



Advanced age or old age are also defined by five-year age-cohorts: 60–64 years old, 65–69 years old, 70–74 years old, 75–79 years old, 80 years old and above.<sup>1</sup>

Since around the beginning of the twentieth century there has been a fairly rapid process of aging of the world population, which is why this century tends to be called “the century of old age.” This process has intensified in the early twenty-first century and will probably continue to do so, causing significant changes in the ratios of people of different ages. The whole of issues related to old age is investigated by a branch of science called gerontology and its more specialized departments – gerontological psychology and gerontological sociology. According to explanations of this science, old age is one of the phases of human life, distinguished because of the diminution of man’s organic and physical strength, his spiritual powers being fully preserved or even increased. The period of old age is the aforesaid advanced age, “the second life,” “the third age” after childhood and mature age. Old age is defined by indicating the biological and psychic features of old man.

Old age as a biological phenomenon is determined by the genetic potential of man’s life forces, his way of life, and by social factors. As people age, in the tissues of human body, cellular plasma becomes dense, tissues become dehydrated, deposits of useless substances accumulate, and more cells decay than are created. The pace of human aging is affected by people’s way of life, especially food, activity, and the environment of life. Aging is accelerated by low locomotor activity, overloading of the nervous system with psychic stress, or with excess signals and information, or by improper diet consisting in deficiency or excess of calories. Social factors can also accelerate aging, especially the condition of not being prepared for old age, wrong attitude towards aging, a sudden change of environmental conditions, worsening of one’s financial standing, lack of peace and rest, and psychic and social isolation.

An old man resembles withering plants and aging animals. He is most often bent and stooped, with his head often bald, hair gray and going gray, eyes faded, as if misty, with no glitter, often assisted with spectacles, complexion gray, wrinkled, yellowish, hands languid, trembling while writing. Such a man shows no resilience, no flexibility of movement and walking, he is languid.<sup>2</sup>

The mental features of an old man are manifested in the lack of strength, lack of imaginativeness, acuity, initiative, flourish, or lack of activity. Memory in an old man looks back towards the past when he was young, healthy and strong, unlike in young people, who live for the future, and in mature people,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. W. Riley, *Age Stratification*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Gerontology*, vol. 1, San Diego 1996, p. 92 et al.; M. Halicka, *Wiek podeszły społeczeństwa. Aspekty demograficzne*, “Ethos” 1999, no. 3, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. J. Pastuszka, *Starość człowieka. Rozważania psychologiczne*, “Ethos” 1999, no. 3, p. 31.

who are concerned with the present-day matters. Imagination in an old man grows weaker in comparison with the imagination of young people and people of mature age. Because he finds thinking a great effort, his intelligence also grows weaker. Especially when the brain is affected by atherosclerosis. Orientation of thinking towards the past also weakens acts of will, by nature oriented towards the future, which arouses fear and uneasiness in old people. The force of human drives changes: the need for nourishment tends to grow rather than decrease while the sexual drive and self-defense drive diminish. Feelings are influenced by changing moods, most often by depressive and pessimistic feelings of loneliness, inferiority, of being dispensable, forgotten by others and being pushed onto the sidelines. These often produce dissatisfaction with life, a carping attitude, acerbity, maliciousness, hostility towards the people around, and sometimes even vindictiveness. The entirety of behavior of an old man is by far most influenced by the awareness of inevitably approaching death.<sup>3</sup>

The attitude to old people in different cultures, in their historical changes, is characterized by essential dissimilarities. In some cultures old age is regarded as a symbol of life wisdom, great experience, caution and prudence. Other cultures, however, identify old age with decrepitude, unproductiveness, troublesomeness, dependence on others.<sup>4</sup>

The position of a human individual in culture is influenced to the greatest extent by normative culture.

Religious culture, moral culture, legal culture and political culture, all together co-create normative culture. Each of them expresses its substance in the form of laws – religious, moral, juridical, or political. All these laws constitute different answers to similar questions related to the subjects, objects, justifications and the character of normativization.<sup>5</sup>

#### ASSESSING THE VALUE OF LIFE OF THE AGED

Specific features of life, especially of human biological and spiritual life, here particularly of the life of old man, give it a subjective and/or objective value. Certainly, biological life is an elementary condition for spiritual life: both earthly life and possible “afterlife,” “life beyond the grave” or “eternal life.” According to various views, whether secular or religious, the value of human life is largely determined by the following features: creation by God, rationality or reason, feelings (emotionality), dignity, personality, humanity, and uniqueness. The views that differentiate the quality of life make it possible to evaluate it

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32 et sqq.

<sup>4</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Prawa narodzin, życia i śmierci*, ed. VII, Zakamycze, Kraków 2002, p. 353.

<sup>5</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Współczesne kultury prawne*, ed. IV, Zakamycze, Kraków 2005, p. 81.

accurately according to deeds. However, the views that defend the absolute value of any human life divorce assessments of the value of life from its biological, mental or social qualities.

Recognition of human life as a value leads to its normative protection, to the extent that it depends on the concept of value of life. Normative systems based on the concept of absolute value of life strive to protect it in its entirety. However, normative systems constructed in accordance with the concept of relative value of life admit of exceptions relating to the protection of life. In either case, the need to protect life stems from everlasting and numerous threats to it [...]. Normative systems cover with protection both the length and quality of human life. As is commonly known, longevity or even immortality belong to man's most magnificent and oldest dreams. Although, as civilizational development progresses, the average length of human life or life expectancy slowly increases, life will probably never achieve immortality in the earthly life.<sup>6</sup>

The length and quality of life has been the subject of special interest, especially with regard to the life of old people.

The quality of life is without doubt adversely affected by man's old age characterized by specific, already named biological and mental features. However, the adverse effect on the quality of life can be reinforced by social factors, which also contribute to a kind of discrimination of the aged. According to the doctrine of ageism (from *age*) formulated in recent years, the quality of life of the aged decreases because they are discriminated against precisely because of their old age. It is difficult to explain the essence of ageism accurately, because it is difficult to determine how large a part of the decreased quality of life stems from advanced age. At the same time one cannot fail to observe that diverse normative cultures accord different position to old people; some value them for wisdom and experience, others push them on the sidelines of oblivion, treating them like a useless burden for society.

The most flagrant manifestations of ageism that produce discriminatory legal and normative consequences for old people include mandatory retirement, making the types and ranges of insurance coverage dependent on age, provision of patient care and treatment conditional on how old he/she is. In the terminology of American law normative ageism is defined with the term "assessment by quality-adjusted life years," or QALYS.

All normative expressions of the protection of human life are crowned, as it were, by the right to life. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights of 4 November 1950 stipulates: "Everyone's right to life shall be protected by law." This Convention prohibits intentional deprivation of human life, subjection of people to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. It provides everyone with the right to liberty and security of person, the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence, and freedom of

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<sup>6</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Prawa narodzin...*, p. 89, 92.

expression.<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of ageism aspires to have a universal reach, covering whole humankind. A more thorough description of the varied position of the aged in society requires that individual cultures of the world be taken into consideration.

#### THE AGED IN PRIMITIVE CULTURES

Primordial cultures, divided into prehistoric, which archeologists are trying painstakingly to explore, and historic ones, existing in contemporary times and thus easier to investigate, show a similar though diversified attitude to the aged. The problem of old age on a large social scale:

[...] did not occur too often during the first three or four million years of long prehistory; hunting, wars, famine, malnutrition, or disease did not give the Paleolithic man too many chances to live to see his hair grow gray [...] the results of analysis of one hundred and eighty seven prehistoric skulls; only three of them turned out to belong to people who were over fifty years old.<sup>8</sup>

The lives of population of primitive tribes were threatened by numerous perils, which is why only a relatively small part of them lived to a ripe old age. Infant and child mortality is very high there. The lives of adults can be also terminated suddenly for entirely unexpected reasons, like an accident, natural disaster, death of starvation, an enemy attack, or poison administered by a shaman. Death is therefore a frequent, unwelcome and intrusive guest. Even old men, who have lived to a ripe old age, cannot disregard envy, which is a threat to their lives. The wisdom and experience of these people can be regarded as detrimental to the rulers. The death of the old can bring relief to the younger. Adult children who struggle to support their family usually gain rather than lose when their parents who were unable to work die. The brutality of this statement is usually accompanied by another brutal proposition: the old have already experienced joys of life, therefore they should give up their place to the younger.<sup>9</sup>

The fact alone that it was rare for members of primitive tribes to live to a ripe old age already determined their unusual value indicating an unnatural quality or the supernatural protection of some supreme or divine powers. However,

[...] the position of an old man in a primitive community can be very different among different peoples, depending on circumstances, the way of life, and the general order of a given culture. The position given to an old man is conditional on the general cultural context. This statement holds true for all ages, and the peoples that did not know writing are an illustration of this.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92 *et sqq.*; On the doctrine of ageism *cf.* H. Lesser, *Ageism*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, vol. 1, Academic Press 1998, p. 87 *et sqq.*

<sup>8</sup> G. Minois, *Historia starości* [History of old age, Polish translation from the French original: *Histoire de la vieillesse...*] Warszawa 1995, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Prawa narodzin...*, p. 353.

<sup>10</sup> G. Minois, *Historia starości...*, p. 20.

In the tribes that lead a (relatively) affluent and secure life, people who have attained longevity have about them an aura of even a supernatural authority, which approximates the threshold of divinity – the *sacrum*. The oldest people come closest to crossing the borderline between this earthly world and the supernatural, which is why they can perform the role of priests, witch doctors, or magi who show others the way of honest life. Among the members of peoples that do not know writing, old men are depositaries of the tribal memory and knowledge, a treasure trove of its wisdom and experience, and their opinion and counsel has a binding force tantamount to the force of law. An African proverb says: “when an old man dies, a whole library is burning.” In many tribes, the people of ripe old age owe their high social position to the wealth they have accumulated. These features of assumed wisdom and real wealth are often the sources of political predominance of old men in primitive peoples, who endowed them with the roles of leaders. However, in tribes that suffer from starvation and poverty, the fate of the aged is often tragic: they are forced to commit suicide or are killed, sometimes in a very brutal way.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE AGED IN HINDUISM

The culture of Hinduism, predominant in India, owes most, in all its manifestations of great wealth, to a religion called *sanatama dharma*, meaning eternal religion. In the catalogue of Hinduistic norms, precedence is given to the absolute imperative for protecting the life of all animate beings (*ahinsa*), and among them human life in each period of it, including old age. According to Hinduism, man’s life goes through four stages or cycles (*srama*), which are distinguished by their own norms. After the learning stage and family stage comes the stage of retirement from life under the burden of old age, which consists in saying goodbye to earthly pleasures, and then the final stage of parting in death with the current form of incarnation, aroused by the hope of more perfect incarnation, with the prospect of full enlightenment and identification with the Universe – *nirvana*.

Hinduism calls on us to fulfil mutual intergenerational obligations during the whole of human life. The older should fulfil their obligations towards the younger, and the younger towards the old. Generally, in marriage the husband’s death happens before the wife’s death, whose matriarchal authority in the family is lower than the authority of patriarch. The situation of the widow who bore no sons can be dramatic. In accordance to the local customs she is deprived of all rights, rejected by the husband’s family, and even by her own. If she has not

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

decided to commit *sat*, immolation of herself on a funeral pyre with her husband's dead body, she could at best count on the job of a servant, living in poverty. However, if she decides to undergo *sat*, she may be given an offering altar, perhaps even a temple, offerings of flowers and seeds, and grain, and she will gain the fame of a virtuous widow, the *sacrum* of a profound believer, the promise of rebirth in an incarnation of higher quality during the process of reincarnation, even if she does not attain the state of *nirvana*.

*Sat* is probably the most spectacular expression of the peculiar attitude of Hinduistic culture towards the fate of an old widowed woman.

The British, who occupied India, legalized the religious sanction of *sat* in 1812, but on several conditions. The widow cannot be under age or sexually immature, during menstruation or the condition of physical impurity, under the influence of narcotics or in the condition of spiritual impurity, she cannot be pregnant, or a mother nursing an infant. First of all, she should give her consent to *sat* of her own free will. The ineffectiveness of this regulation, however, caused the British administrators in India to entirely ban *sat* in 1829, which was to be severely punished. At present, the practice of *sat* happens only sporadically, that is why it gains greater publicity.<sup>12</sup>

For all Hindus fatigued with life, especially old people, the ancient Hindu book *The Laws of Manu* recommends religious suicide as in the form of Great Journey (*mahaprasthanā*), which shortens the road to *nirvana*. A Hindu man or woman, who has decided to take such a journey, may go north-east to effect his/her physical self-annihilation, submit him/herself to the influence of water and air, without eating any food, until his/her body disappears entirely. In the cycles of life and dying (*sansara*), a next act of dying is not a horrifying thing because it leads to another rebirth in a new incarnation. However, the ultimate goal of man is *nirvana* – being freed from the need to be reborn.

#### THE AGED IN BUDDHISM

The position of old people in Buddhism is determined by its main principle, according to which, rather than wait for any divine assistance or intervention, man should solve by himself his life problems that can be reduced to suffering. A rational person, capable of running his own life, can skillfully use both the knowledge that comes from outside of him – *prajna* and from within himself – *karuna*. Thanks to that, in every mature period of his life, even old age, he can find a suitable place within a social order, which makes it possible for him to enter the realm of eternal peace after death.

<sup>12</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Współczesne kultury...*, p. 262 *et sqq.*

Unlike the religions of hope – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – Buddhism, along with Hinduism, belongs to the religions with a lack of hope. When hope arouses tormenting expectations, feelings of unfulfilment, and unnatural desires, the lack of hope – just the opposite: it brings full spiritual peace. When hope produces negative tensions, the lack of hope arouses no tensions. When hope, often living the illusory better future, neglects the present, the lack of hope creates an opportunity to experience here and now that which is the only real. Therefore, according to a Hindu aphorism: “Happy is he who has no hope, for hope is the greatest suffering, and a lack of hope the greatest happiness.” Life wisdom based on hopelessness compels one to seek a sense of life in pondering over the inevitability of death.<sup>13</sup>

Left to his own resources, a rational man devotes a considerable amount of time to meditation, which attains the highest levels in the Buddhist monastery communities (*sangha*).

Treading the path of elimination of suffering, he attains that which is right – views, thinking, speech, conduct, earning, aspirations, concentration, and meditation. Thus, that which is right is to abstain from doing harm, taking what has not been given, sexual abuse, false speech, and from taking substances that cause unconsciousness. [...] Life wisdom should serve inviolability, and therefore the protection of life, (*ahimsa*), both of humans and animals.<sup>14</sup>

A reminder of the vanity of human life is the typical scenery of meditation by a Buddhist sage. His choice will be the site of cremation among scattered and charred human remains. There he perceives also with his senses the truth that appears with all clarity in his mind. It is there that he can more easily attain the eternal truth of Buddhism, expressed in the words: resign yourself to death as the main sign of impermanence of all hopes that are accessible to man; if you do not fear it or long for it, you are well on the way to crossing the line between life and death and winning that which is eternal.<sup>15</sup>

The aforesaid worlds explain why old age and death are accepted peacefully in the culture of Buddhism.

#### THE AGED IN CONFUCIANISM

The place of old people in Confucianism is determined by the idea of order in human relations as a consequence, to some extent, of ordering the world and man's inner life.

Human relations should be practiced according to the importance of persons – from the highest to the lowest. The very nature of family, marriage, neighborhood, society, and State determines the hierarchical positioning of people according to seniority, gender, birth, office, length of service, positions, power etc. Any difference in position in human hierarchy determines

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280 *et sq.*



the differences in the scopes of authority; Confucian legal culture advocates, if possible, avoidance of authority-based coercion but rather the use of moderate norms.<sup>16</sup>

Moral role models of a mature person should be distinctly characterized by a friendly attitude towards one's neighbors (*ren*) defined by norms *li*. They are to regulate the whole of appropriate conduct based on customs, traditions, rites, and etiquette. The choice of a right norm *li* depends on a specific situation, in which the most important role is played by the relationship of people who are an unambiguous relation of subordination. Children are obligated to obey their parents, wife her husband, younger siblings older siblings, the subordinates the governing, and friends obey friends. The underlying significance of *li* comes close to the Golden Rule: "Do not do unto others, what you do not want done to you." Artificial social orders should be harmonized with the natural orders of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Taoism brought into the Confucian concept of life some individualistic, perfectionistic substance and strong emphasis on the need for man's submission to the nature of things. As a philosophical and religious trend it contained numerous descriptions of magic practices that were expected to ensure man's longevity or even immortality. It understood the ideal life of man as the harmony of human thoughts and deeds with human nature, faithful to the natural order of things (*wu-wei*). Taoism derives its name from *tao* – the word denoting the way of life, methods of solving difficulties in life, or conduct in accordance with the natural order of things. The most important norm of *tao* is renunciation in life of greed, desires, lust, cravings and unnatural needs, which provides man with spiritual peace and body health.<sup>18</sup>

A sage, wisdom being a privilege of mature age, devotes a considerable amount of time to contemplations and special physical exercises. They give a person internal peace, permitting him to in a way blend in with the rhythm of the cosmos. Faithful to the guiding precepts of *tao*, a sage renounces desires, including the desire for eternity and immortality; he does not crave for death or fears it. He accepts the necessity of death as entirely natural. However, premature death, before man attains maturity, deprives him of an opportunity to be properly prepared for receiving it. The culture of Confucianism is also no stranger to dreams of immortality. The realization of them was attempted by sages (*hsien*), recluses who lived in the mountain regions, most often old men. It is also worth mentioning that Confucianism formed a particularly developed culture of death by suicide in the forms of *harakiri* or *seppuku* – honorary suicide, and *marishinju* – family suicide, suicide during the war committed by the *kamikaze*.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297 *et sqq.*

## THE AGED IN JUDAISM

Man's old age occupies very much room in the culture of Judaism, formed mainly by the religion's holy books, collectively called the *Talmud*. One of the Talmudic scriptures – *Awot* – while distinguishing individual periods of human life, sets the beginning of old age at the sixtieth year of life. A seventy-year-old man has gray hair, an eighty-year-old – a gift of special force, a ninety-year-old – is bent by the burden of years, a hundred-year-old – is in the state as if he has already left this world and died. Life, measured by days and years, is for man the supreme good, potentiated by its quality and length. Which is why “everything man has, he will give up for his life”. A man, aware of the necessity of earthly death, preserves his life in numerous offspring, faithful to the substance of the covenant of the Israeli people with Yahweh.

Judaism shows its humanitarians in its concern over the happy life of each man. Demanding protection of human life from the moment of natural conception to the moment of natural death, Judaism expresses the striving for the qualitative and quantitative development of the Jews killed by historical cataclysms. Directing vital forces of the Jews towards unhampered reproductiveness, it encourages them to enter harmonious marriages early and to respect maternity, fathers to be responsible for the well-being of the large family, the married couple to be sexually faithful to each other, and to make it difficult to obtain divorce... The Lord of life and death is God – Yahweh. Man was created to live in obedience to Yahweh. As a result of his disobedience, which stemmed from sinful pride, man was punished by mortality. Human death in Judaism is compared to sleeping, which is why it does not denote the end of life but it is reduced to a shadow in the abyss (*Sheol*). Being dead does not mean not being but not being alive. Man will be delivered from death by Messiah-the King, awaited by the Jews.<sup>19</sup>

The culture of Judaism commands, in different ways, that the young show due respect to the old. The Decalogue calls upon one to honor one's parents – mother and father. The Leviticus as part of the Old Testament states that it is necessary to respect an old man: “not to sit on his place, not speak instead of him, not interrupt him.” According to the orders of the Torah, one should stand up in the presence of an old man and stay away from him by four ells. The provisions concerning wedding ceremonies and taking oaths – *Nedarim* – highly regard the wisdom of old people “When children tell you to build, and old men to demolish, listen to the old men and not these children for the building of children is demolishing, and demolishing of the old men – building.” The aforementioned *Awot* adds: “he that learns from the young, shall eat green grapes and drink young wine; he that learns from the old shall eat ripe grapes and drink old wine.” On respecting old people and heeding their wisdom the Talmud poses a question and gives an answer: “Who can be certain of the heaven? He who venerates old men”.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>20</sup> Quotations in this paragraph after: G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

In the culture of Judaism differences are sometimes blurred between the attitude towards old men and differences in attitude towards other people, who are not yet old men, especially the caste of priests. However, while priests always gain knowledge as they grow old, old men who come from simple, uneducated folk, when they do not observe the law enough, frequently go soft in the head with old age. Among old people who come from common folk, “an old man is a burden, while an old woman a real treasure.” Old men often tend to be sad, while old women are more likely to joke. When some rabbis claim that longevity is a sign of moral deserts rewarded by Divine protection, others maintain that it is the result of proper nutrition, doing exercise and bathing.

In practice the attitude towards old people may change, but it probably appears to be more favorable than in [...] the Christian world [...]. On the whole, in the Jewish world old men must have occupied a fairly significant position. This attitude was largely influenced by the importance attached to the oldest Biblical writings, especially the *Pentateuch* – testimonials from the days when old people were a privileged group. For those who would always study the Torah, there remained something of the former aureole about the old man, which endowed him with dignity. In the Christian world, however, which was mainly based on The New Testament, where old men occupied a rather insignificant place, it was easier to assume an attitude of indifference or full of contempt towards them, the more so that Christianity also inherited very much from the Greek-Roman tradition, which treated old people very harshly.<sup>21</sup>

As early as in the Middle Ages Jewish communities established charities that took care of old people.

#### THE AGED IN CHRISTIANITY

Out of the many senses of the concept of “Christianity,” the most useful for presenting the position of old people in society is its doctrinal sense – theological and philosophical views. The Bible mentions old age only at some points in its content; nor did the Office of Church devote special attention to it.<sup>22</sup> To show the position of the aged in society, however, we can make use of the scattered but fairly numerous statements by the authors of broadly understood Christian literature.<sup>23</sup>

In the early Middle Ages, to which the development of Christianity dates back, the value of an old man aged above 65 years was three times as low in Europe as the life of a man aged 20 to 50 years. These values were assessed by the courts in the form of *wergild* while adjudicating on cases involving homicide.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51 *et sqq.*

<sup>22</sup> Thus expressed [in:] T. Ślipko SJ, *Sens życia – sens starości w perspektywie chrześcijańskiej*, “Ethos” 1999, no. 3, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Collected by: G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 127–146.

The then Church did not yet recognize the separate nature of the problem of old people: they were a part of the group of people afflicted by misfortune: the insolvent, widows, the disabled, orphans, the sick, or old men, without specific distinctions regarding their age or even gender. The clergy were occupied with defining non-temporal, as it were, relations between people and God, without distinguishing the period of old age in human life.

St. Augustine set the beginning of old age at the sixtieth year of life and its end, very optimistically, at one hundred and twentieth year of life. John the Baptist, when distinguishing six periods in human life – the period of cradle (infancy), childhood, adolescence, youth, maturity, and old age, maintained that old age covered as much time as the remaining five periods together. Isidore of Seville dated old age from the seventieth year of human life, distinguishing in it the stages of senility and decrepitude. According to Gregory the Great, old age “is a continual weakness that leads to death.”<sup>24</sup> St. Jerome, who regarded seven as a predict number, considered the attainment of the eightieth year of life as an exceptional sign of blessing. On the other hand, Dhuoda, wife of Bernard, duke of Septimany, recognized as ideal the attainment of the hundredth year of life as opening the gate to the Paradise.

Many Christian thinkers associated old age not so much with a definite number of years of man’s life as with his wisdom. “A real old man, regardless of his age, is a sage.”<sup>25</sup> Grey hair is a secondary feature in relation to old age: of primary importance is mental maturity, great experience, moral life and fear of God. For some Christian authors, however, old age, described in terms of decrepitude and ugliness, was a perfect allegory of sin leading to death. John the Chrysostom even went so far as to identify a sinner’s soul with the repulsive image of an old man, who is distinguished by gray hair: “it (the soul) has reached the highest level of stupidity, it speaks nothing but absurdities like old men or people possessed with folly: it suffers from running nose, stupidity, forgetfulness, it is rheumy-eyed, it arouses repulsion in people, and yields to devils easily.”<sup>26</sup>

The repulsive ugliness of old age was described even more bluntly by St. Augustine:

Darkness covers the eyes, ears turn deaf, hair starts falling out, the face pales, teeth are loose and fall out, skin dries up, breath turns foul, the chest pressed inside, with fits of coughing every minute, knees wobbly, heels and feet swelling... his bodily abode will soon crumble. As the end of life is nearing, each old man has nothing left to do but think about one thing, only that is how to reach safely the shore of future life.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Quoted after: G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131 *et sqq.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

An old man would like, which however is impossible, to combine beauty with old age. He should rather be religious, think about strengthening his soul, its salvation, and respectful meeting with God.

These pessimistic descriptions of old age, inspired by the Old Testament and Greek and Roman culture, presented old age, alongside disease, as something evil, a curse, or God's punishment for Adam's sin continued by people. An old man enjoying good health appeared to be a challenge to the Divine plan. This view was toned down, however, by the distinction between sinful old men and virtuous old men; the former were supposed to be assisted by the devil, the latter by the angels. With age, there grew the severity of judgment of people's offences, especially their lecherousness, meanness, conceit, impetuosity, mendacity, greed, selfishness, indecision, and senile flightiness, whereas they were expected to show decent, wise and virtuous behavior that could serve as a good example to the younger. For the same offences – it was believed – the older people deserved to be punished mores severely than the young.

In some of his statements, St. Augustine, quoted above, tried to balance the value judgments on the good and evil of old age.

Old age brings a lot of good and evil with it; a lot of good because it liberates us from passions, from all manner of most cruel tyrants, because it puts an end to sensuousness, tames passivity, adds wisdom, gives mature counsel, and, because carnal desires cool off, old age sleeps without losing virginity, rejecting the pleasures offered him by the Shunemite woman.<sup>28</sup>

However, in the general expression of Christian thought, there is a decisive prevalence of adverse images of old age. Christian thought encourages old people to exchange obedience to their parents for obedience to God. This can be best served by monastery life as an attempt to implement the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Yet in the sets of monastic rules, old men are also pushed on the sidelines, and some rules even demanded that decrepit monks be sent to their families.

The Christian sense of life, and of old age in this context, goes further, though... The role of a pillar in the structure of the sense of life is performed by the ultimate goal, which is God living in the transcendent beyond as the supreme good and infinitely perfect... Thus the supernatural ultimate goal assumes the foundation of the sense of life, but the structure of this sense is also made up of principles, according to which the whole of life activities should be ordered, in order to orientate it towards implementation of the supreme immanent goal... It is obvious, that this sense consists in modification of the general sense of life to suit the specific situation of the final period. It is characterized, as we know, by the inevitable final in the act of death.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> T. Ślipko SJ, *Sens życia...*, p. 26 in.; cf. also Pope John Paul II, *W oczekiwaniu na „wieniec sprawiedliwości”*, “Ethos” 1999, no. 3, p. 11 *et sqq.*; On the Christian concept of life and death see also: R. Tokarczyk, *Współczesne kultury...*, p. 194 *et sqq.*

## THE AGED IN ISLAM

In Islam it is fairly easy to discern similarities, borrowings but also dissimilarities in the conceptions of life as compared with the corresponding conceptions in Judaism and Christianity. This is due, as we know, to the fact that Christianity owes its sources of thought to Judaism, while Islam both to Judaism and Christianity. Let us therefore confine ourselves to indicating only the original features of Islamic ideas of life.<sup>30</sup>

This indication will be confined here to the questions of the place and role of old people in Muslim communities.

There is certainly little originality in the Qur'an imperative of showing respect to the parents, understood in Islamic culture as an expression of Allah's will, revealed to Muhammad as his prophet. Original features, however, are found in the sense of the term *shaikh* as a synonym of an old man. Originally, this term was more of a polite expression than a denotation of man's age. It was used to express profound respect, first for a tribal leader, than *caliphs* and *imams*, founders of brotherhoods, which distinguished themselves while defending Islam, and it was only later that it came to be used to address any older person.

A more special honorific term *shaikh al - islam* was a honorable appellation given from the tenth century on to various learned doctors or mystics, and under the Osman empire it became the official title of the *mufti* of Istanbul, who was hierarchically the superior of all people of religion and the second-in-rank dignitary in the empire.<sup>31</sup>

The position of old people in Islam varied, depending first of all on the character of their life – nomadic, country or town life. This made the positions of old people in Islamic culture closer to their respective places in other cultures, especially primitive ones, moralist cultures, religious and secular cultures. These remarks can be also referred, to a large extent, to the present day.

## THE AGED IN EUROPEAN CULTURE

European culture, from its earliest beginnings until the present day, developed a great diversity of attitudes towards the older people. In ancient Greece, the condition of being old was perceived mainly as "sad old age," which was regarded as a manifestation of evil, pain, and suffering, something even worse than death. Greek mythology emphasized the advantages of young gods over old ones, who were always malicious, dissolute and losers. This conviction was hardly altered by the significant position of the council of the elders in Homer's Greece, the author of famous Iliad and Odyssey. The curse of old age was reflected throughout

<sup>30</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Współczesne kultury...*, p. 244.

<sup>31</sup> J. and D. Sourdel, *Cywilizacja islamu*, Warszawa 1980, p. 567.

all Greek literature: poetry revealed its ugliness, prose – tragedy, and comedy ridiculed it. While Greek political leaders never, as a rule, lived to a ripe old age, Greek philosophers, almost without exception, attained the age of venerable old men. When Plato idealized old age, Aristotle saw no positive features in it. The literary images of old age had without doubt an adverse effect on the situation of the aged in ancient Greek society, which somewhat improved in Hellenistic Greece. It was during that period that they started to look for the causes of human aging. Plutarch, in an essay concerning the old man's involvement in public affairs, answered the title question that the old man could do this, with a great sense of his possibilities and of public sentiment.<sup>32</sup>

In ancient Roman culture, old people played a significant role, mainly thanks to Roman law. This law gave great power (*potestates*) to the father of the family (*pater familias*), making him the absolute ruler of the family. However, a far lesser role in the family was played by the old woman – *mater familias*. Also in the public forum, old men were held in high esteem in the Roman Republic. During the subsequent evolution of the political system of ancient Rome, the power of old people began to be more and more restricted, which was shown in Latin literature, sometimes in a caricature way. In Roman medicine “an old man as a dead man in the state of suspension, did not attract attention of therapists. His disease was incurable, or at any rate it was regarded as such, as long as the only medicine for it was believed to be youth”.<sup>33</sup> A permanent position of value in the history of old age is occupied by the beautiful and wise work by Cicero *On old age*, in which he challenged the four reasons why old age was regarded as an unhappy period of life: we are removed from active life, our physical strength progressively weakens, we are deprived of sensual pleasures, we sense the nearing of death.

While in medieval religious literature old age acquired the standing of a symbol of faith, secular literature of the period showed indifference to it but was not silent about it. An exception were sometimes old men who survived as warriors; death in numerous battles in those days took a heavy toll. The attitude of barbaric peoples towards old men was already influenced by the morality of Christian charity, therefore the sense of family ties provided support for the aged. Misery affected destitute old men, who vegetated on begging in poverty. The number of old men in particular classes was varied, the smaller being among knights and peasants, the largest among the clergy. The political role of old men was significant: – the rulers were surrounded by surprisingly numerous old advisers.

The most ruthless was the peasant world because life in it was based first of all on one's own manual job: while the clergy provided care for their old men, and the family in a castle provided

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<sup>32</sup> G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 53 in.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

support for their progenitor, and the cloister took in a merchant who retired from business, an old peasant could only count on his children, if he had any, and it was not always that they treated well an extra useless mouth. The old man was therefore left with an insecure role of the treasure trove of group memory [...]. Aging did not take a dramatic course on condition that a man managed to hold his place in society or had sufficient resources to withdraw from active life.<sup>34</sup>

An increase in the number and importance of old people in Europe stemmed sometimes from fairly unexpected causes; deadly epidemics in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries killed mainly children and young people. This aggravated conflicts between generations and led to the concentration of power and possessions in the hands of old people. Old men appeared in painting and in sculpture both as artists and as characters. The Age of Enlightenment brought a real wealth of various themes of human old age in life, literature and art. The cult of youth had to struggle with curses cast at old age. The relativity of a subjective sense of old age found its expression in its [old age's] objective manifestations: medical, literary, philosophical, or political. Contempt for old age was in a way balanced out by admiration for old people, especially those among the aristocracy and politicians. The conflict of generations established its place in European culture to survive and develop even until the present day in diverse manifestations of Western culture, which reaches far beyond Europe's geographical borders. However, the contemporary period will first of all go down commendably in history for its great number of social security benefits, including retirement and healthcare packages for the aged.

#### THE SUMMING-UP OF DISCUSSION

Nowadays, when in many countries there has been a high and rapid progressive increase in the percentage of the aged in all societies, called sometimes the 'papy boom', even this brief recapitulation of the fate of the aged in the past indicates significant changes that have since taken place. Among numerous theories on the causes of old age, the most widely accepted is the theory of the process of aging being genetically programmed. As an inevitable reality, old age fills people with fears and anxieties, they wish to remove it from them and retain their youth as long as they can, as far as the borders of eternity.

For thousands of years [medicine] has attempted [...] to understand the causes of aging and to delay its effects; however, because it was helpless in the face of this natural fate, it eventually confined itself to naming typical pathologies of the aged, classifying them in the category of incurable diseases. The old person, as a patient whose prognosis for cure was nil [...] was sent to a hospice.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>35</sup> G. Minois, *op. cit.*, p. 13 *et sqq.*



The present survey of the position of the aged in different cultures, despite its diversity, permits us, however, to define several common features of the social status of an old person. First, it is mainly and without doubt a physical weakness: it discriminates against the aged in poor or ill-organized societies while it goes more mildly in wealthier and well-organized societies. Second, this great wisdom and great experience, more highly regarded in primitive cultures, where speech and customs constitute links between generations and a treasure trove of national memory. Third, degradation of beauty – this factor is of high significance in all cultures where there is the cult of beauty of the human body. Fourth, the widening of circles of relatives by blood and affinity that multiply the great number of family relations of an old person. Fifth, retirement from active professional life.

Each culture has its model of an old man and judges old people by this standard. The more idealized the model is the more demanding and cruel is the society, and until this attitude is reversed, the old man will not really become a full member of a group. All the discovered [...] descriptions were essentially a judgment, they always spoke of a good or bad old man, more or less approximating the ideal assumed in advance. When reality became the starting point for societies, a concrete case of old age rather than an abstract model, it crossed an important threshold. For that to happen, however, one had to wait to see the rise of social sciences, psychology and geriatric, to learn about the aged and adapt society to their needs rather than the way round, accept that an old person had his /her needs, including physical, and make it possible to fulfil these needs; rather than decree that an old man is a sage and try to compel him to be one.<sup>36</sup>

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## STRESZCZENIE

Obecnie, kiedy w wielu krajach świata postępuje duży i szybki przyrost odsetka ludzi starych wśród ogółu społeczeństw, zwany niekiedy „wyżem dziadków” (*papy boom*), nawet zwięzłe przypomnienie ich losu w przeszłości wskazuje na istotne przemiany. Wśród różnych teorii przyczyn starości najszerze uznanie zyskała teoria o genetycznym zaprogramowaniu procesu starzenia się. Jako nieuchronna rzeczywistość starość napawa ludzi obawą, lękiem, pragneliby ją od siebie odsunąć i zachowywać jak najdłużej młodość, aż po granice wieczności. Medycyna „od tysięcy lat starała się [...] zrozumieć przyczyny starzenia się i opóźnić jego skutki, ponieważ jednak była bezsilna wobec tego przyrodzonego fatum, ograniczyła się w końcu do wyliczania typowych patologii starych ludzi, umieszczając je w kategorii nieuleczalnych chorób. Starego człowieka, jako pacjenta nierokującego nadziei na wyleczenie [...] odesłano do hospicjum”.

Przegląd miejsca ludzi starych w różnych kulturach, mimo pewnego zróżnicowania, pozwala jednak określić kilka cech wspólnych ich statusu społecznego. Po pierwsze, jest to głównie i niewątpliwie fizyczna słabość; dyskryminuje ona starych w społeczeństwach ubogich i źle zorganizowanych, przebiega zaś łagodniej w społeczeństwach bogatszych i dobrze zorganizowanych. Po drugie, jest to duża wiedza i duże doświadczenie, wyżej cenione w kulturach pierwotnych, w których mowa i obyczaje są łącznikami między pokoleniami a skarbnicą pamięci zbiorowej. Po trzecie, degradacja urody; czynnik ten odgrywa duże znaczenie we wszystkich kulturach, w których panuje kult piękna ludzkiego ciała. Po czwarte, poszerzanie się kręgów krewnych i powinowatych, co pomnaża wielość rodzinnych relacji człowieka starego. Po piąte, usunięcie się z czynnego życia zawodowego.

„Każdą kulturą ma swój model starca i osądza starych ludzi według tego wzorca. Im bardziej model jest wyidealizowany, tym bardziej wymagające i okrutne jest społeczeństwo, i dopóki podejście to nie zostanie odwrócone, stary człowiek nie stanie się naprawdę pełnoprawnym członkiem grupy. Wszystkie bowiem znalezione [...] opisy stanowiły w istocie osąd; była w nich zawsze mowa o dobrym lub o złym starcu, mniej lub bardziej zbliżonym do ustalonego z góry ideału. Gdy punktem wyjścia stała się dla społeczeństw rzeczywistość, konkretna starość, a nie abstrakcyjny model, przekroczyły one ważny próg. Aby to mogło nastąpić, trzeba jednak było doczekać powstania nauk społecznych, psychologii i geriatrii; poznawać starych ludzi i dostosowywać społeczeństwo do ich potrzeb, a nie na odwrót; przyjąć do wiadomości, że stary człowiek ma swoje potrzeby, także i fizyczne, i umożliwić zaspokojenie tych potrzeb, a nie zarządzić, że starzec jest mędrce i zmuszać go do tego, aby nim został”.