



# Spirituality and Hope in Old Age: Case Study of the Spiritual Academy

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**Abstract:** The article examines the meaning of spirituality and hope in old age, with a special focus on the Spiritual Academy, a programme at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana. The research question focuses on how and why spirituality becomes an important factor in maintaining hope in old age and what role it plays in the context of a secularised society that often does not provide sufficient support for existential issues related to ageing. The article deals with both theoretical and empirical aspects of spirituality and hope in old age. It initially draws on relevant psychological, sociological and theological sources from established authors. The methodology of the following empirical section is based on the analysis of anonymous questionnaires completed by participants at the end of each year to investigate whether the programme meets the spiritual needs of older adults. For this purpose, a case study method with an evaluation questionnaire (with elements of a Likert scale and open questions) was used. The results show that the programme effectively addresses the need for spiritual and personal growth and provides a space for sharing experiences and reflection. Although the survey indicates a high level of participant satisfaction with the Spiritual Academy programme, it also points to areas for improvement, both in terms of organisation and content. The analysis revealed a strong interest among participants in topics related to spirituality and hope, confirming the importance of such non-formal educational programmes for older people.

**Keywords:** existential questions, spirituality in old age, hope, ageing, spiritual growth, Christian anthropology, Spiritual Academy

Ageing brings with it unique challenges and internal issues that are often marginalised at earlier stages. These issues include the meaning of life and a sense of hope for the future. In today's increasingly secularised and consumerist society, which idealises youth, productivity, physical strength and aesthetic appearance, the older person is often confronted with feelings of meaninglessness, loss of identity and marginalisation (Bauman 2001; Moody 2005). Values that were once a source of pride and recognition fade with age, leading to existential emptiness and an increased susceptibility to depression and feelings of hopelessness (Erikson 1982; Tornstam 2005).

Hope is an important psychological and spiritual factor that enables individuals to maintain their inner vitality and positive attitude despite the limitations and losses that ageing inevitably brings. According to Viktor E. Frankl (2006), a person who sees meaning in their suffering can survive even the most difficult trials of life. Hope is therefore not necessarily based on external success, but often on inner resources, including the spiritual dimension of human existence.

The relationship between spirituality and ageing was first addressed by Protestant ministers, and most of the major work on this topic continues to come from their circles (Jewell 2004; Kimble and McFadden 2003; MacKinlay 2004). Spiritual and religious beliefs are important in human life as they influence lifestyle, behaviour and emotions in relation to ageing, illness and death. The importance of spiritual beliefs is particularly pronounced during illness, as they help patients and their families to accept the illness and ease its burden (Skoberne 2002). Spirituality has a positive influence on making sense of life in old age and on the acceptance of ageing itself (Macuh and Raspor 2018). Numerous reports speak of a positive influence of spirituality and religiosity on the spiritual, mental and physical health of older people (Manning and Miles 2018).

It is therefore not surprising that there is often a renewed interest in spirituality in old age. Older people turn to questions of meaning, transcendence, reconciliation and wholeness of life, reflecting the natural connection between age and spiritual endeavours (Atchley 2009). In this context, spirituality becomes a potential source of inner strength, connectedness and comfort that does not necessarily stem from a formal religion, but from a deeper sense of meaningfulness, wholeness and connectedness to something larger than oneself (Pargament 2007).

The concept of spirituality can include a religious affiliation, but it also goes beyond that. In contemporary scholarly debates, spirituality often implies the search for ultimate meaning, connectedness with others and the world, and a sense of inner coherence, especially in the context of suffering, impermanence, and the finitude of life (Moberg 2001; Koenig, King, and Carson 2012). In this regard, spirituality can serve as a basis for the restoration of hope in people facing grief, loneliness or near death.

The aim of this paper is to explore how and why spirituality becomes an important factor in maintaining hope in late life and what role it plays in the context of a fragmented society that often does not provide sufficient structured support for the existential issues of ageing. The article addresses both theoretical and empirical aspects of spirituality and hope in old age, drawing on relevant psychological, sociological and theological sources from established authors.

The topic of spirituality in late adulthood is socially and theologically important but is still relatively rarely dealt with empirically in theological and pastoral sciences. In this article, we therefore want to link theoretical findings with the practical promotion of spirituality in old age. In the field of promoting spirituality in old age, most programmes for older people are linked to religious communities and take place in local settings that mainly target members of religious communities. This represents a gap and an opportunity for the promotion of spirituality among older people in practice, but also a gap in research. Some models try to go beyond this concept and are also open to other older people. One such programme is the Spiritual Academy, which provides support for the spiritual needs of older people in an academic setting. The empirical part of the article is therefore a case study of a support programme

for older adults developed at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Ljubljana. The programme seeks ways to address the spiritual needs of older people. The article examines the extent to which the content and development of the Spiritual Academy programme are consistent with the findings presented in the theoretical part of the study. We ask whether programmes that are not tied to a specific religious community can promote the spirituality of older people. Our thesis is that the development of programmes such as the Spiritual Academy is a possible response to the spiritual needs of older people that go beyond the scope of individual religious communities.

In the empirical part, we will therefore examine the Spiritual Academy model and evaluate it on the basis of the evaluation questionnaires completed by programme participants each year.

## 1. Theoretical Framework and Definition of Key Terms

The experience of aging is undergoing a paradigmatic change in contemporary gerontological, psychological and theological discourse. Old age is no longer perceived solely through the lens of biological decline or social withdrawal but is increasingly interpreted as a time of complex inner development, reflection and potential spiritual growth. In this context, the interwoven dimensions of age, hope and spirituality are emerging as key factors in shaping the quality and meaning of later life.

This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for understanding old age not only as a developmental phase, but also as an existential space in which spiritual awareness and hopeful orientation can deepen. On the basis of relevant psychological theories, spiritual anthropology and current gerontological findings, the core concepts underlying this study are defined: Age as a developmental phase, hope as an existential-motivational construct, and spirituality as a multidimensional framework for finding meaning. Each of these themes is examined in the context of the psychosocial, emotional and spiritual challenges and potentials that characterize the lives of older adults.

The purpose of this theoretical foundation is to frame the subsequent analysis of the Spiritual Academy as a case study in which these dimensions interact concretely in the lived experience of older participants.

### 1.1. Age as a Phase of Development

Old age is not simply a biological condition characterised by the gradual decline of physical abilities, but a complex and dynamic phase of human development that encompasses intertwined physical, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions. Contemporary gerontological and psychological theories increasingly emphasise

that ageing is not only a process of loss, but also a process of potential growth and transformation (Coleman and O’Hanlon 2004, 17–29).

According to Erik H. Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, late adulthood is characterised by the challenge of ego “integrity,” in which the individual reflects on his or her life and strives for coherent meaning, acceptance and reconciliation with successes and failures. This phase is a confrontation with finitude and mortality, in which the individual must integrate past experiences into a meaningful whole. Failure to do so can lead to “despair,” which is characterised by regret, fear of death and the loss of existential hope (Erikson 1982, 55–75).

During this time, people often experience the cumulative effects of loss—including the loss of professional roles, social status, a spouse or close companion, physical functioning, autonomy and even cognitive clarity. Such changes can severely affect one’s identity, self-esteem and perceived social value. In a culture that glorifies youth, beauty and productivity, older people can experience “social invisibility,” marginalisation and a diminished sense of belonging (Moody 2005, 89–101; Gullette 2004, 32–47). Research shows that ageism is present in many Western societies. Older people are often the target of negative stereotypes, social marginalisation and a lack of opportunities for social participation (Gullette 2004; Nelson 2005). In line with Robert N. Butler’s (1969) work, ageism remains deeply rooted in complex social structures that idealise youth and productivity and lead to the marginalisation of older adults. The ageism subtly but effectively reinforces the idea that ageing is a deficit rather than a meaningful stage of life.

In addition, the transition to old age often requires considerable psychological adjustment. Paul B. Baltes and Margret M. Baltes (1990) introduced the concept of “selective optimisation with compensation” as a model for successful ageing, which emphasises the importance of strategic adaptation in coping with loss of function while maintaining a sense of purpose and commitment. This process implies the active pursuit of goals that remain attainable and personally meaningful.

In view of these developmental tasks and existential challenges, the role of the “inner life” and “spiritual resources” is becoming increasingly central. As physical and social structures recede, older adults can turn inward and reflect more deeply on ultimate concerns, identity, purpose and transcendence. Ageing thus creates a fertile framework for spiritual development and existential integration—a process often referred to as “gerotranscendence,” as defined by Lars Tornstam (2005), in which individuals move from materialistic and rational perspectives to a more cosmic and transcendent view of life.

In this psychosocial and existential context, the search for meaning, continuity and hope becomes particularly urgent and potentially transformative. Rather than being a time of inevitable decline, old age can be reimagined as a spiritually rich time of self-realisation, healing and renewed connection with the sacred.

## 1.2. The Concept of Hope

Hope is not just a fleeting emotional state or naive optimism, but a complex cognitive, affective and motivational construct that significantly characterises human resilience and existential orientation. As such, hope functions as a dynamic psychological force that sustains people in the face of adversity and offers a future-oriented perspective that integrates goals, meaning and the expectation of future fulfilment (Scioli and Biller 2009, 27–38).

Charles R. Snyder's (2002) influential theory of hope conceptualises hope as a cognitive motivational system consisting of two central components: "Agency Thinking"—the perceived ability and internal drive to initiate and sustain movement towards goals; and "Pathways Thinking"—the perceived ability to develop plausible strategies or pathways towards those goals. These components interact dynamically: the greater the perceived ability to act and the greater the ability to imagine pathways, the more hopeful the person is. In this sense, hope is not just a feeling, but a process of thinking, problem solving and strategic planning that is orientated towards a desired future (Snyder 2002, 249–76).

In older adults, however, the expression of hope often deviates from the conventional goal-orientated models. As biological decline and existential considerations increase, hope may turn away from hopes centred on achievement or future success and instead take the form of "existential or spiritual hope." This type of hope is less about the outcome and more about "meaning," "connection," "acceptance" and "reconciliation." It involves trust in the continuity of life, in the existence of transcendence, or in the possibility of inner peace despite uncertainty and loss (Herth 1993a, 38–44; Dufault and Martocchio 1985, 279–88).

In gerontological and palliative care research, hope has been shown to be a crucial predictor of psychological well-being, particularly in the case of illness, the need for care or near the end of life. Studies show that the presence of hope correlates positively with better emotional adjustment, lower anxiety, higher life satisfaction and even improved physical health indicators (Koenig, King, and Carson 2012, 134–40). Hope serves as an "inner anchor" that maintains a sense of identity and integrity during loss and uncertainty.

Spiritual traditions, including Christian anthropology, have long emphasised hope (*spes*) as one of the theological virtues—a God-given ability to trust in divine providence and eschatological fulfilment. In this framework, hope is not based on personal strength or empirical certainty, but on faith in transcendent reality and ultimate meaning (Pieper 1997, 91–110). Such hope enables older people to endure suffering not passively, but with a sense of openness to mystery and to the possibility of inner transformation.

To summarise, it can be said that hope in old age cannot be reduced to an individual psychological variable. It is relational, embedded in a social and spiritual

context and often focussed on non-material goals such as peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and legacy. It is precisely this expanded, existentially anchored conception of hope that makes it such an important resource for the experience of ageing.

### 1.3. Spirituality: A Multidimensional Concept

Spirituality is a term employed in various ways in both scientific and practical contexts, often without a standardised definition. In the broadest sense, it can be understood as an inner, individual experience of connectedness with meaning—whether with oneself, with others, with nature, or with a transcendent reality (Pargament 2007, 32–35). It involves the search for meaning, values, and connectedness, as well as the sense of being part of something larger.

Anton Mlinar (2009) observes that, until recently, spirituality was largely reserved for religious groups. It is no longer necessarily defined in exclusively religious terms, but now encompasses topics of profound importance for human growth, such as morality, ethics, justice, connectedness, creativity, meditation, prayer, and relationship with the transcendent. If the biological dimension of a person is defined by bodily systems, and the psychological dimension by thoughts and thought processes, then the spiritual dimension is the aspect of a person that seeks meaning and purpose in life (Hutchison 2025).

The concept of spirituality is broader than that of religiosity, although the two may overlap to some extent. Spirituality is often described as multidimensional; the two most frequently mentioned dimensions are the existential and the religious. The existential dimension concerns the purpose and meaning of life, while the religious dimension focuses on the individual's relationship with God or a higher power, which also shapes their sense of meaning. Another framework presents spirituality as a two-dimensional concept, with a vertical dimension—relationship to the transcendent or some supreme value that guides life—and a horizontal dimension—relationship to self, others, and the environment (Gedrih and Pahor 2009).

Different disciplines concerned with ageing use the concept of spirituality in distinct ways. The interrelationship between spirituality, religion, and ageing is clearly outlined in Holly Nelson-Becker's work *Spirituality, Religion, and Aging* (2018), which presents principles that can be applied in gerontological counselling and psychotherapy. Harry R. Moody (2012) edited *Religion, Spirituality, and Aging: A Social Work Perspective*, which includes essays on spirituality from a social work standpoint. Gerontologist William L. Randall (2019) conceptualises ageing as a spiritual experience, highlighting the use of personal narratives as a means of developing spirituality. Spirituality is also closely associated with palliative care, as described in *Ageing, Spirituality and Palliative Care* (MacKinlay 2006).

In contemporary ageing research, there is growing interest in the concept of gerotranscendence, developed by Tornstam (2005). This refers to the natural evolution of

older people's consciousness away from materialistic and rationalistic perspectives, towards greater contemplation, acceptance of life's paradoxes, and a deeper sense of connection. In this process, spirituality need not be religious, but instead reflects an inner maturation and transcendence of the self. It is therefore important to distinguish between spirituality and religiosity. Religiosity typically involves belonging to a particular faith, participation in religious practices, and acceptance of specific doctrines (Koenig, King, and Carson 2012, 45–49), whereas spirituality can be entirely personal and individual. Especially in later life, when some may be unable to participate in institutional religious practices, spirituality often endures as a source of comfort and hope.

## 2. The Social Context of Ageing and Secularisation

In modern Western societies, cultural patterns that glorify youth, speed, physical attractiveness, and productivity are increasingly prevalent, while old age has lost much of its former significance as a period associated with wisdom, respect, and spiritual maturity. A dominant youth culture promotes idealised visions of life that are difficult, if not impossible, for older people to realise. This cultural environment fosters the symbolic and social exclusion of older people, diminishes their presence in public discourse, and undermines their self-esteem. The following section examines the main dimensions of this phenomenon, with a focus on the cultural, social, and spiritual changes shaping the experience of old age in today's secularised world.

### 2.1. Youth Culture and the Marginalisation of Older People

Modern Western societies—characterised by individualism, rapid technologisation, and a neoliberal emphasis on productivity—tend to prioritise values such as youth, physical attractiveness, speed, innovation, and consumerism. In this context, old age is often perceived not as a natural and valuable life stage, but as a period of decline, redundancy, and passivity. Youth culture reinforces ideals that are unattainable for many older people, contributing to their social marginalisation and internalised stigmatisation (Gilleard and Higgs 2000, 22–28; Trstenjak 1965).

In Slovenia, Anton Trstenjak (1965) stresses that contemporary society often takes an unfavourable view of ageing, perceiving older adults primarily as recipients of social and health services rather than as carriers of wisdom or active participants in public life. He argues that one of society's key responsibilities is to restore the dignity of old age and to foster an environment in which older people are not merely physically present, but also mentally and culturally engaged.

This marginalisation is also symbolic: in the media, older people are frequently portrayed as a burden on healthcare systems, as ill, cognitively impaired, or dependent, and seldom as a source of knowledge, experience, or spiritual depth (Twigg 2004). Such representations reinforce stereotypes and contribute to the so-called social invisibility of older adults, which manifests in reduced inclusion, loneliness, and a diminished sense of meaning. Research by Slovenian anthropologist Vesna V. Godina (2015) shows that the role of older people as bearers of traditions and intergenerational continuity has been significantly eroded in the post-socialist transition, exacerbating feelings of social distance and existential insecurity in later life.

Ageing today also occurs in a secularised cultural framework, in which stable structures for understanding ageing as a spiritual journey—or as preparation for death—are increasingly absent. As Irvin D. Yalom (2008) notes, death is our greatest teacher, reminding us of life's limits and its preciousness. Confronting mortality in old age can lead to a deeper appreciation of life and an intensified search for meaning. In the past, religion, community, and family played a central role in structuring the daily lives of older people and ensuring their integration into society (Berčič 2014). Today, many older adults lack such support mechanisms in an increasingly individualised and de-Christianised cultural environment. Sociologists argue that the loss of symbolic structures—such as religious belief, ritual, and community—often leaves older people facing existential loneliness that extends beyond physical isolation, striking at the core of meaning and belonging (Idler 2024).

These trends have profound implications for the inner lives of older people. As they are excluded from the centre of social life, lose their professional roles, and experience physical decline and pain, many struggle with feelings of worthlessness, depression, meaninglessness, and spiritual emptiness. Slovenian studies confirm that loneliness is one of the most pressing challenges for older adults, with significant consequences for their physical and mental health (Ličen et al. 2022, 85–98).

It is increasingly clear that material support alone is insufficient. A holistic approach to ageing—one that encompasses not only physical and economic needs, but also the spiritual, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of life—is essential. Creating spaces where older people feel heard, valued, and spiritually included is becoming a central challenge for social policy, education, and pastoral practice alike.

## 2.2. Secularisation and the Loss of the Religious Framework

In addition to demographic ageing, modern European societies are undergoing a profound process of secularisation that is changing the way individuals experience meaning, transcendence and community. This change involves not only a decline in religious practise and belonging, but also a profound cultural shift in the way societies understand life, suffering and death. As Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) noted, the decline of institutional religion has been accompanied by an increasing

emphasis on individualised, subjective forms of spirituality. This transition has been characterised as a movement from “religion as belonging to spirituality as search”—from communal rituals and shared dogma to personal exploration and experiential meaning-making.

In the Slovenian context, sociologists notes that post-socialist societies have experienced a complex interplay between religious revival and secularising tendencies. While institutional religion regained a certain visibility after the fall of socialism, its influence has declined significantly in recent decades, especially among the younger generations. For many older adults, however, the church continues to function as a central framework for interpreting the deeper dimensions of life, including suffering, mortality and hope. As secularisation progresses, these people often find themselves disoriented in a society where traditional symbols, rituals and theological language are no longer taken for granted or supported by society.

Bojan Žalec (2010) emphasises that the loss of a common religious framework not only weakens theological education, but also the broader symbolic structures that enable people to formulate existential questions. Without communal rituals that have meaning—funerals, rites of passage, liturgical celebrations—older people can struggle to find culturally coherent ways to process loss, face death or find hope. This phenomenon has also been explored by theologian Roman Globokar (2019), who argues that spiritual issues persist even in secular settings, but are increasingly addressed in fragmented, eclectic and often consumer-orientated ways. He warns of the danger that spirituality without direction and depth becomes a superficial substitute for true transcendence.

Nonetheless, this cultural void often opens new possibilities for spiritual searching in later life. As James Fowler (1981) has pointed out in his theory of faith development, older adults often engage in deeper existential reflections and integrate life experiences into a broader spiritual narrative. In Slovenia, this can be observed in the growing interest of older people in non-formal spiritual education (e.g., *Duhovna akademija*), contemplative practises and re-engagement with sacred texts. Anton Jamnik (2021) emphasises that spiritual awakening in old age is not just a nostalgic return to childhood beliefs but can represent a mature and critical appropriation of faith, often focused on inner transformation, forgiveness and preparation for death.

Furthermore, research by the Anton Trstenjak Institute (Ramovš 2009) shows that spiritual support plays a key role in the psychological and relational well-being of older adults in Slovenia. Their studies emphasise that even among those who do not describe themselves as religious in an institutional sense, spiritual themes—such as gratitude, transcendence, acceptance and hope—are important resources for coping with the challenges of ageing.

In summary, secularisation has contributed to the erosion of the collective religious framework that once provided meaning, especially in times of crisis. However, this loss is not necessarily synonymous with the disappearance of spirituality. Rather,

it has led to a shift in the way spiritual issues are approached—more personal, less dogmatic and often more reflective. The challenge is to create spaces in both pastoral care and education in which these questions can be addressed with depth, authenticity and intergenerational openness.

### 2.3. Loneliness, Individualism and the Need for Transcendence

In today's post-industrial societies, the prevailing cultural emphasis on individual autonomy, personal achievement and self-sufficiency has led to increasing social fragmentation and a weakening of traditional community bonds. While these values may promote personal freedom, they can also have unintended consequences—particularly for older adults who often find themselves excluded from active social participation. After retirement, the loss of a professional role, diminished mobility or a death can lead to a significantly reduced social network. This makes the older population particularly vulnerable to loneliness, which has become one of the most pressing psychosocial issues in gerontology. Older adults today often experience feelings of loneliness and existential emptiness. Yalom (1980) points out that basic existential concerns—death, freedom, loneliness and meaninglessness—are the source of human anxiety. Developing spiritual practises that focus on coping with these issues is crucial for spiritual growth and maintaining hope in old age.

As Christina Victor, Sasha Scambler, and John Bond (2009) emphasise, loneliness in old age is not only an emotional experience, but also a strong predictor of decline in physical and mental health, cognitive impairment, depression and mortality. In Slovenia, studies by Jože Ramovš et al. (2018) have repeatedly confirmed that social isolation and loneliness significantly affect the quality of life of older adults. His research shows that interpersonal relationships, trust and a sense of belonging are crucial protective factors for healthy ageing.

Slovenian gerontologist Ramovš (2003) argues that today's society suffers from a lack of community that disproportionately affects older people. The weakening of traditional intergenerational structures and the transition from a "we culture" to an "I culture" (*kultura jaza*) has meant that many older adults have fewer opportunities for meaningful social engagement. This social individualism is not only structural but also existential—it undermines the individual's sense of purpose and connection, especially when social roles and status are no longer externally validated.

However, loneliness in old age masks not only a lack of contact with others, but often a deeper spiritual longing—a longing for a connection to something greater than oneself. As David Moberg (2001) and Robert Atchley (2009) suggest, the need for transcendence comes increasingly to the fore in later life as individuals are confronted with questions of mortality, meaning and legacy. This spiritual need is not always religious in nature; it may manifest in quiet contemplation, a new appreciation

of beauty, deep emotional intimacy, forgiveness and reconciliation, or a profound sense of peace in nature.

This is in line with the findings of Slovenian psychologist Kristijan Musek Lešnik (2019), who describes spiritual maturity in old age as the ability to maintain inner coherence, openness to the transcendent and acceptance of life's ambiguities. He notes that older adults who cultivate some form of spiritual engagement—be it through religious practise, meditation, service to others or reflection—have a higher level of psychological resilience and life satisfaction.

Spirituality is becoming increasingly de-institutionalised in the post-secular age. Many people, including older adults, are not returning to traditional religious forms, but rather searching for meaning in a more personal way. This phenomenon reflects a broader cultural shift from dogmatic religiosity to experiential and existential spirituality, where meaning comes from depth of relationship and everyday mindfulness rather than doctrinal conformity.

This reorientation suggests that the spiritual needs of older adults need to be addressed in ways that transcend rigid religious categories. Whether through life review, narrative meaning-making, intergenerational storytelling, artistic creation or ecological awareness, older people express a clear desire to connect with that which is beyond the immediate and material. In this sense, spirituality can serve as a bridge—between self and others, between past and future and between immanence and transcendence.

### 3. The Case of the Spiritual Academy

Within the sphere of spirituality, most programmes for older people are associated with religious communities and take place in local settings, thus primarily reaching members of those communities. Some models, however, seek to move beyond this concept and are open to other older adults as well. One such initiative is the Spiritual Academy, which offers support for the spiritual needs of older people in an academic setting.

The Spiritual Academy (*Duhovna akademija*) is an informal lifelong learning programme which has been running at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, since 2015. It was established with the aim of offering older adults, in particular, the opportunity to receive additional support for personal and spiritual growth beyond the usual framework of sacramental life. The programme is grounded in a holistic understanding of the human person in the light of Christian anthropology and seeks to foster a spirituality deeply rooted in a personal relationship with God, while also acknowledging the social dimension of faith. It is designed in such a way that no prior religious knowledge is required.

The conception of the programme is linked to several objectives: to provide a greater number of adults with access to the richness of the Catholic theological and spiritual tradition; to promote integral spiritual maturation; and to contribute to intergenerational dialogue and the involvement of retired professionals who wish to continue sharing their knowledge and experience. The programme does not offer formal qualifications or certificates, but rather aims to help participants incorporate the content into their everyday lives.

Since 2022, the programme has also been part of the Faculty of Active Wisdom (*Modra fakulteta*) at the University of Ljubljana. The Faculty of Active Wisdom develops innovative educational practices that enhance the well-being of older people and foster social integration.<sup>1</sup>

Given that the programme appears to provide older people with innovative support in the field of spirituality, we shall examine the Spiritual Academy in greater detail below.

### 3.1. Methodology

At the end of each programme year, participants in the Spiritual Academy were invited—both verbally and via email—to take part in an anonymous survey. The main purpose of the survey was to analyse and improve the implementation and design of the Spiritual Academy in subsequent years. In this study, we review data from these evaluation surveys in order to determine whether the programme is meeting the spiritual needs of older adults, as discussed in the first two chapters of our research.<sup>2</sup>

The survey is conducted annually using the open-source application 1KA, which provides online survey services and ensures the anonymity of responses.<sup>3</sup>

All respondents are asked, at the start of the questionnaire, to confirm that the results may be used to analyse the programme and its implementation.

The questionnaire is intended primarily to evaluate and improve both the content and the technical aspects of the Spiritual Academy and does not collect personal data. Consequently, consent in the sense of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is not required. The instrument was developed during the first year of the Spiritual Academy, taking into account the findings of an initial pilot study. In the summer of 2014, a pilot study was carried out among senior students of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Ljubljana who were enrolled in continuing education programmes, as well as among members of Catholic parishes in the city.

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1 For more information about the Faculty of Active Wisdom, please visit <https://www.uni-lj.si/en/study/alumni/faculty-of-active-wisdom>.

2 The surveys are available in the archives of the Spiritual Academy. The programme and recordings of some of the lectures are available at <https://www.teof.uni-lj.si/studij/vsezivljenjsko-ucenje>.

3 A detailed description of how the application works can be found at <https://www.1ka.si/d/en/about-1ka>.

This survey explored interest in different areas of spiritual growth, the suitability of the proposed schedule, and willingness to participate in the programme.

For reasons of scope and space, the following analysis will be limited to the Spiritual Academy during the “Year of Hope” (2024–25). We employ a case study approach, using an evaluation questionnaire with both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The data are presented in numerical form, and both quantitative and qualitative findings are analysed (the latter through thematic analysis of participants’ statements).

The small sample size and limited validation are acknowledged limitations of the method used, offering scope for a more extensive analysis in future research. Although the survey results are not representative, they nonetheless provide valuable insights from the perspective of programme participants.

### 3.2. Spiritual Academy in the Year of Hope—Survey Results

The focus of the Spiritual Academy programme in 2024/2025 was “Spirituality and Hope”. Data from the evaluation surveys for the academic year 2024/2025 indicate considerable interest among participants in a further exploration of topics related to Christian hope. The questionnaire was distributed to all enrolled participants ( $N = 231$ ) and 56 individuals responded, representing a response rate of 24%. It contained both quantitative ratings (on a five-point scale) and open-ended questions.

The evaluation results demonstrate an overwhelmingly positive response from the public. No fewer than 93% of respondents expressed a desire to participate in the programme in future years, confirming the high value placed on both content and delivery. The topics that participants rated as most desirable for future sessions were:

- 1) Hope (4.7): This received the highest rating, reflecting participants’ existential need for content addressing meaning and the perspective of the transcendent in life.
- 2) Bible (4.6), Spirituality (4.6), Family and Relationships (4.6): High ratings for these topics indicate a wish for a deeper understanding of personal faith and its lived expression in daily relationships.
- 3) Prayer and Personal Spirituality (4.5), Current Social Issues (4.4): These results show an integration of the personal and social dimensions of faith, consistent with the original vision of the programme.

Other areas of focus, though slightly lower, still achieved relatively high scores: Sacraments (4.2), Creation and Nature (4.0), Liturgy (4.0), Contemporary Philosophy (3.8), Artificial Intelligence (3.8) and World Religions and Spirituality (3.7). The lowest average score (2.4) was for the category “Other,” suggesting a strong orientation towards the proposed topics and limited interest in additional, unlisted content.

The socio-demographic profile of respondents shows a predominantly older participant group:

- 1) Age: 54% were aged 61 or over, 34% between 41 and 60 years, and 13% between 21 and 40 years.
- 2) Gender: 73% were women, 27% were men.
- 3) Status: 54% were retired, 39% were employed, 7% were in education.

This distribution confirms that the Spiritual Academy effectively reaches older adults seeking a deepening of personal spirituality and new avenues for social integration. The gender ratio also mirrors broader trends indicating women's stronger representation in activities linked to spiritual growth (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013).

When asked to what extent their expectations had been met, 79% of participants stated that they had been largely met, 18% that they had been partially met, and 3% did not respond. The suitability of the programme was further underlined by responses to whether participants wished to attend again the following year: 92% answered "yes," 7% were undecided, and only 2% did not wish to re-enrol.

Although satisfaction levels were high, responses to open-ended questions also revealed areas for improvement: avoiding date clashes with the *Evangelii gaudium* Bible School; providing certificates of participation to those with at least 90% attendance; ensuring a closer link between content and everyday life; inviting international guest speakers; and including themes on bioethics and artistic expression. Praise for the organisers and lecturers predominated among open responses.

The example of the Spiritual Academy illustrates that structured, professionally supported and personally engaging spiritual growth programmes are of considerable value to the older population—not only as a source of intellectual and religious enrichment, but also as a response to needs for hope, community, and meaning that are often overlooked in a secularised society. The programme successfully fosters a multidimensional spirituality encompassing the personal, communal and social dimensions of faith, thus affirming the importance of spiritual learning as an integral part of ageing with dignity.

#### 4. Discussion

The empirical evidence from the Spiritual Academy study corroborates the findings of numerous other research projects which emphasise that spirituality in later life is an increasingly important existential and psychosocial dimension of human experience. In old age, spirituality is not confined solely to religious practices; it is often

expressed as a heightened need for meaning, inner reconciliation, connection with others, and engagement with the transcendent (Moberg 2001; Tornstam 2005).

Nives Ličen et al. (2022) observe that in today's largely secular, individualistic and pluralistic society, people are increasingly experiencing a crisis of meaning and values, evident both individually and collectively. The "horizontal" dimension of spirituality concerns relationships with the self, with other people, and with the environment and nature, representing a non-religious understanding of life's meaning. The "vertical" dimension is associated with a relationship with God, another deity, or a higher power.

Across religions, certain human spiritual needs are universally recognised: the need for meaning and purpose; the need for love and connectedness; and the need for forgiveness. George E. Vaillant (2009), a leading researcher in the Harvard Longitudinal Study of Adult Development, notes in *Spiritual Evolution* that spirituality constitutes an inherent positive force within human beings.

#### 4.1. Spirituality as a Developmental Need in Late Adulthood

In Erikson's (1982) well-known theory of psychosocial development, the final stage of the human life cycle is characterised by a dynamic interplay between ego integrity and despair. In this stage, older adults undertake a retrospective evaluation of their lives. Successful resolution leads to a sense of coherence, acceptance, and fulfilment—what Erikson termed "integrity." If, however, the stage remains unresolved, it may be overshadowed by regret, a sense of missed opportunities, or existential emptiness, culminating in despair.

In this critical phase of life review, spirituality serves as an important interpretive framework. As Paul Wink and Michele Dillon (2002) observe, spirituality in later life is not merely a source of comfort; it also provides a meaningful lens through which the individual may reinterpret suffering, cope with loss, and prepare for death with dignity and peace. Spiritual reflection enables individuals to transcend the limits of their own biography, situating their life story within a broader—indeed, potentially eternal—horizon.

This developmental need is especially apparent in contexts where traditional religious affiliation has weakened, yet the spiritual quest endures. Atchley (2009) argues that spiritual development in old age should not be viewed as static or regressive. Rather, it is frequently marked by increasing inwardness, deepened contemplation, and a redefinition of one's relationship with God, with others, and with oneself. He describes this shift as a movement from religion as belief to spirituality as lived experience, noting that many older adults discover renewed meaning not through rigid adherence to inherited dogma, but through reflective practices, acts of service, gratitude, and active participation in community life.

Within this developmental framework, initiatives such as the Spiritual Academy can play a vital facilitating role. By offering structured content that integrates theological insight, biblical reflection, and experiential learning, the programme addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of spiritual growth. Perhaps even more significantly, it fosters a safe and inclusive environment in which participants feel seen, respected, and socially connected. This interpersonal dimension—the experience of being heard and valued—features prominently in participants’ feedback and aligns with gerontological research emphasising the importance of recognition and relational competence in late adulthood (Ramovš 2003; Musek Lešnik 2019). Moreover, the interdisciplinary character of the Academy—bringing together theology, philosophy, psychology, and pastoral care—embodies a holistic vision of the human person consistent with Christian anthropology. It affirms that spirituality in old age is not an escape from reality, but rather a profound engagement with it: reinterpreting past wounds, cultivating gratitude, seeking reconciliation, and renewing hope. This is particularly relevant in a secularised society where older adults are often deprived of public spaces for such existential dialogue.

As Darja Kobal Grum and Majda Pahor (2022) demonstrate in their research on ageing and identity in Slovenia, older adults participating in spiritually oriented life-long learning programmes tend to report higher life satisfaction, greater emotional resilience, and stronger social integration. Such findings mirror the testimonies of Academy participants, many of whom attest that the programme not only broadens their knowledge but also sustains their sense of dignity and spiritual vitality.

In sum, spirituality in late adulthood should not be regarded as a luxury or marginal concern. Rather, it represents a central developmental task—one that enables individuals to integrate their life experiences and to approach death in a way that affirms meaning, connectedness, and transcendence. Educational and community-based initiatives that support this process merit recognition as essential components of comprehensive ageing support.

#### **4.2. Hope as a Fundamental Spiritual Category**

Among the subjects offered by the Spiritual Academy, “hope” emerged as the highest-rated theme, attaining an average score of 4.7 out of 5 in participants’ evaluations. This outcome is neither incidental nor superficial, but reflective of a profound existential need, particularly acute in later life. Older adults frequently confront the imminence of loss—of health, loved ones, social roles, and ultimately life itself. In this context, hope is not a luxury, but a spiritual necessity, intimately linked to resilience, meaning, and the capacity to live fully, even in the face of decline.

From a theoretical standpoint, hope is distinct from mere optimism. Whereas optimism is typically grounded in positive expectations regarding specific outcomes, hope—especially in its spiritual dimension—derives from a deeper

existential openness. According to Kathleen J. Dufault and Benita C. Martocchio (1985), hope encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions: it involves not only goal-setting and problem-solving (as articulated in Snyder's model) but also emotional acceptance, trust, and the capacity to remain anchored in meaning during periods of uncertainty or suffering.

This distinction is particularly pertinent in old age. As Kay Herth (1993b) demonstrated in qualitative studies of older patients, spiritual hope often manifests not as an expectation of external change, but as an inner orientation—a readiness to reconcile, a sense of inner peace, and a transcendent horizon that renders suffering bearable. Such an orientation was clearly affirmed by participants of the Spiritual Academy, many of whom described the sessions on hope as comforting, liberating, and as reawakening something essential that had lain dormant. In the Slovenian context, Ramovš (2003) likewise underscores the importance of cultivating hope within personalistic gerontology, which views ageing not solely as biological decline, but as an opportunity for the growth of wisdom, solidarity, and transcendence. Ramovš maintains that older individuals who sustain an active sense of hope are better able to preserve emotional equilibrium, maintain social engagement, and uphold a positive self-image. This is corroborated by recent studies by Kobal Grum (2022b), which identify hope as a vital protective factor for the mental health of older adults in uncertain times, particularly within post-secular societies.

Across contemporary Europe, secularisation has weakened traditional religious narratives, yet it has not diminished the spiritual hunger for meaning, direction, and a sense of future. As Heelas and Woodhead (2005) observe, the shift from institutional religion to personal spirituality does not eliminate the need for hope; rather, it transforms its language and its modes of expression. In this respect, the Spiritual Academy's success lies in its ability to address evolving spiritual needs. Its approach is not exclusively theological or denominational, but arises from a holistic anthropological vision that honours the spiritual diversity of its participants while remaining grounded in the Christian humanist tradition.

The Academy's curriculum integrates biblical, theological, and philosophical reflections on hope—not solely as a theological virtue, but as a lived, embodied, and relational reality. Participants are encouraged to reflect upon hope not only in relation to eternal life, but also in terms of daily resilience, intergenerational reconciliation, ecological responsibility, and civic engagement. This synthesis of personal and social dimensions reflects a contemporary understanding of spiritual maturity.

Hope also assumes a vital communal role. Group sessions, shared prayers, and intergenerational exchanges create spaces where hope becomes more than an individual sentiment; it emerges as a shared narrative capable of counteracting the isolation and fragmentation often accompanying old age.

In conclusion, hope should be recognised not merely as a theological abstraction or psychological state, but as a fundamental spiritual category—a dynamic force that

enlivens life, renews meaning, and safeguards dignity in later years. Educational initiatives such as the Spiritual Academy are therefore essential in cultivating this inner resource, which not only enhances individual well-being but also fosters a more compassionate and spiritually resilient society.

### 4.3. Spiritual Community as a Response to Isolation

One of the most pressing challenges of contemporary ageing is social isolation, which frequently leads to loneliness, marginalisation, and a diminished sense of belonging. Numerous Slovenian studies have shown that loneliness constitutes one of the most common psychosocial problems faced by older adults, significantly affecting their mental health and overall quality of life (Ramovš 2003; Kobal Grum 2014).

Ramovš emphasises that ageing is not solely characterised by physical decline, but also by the necessity of rediscovering one's place in society—especially following the loss of significant roles such as professional, parental, or partnership identities. In this context, belonging to a community becomes a pivotal determinant of psychosocial well-being. A community provides support, structure, and opportunities for the mutual sharing of life experiences—resources particularly valuable in later life (Ramovš 2011).

Although the Spiritual Academy is not a formal ecclesial body, it functions as a spiritual learning community where participants meet, share reflections, and collectively seek meaning. This affirms a central anthropological insight: that human beings are inherently relational, in need of connection, dialogue, and a shared symbolic orientation. According to Kobal Grum (2022a), many older adults seek a form of spiritual belonging that extends beyond institutional religiosity, finding fulfilment in smaller, more intimate communities where they feel heard, respected, and accepted.

The value of such communities extends beyond emotional or informational support; it is existential and transformative. As Metka Kuhar (2010) notes, interpersonal connectedness in old age is essential for sustaining self-worth, meaning, and spiritual maturity. When individuals lose physical capacity or formal social roles, they require spaces in which to share stories, listen to others, pray, reflect, and co-create a shared symbolic world.

Slavko Gaber (2019) likewise highlights the importance of community-based learning and spiritual development that bridges generations. Programmes such as the Spiritual Academy foster intergenerational dialogue, challenge age-related stereotypes, and cultivate a culture of respect and inclusion. Participants often remark that the Academy is not simply a place where content is delivered, but a living environment in which they feel part of something greater, vibrant, and meaningful.

In this way, the Spiritual Academy addresses not only the intellectual interests of older adults but—more importantly—their need for belonging, connection, and

spiritual sustenance. At a time when traditional forms of community are fragmenting or transforming, such initiatives provide a valuable alternative, strengthening spiritual resilience, fostering connectedness, and promoting meaningful ageing.

### **Conclusions: Spirituality as a Place of Meaning and Community in Old Age**

In modern secularised societies—dominated by the values of youth, productivity, and aesthetic perfection—older individuals often find themselves on the margins. As physical abilities wane and retirement marks the end of professional life, the risk of losing meaning, identity, and hope increases. For this reason, spirituality in later life assumes particular significance—not as escapism, but as a vital inner dimension enabling deeper self-knowledge, a fuller grasp of one’s life trajectory, and sustained connection with others and with the divine.

The case of the Spiritual Academy demonstrates that well-designed, non-formal programmes of spiritual education can make a significant contribution to the spiritual and psychosocial well-being of older adults. Through its diversity of themes, intergenerational ethos, and emphasis on personal growth and community, it offers a tangible response to the needs for meaning, hope, and belonging—needs that often resurface in later years.

Wink and Dillon (2002) rightly observe that spiritual development does not cease in old age; indeed, it may become more dynamic, profound, and authentic. The Spiritual Academy also corroborates Atchley’s (2009) assertion that spirituality is a fundamental human need transcending religious affiliation, manifested in the pursuit of inner wholeness and interpersonal connectedness. Spirituality in old age is therefore not solely a matter of private belief, but also a pressing social question concerning how society addresses existential needs often neglected in secular contexts.

While annual evaluation surveys indicate high levels of participant satisfaction with the Spiritual Academy, feedback also reveals areas for enhancement, as outlined in Chapter 3. These include organisational improvements (e.g., scheduling, provision of participation certificates) and content-related expansions (e.g., bioethics and the arts).

Based on our findings, we contend that the model of informal adult spiritual education exemplified by the Spiritual Academy holds considerable potential for adaptation in diverse national and cultural contexts.

*Translated by Andrej Turk*

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