

## CARING FOR THE ELDERLY: HOW TO ADEQUATELY DEAL WITH OR STOP THE ABUSE OF THE FRAIL ELDERLY

### BACKGROUND

Every so often one would read or hear about the abuse of the elderly. This is especially so where the elderly is dependent on others for the activities of daily living. How ought the Church to respond to the abuse of the frail elderly? This paper, which may serve as a starting point for further work on how to deal adequately with the abuse of the frail elderly, was presented at a DEWCOM meeting for personal reflection. How can the viewpoints expressed herein assist local churches to care more adequately for, and, in doing so, work against the abuse of the frail elderly?

The paper is based on two lectures<sup>1</sup> hosted in August of 2012 by the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology, Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics. The lecturer was Prof. Fritz de Lange from the Netherlands. The lectures were given in honour of Prof. Etienne de Villiers, professor in Christian ethics and author, who retired from the University of Pretoria last year. This paper is a summary of the original papers or lectures (10 and 15 pages respectively) made available to those who attended the lecture. A word of thanks is extended to the University of Pretoria, the Faculty of Theology, Prof. de Lange and Prof. de Villiers for making the material available.

### INTRODUCTION

The presentation deals with a theological ethical contribution toward caring for the frail elderly. The frail elderly are those who are "... mostly the oldest old, who depend on others for the activities of daily living or who are at high risk of becoming dependent."<sup>2</sup> The question it seeks to address is what kind of ethics would best promote the welfare or good of the frail elderly.

In summary, the argument is for an ethic of care. An ethic of care is chosen because it promotes a morality in which it is recognized that care and social justice go together and that as human beings we are dependent throughout our lives. It is the moral claim of those who are dependant which is primary. This, it is argued, is a more biblically based approach. This is in opposition to those approaches which neglect this dependency, seeking to care for only the active autonomous elderly thus neglecting the frail elderly. What is aimed for is a morality which deals adequately

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<sup>1</sup> The De Villiers lesings (lectures) one and two, hosted by the University of Pretoria, faculty of theology, department of Dogmatics and Christian ethics, delivered by Prof. Fritz de Lange, a visiting professor from the Netherlands, entitled; (Lecture one) – "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm eighty four? Or: why we need an ethics of care. (Lecture two) – 'Old people just make me feel sick: How to love your neighbour as yourself, in August 2012.

<sup>2</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 1

with intergenerational dependency, a characteristic of being human. Where this is neglected care for the frail elderly is neglected.

## REASONS FOR MAKING A CONTRIBUTION

Why should theological ethics make a contribution? The first reason is because of demographics. Old age is here to stay. "Presently there are more old people in the world than ever before, and they are growing older than ever."<sup>3</sup> Contributing factors involved are increased life expectancy and declining fertility rates. This is also affecting the structures of society because this trend is unprecedented,<sup>4</sup> pervasive and enduring. It is here to stay and in "...developing countries the demographic transition goes together with increasing mobility and changing family structures. Community networks which formerly provided support to the older generation are weakened, and often destroyed by rapid social and economic change."<sup>5</sup>

The second reason is gerontology – a scientific discipline dealing with ageing and the elderly. No longer can we claim that gerontology has no need of normative claims. The "... dominant paradigm of the so called 'new gerontology' and its ideas about 'successful', 'healthy', and 'active aging', offers an optimistic and activist view of what old age can be."<sup>6</sup> The notion is that success is defined in terms of physical and mental abilities and which is available through one's own effort and life style choices. The problem however is that this approach is based on an anti-ageing view. What can happen is that the frail elderly can be neglected and policies become focused on keeping the vital and healthy senior vital. It is suggested that this cannot be the critical measure of success in old age.

A third reason is theological which may bring into the discourse an existential and pastoral dimension. Often old age policies are without the vocabulary that religion can bring to the discourse. Aging is also a subjective and communal experience. In old age the elderly have to relate to it in a reflexive and existential way. Religion does provide for means of reflection through various practices. Pastoral work needs to be more comprehensive. This means that not only do we need to deal with their spiritual lives but also with their bodies, budgets, families, and with the reality of institutions and politics. Caring about the elderly is thus also a social justice issue.

## IS IT A PRIVATE AFFAIR?

Policy dealing with ageing is, in most cases, foremost a public health care problem – it is all about access, rationing, quality and effectiveness, in which the personal experience of an elderly person is seen to be a private affair. The reality is that your

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<sup>3</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 1

<sup>4</sup> "Those 80 or over are now only slightly more than 1 per cent of the total human population. This proportion will increase almost fourfold over the next 50 years to reach 4.1 per cent in 2050."

<sup>5</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 1

<sup>6</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 2

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age and ageing is a social affair and has to do with one's identity. It is also often said that what makes for a happy life is what makes you feel good –this however reduces old age to 'consumerism fun.' "Finally liberated from the pressures of work and social life, relax and enjoy old age, the best part of your life!"<sup>7</sup> However, a human life is more than just feelings – "old bodies do not only need pills and wheelchairs, but also truth and respect. They not only should feel well but also be treated rightly according to their worth."<sup>8</sup>

Another approach is the notion that the goal of life is to live well. A well lived life is a happy life. The good life therefore is primarily seen, as something which is deliberate and controlled activity. The role model here is the vital and active elderly where old age refers to the final appropriation of one's self - actualization.

The reason why they do not deal adequately with the frail elderly, and the crux of the matter, is that many of the approaches as in the case of the above is that they are agent/individual orientated;"Old age is considered as, .... , a satisfactory, happy, virtuous personal journey, and good ageing is an individual experience or active performance."<sup>9</sup> The point is that in these approaches "...others are present as an element in or as a support of that journey in time, but not as what they are – its co-constituents. Living through old age is, at least for the oldest old, always an experience of dependency on others. Good ageing is a relational matter....no one grows old alone."<sup>10</sup>

De Lange goes on to say that "(h)uman beings live together in cohorts and generations that come and go, not as ageless individuals. We travel in 'convoys' through our life span. Old age is – like dying – a social event drenched in (inter) generational and familial ties, a set of moral bonds, even without one is aware of them. Our relationships are not the 'environment' of our ethics; they are the stuff we are morally made of."<sup>11</sup>

This is also the biblical view. It would seem that in the Bible what happens with the elderly is closely connected to 'intergenerational intrigues.'

See Gen. 27: 12, 48: 10, 1 Sam 4: 12-18, Gen. 27 and 1 Kings 1, Gen. 9, 19, 2 Sam. 11-1 Kings 2: 11, Deut. 34: 7, Josh. 14: 10-11, 1 Kings 1: 1-4, 2 Sam. 19: 34-37.

Any ethics which seeks to deal adequately with the issue at hand must deal with the moral or ethical impact of the vulnerability and the 'relationality' of growing old. It

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<sup>7</sup> De Lange, F 2012 lecture 1, page 4

<sup>8</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 4

<sup>9</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 7

<sup>10</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 7

<sup>11</sup> De Lange, F 2012, Lecture 1, page 8

should not consider “the dependency on others beforehand as a moral defeat but as a constitutive good in the frailty of old age.”<sup>12</sup>

## THE ETHICS OF CARE

The ethics of care offers to theological ethics an adequate approach as it acknowledges, amongst others, intergenerational dependency as a structural feature of the whole life course.

“...(h)uman beings are dependent for many years of their lives and that the moral claim of those dependent is pressing. Moralities built on the image of the independent, autonomous, rational individual overlook this reality. ... (h)ow we flourish depends on the care given to us. ... (i)t values emotion rather than rejects it. Emotions as sympathy, empathy, sensitivity and responsiveness need to be cultivated. .... (It) rejects the view that moral reasoning needs abstraction and impartiality. (It) respects the claims of particular others with whom we share actual relationships.”<sup>13</sup>The ethics of care also questions traditional notions about the public and private spheres. It questions the distinction between justice and care by saying that there can be no justice without care. Persons are relational and interdependent. Our relations are a constitutive part of our identity and care is both a value and a practice. It may not be too difficult to see the connection here with what religion can offer.

## SOME NOTES ON THE LOVE COMMAND

The second lecture deals with the love command and how it supports the views expressed above. Love is not only seen as benevolence, in analogy with God’s forgiveness, but self-sacrificial, being there for others, also in terms of emotional investment on the part of God. “What counts ethically is this: one seeks to promote what one believes to be that person’s good or right.”<sup>14</sup> Love can thus be seen as ‘caring about.’ Jesus meant the double love command for everyone, not just for his followers. (Math. 22: 38-40, Mark 12: 28- 34 and Luke 10: 25-37. The love command applies first of all to God’s love for God’s creation – this love becomes mutual and shared in communion. The command thus presupposes the experience of God’s love.

What is aimed for is; ‘love your neighbour as another self. Love yourself as another neighbour.’ “Self –love comes not out of egoism (then we are talking about self-

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<sup>12</sup> De Lange, F 2012, Lecture 1, page 8

<sup>13</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 1, page 9

<sup>14</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 2, page 1

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indulgence) but originates in the care about one's own worth for God." This love serves as a model for the love of others. "Love your neighbour as if it were another self."<sup>15</sup> Self-love is not a goal in itself, the other has priority.

A consequence of this is that one can love one's aging neighbour as one can love one's aging self. Regardless of your age the good of the elderly comes first. Elderly ethics should be recipient – not agent orientated. The ethical question here is thus not how old people can live well, but what are we contributing so that their lives go well.

## CONCLUSION

The neglect of the elderly is, it seems, evident in our society. Elderly people are abandoned, mistreated and even become objects of violence. The WHO states in its Report on Violence and Health elder abuse as "a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an elder person."<sup>16</sup> The abuse can be physical, emotional and so on. Apparently the world does not love old people as it should and the frailty of elderly is not always an obvious reason for care but may be an invitation to harm them. What makes old people a so willingly object of indifference, neglect, even abuse? Some elderly may be nasty characters and thus difficult to go along with but this has really nothing to do with age. One of the factors however, in elder abuse might be precisely their age. We don't love elderly, even may feel disgust for them, because they are old. Why? Research has shown that one answer to this may be that younger people don't like elderly because they dislike their own aging. It would seem that the frailty of other's bodies can remind people of their own vulnerability and mortality and in this sense challenges their self-esteem.

"In terms of the love command, ageing theory mirrors its exact negative: we don't love our elderly neighbour, as we don't love our aging self."<sup>17</sup> Ageism is a form of prejudice – "...a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender. Old people are characterized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills, ... Ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves, thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it goes deeper than this – "ageism does not imply any group, discriminating against another, but concerns a

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<sup>15</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 2, page 3

<sup>16</sup> World report on violence and health, World Health Organisation, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2002, ch.5 ([http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/global\\_campaign/en/chap5.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap5.pdf))

<sup>17</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 2, page 7

<sup>18</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 2, page 7

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form of oppression that we all suffer, throughout our lives, as a result of dominant expectations about age.”<sup>19</sup>

Can we love ourselves – even in old age? Love is – attraction, attachment, compassion. Perhaps we can also include love as duty. Can we feel attracted to ourselves even in old age? How should we get attached to ourselves? (Helping aging people care about themselves is the most elementary form of elderly care.) Is there any compassion thinkable with our own aging?

“Dying, just as aging, is a relational thing, and one never dies alone.”

As an after – thought may I add that it is not necessary to agree with all that is being said here or in the complete report, for we need to, after all, contextualised things, but I do think that it offers a platform from which to begin to engage with the issue in a more systematic way. As indicated earlier on this paper is a very brief summary of a much longer paper – I will gladly send the full text to those who would like to have it.

Rev. Faan Myburgh

## Bibliography

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<sup>19</sup> De Lange, F 2012 Lecture 2, page 8