have all been worked into the Christian tradition.⁴³ Christians in the early church emphasized, with the Stoics, the worth of every human, but the Church Fathers also used dignity in the second sense, speaking of the special dignity of a particular person’s vocation or ecclesial office (such as a martyr, virgin or bishop).⁴⁴ Concerning dignity as glory, Origen (185–254) states that though ‘man received the dignity of God’s image at his first creation’, the divine likeness itself is only ‘reached in the end’ in the eschatological consummation.⁴⁵

The dignity of the old consists in their humaneness, so that discrimination, neglect, mistreatment and abuse of the elderly should be combated; yet it also concerns their merit and prestige for which they should be honoured. Finally, it consists in the unique history that God develops with each person during her or his life-course; a story can only be told by them together. It is, as ‘my-story’, a mystery that should be respected.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Johannes van der Ven, Jaco S. Drayer and Hendrik J.C. Pieterse, *Is there a God of Human Rights? The Complex Relationship Between Human Rights and Religion: A South African Case* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 267.

⁴² Cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴³ For the following, see ‘Introduction: Contextualizing Human Dignity’, in R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, eds, *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 5–6.

⁴⁴ As Soulen and Woodhead note, Clement of Alexandria (150–215) holds that those who submit themselves to ‘the training of Christ’ acquire a ‘moral loveliness’, a ‘superior dignity’ that can be ‘augmented and increased’ (ibid., p. 4).

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁶ For that reason Linda Woodhead pleads for an ‘apophatic anthropology’, for which theology seems better prepared than philosophy. For ‘there is inbuilt theological resistance to the task of defining the human . . . it shares in the *mystery* of God—and can never be pinned down’; ibid., p. 233 (original italics).

In Conclusion

A global ethic of ageing may grow around the notion of respect for the dignity of the old. In exploring the concept, liberal and communitarian ethics find common ground. The central question in such an ethic is what ‘dignified ageing’ stands for in the dynamic of globalization. In a contextual dialogue, different cultural practices can be brought together with philosophical arguments and religious beliefs and values. Globalization makes possible new kinds of interconnectedness and invites coming generations to an exchange of values and practices in caring for and supporting the elderly.

Ethical traditions with a long history such as Stoic philosophy and the Christian tradition in Europe, provide fertile hermeneutical resources, but are not exclusive and should not be used to end dialogue. The worldwide conversation about the dignity of the old, that I have in mind, can find a concrete starting point in local communities within the ecumenical network of Christian churches. We need to ask how the dignity of the old is empirically perceived and practiced, neglected or violated in the favelas of Rio, in Guguletu at Cape Flats, in a middle class suburb in Utrecht, in a rural village in the highlands of Scotland, on the Fiji Islands in the South Pacific and so on. Additionally, we need to take identify what those communities can learn from each other about what it is to age well. In this exchange of practices, values and beliefs, globalization might change from a threat for the frail and vulnerable into an enriching experience for all.