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Privatisation of the privatized: forms of co-resonance between old age and spirituality among Czech elders

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ABSTRACT

Growing number of studies pointed to the importance of the topic of spirituality and religiosity among older people. However, these studies are conducted in countries with high religiosity. The Czech Republic is one of the most secular regions in the world. These facts led us to question the relationship between old age and spirituality in the environment of the Czech Republic. In thirteen semi-structured interviews with seniors from the Czech Republic (age 65+) we focused on the relationship between spirituality and old age. The qualitative analysis procedures formulated by Miles and Huberman for generating meaning were used for the analysis itself. Findings revealed only a limited association between spirituality and old age. Spirituality was used by the elderly for the purpose of expressing gratitude or as a function, which was a response to the particular topic of the old age as control of skills, maintaining relationship or activity.

KEYWORDS

Elderly; spirituality; religiosity; Czech Republic; qualitative research

Introduction

According to the Czech Statistical Office, seniors (65+ years) in the Czech Republic accounted for 20.17% of the total population of 10.7 million inhabitants in 2020. The Czech Republic is thus affected by the same trend as the rest of Europe, namely, a continuously aging population. The proportion of seniors has increased by almost 7% over the last 20 years. In addition to its aging population, Czech society is characterized by a low level of religious affiliation. The 2021 census showed that 13.1% of the population were enrolled in churches or religious societies, thereby reflecting the continuing trend of the population to move away from traditional churches (Váně et al., 2018, p. 57). Due to the massive departure from the church, the Czech Republic is one of the most secular regions in the world. Despite the low number of believers, the church strives to remain an important player on the political and public scenes. One strategy that allows churches to maintain their influence in the public sphere is their provision of social services. Due to the established and

generous system of public social care, church services offer an additional layer of social security.

These two opposing tendencies, namely, the aging population and the declining influence of religion, led us to question the relationship between the constructions of old age and spirituality in the environment of the Czech Republic. We queried this for two reasons. First, a growing number of studies and theoretical articles have pointed to the importance of the topic of spirituality and religiosity among older individuals in general and in the Czech environment (Váně et al., 2013). At the same time, the “language of spirituality” is used in descriptions of old age and aging, and these two areas of human life are generally considered to be interconnected (Dalby, 2006; Mawson, 2021, p. 373; Moberg, 2005). Sadler and Biggs (2006, p. 273) emphasized that spirituality is essential for good aging management and can act as a “source . . . of successful adjustment” in old age. Mawson also pointed to the growing need for “an interest in spirituality in order to understand the aging process,” as well as the preponderance of texts that focus on “the role of spirituality and religion during aging” (Mawson, 2021, pp. 379–380).

Based on the aforementioned studies, we can assume that spirituality or religiosity is significantly linked with old age, at least for those seniors who perceive themselves as being spiritual or religious. In contrast, Janhsen et al. (2019) relativized the interconnectedness of old age and spirituality. In their qualitative study, the authors claimed that it was not entirely conclusive whether old age as such had affected the changes in spirituality among their respondents. Accordingly, we questioned whether there is – or the nature of – the relationship between spirituality and the construction of old age in the highly secularized environment of the Czech Republic. In other words, we asked whether spirituality is used in the construction of old age, whether old age is used in the construction of spirituality, and what form such a relationship takes.

Spirituality and religiosity

Recent studies focusing on the religious environment in the Czech Republic have shown that, although it is a highly a religious landscape, churches continue to exert a cultural influence, which is reflected in the nation’s cultural spiritual memory (see, Váně et al., 2018). This memory continues to be the counterpart of secular cultural memory and corresponds to the influence characteristic of modern societies (Davie, 2000; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). From a theoretical perspective, the approach proposed by Roberto Cipriani (2017) referred to as diffused religion best corresponds to the given situation. The concept of diffused religion is an attempt to bridge the secularization and individualization approaches to the interpretation of the role of religion in modern societies. It is based on the premise that religion is widespread because

it covers large sections of the population and goes beyond the mere boundaries of institutional religion. Diffused religion thus affects broad sections of the population.

The form and nature of religion in a particular country is, of course, influenced by the contemporary context, but even in the most secularized countries, where religious socialization in the family has ceased, religious organizations (churches) continue to operate, with their influence, albeit via tiny capillaries, seeped into society. Diffuse religion is not obvious but exists in forms that are not fully valued yet not completely suppressed. Scattered religion is a set of values, practices, beliefs, symbols, attitudes, and behaviours that do not fully correspond with the official model of religion in a country but almost completely, or at least largely, coincide with a significant part of civil society. The generation of seniors we studied had undergone at least an early religious socialization, which was once part of the educational system in the Czech Republic.

The main difficulty in examining spirituality is its vague conceptualization (Harrington, 2016; Koenig, 2008). In general, two possible approaches can be found regarding its conceptual grasp: (a) spirituality conceptualized in connection with the transcendent (e.g., God, gods, deities) and (b) spirituality conceptualized as meaning making, in the sense of finding the meaning of events and life, as well as the need to establish meaningful relationships. In both cases, however, it is understood as an individual and subjective bond (Kaňák, 2019; Roberson et al., 2021; Siegers, 2014; Streib & Hood, 2011). We consider spirituality to be a dynamic phenomenon rather than a state that is constant and unchanging, and one that can be achieved through socialization or other processes (Wuthnow, 1998).

Because this paper is based on the first concept (i.e., defining spirituality as a personal relationship to the transcendent), it is necessary to define the relationship between spirituality and religiosity. This is inherently difficult because there is no generally accepted definition of religiosity (Wilander, 2014), and the relationship between religiosity and spirituality is the subject of dispute among scholars (Hill et al., 2000). Nevertheless, to put it simply, religiosity is a measure of being religious (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Following the discussion on the “substantive and functional definitional strategies” of defining religiosity, we consider the substantive definition of religion as a relation to the sacred, which we recognize as a “supernatural entity, or that which is beyond this empirical world” (Wilander, 2014, pp. 33–34). This functional definition is thus related to a system of beliefs and activities that are institutionalized with respect to what religion means within a specific understanding of sacred. We are aware that this definition may not correspond with some concepts, such as “polythetic definitions of religion” (Bergunder, 2014, p. 248). At the same time, however, it does not exclude them.

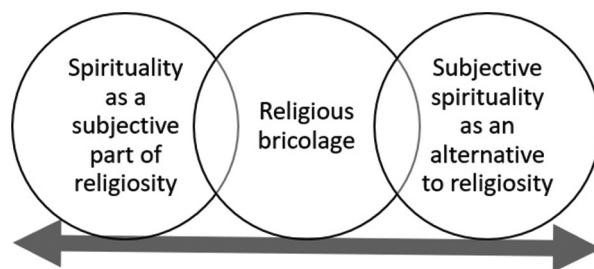


Figure 1. The spiritual-religious relationship as a continuum.

The typology proposed by Siegers (2014) could be used to conceptualize the spiritual–religious relationship. If we perceive the division of the relationship between spirituality and religiosity as a certain continuum, then on the one side, there would be an identification of spirituality with the subjective level of religiosity. On the other side, there would be the concept of spirituality as a purely subjectively constructed alternative to religiosity (a position that is sometimes referred to as “I am spiritual, but not religious”). Between these two extremes, one can observe a combination of different spiritualities, which is also sometimes referred to as a religious bricolage (see, Figure 1).

Old age

Based on Bourdieu’s (1993) reflection on age, we understand old age as a process that is socially constructed. Although numerical age determination (i.e., some kind of biological identification or chronological changes) is used for its construction, old as such is also a classification in which the younger–older dichotomization is applied. These two categories are constructed in relation to each other and therefore lose their absolute value. In other words, the defining criterion of who is a senior is a sociocultural practice, by which we mean a relatively stable set of follow-up activities that lead people to a broadly defined goal.

In the spirit of Bourdieu (Ebrecht & Hillebrandt, 2004), we worked with the idea that the elderly are a group of people who, although they have different forms of, for example, interests, homes, and illnesses, nevertheless have similar sociocultural practices. They share a certain symbolic system, which everyone in various social situations understands and which strategically influences and directs their actions. Religion can also play a key role if it is part of these structures, albeit implicitly or diffusely. This is another of Bourdieu’s assumptions that we accept, namely, that the individual acts mainly practically and adapts to various changes and the existing conditions. They always try to achieve their goals by applying certain strategies that have two levels. The first

satisfies certain official rules, and the second concerns primary profit from practice.

In the context of our topic, it is possible to describe the institutional constructions that are given by age by establishing an age limit. It is also possible to describe the cultural constructions of old age (i.e., a kind of collective of images and ideas about different periods of life). Interactive constructions represent a focus on the so-called doing age and doing aging (i.e., defining age and aging in interactions). However, as Degnen writes, these interactions are realized with respect to various “social registers and multiple contexts.” (Degnen, 2007, p. 71) The last type of construction is individual constructions of age (i.e., subjective individual ideas about age; Amrhein, 2013, p. 12).

To date, researchers have examined how the perceptions and interpretations of age are understood and changes in old age are treated. On the one hand, the constructions of old age are considered the subjective perception of oneself as an ageless self that excludes changes on a bodily level (Foweraker & Cutcher, 2020; Lim & Song, 2019). On the other hand, consideration is given to the pressures of society on these very performance structures and on emphasizing activities in old age, which are themselves replicated by older people in interactions (including research interviews), without considering these attributes as important. The interactive construction of old age thereby becomes a type of masquerade, a mask emphasizing the attributes of the activity older people take on, metaphorically speaking, in interactions. At the same time, old age is a charade, a game in which this mask is emphasized and highlighted in interactions (Richter, 2016).

Relationship between religion/spirituality and old age

Despite the growing interest in spirituality in social science research (some authors use the term “spiritual turn of society”), most studies have focused on the relationship between spirituality and health (Janhsen et al., 2021, p. 38). Studies have been conducted to measure the relationship between religion/spirituality (R/S) and well-being, drug use, mental health, adjustment to different stressful situations, and depression, meaning depression in terms of life or quality of life (MacDougall, 2020). The influence of spirituality on adjustment to aging has also been investigated (Humboldt von et al., 2014). The effect is usually described as having a positive correlation with those areas that are defined as healthy and a negative correlation with those that are defined as pathological (e.g., depression). Some adjustment-to-aging studies have even presented the strongest influence, namely, spirituality, alongside other factors, including the people’s personal economic situation (Humboldt von et al., 2014). Zadworna-Cieślak (2020, p. 123) spoke of “extensive

empirical evidence” that supports the assumption of the positive influence of spirituality on “late-life functioning.”

However, the link between spirituality and old age is not inherently positive. The existence of negative spiritual coping (MacDougall, 2020) and religious/spiritual struggles have been documented empirically (Cowden et al., 2021, p. 10). Both are characterized by the negative impact of spirituality or religiosity on coping with situations and functioning. In the case of R/S struggles specifically, it is a mutual strengthening of the negative impact: “Psychological distress leads to R/S struggles, and R/S struggles lead to psychological distress” (Cowden et al., 2021, p. 10). However, in both the positive and negative relationships between spirituality and old age, spirituality is referred to as a “fundamental character” or “crucial factor” (Božek et al., 2020, p. 7), or as a “core component in . . . life” (Thauvoye et al., 2020, p. 88). However, spirituality is often reduced in coping–functioning research, leading to “[the neglect of] the simultaneousness, ambivalence, or ambiguity of [the] relation between spirituality and aging” (Janhsen et al., 2021, pp. 47–48). The relationship between the concepts of spirituality and the constructions of old age are, however, not entirely clear from the literature.

This could be examined with respect to the types of constructions of age (Degnen, 2007) and the relationship between spirituality and religiosity (Sieggers, 2014) in a total of 12 more specified combinations (see, Table 1). If we simplified this space, then it would be possible to ask in general about the interaction of the constructions (a) R/S and the institutional definition of age, (b) R/S and the collective images of age, (c) R/S and the formed image of age in interactions, and (d) R/S and subjective conceptions of old age.

In this study, we focused on the last row of Table 1 (i.e., the individual constructions of aging and R/S), mainly because the data collection for this study was carried out as part of a broader project (hereinafter referred to as

Table 1. Potential combinations in the study of relationships of religiosity/spirituality and aging constructions (examples of themes).

Aging and spirituality-religiosity constructions	Spirituality as subjective religiosity (SR)	Religious bricolage (RB)	Spirituality as alternative to religiosity (AtR)
Institutional	Mutual interconnection of constructions of age categories and SR	Interconnection of the structures of specified age categories and RB	Interconnection of the structures of specified age categories and AtR
Cultural	Mutual interconnection of collective images of old age and SR	Mutual interconnection of the collective images about old age and RB	The interconnectedness of the collective images of old age and AtR
Interactional	Interconnection of age structures and SR in interactions	Interconnection of age and RB structures in interactions	Interconnection of age structures and AtR in interactions
Individual	Mutual interconnection of individual understandings of the concept of old age and SR	Mutual interconnection of individual understandings of the concept of old age and RB	Mutual interconnection of individual understandings of the concept of old age and AtR

“the project”) that aimed to improve possible interventions using spirituality when working with seniors in residential facilities (McDonnell-Naughton et al., 2020). We proposed the main research question (MRQ): What is the relationship between the individual constructions of spirituality and old among the participants in the project?

Methodology

Design and sample

The data were created within the second of five phases¹ of an ongoing project focused on the development of competencies in work with spirituality within gerontological social work in the Czech Republic. This second phase was the only one of the five in which individual interviews (n = 13) with older persons took place. All analyses presented here relate to data collected only at this stage of the project. The phase was conceived as a pilot study, with an emphasis on the meaning of saturation in terms of data saturation (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). We handled the data in such a way that it was not possible to identify new topics or emerging contexts within them. Within the meaning of saturation, our outputs were sufficiently saturated. With this in mind, an inductively framed qualitative research design was selected.

Between January and March 2021, a total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants aged 65 years and over. The interviews were conducted by the authors of this paper and three other members of the research team. The participants were selected from various large cities in the Czech Republic for the purposes of the pilot study. All the participants lived in their own homes, two of them were using institutional support during the day out of their homes. Eight of the participants lived alone. All the participants declared spirituality as socially important and inspiring for themselves, or personally important. The basic characteristics are given in [Table 2](#).

Instrument

In order to answer the MRQ, a plan of semi-structured interviews was created, in which we formulated questions focused on (a) the content of individual constructions of old age and (b) the content of spiritual constructions. The

Table 2. Composition of the sample.

Age group (years)	65–69 (n = 4), 70–74 (n = 2), 75–79 (n = 0), 80–84 (n = 3), 85–89 (n = 2), 65+ but without a specified age group (n = 2)
Gender	Masculine (n = 3), feminine (n = 10)
Living situation	Private (n = 11), private with institutional support during the day (n = 2)
Living arrangements	Alone (n = 8), with husband/wife (n = 4), with daughter (n = 1)
Spirituality	Perceived as societally important (n = 2), personally and societally important (n = 11)

participants were asked about their memories of important seniors they had met during childhood, changes in their perceptions of the old, and their perceptions of their current life situation. They were also asked about the concept of spirituality and its impact in their lives up to the present. The area of spirituality issues was operationalized with respect to the operational model of spirituality by Canda and Furman (2010, p. 82). The questions focused on old age at an individual level, in line with Degnen (2007).

Qualitative analysis

The data were recorded, transcribed literally, and coded by paragraph using In Vivo Coding (Saladaña, 2013). For the MRQ analyses (realized by the authors of this paper), only the codes that related to the constructions of age and spirituality were used, and they were subsequently grouped into categories. The Atlas.ti 7.5.18 program was used for the coding. The qualitative analysis procedures formulated by Miles and Huberman for “generating meaning” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 245) were used for the analysis itself. With regard to the MRQ, we monitored how the two structures were interconnected, at what moments, and with regard to what topics.

In line with Lietz and Zayas (2010), the criteria were used to improve the quality of the research, especially the triangulation (the interviews and analyses were conducted by several researchers and participants from different places in the Czech Republic) and audibility (a reflection on the data collection and analysis process by the research team). Given the deteriorating situation as a result of COVID-19 and the anti-epidemiological measures taken, no group feedback or evaluations were carried out with the participants.

Due to national law and non-interventional aspect of the study any ethical approval was not required. The implementation of the specific form of research was accepted by the grant agency (see Funding). The nature and conduct of the research, as well as the voluntary nature of participation and the possibility to withdraw from the research at any point (before the results were sent for review) were explained to each participant. The text does not present any statements made by the respondents that were subsequently identified by them as confidential or intimate, or that could lead to their potential identification.

Findings

Constructions of old age

The general constructions of old age within our sample can be characterized as having a mutual similarity. A unified symbolic system of age is evident behind

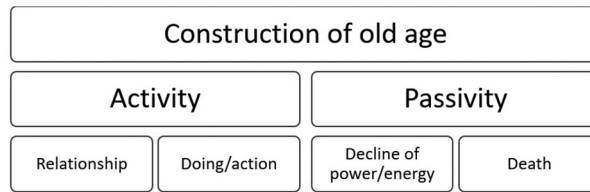


Figure 2. Construction of old age.

individual constructions (Bourdieu, 1993; Ebrecht & Hillebrandt, 2004; Milton et al., 2015), and this was apparent in our sample (see, Figure 2) with respect to:

- associating old age with time and the resulting changes on physical and cognitive levels,
- tension between activity and passivity,
- relationships as a valued dimension of human existence, and
- mortality/death.

The constructions of old age reflected the assumption of the passage of time and the acceptance of old age as a certain category, which, however, was not explicitly connected with a certain age. In the constructions, the phrases used included “now that I am so many years old” (I4: 52, where I4 is the mark of the interview, and 52 is the mark of the paragraph generated by Atlas.ti), or “that age is the only righteous thing in the world. This simply cannot be avoided” (I2: 55). Age or aging was also used. Mrs. Alena (all the names are pseudonyms) described her present age as “old knees” (I6: 376). On the one hand, following this chronosystemic (Smith, 2020) definition of age, changes were expected that would lead to reduced activity opportunities and perceived higher vulnerability: “sometimes I don’t remember when I express myself” (I3: 88), or “my organs are gradually giving up” (I10: 46). On the other hand, there was a discrepancy between chronologically and subjectively perceived old age. In this sense, Ms. Olga stated that “I am physically [old, but] frankly, I don’t feel very old on the inside” (I13: 65).

This was also reflected in the tension between passivity and activity. The participants constructed their current age as being full of activities and a period when they, for example, “go hiking, go swimming,” “meet in different communities” (I7: 41), or “[when] I still play the guitar in such a band” (I8: 88). Although old age was constructed as a specific analogy in an individual’s life, it was shaped more as the maintenance of continuity rather than discontinuity in the life cycle (Lim & song, 2019) and as the preservation of the ageless self (McHugh, 2000). Passivity had a negative connotation and was perceived as defeating and inappropriate: “They sat in chairs and tossed a ball.

I told myself, it must be insanely defeating” (I6: 262), or “No one wants to stay idle” (I 7: 39). Furthermore, there was a risk that the senior would be labelled as a useless old person (Blakeborough, 2008). Mr. Radim summed it up well: “Are you old? Alright then. Just as well we are no longer interested in your opinions” (I10:40).

An expected element of age construction is the importance of relationships. The meaning of relationships was constructed in turn as “terribly important to me” (I1: 170) or by emphasizing positive experiences: “I look forward to seeing my friends again” (I12: 58). Death was the last common theme in the construction of old age. However, it was not constructed as negative or feared. Mrs. Gabriela reflected on death by saying that “now I hear my peers around me, so if something strikes them, I die, I am not afraid” (I1: 101). Mrs. Natalie construct death as an escape from a world that is difficult to understand: “I already wish I had died. Because I no longer understand the world here at all” (I4: 86–88). Mr. Joseph stated that “I know that I must die, even that it will come soon” (I5: 48). These findings were consistent with the described increase in the acceptance of death at age 60+ (Cicirelli, 2006), as well as the possible lower fear of death in those who are considered religious, especially those who have formed an idea of the afterlife (Upenieks, 2021).

Constructions of spirituality

The constructions of spirituality showed greater heterogeneity than those of old age. It was possible to identify four types of spirituality constructions: (a) spirituality as inspiration, (b) religious bricolage, (c) weak religiosity, and (d) strong religiosity. As evident in Table 3, the differences between them are not in all the described aspects of the constructions but are in the basic thesis, which then makes sense for the other aspects of the constructions (Chronaki & Kolloesche, 2019).

In the case of spirituality as inspiration, the key was the perception of spirituality as something that can bring some inspiration to life. However, it was not formed into specific definable content. Mrs. Michaela declared, “I am not a believer.” At the same time, she accepted the presence of a spiritual dimension in the form of Bible readings “in some lay way . . . and I enjoy it” (I3: 104). Mrs. Alena conveyed her experience as follows: “I cannot describe [it], but I say, it affected me, and in a way, I went from there to being so calm” (I6: 212). As expected, there were no parts of the constructions that could describe the impact on normal behavior (very generally, only Mrs. Jarmila assumed a possible influence: “to behave well” [I11: 94]). Spiritual activities, if they were mentioned, did not include the nature of the development of the participant’s own spirituality or of regularly realized activities, but was rather expressed through limited experience (e.g., “I clearly felt tingling through

Table 3. Different constructions of spirituality.

Type	Nodal point	Range of age (years)	n	Impact on behavior	Spiritual activities	Spiritual coping
Inspiration	Source of inspiration	70–84.9	3	Minimally mentioned	Marginal	
Religious bricolage	Combination of different elements	65–69.9	2	Related to general guidelines		
Weak religiosity	Christianity without belonging to a church	85–89.9	2	Related to the Ten Commandments and God	Essential part of the construction	Reaction to important complications
Strong religiosity	Christianity with declared affiliation	65–84.9	6			Inconsistent approach

those fingers” [I6: 214]). Even so, spirituality was perceived as a framework coping mechanism, as a space in which “I ask for help” (I6: 216).

The nodal point religious bricolage can be described as a combination of different elements that could be included in different religious or spiritual traditions. For example, Mrs. Olga constructed her spirituality as a combination of faith “in reincarnation” (I13: 70) and the fact that “I am actually an evangelical . . . [but] I am not a practitioner, I am not so much a believer” (I13: 62). From the point of view of the impact on ordinary actions, no specific guidelines were mentioned other than “such ordinary values” as come from the “Judeo-Christian world” (I13: 66) and “when I am a good person” (I9: 64). Spiritual activities were related to the transcendent, in the sense of expressing gratitude – “I have such a habit that in the morning, when I wake up, I thank the universe” (I9: 102). From the perspective of coping, the concept emerged that “something can be asked by using certain methods,” but such requests may not always be granted because it “may not fit in with God’s purpose” (I9: 116).

Weak religiosity was characterized by the construction of spirituality in the context of Christianity. The phrases used in the constructions were “I believe in God” (I5: 96), with which one can establish a relationship and communicate (“as in the spirit I speak with God” [I5: 104]). At the same time, however, it entailed believing rather than belonging (Davie, 1990). Mr. Joseph opposed belonging by claiming that “I am not such that I go to church” (I5: 92). The behavioral impacts explicitly included the “Ten Commandments” as a set of guidelines, according to which “if one tried to live . . . everyone would be well in the world.” More specifically, spiritual activities were also described: “I listen to or read books by Halík” (I5: 92), as well as via occasional attendance at church as a space (I4: 106, I5: 108) and prayers (I4: 164, I5: 92). At the same time, prayers served as a coping mechanism: “One uses this . . . that when

things get worse, I'll close my hands and say 'Jesus, then if you are God, help me'" (I5:134).

Strong religiosity was essentially identical to the previous constructions; however, a clear declaration of Christianity was provided as the starting point, and an affiliation to a church was declared. Mrs. Gabriela, for example, described how she was "accepted into the Hussite Church" (I1: 83) and remained part of the church: "I am in the Hussite Church" (I1: 101). Faith was seen as participating "in that community" because "religion is a matter of community" (I10: 52). In terms of the impact on the proceedings, both the Ten Commandments and, in general, "all of the recommendations of Jesus" were mentioned (I10: 70). As in the previous type of construction, more extensive spiritual activities were mentioned here, such as participation in confessions (I7: 111), the perception of sermons (I1: 77), praying (e.g., I1: 74, I8: 154), watching Christian programs (I8: 134), and Scripture reading and meditation (I10: 52). While in the case of weak religiosity, the spiritual activities in the constructions also had a coping potential, in the case of strong religiosity, this was not entirely true for the individual participants. While some participants constructed spiritual coping as such (e.g., "will certainly help to survive some difficult moments" [I12: 78]), others defined it in contrast to the coping function of spirituality and called it an "illusion" (I10: 80).

With regard to possible interpretations of the findings (see Discussion), it should also be noted that for spirituality constructed as religious bricolage and weak and strong religiosity, freedom was as an important element of spirituality. Freedom was epitomized by the reversal of "self-thinking" and self-principles (I1: 115), by turning away from the everyday concept freedom (I2: 87) in order to strive to live according to the Ten Commandments (I5: 112), and by questioning the need to strictly follow the rules set by the church: "Do I have to go to church every week?" (I8: 168).

Relationship between old age and spirituality

From the descriptions of age and spirituality, it became clear that their potential interconnections would be far more problematic than the mere statement that the form of spirituality influences the form of the construction of old age (Oz et al., 2022). From this alone, it can be deduced that the type of constructed spirituality had no influence on the construction of old age as such among the actors we studied. Old age was constructed outside of spirituality, especially the spiritual framework or language. No words were used that would refer to spirituality, particularly to its given form by specific participants. Likewise, references to the constructions of old age were not used in the spirituality constructions in conversations. Ergo, for the participants, being old did not mean being spiritual, and being spiritual did not mean being old. After all, the disconnection of one of the participants after a possible

description of the importance of spirituality for a dignified old age also pointed to the disconnectedness: “Well, I don’t know. I won’t tell you that. Well, only in that I just walked among those people” (I4: 126). That “walking among those people” was not a specific spiritual activity, but rather its functional impact.

Rather than interconnectedness, one can think of a kind of seepage from one structure to another, a kind of penetration of one by another: no new construction is created, but both are distinguishable and separate. In the context of discursive struggles, this situation could be described as a synchronic interplay (Baxter, 2011). However, given the data in our sample, it is more accurate to talk about co-resonance. In co-resonance, metaphorically, the tones of the scales of spirituality and old age are still distinguishable, but the resulting harmony creates a unified and unfragmented impression. It forms a whole that would not make sense without one of the tones. This resulting harmony then sounds like either gratitude or functionality. Co-resonance is mostly based on a certain aspect of the construction of old age (e.g., death, activity, relativity).

Co-resonance, which sounds like an expression of gratitude, was represented in the constructions of only two participants (I9 and I10). This construction was not tied to a type of spirituality because it occurred in both religious bricolage and strong religiosity. In both cases, this co-resonance was associated with the theme of death and dying and with gratitude for the opportunity to experience and work in the world. In one case, this gratitude was mentioned explicitly, while in the other, as Mr. Radim characterized, it related to smiling and bargaining (see below). In the terms of gratitude, Mrs. Mary’s everyday life was presented as the importance of every additional day a person is alive.

Mary therefore said, “In the morning, when I wake up, I thank the universe that I have the opportunity to spend another 24 hours here. Or the next day that I am given, because I never know when I can leave” (I9: 102). Similarly, everyday life is mentioned in Mr. Radim’s construction: “Well, I always say this with a smile that I make deals with the Lord God every day Well, I would still need to graft this one this spring, I would still need to transplant this tree in the fall” (I10: 48). He also added that when one is able to perceive “simply the presence of God,” one is able to notice it during the day and say, “Thank you, Lord” (I10: 78). However, death is neither postponed nor denied. Mr. Radim made it clear that “it will probably no longer threaten me” (I10: 48) when he thought about what could be negotiated with a smile. In the same way, in her constructions, Mary indicated that she “never knows” when she could die.

What was more strongly represented was co-resonance in the form of functionality. Within this, spirituality played a certain function, which was a response to the given topic of the construction of old age. This leakage

affected all four subtopics described within the construction of old age (see, [Figure 2](#)). In relation to the death of a loved one (I1, I3, I11), spirituality fulfilled the function of maintaining the potential of meeting the loved one. The purpose of this functionality was to make it easier: “so I think it’s easier than someone who knows he’s going to die and that nothing will ever happen again” (I11: 078). This facilitation also acted as an aid in reassuring the participants with respect to their faith, but in the constructions, this was secondary. The primary aspect was to maintain the possibility of future contact with people with whom they had had relationships: “When my husband died, when I no longer thought about it, it is possible/not possible. But because I want to meet him, I simply believe that God is and that I will meet him” (I11: 92). Similarly, in constructing relationship, Mrs. Michaela created the hope that she would meet her dead husband: “let’s talk about what I did wrong to him, if I say, ‘Please don’t be angry.’” (I3: 164).

Within co-resonance, spirituality also serves as a statement about the control of skills and abilities, including the ability to handle demanding or stressful situations (I5, I7). Mr. Joseph described the use of prayer as a tool to control cognitive functions: “For example, I pray daily, saying the Lord’s Prayer. But it is not only a manifestation of a religious feeling, but I also control myself, and it is such a rationality in whether I can still say it all” (I5: 92). In this sense, Mrs. Eva indicated that she perceived how forces “diminish” (I7: 77), and this had an impact on one’s physical abilities and the ability to cope with difficult situations. In this sense, the interaction was specific in the context of the age constructions. During the interviews, one of the authors of this text (JV) asked Mrs. Eva: “I mean, is it actually like a format for dealing with those difficult situations, which has intensified compared to, for example, middle age?” Mrs. Eva responded, “Certainly” (I7: 73–74). Just as the construction of old age was a reflection of a certain more general social repertoire of old age (see above), it was not the case in the construction of cooperation. While spirituality played the role of a coping format for Mrs. Eva, Mr. Radim, who constructed the same type of spirituality (i.e., strong religiosity as with Mrs. Eva), defined this role as illusory: “I also lived with the illusion . . . that a person like, who really believes, so he should actually endure everything better. But no. Every believer is above all human; he is the same as the others, the same as unbelievers” (I10: 80).

In the co-resonance of spirituality and old age, which touched on relativity (I1, I4, I12), spirituality was used as a circumstance of encounter. Mrs. Natalie said, “I went to church with my cousin . . . every Sunday” (I4: 112). Subsequently, “I got married, so it stopped, I moved out. And now, when I was left alone, I began to go to church again” (I4: 112). This going to church was a “rather social” affair (I4: 162) to “come again among the people” (I4: 116). From the point of view of relativity, faith then served as an entry point for communication, as “a community of people whom you assume are also

believers and free to speak of” (I1: 163). However, in the context of this cooperation, the meeting was more of a circumstance. “And even after the service, we had coffee and talked about our personal lives. And that’s why I miss them during the last year, because I’ve been there a few times. Although I have a telephone contact, a telephone contact is not a personal call” (I1: 55). Mrs. Jana, on the other hand, mentioned that in relationships, the very relationship with God was essential for feeling connected to someone else: “when one turns to God, so that one does not feel alone” (I12: 80). For Jana, therefore, spirituality was not a circumstance, but the content of a relationship.

The last area of co-resonance of spirituality and old age was the area of meaningful activities. Spirituality, and dealing with spirituality in particular, was also constructed as a meaningful activity. Mrs. Michaela described how the pastor “comes here once a month, reciting the Bible in some lay way” (I3: 104). Devoting oneself to the activity of Bible interpretation was referred to as a meaningful and even pleasant activity: “I like to listen to him . . . [he] tells a story, I’m interested” (I3: 146). In this activity, the content of which in this particular case was spirituality, the interpretation and approach to certain parts of the Bible were therefore used as suitable and accepted ways of structuring time, and especially activities. In the same way, Peter’s cooperation was related to his devotion to spirituality, in particular theology, as it structured the activity: “how it is . . . if there is any discussion at all here” (I8: 176).

In this way, co-resonance primarily reflected the motif of individual areas of old age and allowed the individual participants to experience spirituality. It was thus logical to ask whether the relationship between spirituality and old age in co-resonance could also be the opposite, namely, that spirituality was the main motive but was complemented by the tones of old age? This was not the case in our sample. Rather than co-resonance, Mrs. Gabriela (I1) and Mrs. Jana (I12) talked about the transformation of spirituality in relation to a specific experience. However, it was not associated exclusively with old age as such, but with the death of a loved one. Gabriela described the change in spirituality after a child’s death: “I was more aware of the words of the church service, whereas in the past, one listened to it half-heartedly. Everyone perceived the word more. Even from those saints’ lives, and that here and literally every word of the Lord’s Prayer was perceived differently. That it wasn’t just broken words And otherwise, I saw the pain of Mary and the crucifixion of Christ” (I1: 77–83). The description showed a deepening of the content of spirituality, which was present in the life of the participants and which turned into a greater presence (“I perceived the words of the service”) and a modified experience (“otherwise, I saw Mary’s pain”). In the same way, Mrs. Jana talked about the fluctuations in her faith: “when, for example, my mother was dying, it was the first time that I had some doubts about that faith. Yeah. Yeah, I thought it was terribly unfair.” (I12: 68).

Discussion

In answer to the MRQ “What was the relationship between the individual constructions of spirituality and old age among the participants in the project?” it can be said that this relationship was a co-resonance of spirituality in the construction of old age, with a certain seepage of the construction of spirituality into the construction of old age. This infiltration of the co-resonance of spirituality into old age was apparent among our sample in specific parts of the age construction. Across the whole sample, however, it touched on all the subtopics that exist in age constructions (i.e., relationships, activity, loss of skills, and death). Otherwise, the two structures remained separate from each other. Because the type of co-resonance was not related to the type of spirituality (see, [Table 4](#)), it can be assumed that this place of co-resonance related more to the life stories of the specific participants and therefore represented possible sensitivities to certain topics of old age. The “Bourdieu” fields in which these individuals moved seemed to be important for this seepage. We interpreted these findings in the context of the internalization of the process of the privatization of religion, which has been observable since the middle of the last century ([Schonefeld, 1990](#)).

The privatization of religion has manifested itself in the public sphere through emphasis on the assumption “that beliefs about God are subjective, idiosyncratic and private expressions of faith” ([Schonefeld, 1990](#), p. 28). Analytically, the privatization process can be interpreted as a decline in the social and political function of religion (e.g., [Glendinning & Bruce, 2011](#); [Lee, 2021](#)). We believe that this social process of privatization has also become an internal process of the privatization of spirituality. What has manifested itself at a societal level as a decline in political and social function has manifested at the level of individuals as a decline in the identity function of spirituality. We believe that the findings presented in this study (i.e., the non-continuity of the constructions of spirituality and old age and the limited thematic co-

Table 4. Co-resonance and different constructions of spirituality.

Interview	Spirituality	Co-resonance
13	Inspiration	Functionality – death Functionality – activity
16		Not detected
111		Functionality – death
19	Bricolage	Gratitude – life/death
113		Not detected
14	Weak religiosity	Functionality – relationship
15		Functionality – loss of skills
11	Strong religiosity	Functionality – death Functionality – relativity
12		Not detected
17		Functionality – loss of skills
18		Functionality – activity
110		Gratitude – life/death
112		Functionality – relationship

resonances of both constructions) provide evidence of the privatization of the previously privatized. In our sample, the individuals therefore did not create, as Hervieu-Léger (1998) assumed, their own so-religious identity, but rather, they created a social identity of old age and, in parallel but not interrelated with it, a religious or spiritual identity. The understanding of the one area of the construction is not used to understand the other, and apart from the defined areas of co-resonance, the other is not needed. In essence, we can talk about a double phase of privatization. While in the first phase, religiosity/spirituality was privatized from the public space, in the next phase, it was (apparently) privatized by the individuals themselves from the constructions of each individual's own life as a whole to a specific religious/spiritual identity. The privatization of the privatized had reached such a depth that in order to understand co-resonance, knowledge of the construction of spirituality was essentially not necessary because spirituality resonated with the theme of old age in a spiritually non-specific way.

This begs the question: why did this privatization actually take place? Although we could have made assumptions from our data, we formulated two factors that may be valid for our sample. We believe that at a social level it is as a result of:

- (1) the systematic exclusion and regulation of religion by the Communist government between 1948 and 1989, followed by a culture of individuality, and
- (2) the perception of spirituality as passive activity that does not correspond with the emphasis on an active old age.

After all, the impact of systematic exclusion and the regulation of religion (Winter, 2000) was also confirmed by the participants in this research. In the conversations, there were statements about "persecution" (I13: 62) and "remarks" (I5: 92), which led to the outcome that one "simply should not talk too much" about one's faith (I8: 120). As a result, this could lead to the privatization of religiosity, the exclusion from public space, and the fact that "the generation" no longer thinks about faith and in this respect "is lost" (I8: 132). Although we do not want to diminish the impact of communist oppression, we believe – as indicated above and in line with the thesis summarized by Podolinská (2010), pp. – that it has not been caused by the ideological intervention of the internal privatization of externally privatized faith. If it were, there would likely be religious revivals when dismantling anti-religious measures, as was the case in the post-Soviet states (Froese, 2004). We believe that the privatization of the privatized was strongly supported not only by communism, but also by the subsequent rise of individualism, whether we view it as one of the manifestations of neoliberalism (Boltanski & Chuapello, 2007; Mueller, 2011) the need of individuals

to constantly adjust and epitomize the fluidity of modernity, or their penchant for “feeling free to move or act” (Bauman, 2000, p. 16). After all, even in our research, freedom and personal responsibility, as well as decision-making, were identified as important elements of spirituality. Whether these tendencies at a societal level have met the historical anti-ecclesiastical roots of the Austro-Hungarian era (Nešpor, 2010) is, however, beyond the scope of our study.

Our second consideration follows the thesis on masquerades (Richter, 2016). If seniors are required to be active, and the activity as such needs to be made clear, even if the seniors themselves do not care about it, spirituality can be perceived as a certain passive activity. If active aging is a normative challenge to action in the field of “employment, health, social inclusion, education or access to transport” (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2014, p. 14), then spirituality as an internal relationship with the transcendent and a certain collection may not fit into this picture. The fact that even this factor could play a role in the privatization process was supported by our sample: the co-resonance of spirituality and old age was exclusively the use of spirituality for co-harmony in selected topics of the old age construction, and not vice versa. Accordingly, if spirituality in co-resonance is intended to complement the music of old age, then it is possible that it does not fit into the overall picture of activity, which was widely appreciated in the constructions of old age provided by the study participants. This statement would be supported by a German study by Janhsen et al. (2019).

Limitations

The primary limitation of our study findings was the small number of participants for individual constructions of spirituality. Accordingly, it is necessary to perceive the descriptions of the constructions of different types of spirituality as preliminary, with the need for more detailed research. However, it should be noted that the constructions of spirituality described by us correspond to the findings on the forms of spirituality in the Czech environment (e.g., Opatrný, 2013). Nevertheless, we believe that the limitations of the findings also stem from the process of operationalization, which purposefully did not emphasize the interconnectedness of the constructions of spirituality and old age. In effect, the interconnectedness was not forced on the participants. While we are aware of the individual interpretations and constructions of the terms of spirituality and old age, the conclusions about the relationship between the two were therefore analytical. Of course, this also entails a certain hypotheticality in terms of the proposed factors that influenced the privatized privatization process. In both cases, however, these are factors that reflected the data of the presented study.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research on this topic can be extracted from the aforementioned limitations. First, it would be appropriate to subject the theses on co-resonance and privatization formulated here to a broader examination, especially of a qualitative nature, because the usual quantitative tools, such as those indicated by Podolinská (2010), may fail. Following the thesis of Janhsen et al. (2019), in future research it would be appropriate to include seniors who do not perceive themselves as active. If there is a link between the importance of spirituality for the construction of old age with respect to activity in old age, then such research could provide additional information about spirituality as a more passive activity and the impact of this concept of spirituality on masquerades (Richter, 2016) and co-resonance. Co-resonance itself should be examined in more detail, for example, with regard to more detailed life narratives, as the co-resonance of spirituality and old age seems to be determined individually.

Conclusion

Some researchers of old age and spirituality have assumed their interconnectedness both in terms of identity (Hervieu-Léger, 1998) and gerotranscendence, and linked spirituality to successful aging, as well as changes in spirituality in old age (Oz et al., 2022; Sadler & Biggs, 2006). In this view, religiosity/spirituality, although privatized from social structures and weakened by social and political functions (Glendinning & Bruce, 2011; Lee, 2021), plays a relatively important individual function. In contrast, Janhsen et al. (2019) questioned these connections. In our research, we therefore focused on how old age and spirituality were connected among the participants comprising seniors who were participating in the second phase of an ongoing project focused on the development of competencies for gerontological social work in the Czech Republic.

Based on our data (see the parts in the Methodology and Limitations sections), we believe that the process of religious individualization or the privatization of religion and spirituality (e.g., Pollack, 2003) is also followed by the privatization of spirituality in the context of identity. This privatization of the privatized manifests itself in such a way that it is not necessary to know the construction of spirituality in order to understand old age – and vice versa. Old age and spirituality are therefore constructed separately, like two different identities. If, metaphorically speaking, they meet, then this meeting would take the form of co-resonance. In this co-resonance, both of the original constructions can be distinguished, but spirituality is used within the chosen theme of old age as a chord that takes the form of either gratitude or functionality. Co-resonance therefore affects all four thematic

units of old age (i.e., relationships, doing/action, the decline of power, and death [see, [Figure 2](#)]), and the connection to them is not provided by a specific construction of spirituality. It likely has a purely individual character, which is based on the life story of the communication partner. However, this co-resonance was not identifiable in three of the 13 participants.

We assumed that the process of privatization of the privatized would be supported by a combination of communist ideological interventions in the area of religion between 1948 and 1989, which was replaced by an environment emphasizing individualization. For our participants, this and the emphasis on active aging (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2014; Richter, 2016) appeared to cause spirituality to play second fiddle in the context of co-resonance and to only manifest in some parts of the construction of old age.

Notwithstanding the above, we consider it necessary to state that we are not claiming that spirituality as such was not important for the individual participants in our study; rather, it was important in different ways. However, what was similar was that, for the clash of spirituality and old age, co-resonance was thematically limited, regardless of the importance of spirituality as such. For researchers and helping professionals, this, in addition to other possible research directions (see Recommendations), implies the need for caution in terms of the impact of spirituality on the construction of old age.

Note

1. For a better understanding of the context of the research in terms of the project, we will only briefly describe the phases. The first phase focused on mapping the current knowledge and reflecting on possible methodological approaches. In the second phase, individual interviews were conducted (related to the constructions of spirituality, old age and their relationship). In the third phase, focus groups were conducted according to a structure based also on the findings presented in this text. Data from the third phase are currently analysed. During the focus groups, we explored slightly different aspects of old age and spirituality than the findings presented in this text. We also focused on the topic of institutional care for older persons. In the fourth phase, lifelong learning courses will be conducted focusing on spirituality sensitive interventions in social work, as well as basic knowledge about the context of spirituality. The last phase will be devoted to reflecting on the parts of the project and formulating options for spiritually sensitive interventions in the context of research findings and international practice.

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