

Ageing: Challenges and Opportunities

by Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian. George Ronald, Oxford, 1991, 129 pages.

reviewed by Deborah Kestin van den Hoonaard in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1994)

This is the first book written by a Bahá'í that attempts “to address the process of ageing and coping in the light of the Bahá'í Writings...” (11). It is particularly significant because, as the author points out, there really are no Bahá'í Writings that deal directly with aging.

I come to this book as a Bahá'í, as a sociologist specializing in the place of old people in our society, and as a woman. Thus, I find that I am especially sensitive to the sociological aspects of aging as well as to the presentation of research whose conclusions were based solely on findings related to male subjects and then generalized into assumptions about all human beings.

The Introduction, as well as the first four chapters, depend heavily on sources, some of which are old and often base their conclusions on existing studies which have historically excluded women. The author sometimes gently questions these sources, but one is still left with a sense of their authority.

For example, in Chapter 2, “The Psychobiological Clock,” Dr. Ghadirian quotes a study that looks at how well old people adapt to changes in their environment, but most of the subjects of the study were residents of nursing homes. Although the author notes this fact, he fails to observe that (1) we cannot make judgments about well people by analyzing the activities of ill people (we would never say that people in their twenties have trouble going up and down stairs based on study of people with broken legs); (2) going into a nursing home is not simply changing environments; this event has tremendous implications regarding loss of independence; and (3) the treatment of nursing home residents can have a tremendous impact on their ability to “adapt.” The fact that this type of study is done and supposedly is generalizable to the entire old population may say more about our prejudices than about old people's actual abilities. It is unclear in these early chapters whether certain conclusions deal with intrinsic aspects of aging or whether they are the result of the prejudice and stereotyping that confront old people in our society.

The Introduction provides an overview of aging in a historical perspective. It is unclear, however, whether women shared the high status of men in preindustrial society. In this chapter, the author also looks at predictors of psychosocial health in later life, citing the major study, which unfortunately only looked at male subjects. In his discussion of middle age, the author correctly notes that the ages comprising middle age are uncertain, but he uses Erikson's stages of life theory, which is again unfortunately based on males.^[1] For example, Erikson believes that in middle age a nurturing attitude prevails, “the blossoming of caring and nurturing relationships” (9), but for women nurturing may be more closely related to the time when their children are very young. Perhaps with the growth of understanding of equality of men and women, men are beginning to take a more nurturing role when they are younger, and such a role is becoming more valued: “Hence the new age will be an age less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals—

or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more even]y balanced.”^[2]

I am uncomfortable with the discussion of retirement in Chapter 2. It is, after all, a socially constructed institution, as is the meaning of work in our society. Here, the consideration of sociological factors would have been helpful. Is “a state of progressive detachment, resignation and renunciation of the world” (25) a natural concomitant of aging, or is it a result of a social world that withdraws from the old person by removing meaningful activities (like work) and lowers his or her status?

In Chapter 3, “Ageing and Creativity,” the author begins to integrate Bahá’í principles and insights into the body of the chapter, giving them a centrality missed in the earlier chapters. He presents inspiring stories of famous people who were strikingly creative throughout their lives well into old age. Surely Bahá’í communities could provide some more splendid examples of ordinary people who were also creative in old age. Ghadirian discusses fifteen men and only two women.

In the fourth chapter, “The Challenges of Old Age,” some of the challenges, for example, loneliness and a sense of isolation (52–53), are presented as if they are intrinsic elements of aging when they may, in fact, be a result of the social place of the old in our society. In this chapter, the author also presents some of the physical and psychological challenges of old age (such as dementia, depression, and substance abuse) and describes defence mechanisms. Some of these challenges may be related to social definitions of aging—for example, denying old age (46–47) may be associated with the negative definitions of aging. As well, “regression” may, at least in part, be a result of being treated like a child by others. Ghadirian notes that “elderly people may try to compensate for the loss of a spouse . . . by idealizing her or him” (47). But, as Helena Lopata, a recognized expert on widowhood, notes, such idealization is characteristic of widows of all ages. Ghadirian notes that some old people become “rigid,” especially in “money matters” (48), but this may be a result of a particular generation’s having lived through the Great Depression rather than a result of being old.

The section on the psychological challenges related to retirement takes into account the different challenges for men and women in this area. There is a particularly good section on the fear of death and spiritual reactions to death. Chapters 5, “Coping with Stress,” and 6, “Alzheimer’s Disease: An Eclipse before Sunset,” are both very strong chapters particularly because the author integrates spiritual principles and insights from the Bahá’í Writings throughout both chapters. In these two chapters, his expertise and experience are obvious and contribute a great deal. He intersperses anecdotes, both from the Bahá’í Writings (e.g., relevant stories about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) and other sources with spiritual principles and psychological material, as well as offering practical comments for using this information to improve our own lives and the lives of old people we know.

In Chapter 5, I especially like the section dealing with humor and laughter. The author reminds us that “God loves laughter” (72), provides a now classic example of how Norman Cousins used humor to “laugh his illness away” (72), and ends with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s exhortation for us to “be happy” (73).

Chapter 6 is written with sensitivity and compassion; the author takes into account the experiences both of the victims of Alzheimer’s Disease and those of their caregivers, thus providing an unusual and important balance of presentation. The discussion of this devastating illness and its lack of effect on one’s soul provides an important contribution to the understanding of Alzheimer’s Disease and our response to it as Bahá’ís. Interspersed in the chapter are truly inspiring anecdotes of experiences in dealing with the disease from a Bahá’í perspective. A particularly moving inclusion is letter written by a local Spiritual Assembly to a Bahá’í who is a victim of this disease. In this letter the Assembly thanks the individual for her contribution to the community, points out that this illness in no way damages the soul, and ends by saying: “We feel it is a privilege to have you in our community and are eager to show our love for you by assisting in any way we can with challenges now facing you.” (102) This excellent chapter can help Bahá’í communities learn about what they can do for both Alzheimer’s Disease patients and their families, as well as to help the patients and caregivers to cope with the disease.

Chapter 7 provides a good summary and points out that, although our bodies age and may decline, our souls continue to progress and prepare for the next world. Perhaps this reminder will encourage us to fight against the tendency to stereotype and devalue older people—a tendency unthinkingly carried over from general society. *Ageing: Challenges and Opportunities* is a book geared to a Bahá’í audience. It is an important beginning in addressing a subject with which Bahá’í communities will have to grapple more and more in the years ahead.

[1] Marie Marshall Fuller and Cora Ann Martin, *The Older Woman: Lavender Rose or Gray Panther* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1980).

[2] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoted in *Women* (Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá’í Canada Publications, 1986) 13.