

DECLARATION OF THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS:
THE ELDERLY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY AND THEIR PROTECTION

CURRENT SITUATION AND CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Since the beginning of this millennium, sociodemographic studies have been warning about the aging of the world's population as a global and generalized process, reflecting the decrease in the birth rate and the increase in life expectancy. This demographic phenomenon is being addressed by researchers and policy makers in multiple areas, as it poses challenges in all sectors of society, from labor and finance, demand for goods and services, social and health protection, to urban structure and intergenerational family ties. More specifically, research indicates that life expectancy has increased at all ages, but the greatest increase has been observed among adults over the age of 65.

On the other hand, population aging can also be seen as an opportunity for society. With successful aging being an attainable goal, characterized by good health and community participation, older people can contribute significantly to social or community volunteering, education, and intergenerational knowledge transfer, among other activities that have not yet been properly sized in their positive potential for society. In this sense, the traditional concept that retirement marks the end of contribution and inactivity is no longer valid. Many seniors embark on second careers, personal ventures or volunteer work that allow them to continue contributing their experience and wisdom, not only enriching themselves individually, but also contributing value to the community at large, building a resilient and cohesive society.

Overall, this demographic phenomenon is a reminder of the importance of adapting our policies and social structures to meet the changing needs of an ever-evolving society. And these challenges, rather than a regret, are an opportunity to rediscover the role and positioning of older people and elevate the moral status of society.

By addressing the challenges presented by the aging of the world's population in a holistic and humanitarian manner, we may be facing an unbeatable opportunity to change the paradigm of conceiving the elderly as a negation and superfluous stage of life, for a phase worthy of respect, care and participation, recognizing the value and experience of the elderly, providing them with the necessary support and building a more inclusive and supportive society for all ages and for the collective benefit. This change disarticulates the current ageism that discriminates, excludes, infantilizes, violates and invisibilizes the elderly, who for centuries have been the guardians of the living history of a society, the bearers of traditions and values that have been transmitted from generation to generation. Sharing their experiences and knowledge helps new generations to understand their past and, therefore, to forge a solid cultural identity.

Only under this perspective of inclusion, protection, and enhancement of the value of old age, whose roots are found in each of the founding texts of the Abrahamic religions, we can resolve the challenges with respect and dignity towards the human being, without the reification of the human condition such as those already unfortunately experienced in the darkest stages of the 20th century. In this century, humanity must still demonstrate that it has overcome that “throwaway culture”, committing itself to change, through effective policies, its attitude and mentality where people, as well as goods and resources, are not treated as disposable or dispensable under a criterion of productive obsolescence and irrelevance to society.

OLD AGE AND THE ELDERLY PERSON IN ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

Historically, the multiple ways of measuring the progress or greatness of civilization were the wealth and material productivity of nations, the conquest of other countries and acquisition of territories, military forces, scientific and technological development, or their cultural level.

DIGNIFY

In the Abrahamic traditions, one of the values that reflected the moral strength of people were their attitude towards the most socially vulnerable and dependent sectors. This value is the factor that measures cohesion and mutual responsibility in society, based on the investment of effort and means for the good of others without a necessary benefit that promotes it, but by the duty itself imposed as a specific difference between the human and the animal.

This is where the monotheistic worldview conceives moral action, placing the human being as an end and not as an instrument, and hence emphasizes helping the poor, the weakest, the unprotected, the needy, the deprived of their physical self-determination and political pressure power, or the socially marginalized. This precept, among others, is the common denominator of our Abrahamic traditions that shapes a social conscience expressed under the concept of freedom and dignity of the person, without age differences.

In the case of the elderly, the physical wear and tear of the passage of time is compensated by the acquired wisdom, being this one of the occasions where the attitude towards them on the part of the community expresses its humanism.

The teachings of the revealed texts present the concept of old age as fullness in favor of achieving the goal of life. Therefore, the elders are considered true leaders whose wisdom makes them "teachers of life".

The synthesis between these concepts is that in the elderly we can find the understanding as a process of acquisition through the years. That is, wisdom does not come naturally, but is created because of accumulating knowledge and experience, understanding the world and its development.

ASSIST

Honoring and ennobling parents, treasuring their advice, and accepting their authority, is complemented by a deep gratitude towards them that is expressed by assisting them in times of need. When these attitudes are assumed by society, a relationship with our elders is established not only of mercy and kindness but of justice.

The transmission of their accumulated wisdom endows our elders with a unique perspective on life and not only connects people to their roots, but also fosters a sense of belonging and continuity in an ever-changing world.

For while forms and technologies change, the human factor, their commitment, resilience and leadership skills, their reflection on challenges and decision making, do not. This makes elders mentors and spiritual guides for younger generations. Their advice and guidance are invaluable in times of uncertainty, helping people to make informed decisions and face adversity with fortitude.

Society cannot afford to lose this important contribution of the elderly, which is why it must assist and protect them as a true treasure when they become frail.

INTEGRATE

For all these reasons, Abrahamic cultures conceive old age as a stage of development and not a period of life condemned to social marginalization.

The monotheistic traditions come to the rescue of this phase of human existence that results in a contribution to the social good, considering old age as an integral part of the course of life and the fabric of the family and the community.

In the sources of our three traditions, old age is not evaded with euphemisms since it is not a marginal instance, nor do the elderly grotesquely try to emulate youthful behaviors. There, and despite the difficulties, there is respect for the elderly, who have a social place either by maintaining their autonomy or by being dignified and supported by the community. The elder respects himself for his experience, wisdom, and life trajectory, for which deference and honor should be given to the elderly.

Society must integrate its elders by improving their quality of life and eliminating all forms of social discrimination based on age, which affects many elderly people. Then, it is necessary to explore structural changes in the framework of social policies with effective proactive and adaptive labor measures, social protection plus quality and universal health coverage.

Our society looks down on old age, linking it with the past and the obsolete, but old age is the future for all of us.

To honor the elderly today is to prepare the future dignity with which we aspire to be treated.

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