

A THEORETICAL VIEW OF ELDERLY RELIGIOUS (1/2)

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INTRODUCTION

The older adult who has lived most of life as a religious needs to be cared for accordingly. This is because of the former style of early training which was psychologically and socially limiting. Prior to the 1960s, the initial training of religious emphasized avoidance of the "world" as the mark of a good religious. As much as possible, they were to separate themselves from the "world" which was considered the source of temptations to the way of life they professed. This flight from the "world" resulted in a constricted scope of social relationships. It is to be noted that the needs of elderly religious are very similar to that of other older adults.

In planning for a holistic approach towards the continuing care and animation of the former, some important points need to be taken into account. The fact that they have lived a life of celibacy as young and middle-aged adults has a tremendous impact on their lives as older adults. This is due more to the understanding of religious celibacy at that time, than the fact that they lived a life of publicly professed celibacy. Another important point is the fact that, in their early training as religious, the vow of celibacy was presented with a rather narrow interpretation. It was basically not having any sexual experience, be it via the mind, through word, or by action. There was emphasis on the many prohibitions in the living of the vow. In practice, this meant being extremely reserved as regards social relationships, especially with the opposite gender. Furthermore, most of the elderly religious of today joined when they were on the threshold of adulthood. It was at this stage of development that they were

trained to take on some of the behaviors that are considered psychosocially unsound by today's standards. Thus, I suggest that they entered older adulthood socially and psychologically disadvantaged. Most of their developmental psychosocial needs were sublimated through their work. It is interesting to note that religious are generally known for the quality of their ministry.

Aspects of Attachment Behaviors (Bonding) in Older Adulthood

John Bowlby (1907-1990) spoke of four developmental stages in the process of bonding through one's lifespan: child-caretaker, child-child, adult-adult, and adult-child. Accordingly, the failure to achieve bonding in any one of these stages can result in the formation of an "affectionless character". It would be true to say that many elderly religious struggle with attachment behaviors which they were trained to disregard in their early adult lives. I suggest that many of the elderly religious of today were denied the full opportunity of developing the attachment behaviors proper to early and middle-adulthood. In fact, their early training emphasized detachment from things and people. The detachment from earthly things is understandable as they were trained to renounce all earthly goods for God. The fact that the early training occurred in a one-gender environment helps to explain the negation of attachment/bonding towards persons, whether of similar or opposite gender. There was a very great fear of attachment behaviors that tended towards homosexual or heterosexual bonding.

I suggest that the elderly religious who has continued to grapple with this tension, between the innate attachment behaviors and the learned opposite, will have a better chance of a happy older adulthood. I believe that the resolution of this healthy tension is aided by any quality interpersonal relationships they might have experienced during their lives of early and middle adulthood. The limiting effects of the elderly religious' early training will then be significantly less of a factor in older adulthood.

Bowlby states that "in old age, when attachment behavior can no longer be directed towards members of an older generation, or even the same generation, it may come instead to be directed towards members of a younger one". This is seen in behaviors in which the elderly religious treat the caregivers in a maternal/paternal fashion, as in an adult-child relationship. Further on, he adds that it is extremely misleading to label as "regressive" for every "manifestation of attach-

ment behavior in adult life. ... To dub attachment behavior in adult life regressive is indeed to overlook the vital role it plays in the life of man from the cradle to the grave." I suggest that what is sometimes called a person's "second childhood" has adaptive, developmental, and survival value. Some elderly religious satisfy their need for attachment/bonding through behaviors of helplessness and dependency. This elicits the corresponding instinctive response from the caregivers, as seen in the succoring behavior that is typically displayed by a child towards the primary caregiver. The elderly religious' innate need for attachment seems to override most of the cognitive and affective learning to the contrary in early training.

Social Theories of Aging

Two social theories of aging are relevant to the elderly religious:– disengagement theory and activity theory. Disengagement theory, developed by Cumming and Henry (1961), proposes that as people age "they slowly give up specific roles, interests, and activities and gradually withdraw from society. Disengagement is viewed as a mutual activity; the older adult disengages from society at the same rate that society disengages from the older adult. According to the theory, an older adult develops increasing self-preoccupation, reduces emotional ties with others, and shows a decreasing interest in the affairs of the world. Such a reduction of social interaction and increased self-preoccupation was considered necessary to maintain life satisfaction in late adulthood".

This explanation of the disengagement theory accurately describes some elderly religious long before they reach older adulthood. This is because their early

training led them to disengage from society (the "world") in early and middle-adulthood. They began the process of disengagement unilaterally and prematurely. Their early training tended to form inward-looking communities which were isolated; economically, psychologically, and socially. Religious were trained how to interact among themselves and how NOT to with those outside of their religious communities. Their skills for interacting with the larger society were not very well-developed nor encouraged. Their training also led to considerable ignorance in ordinary matters of the "world". I suggest that these elderly religious have aged socially much earlier than normal, when compared to other older adults.

The second social theory of aging is activity theory (Neugarten et al, 1968). Activity theory proposes that the more active and involved older people are, the more likely they will feel life satisfaction. "Activity theory suggests that it is often healthy for individuals to continue their middle-adulthood roles through late adulthood and that, if these roles are taken away, it is important to find substitute roles that keep people active and involved in the world".

Many elderly religious entered older adulthood with very little prospects for any activity related to what they had been actively engaged in during middle-adulthood. These religious were very active in their various ministries in middle-adulthood, and they were generally acknowledged as very good at what they were doing. Upon retirement, they were not provided with similar substitute roles that would have given them satisfaction in older adulthood. There are many benefits if elderly religious are given opportunities to continue their roles of middle-adulthood, or be given substitute roles that will keep them active, interested, and involved in the world around them. This will help ensure a better quality of life in their retiring years.