

AGING: SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES
edited by Francis V. Tiso
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Ralph Buultjens

The subject of aging recently has received considerable attention, largely because the elderly are an ever-expanding group in most nations. Conventionally, those who discuss the process and the problems of aging take either a physiological approach, which seeks to understand aging as a biological phenomenon, or a psychological approach, which seeks to understand it as an emotional phenomenon.

Aging: Spiritual Perspectives has chosen a different and original way to address the subject. In presenting the viewpoints on aging of different religious traditions, it confronts one of the most important factors that shape a society's attitude to senior citizens. Then, too, religion often has a special place in the lives of the aging themselves; the winding down of biological life frequently induces greater interest in the spiritual one. And the different religious traditions may well contain some truths about aging that science has yet to unlock or investigate.

This volume, essentially a collection of essays prepared in anticipation of the World Assembly on Aging sponsored by the United Nations, is organized into two principal sec-

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tions. The first consists of nine chapters, each dealing with the views of aging offered by a major religious tradition: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, the African tradition, the Native American approach, and the Chinese and monastic perspectives. All do indeed have something of importance to say to modern society. If one common theme can be extracted from these diverse and historically dispersed cultural experiences, it is that the aged are of special value: how society treats them is a barometer of its own condition, humanity, and civic cohesiveness.

Unfortunately, and perhaps because each chapter is the work of a different scholar, the presentations are of mixed quality. The fine introductory essay by Thomas Berry, which compares the approach to the elderly in Western industrial countries with that of other societies, offers an analysis of the elderly as a cherished social resource and comments excitingly on the aged as agents of transition. Buddhadasa P. Kirthisinghe writes with evident concern about the erosion of traditional attitudes in Buddhist cultures and encapsulates Buddhist attitudes toward aging within a masterly discussion of Buddhism as a larger social system. Mohammed Abdul-Rauf's contribution on Islam is also educative and effective.

By contrast, the sections on Christianity and Hinduism are deeply disappointing—especially so because both faiths have much to say to this subject. These two essays, particularly the analysis of Christianity, offer long theological histories, large parts of which have little relevance for the theme of the book. Many of the authors, these two among them, are on the faculty of Fordham University, and the reader sometimes feels he is sitting in on an elaborate course in comparative religion and only occasionally catches fragments of a discussion on aging in the context of these religions.

The second part of *Aging* deals with aging as fulfillment. Three essays address general issues of aging, such as paradigms, death and afterlife, and aging as a mystical process. These contributions, while interesting, are somewhat esoteric and tend to blur the focus of the book.

Is this, then, an analysis of religious traditions and their approach to aging or a description of cultural attitudes toward aging or an esoteric speculation on aging? The editor's indecision in choosing among theological, anthropological, and mystical themes is apparent throughout. And the book manages to evade two critical questions: Why have societies with long traditions of reverence for age now come to regard the

elderly as a burden? How can the religions discussed, all of which claim to value the elderly, now help to reverse this deplorable attitude? It seems that only Kirthisinghe among the fifteen contributors tries to grapple with these issues. A book of this nature must not only inform us of the past but make suggestions for the future.

Yet, for all its failings, this is a brave attempt at charting new ground. For those concerned with the moral and philosophical dimensions of social problems, *Aging: Spiritual Perspectives* will be a starting point for a new approach to an important subject.

Briefly Noted

**POST-CONSERVATIVE AMERICA:
PEOPLE, POLITICS AND
IDEOLOGY IN A TIME OF CRISIS**
by Kevin P. Phillips

(Random House; xxiv + 261 pp.: \$14.50)

One of the bright young men of the Republican party during the Nixon years, Kevin Phillips caught national attention in 1969 with *The Emerging Republican Majority*. A decade later he is highly skeptical of the Reagan "revolution." He questions the capacity of Reaganism to engage effectively the economic, social, and political problems facing America—and the world—as the twentieth century comes to its close.

The coalition behind Ronald Reagan's presidential victory is characterized, Phillips claims, "by various nostalgias and backward-looking vistas." A coherent economic or political philosophy is dangerously lacking. While leaders address the people with nostalgic images of past American financial and global ascendancy, they offer neither an accurate understanding of the past nor a program for future needs.

Phillips sees an American people traumatized by institutional failure. Family, church, job, community, and government no longer provide the sense of security, pride, and purpose we believe they once did. Fragmentation is so deep that geopolitical, geo-economic, ethnocentric, and even generational combativeness are emerging. The gap between day-to-day life and our "great expectations" grows ever wider. And if the policies put forth by the new conservative coalition do not narrow that gap, restore the American Dream, and strengthen the old beliefs, a mass, Middle American frustration will explode. This book exhorts us to be wary of the fallout from that explosion. The populist, apolitical, regional,

and self-centered Silent Majority will become radical; fundamentalism will become widespread among all denominations, especially the Protestant.

The most controversial of Phillips's propositions is his analogy between our times and those of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. We all know the dark night that fell on Germany in 1933, when Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor. That darkness still chills, but Phillips has to work history too hard to make his point. He concludes that "the Weimar-U.S. analogy can be usefully pondered when one compares parallel

feelings of frustration in the social order; for anything beyond, the analogy breaks down." Indeed.

While self-styled a popular book, *Post-Conservative America* manages to be condescending at times, fatuous at others. The speculative dialogue is more escalatory than enlightening, as when he wanders through allegations of CIA plotting to destroy the Nixon presidency through the Watergate burglary. Serious, informed analyses of the present decade are desperately needed. This effort is an utter disappointment.

—Susan J. Shepard

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