

# Gerotranscendence and different cultural settings

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## **ABSTRACT**

Within the framework of an international research project aimed at studying the impact of different cultural settings on gerotranscendent development, six groups of older people distinguished by religiosity and cultural origin were studied. A life history approach, followed by thematic semi-structured interviews, was applied. One of the objectives was to inquire about the possible impact of religion, conceived of as a cultural setting, on development towards gerotranscendence. The findings of this inquiry gave rise to two hypotheses as to the relationship between gerotranscendence and religiosity. The first hypothesis is that the internalisation of mystical-type ideas in individuals' ways of thinking is probably a factor involved in the development of a gerotranscendent view of life. In other words, whether individuals practice their 'religion' in a spiritual, nonorganisational way, or in an organisational way, may play a role for development towards gerotranscendence. The second hypothesis is that certain characteristics, such as the secular and individualistic features of modern societies, may delay development towards gerotranscendence.

**KEY WORDS** – Gerotranscendence, spirituality, religion, ageing Sufism.

## **Introduction**

With points of departure from his own studies, as well as from the theories and observations of others, Tornstam (1996, 1997*a*, 1997*b*, 1999) has suggested that human ageing, the process of living into old age, is characterised by a general potential towards gerotranscendence. As he explains, the gerotranscendental individual typically experiences a redefinition of 'self' and of relationships with others, as well as a new understanding of fundamental existential questions. The individual might become less self-occupied, and experience a decreased interest in material things and a greater need for solitary 'meditation'. There is also often a feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe,

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and a redefinition of time, space, life and death. There is an increased feeling of affinity with past generations and a decreased interest in superfluous social interaction. He describes the dimensions or signs of gerotranscendence as ontological changes on three levels: the cosmic level, the self level, and the social and individual relations level (Tornstam 1996: 42-3). These levels are explained as follows:

#### The cosmic level

*Time and space.* Changes in the definitions of time and space develop. For example the transcendence of borders between past and present occurs.

*Connection to earlier generations.* Increasing attachment. A change from link to chain perspective ensues.

*Life and death.* The fear of death disappears and a new comprehension of life and death results.

*Mystery in life.* The mystery dimension in life is accepted.

*Rejoicing.* From grand events to subtle experiences, the joy of experiencing macrocosmos in microcosmos materializes.

#### The self

*Self confrontation.* The discovery of hidden aspects of the self – both good and bad – occurs.

*Decrease of self-centredness.* The self is removed from the centre of one's universe.

*Development of body-transcendence.* The care of body continues, but the individual is not obsessed with it.

*Self-transcendence.* A shift occurs from egoism to altruism.

*Rediscovery of the child within.* The individual experiences return to and transfiguration of childhood.

*Ego-integrity.* The individual realizes that the pieces of life's jigsaw puzzle form a wholeness.

#### Social and individual relations

*Changed meaning and importance of relations.* One becomes more selective and less interested in superficial relations, exhibiting an increasing need for solitude.

*Role play.* An understanding of the difference between self and role takes place, sometimes with an urge to abandon roles. A new comforting understanding of the necessity of roles in life often results.

*Emancipated innocence.* Innocence enhances maturity.

*Modern asceticism.* An understanding of the petrifying gravity of wealth and the freedom of 'asceticism' develops.

*Everyday wisdom.* The difficulty in separating right from wrong and withholding from judgements and giving advice is discerned. Transcendence of the right-wrong duality ensues.

Criticising conventional theories and holding up a new view of ageing that stresses the experience of a fundamental shift with advanced old age, Tornstam advocates a meta-theoretical paradigm, which is akin to certain contemplative traditions. He shows his awareness of this affinity when he points out that:

To reach a new meta-theoretical paradigm we shall have to leave our normal positivist way of thinking. We are going to contrast our picture of the world with that which a Zen Buddhist would probably have. The Zen Buddhist lives within a cosmic world paradigm with many diffuse and permeable borders. In this world much of the difference between subject and object is erased. The statements made by a Zen Buddhist are often difficult to understand from the point of view of our meta-theoretical paradigm – for example, that you and I are not separate objects but parts of the same entirety. Past, present and future are not separate but exist simultaneously. (Tornstam 1996: 41)

These statements do not imply that the theory of gerotranscendence is identical to contemplative traditions or religion. As Thomas (1997*b*: 14) stresses, the theory ‘does not assume that gerotranscendence is necessarily connected with religion’. Rather, it is posited that gerotranscendence normally occurs with age, although it is subject, of course, to cultural influences in terms of how it is manifested and interpreted. What causes this apparent affinity between the theory of gerotranscendence and certain contemplative traditions is that both stress the individual experience of a transcendent, cosmic view of life.

In many religious and contemplative traditions, age has been considered a symbol for wisdom and transcendence. Yet if, according to the contemplative traditions, individuals transcend as a result of a metaphysical or supernatural experience, the theory of gerotranscendence suggests that ‘ageing, or rather, living, implies a process during which the degree of gerotranscendence increases’ (Tornstam 1996: 41). Although age, according to the theory of gerotranscendence, has an important impact on developing a transcendent view of life – described above as ontological changes on three levels – such a development is indeed a life ‘project’. This point has been made in various studies conducted to examine the theory of gerotranscendence. For instance, in a mail survey study of 2002 Swedish men and women between the ages of 20 and 85, cross-sectional age differences were found. Tornstam explains this as follows:

We have patterns of increasing cosmic transcendence, coherence and need for solitude. Our data suggest that the development of cosmic transcendence and coherence are continuous processes which begin during the first half of the adult life and gradually develop to their maximum in later life (at least among women). The need for solitude also reaches its maximum in late life, but develops most rapidly during the first half of the adult life. We have found that women score higher than men on cosmic transcendence, but that sex differences decrease with increasing age. (Tornstam 1997*b*: 34)

Thus the process of gerotranscendence is an ongoing process during the individual’s whole life. It is influenced, however, not only by age, but

also by other factors such as life circumstances or culture. Tornstam, stressing the possible impact of cultural settings on development towards gerotranscendence, maintains that the process 'is intrinsic and independent of culture, but modified by specific cultural patterns' (Tornstam 1996: 41). He stresses that:

In most Western cultures neither guidance towards nor acceptance of the wise gerotranscendent state of mind exists. In our culture, a person who displays the changes accompanying the gerotranscendence state of mind runs the risk of being judged as deviant, asocial or mentally disturbed. (Tornstam 1996: 45)

Considering the relation between religion, culture and gerotranscendence, one of our initial hypotheses was that societies in which religion is integrated into social and cultural life provide fertile soil for individuals to develop towards gerotranscendence. In contrast, societies in which religion does not play such a role, might hinder gerotranscendent development. This hypothesis will be examined here.

## **Method**

This article draws on three studies undertaken within the framework of an international research project. The aim of this project was to use a cross-cultural approach in studying the impact of different cultural settings on gerotranscendent development. The objective here is to discuss the impact of religion, seen as a cultural setting, on this development.

I undertook two of the studies: one of Swedes and the other of Iranians living in Sweden. The third study was undertaken in Turkey by Professor L.E. Thomas of the University of Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> In each study, two groups were studied, namely religious and secular elderly people. The religious samples consisted of persons who believed either that there was a personal God or some kind of spiritual being or vital power. In the Swedish Study they were all Protestants, in the Iranian study Shi'a Sufis, and in the Turkish study Sunni Sufis. Both Shi'a Sufis and Sunni Sufis are regarded as Islamic mystics.<sup>2</sup> In all three studies, the secular samples consisted of persons with a secular world-view: a disbelief in any kind of spiritual being, God or vital power.

### *Participants*

All 29 participants in the Turkish study were 66 years of age or older. In the religious sample, all 12 were Sunni Sufis – Islamic mystics from the *Naqshibandi* and *Kadiri* orders. Seventeen persons were interviewed

for the secular sample. Interviews were conducted in Ankara and Istanbul. Contact was established, and informal interviews and observations made, with several other persons who were not included in the sample because of age or because they, for various reasons, could not complete the interviews. In selecting interviewees, Thomas contacted the different communities and selected persons who were viewed by their community as being appropriate. Explaining this point Thomas comments:

This method of sample selecting by lay nomination is similar to the method used by Baltes and his colleagues in their Berlin wisdom studies (Baltes *et al.* 1995), except that I did not limit my sample to public figures, as they had done. (Thomas 1997*b*: 4)

The religious sample was confined to men. Efforts were made to find older women who were considered spiritually mature, yet informants were unable to come up with names. It is not clear if this was because of an inadequate sampling net, or whether it reflects the state of religious identification in this population. All of the Turkish Sufis were college graduates, with four holding advanced degrees. The entire secular sample had had a college education, with five attaining graduate degrees. Ten of the interviews in the religious sample and 12 in the secular sample were conducted in Turkish, with the help of a research assistant who was familiar with the community and who served as an interpreter for Turkish-speaking respondents. The remaining two interviews with the religious Turks and eight of those with secular Turks were conducted in English.

In the Iranian study, 23 interviews were conducted with persons 65 years of age and older. All informants were Iranians who had migrated to Sweden and who were living there at the time of the interview. Being late-in-life immigrants, these informants had not been socialised into Swedish society. Rather they had internalised and retained the Iranian norm and value system. Interviews were conducted in Persian and no translator was necessary. The informants were selected by contacting different communities. The religious sample was chosen among the only two established Iranian Sufi groups in Sweden, each having their own *Khanigah* (Sufi's assembly halls). Interviews were conducted in Stockholm and Uppsala.

The religious sample consisted of 13 persons, 10 men and three women, all residing in Sweden but devoted to Sufism. All belonged either to the *Nimatullahi* or the *Gonabadi* orders. These are regarded as the most important Persian Shi'a Sufi orders and have their own *Khanigah* in Iran as well as in many Western countries, including Sweden. All interviewees from the religious group had completed

primary school education, 11 had graduated from high school, while seven had attained advanced degrees. Two women who had agreed to take part in the study were unable to do so as a result of illness. Unlike Turkey, it was not difficult to find elderly women who were considered spiritually mature among Iranian Sufis.

Ten individuals (four women and six men) were interviewed for the secular sample. All had completed primary school education, seven had graduated from high school, and four held advanced degrees.

In the samples of people born in Sweden, 21 persons (12 men and nine women) were interviewed in Uppsala. Interviews were conducted in Swedish and no translator was necessary. In recruiting informants for both the secular and religious groups, the researcher contacted two important retirement organisations. All informants were 67 years of age or older. Eleven informants (six men and five women), all Protestants, were included in the religious sample. Ten interviewees (six men and four women) comprised the secular sample. In both groups, all had completed primary school and four in each group had graduated from high school.

#### *The process of analysis*

Data were gathered using life narrative interviews (Bertaux and Kohli 1984), followed up by thematic semi-structured interviews. The life narrative approach was considered appropriate for an exploratory study, allowing us to obtain in-depth information on relatively small numbers of respondents.

Since gerotranscendent development was a major focus of this study, questions tapping the different dimensions of the theory were incorporated into the interviews. In order to proceed from a shared understanding of the qualities that characterise the dimensions of gerotranscendence, we had to operationalise the definitions of these dimensions. Eight dimensions posited by the theory of gerotranscendence are: view of time and space; view of life and death; self-understanding; decrease in self-centeredness; transcendent wisdom; meaning and importance of relationships; mystery dimension of life; and attitude toward material assets.

At the first step of analysis, we chose some transcribed protocols from all six samples and independently read them. At the second step, we extracted from the texts those meanings (meaning units) that reflected each interviewee's position regarding the different dimensions of gerotranscendence. Meaning units are the smallest units of speech that independently carry meaning (Jones 1984).

The interviews were analysed according to the hermeneutical approach (Bertaux and Kohli 1984; Gadamer 1984; Ricour 1981). In line with this, when reading the interviews, we kept in mind the larger context in which the texts were embedded. The researchers interact with their 'fore-meanings' or assumptions. These assumptions can be based on previous research experience or/and personal and cultural knowledge. As Thomas (1989) explains:

Rather than being an objective, value-neutral undertaking, hermeneutical analysis is to be the result of the interaction of a unique interpreter, who draws upon his or her full means of comprehension and intuition in order to understand a text in 'all its newness' (Gadamer 1984). At the same time the interpretation of a text is undertaken in a systematic and orderly manner, in the spirit that Mills (1959) terms *intellectual craftsmanship*.

The metaphor which best captures the process of a hermeneutical analysis is that of a dialogue between the researcher and the text, during which the researcher 'respects the integrity of the text, asking questions and listening carefully to what emerges from the text' (Thomas 1989). It was just such a dialogue that we both had with the interview protocols.

At the third step, we each analysed separately the meanings extracted from the *chosen* interview protocols. At the next step, we discussed together our interpretations of these meanings. By comparing the preliminary definitions of different dimensions of gerotranscendence with what was found in the interview protocols, an agreement on the main characteristics of the operationalised definitions of dimensions of gerotranscendence was reached.

At the fifth step, we designed a 'test list' for estimating evidence or lack of evidence of dimensions of gerotranscendence emerging in each of the interview protocols. For each dimension we estimated whether there was no evidence, moderate or extensive evidence. This was intended only to facilitate the discussion between us, and not to be used as a measurement tool. At the next step, each of us returned to the original interview protocols we had conducted independently and coded *all interview transcripts* in terms of the dimensions of gerotranscendence.

At the last step, after reading all interview protocols several times, we each independently completed the 'test list' for each interviewee. In doing this, each of us departed from our own understanding of the extent to which each interview displayed the different dimensions of gerotranscendence.

## Findings

### *The Iranian study*

Signs of gerotranscendence were found among some informants within the religious as well as the secular Iranian sample. The responses of one informant belonging to the religious group, Mr M., a 77-year-old man, illustrates the quality of gerotranscendence among Iranian informants. He was asked if he had changed his view of himself with age. The answer was:

When I was young, I did not know myself. I believed, however, I did. It was wrong, completely wrong. Now, I am not sure if I know myself very well, but I think I am on the right road to knowing who I am. I discover every day one part of my real self. Every day is for me an expedition in an unknown world that is called M. [He refers to his name].

When asked about his relationship to others, he responded:

I have been successful in establishing very close and deep relations with a few friends. On the other hand, I have contact with a vast network of Iranians. Actually, I have learned to deal with the foibles of people around me better than I did before. This is perhaps because of the fact that now better than ever previously I understand my own foibles. When I was young, I used to get mad very easily particularly when I was discussing with some one who had opinions other than mine, especially when it regarded politics. You maybe know how sensitive political issues are for us Iranians! Now, I listen very patiently to people who have completely different political opinions than I have.

He was asked to explain about his view of time and if he has considered any change in his understanding of time during his life period. He answered:

Everything happens again and again. It seems that everything repeats. Have you ever read de Beauvoir's book *All Men are Mortal*? It is about a man who never dies and therefore perceives how human history is only a repetition. Not only, just like that man in the Beauvoir's book, have I come to the insight that everything in history is actually a repetition, but I can also feel this repetition. You know, those events that once seemed so far from, far from our day, no longer seem so distanced. Sometimes, they happen again but in other forms. I don't know how to explain it to you. It is not easy to say with words what I mean.

A 68-year-old woman from the secular group answered the question of whether she had changed her view of herself with age as follows:

Of course my view of myself has changed with age. I have become a much more tolerant person than I was before. I accept reality as it is, not as I want it to be. I enjoy my life. Every minute of it, differently from how I used to. I



see myself as a star among many stars in the sky, a beautiful star (she laughs) among many beautiful stars. Life is wonderful. I say this despite the hard life I have lived especially during the last twenty years; you know after the Revolution.

About her relations to others, she said:

You know, everyone in my family was politically active in Iran. I used to associate only with my relatives and with people who thought like me. I was not and still am not a religious person. I don't believe in God either. Before, I didn't like to keep company with religious people. Now, I like to listen to people with different ideologies, especially those who belong to different religious group: Muslims, Christians and Jews. Here in Sweden, I have friends with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. They are not so many, but quite enough (she laughs). It is very interesting to chat with them.

She was asked to tell me about her view of time and whether she had noticed any changes in her understanding of time during her life period. She answered:

I see my life as a short part of a long journey, a journey in a timeless world. We travel in a circle and at least come back to the same point. We are not yet aware of it because we have changed so drastically during this journey that we don't even recognise ourselves. We, human beings, have a short memory, only certain people those enlightened, not necessarily the religious ones, have the insight to feel this circular journey. I am not one of them. But when you get older and older, you see life in its entirety and you realise that time is a circle. That's it.

As these statements indicate, there is hardly any qualitative difference between the answers of these two informants, one religious and the other secular. One important finding from the Iranian study was that almost no evidence was found to indicate that signs of gerotranscendence were more prevalent among religious than among secular persons.

#### *The Turkish study*

Thomas (1997*b*) explains that the Turkish interviews indicate that there is clear evidence of gerotranscendence in some, but far from all, respondents. In fact, some informants were found to be almost totally lacking in gerotranscendence. An indication of life satisfaction, along with an awareness of the transcendent, is apparent in the answer given by Mr D., an 82-year-old man from the religious group, to the question 'What is your biggest regret, looking back on your life?':

I don't have any regrets. I always thank God for his help. I believe in him wholeheartedly. And God for me – I am a pantheist. I see God everywhere ...

More typical of the quality of gerotranscendence found among respondents, were responses of persons like Mr O., an 82-year-old retired diplomat with a great spiritual interest (Thomas 1997*b*: 6). When asked if he had changed his view of himself with age, he replied:

Well, first of all, with age I have become more tolerant. People criticise youth for their music, their behaviour. At their age perhaps I was doing the same thing. My elders were criticising me, but I accept them as they are.

In response to the question ‘Have your relationships with people changed?’ he stated:

Yes. As I said, it has been sweetened by the years. I used to get angry at things, a statement. But today, I don’t get angry any more ... and I’ve learned to keep quiet.

He was also asked ‘Have you considered during the last years any changes in your view of time?’ His answer was:

Sometimes I feel I have difficulty in remembering correctly when the events happened. I have a feeling all events have happened in my life. For example I perceive that my wedding did not happen so many years ago, but just yesterday. It seems so close to now. Maybe I have Alzheimer, but I have not forgotten the events, I only do not see a clear distance between yesterday and ten years ago. You think I am crazy, but it is interesting, very interesting to view time in this way. It is a gift from God. I believe in him wholeheartedly.

No clear evidence of gerotranscendence was found among the secular informants. For instance, a typical answer regarding views of oneself and relations with others, was the answer of Mr O., an 86-year-old man. In response to the question ‘Do you have a pretty firm sense of identity; that is of who you are now?’, he replied:

To be very active, is my identity. To work very hard. And to try to impose my ideas on others.

Thomas (1997*b*: Table 4) found that evidence of gerotranscendence was more noticeable among the religious sample. Almost no evidence of gerotranscendence was found among the secular Turkish informants.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The Swedish study*

Evidence of gerotranscendence was found among both the religious and the secular Swedish samples. A glimpse of the quality of gerotranscendence among Swedes, is provided by some answers of a secular informant, Mrs B. She was asked to explain about her sense of self and her relation to the people around her, and responded:

I have re-evaluated many events in my life. I have forgiven the persons who once were not so nice to me. Now I do not feel any hate or bitterness to anybody. I remember that many years ago – it was almost ten years ago when my husband got seriously ill – I woke up one morning with a strange feeling. It was like I was born again. I felt no pain, no bitterness, only love in my heart, love toward all people. I even can say love toward all creatures. After my husband's death, I have no one but a friend with whom I share my inner life. Yet I have fewer problems than before to accept people with different opinions and attitudes than I have.

When asked her about her view of time, she answered:

I don't think about what is going to happen in the future, nor bother about what has happened in my past. The memories of past arise, yet, without any reflection. They happen again, in front of my eyes. It is not illusion. I see the past events as they have happened some hours ago. Do you believe me? Nothing is distanced anymore. Nothing is unclear. Past, present and future actually exist simultaneously, we are not yet so clear in mind to understand it.

There were few signs that gerotranscendence was more noticeable among the religious sample. For instance, the answer of one religious informant, Mr P, to the question of whether he had changed his view of himself with age, was not so different from the answer of Mrs B to the same question. He said:

Many little things – maybe insignificant in the eyes of other persons, but important for me – have happened in my life which have changed me, without my being aware of it. Still, my life was not so adventurous, but I have learned bit by bit in life who I am or rather who I am not and who I cannot be. I was a problem child. I was unfaithful to my wife. I made many bad decisions in my life. I always used to find a rational reason for excusing my deeds. Yet, growing into old age has taught me to be honest with myself. See myself in the mirror of others' eyes and tolerate other people's opinions when they are not in line with mine. I discovered my ugly soul. It was like being born again. My view of myself changed drastically after my retirement, when one day I realised that I had played many roles in the drama of life, but not my own role. Then no mask was left. I found myself.

His view of time was expressed as follows:

I am not a philosopher. Philosophers usually occupy themselves with such questions. I only know we have it wrong. What we see as the passing of time is only a fictitious feeling. There is more beyond our feeling and understanding. Perhaps, time does not exist. Sometimes I feel I am somewhere in a timeless state. Far from here, far from now. You will say, typical old person! But I promise you, it is not a fiction, it is a real state of being in a timeless state.

The above extracts from interviews were selected only to show the quality of gerotranscendence among interviewees, not to make any

comparisons between these qualities. It is not possible, within the framework of the research study, systematically to compare the Turkish, Iranian and Swedish interview findings. Yet one general difference among the three studies is worth taking into consideration. This is that evidence of gerotranscendence was found among both religious and secular elderly people in the Iranian and Swedish studies, but hardly among the secular in the Turkish study. This finding does not support our initial hypothesis. We had expected to find evidence of gerotranscendence among both religious and secular informants from Iran and Turkey since they were socialised in societies where religion is an integrated part of the culture. In contrast, we assumed that, because Swedish society is secular and religion is not an integrated part of the dominant culture, evidence of gerotranscendence would be found among religious Swedish informants, but not among the secular sample.

Regarding the age at which a transcendence view of life developed – similar to the gerotranscendent view – among some Iranian informants, this was at an early age (Ahmadi 1998, 2000*a*, 2000*b*; Ahmadi Lewin and Thomas 2000). This was not true of the Swedish informants. Unfortunately it is not possible to discuss opportunities, or the lack thereof, to develop towards gerotranscendence early in life in Turkey since Thomas provides no information on this issue in his papers.

These findings suggest three different patterns regarding the relation between religion, as a cultural setting, and gerotranscendence. These patterns obviously cannot be regarded as the only ones. They show us, however, the manifold impact of different cultural settings on gerotranscendent development among individuals living in different cultures, practising different religious beliefs and expressing different metaphysical ideas. The three patterns are as follows:

*The Iranian pattern:* Individuals, irrespective of religiosity, may have good chances to develop towards gerotranscendence.

*The Turkish pattern:* Whereas religious people may have chances to develop towards gerotranscendence, secular people have poor chances.

*The Swedish pattern:* Although the individualistic character of the society delays development towards gerotranscendence, individuals, irrespective of religiosity, may have good chances to develop towards gerotranscendence.

## **Discussion**

Far from answering with certainty questions about the impact of religion as a cultural setting, the findings of the three explorative studies conducted among Iranians, Turks and Swedes show a more complicated picture of the relation between religion and gerotranscendence than was supposed at the beginning. On the basis of this research we can talk of three different patterns. In the following, I will, on the basis of some characteristics of the Iranian, Turkish and Swedish cultures, discuss possible explanations for these patterns.

### *The Iranian pattern*

As mentioned before, evidence of gerotranscendence was found among both the religious and secular samples. One possible interpretation is that, whereas the official religion in most societies in the Muslim world, including Turkey, is Sunni Islam, the official religion in Iran is Shi'a Islam<sup>4</sup>. The difference between these that is usually regarded as most important is a political disagreement on the successor of the Prophet<sup>5</sup>. Essential to our discussion here, however, is a philosophical difference. Sunnism represents the rational aspect of Islamic thought variously termed 'Orthodox Islam', 'Western Islam' or 'Averroism', where Aristotelian philosophy is brought into focus. Shi'ism, in contrast, is characterised as the 'irrational' and supernatural mystical dimension of Islamic thought (Corbin 1991; Schimmel 1986). Simply put, whereas the exoteric aspect of Islam is represented by Sunnism, Shi'ism unveils its hidden esoteric features. Thus, Sunnism can be regarded as an institutionalised religion due to its strong rational character. Shi'ism represents a non-organisational, spiritual religion (Corbin 1971, 1991, 1993; Nasr 1972; Schimmel 1986).

Given that the official religion in Iran is Shi'ism, and remembering the strong tendency towards mystical-type ideas in Iranian pre-Islamic thought (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998; Corbin 1971; Schimmel 1986), it is not a fallacy, as many researchers stress, to maintain that mystical ideas – here Sufism – are an integral part of Iranian ways of thinking (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998; Corbin 1991, 1993; Lewisohn 1992; Nasr 1972; Schimmel 1986). There is an undeniable similarity between some aspects of ancient Iranian philosophy and aspects of Sufism which was crucial, not only for the spread of Sufism among the Iranian people, but also for its development from an ascetic to a contemplative movement. Bearing this in mind, Schimmel holds that:

Sufism has often been considered a typically Iranian development inside Islam. There is no doubt that certain important Iranian elements have survived through the ages beneath its surface as both Henri Corbin and Seyyed H. Nasr have recently emphasized. (Schimmel 1986: 10)

Despite being conditioned by historical and social changes, Sufism as a thought-tendency has persisted through the ages in Iran (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998; Corbin 1991; Lewisohn 1992; Nasr 1972). Sufism has had a long-lasting impact on Iranian thought even into modern times and even among secular groups (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998; Nasr 1972)<sup>6</sup>. There are many Sufi assembly halls in Iran and to be a Sufi is honourable among contemporary Iranians. Even a political leader like Ayatollah Khomeini, who is mostly known for his fanaticism, composed a collection of Sufi poems, which was published after his death.

Sufism is an integrated part of individuals' ways of thinking in Iran, regardless of religiosity and, as a result, Iranians probably express metaphysical ideas about the world in a spiritual, subjective and non-organisational way. Such being the case, it is reasonable to maintain that the Iranian informants in this study were socialised within a culture where spirituality was integrated into popular ways of thinking. As the Iranian pattern indicates, to be socialised in a cultural setting where mystical-type ideas are integrated into people's ways of thinking, probably contributes to the development of a transcendent view of life, similar to gerotranscendence, irrespective of religiosity.

#### *The Turkish pattern*

Contrary to Iran, mystical-type ideas are not internalised in popular ways of thinking in Turkey. They are almost totally confined to Sufis. This possibly explains the Turkish pattern of religious people having chances to develop towards gerotranscendence, whereas secular people have poor chances. Citing Schimmel (1986), Thomas (1997a: 3), points out that the Islamic mystics – Sufis – ‘have had to swim against the current in cultivating the inward spiritual practices’, adding that:

Sufis in modern Turkey have had the additional burden of living under a secular government that had perhaps even less sympathy for their mystical tendencies. Ataturk, the founding father of Turkey, declared Sufi orders illegal in 1925, and they have technically remained so up to the present time.

He stresses that:

Today occasional Sufi ceremonies are allowed in certain of these buildings [Sufi assembly halls], but they must be presented in the form of cultural performance, not as a worship service. (Thomas 1997a: 4)

Regarding this study, we can presume that these attitudes towards Sufism in Turkey have had an impact on the way in which people express metaphysical ideas about the world. It seems that the organisational way of practising religion is dominant in Turkey. The majority of Turkish people are Sunnis and the number of mosques – the official and institutionalised place of worship – is 2,690 in Istanbul, four times the number in Teheran (both cities have approximately 12 million people)<sup>7</sup>. This contrast becomes more interesting when we consider that, whereas in Turkey political power has a secular character, in Iran it rests with the clergy. Sunni Islam, the official religion in Turkey, represents, as mentioned before, the rational aspect of Islamic thought. Thus Sufism provides official religion in Turkey with an organisational spiritual framework: mystical ideas are hardly internalised in people's ways of thinking, especially among those who are not religious. This perhaps explains why the secular informants had not developed a gerotranscendent view of life.

One of our initial hypotheses regarding religiosity and gerotranscendence was that societies in which religion was an integrated part of social and cultural life would provide fertile soil for development towards gerotranscendence. Following the above discussion, we can hardly support this hypothesis. Although both the Iranian and Turkish informants have been socialised in a Muslim society, two divergent patterns were found among the Iranian and Turkish informants. One explanation is that the internalisation of mystical-type ideas did alter the life conditions of the Iranian interviewees – regardless of religiosity – such that they developed many of the dimensions of gerotranscendence. The Turkish informants, in contrast, had not been socialised in a spiritual-oriented culture. Thus, in the case of Turkey, the dominant cultural setting did not contribute to the internalisation of mystical-type ideas among secular informants.

#### *The Swedish pattern*

Swedish society is well known as a secular and rationally organised society, and the Swedish people are considered to be non-religious. This may be because, unlike many other Western countries, church attendance is not a common way of practising religion in Sweden (Jeffner 1988: 37; Lewin *et al.* 1998: Appendix 1: 8).

Research conducted among 2,003 Swedes in 1993 however, shows that 33 per cent of Swedes belong to a group that can be categorised as 'privately spiritual' (Kallenberg *et al.* 1996: 54). Although in comparison with other European countries, Sweden ranked low in its

proportions of 'Church Christians' and 'private Christians', it had some of the highest figures for those categorised as 'Church spiritual' and 'privately spiritual' (Kallenberg *et al.* 1996: 53). Jeffner (1988: 42) investigated the conception of life among 615 Swedes, and found that few expressed clear-cut metaphysical ideas about the world, such as the world being a materialistic probabilistic construct or – in contrast – the world being created and endowed with spirituality. This does not mean that contemplation of such ideas is impossible, but that in Sweden only a minority express their views using such conventional formulae. As Jeffner (1988: 42) stresses, the most common attitude is to keep a door open towards transcendent aspects of life, without making a firm commitment. This is one of the many meanings people give to the expression 'Christian in my own way'. Since, it would appear that Swedes are more likely to describe their religious lives in spiritual terms, it is appropriate to talk of the existence of a kind of *spirituality* rather than *religiosity* among Swedes<sup>8</sup>.

Concerning this point then, we must modify our hypothesis that Swedish ways of thinking lack mystical dimensions. Although it is hard to deny the weak influence of religion upon Swedish social life, it seems that there is a tendency towards spirituality in their cultural life (Uddenberg 1995). Seen in this light, we may hypothesise that both the religious and secular Swedish informants have found the tendency towards a kind of spirituality to be fertile soil for developing the dimensions of gerotranscendence. This is in line with the above explanation for the Iranian and Turkish patterns, namely, that to be socialised into a religious culture may not play a decisive role in an individual's development towards gerotranscendence. What does appear to play a role are mystical-type ideas that are internalised in a way of thinking, and the potential for individuals to express metaphysical ideas about the world in a spiritual, non-organisational way.

That there are signs of gerotranscendence among both the Swedish samples does not indicate however that such development is without difficulties in a modern/post-modern individualistic society like Swedish. Let us examine this point.

At the beginning of this research project, we supposed that developing a transcendent view of life would be more challenging in cultural contexts where everyday life was characterised by materialism, individualism and secularism than it would be in non-individualistic and non-secular cultures. As previously mentioned and discussed in other articles (Ahmadi 1998, 2000*a*, 2000*b*; Ahmadi Lewin and Thomas 2000), some Iranian interviewees showed signs of a view of life



that was similar to the gerotranscendent view even before entering into old age. Such an early gerotranscendent development was not found among Swedish informants. Thus, it would seem that this early Iranian development may be due, not only to the integration of mystical-type ideas in Iranian ways of thinking, but also to the fact that they were socialised and had lived in a non-secular and non-individualistic society (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998).

Tornstam (1997*b*: 31), when discussing the correlation between some dimensions of gerotranscendence and age, writes:

Even if some aspects or dimensions of gerotranscendence are referred to as general in the sense that they show statistically significant correlation with age, some circumstances do modify these correlations. Gender, crises, and life circumstances have been found to be such modifiers.

In the same vein, my hypothesis is that although gerotranscendent development is a general phenomenon, life circumstances – such as living in a society like Sweden, where a materialistic and individualistic way of life is one of the cornerstones of the social structure – may cause a ‘delay’ in developing a view similar to the gerotranscendent one. I would like to suggest that in such societies, long life experience is required. Seen in this light, we can perhaps assume that growing into old age is a prerequisite for developing a transcendent view in modern individualistic societies like Sweden.

## **Conclusion**

I conclude by presenting two hypotheses on the relation between religiosity and gerotranscendence based on an interpretation of the present findings. In this regard, my focus is on the importance of religion in the ways of thinking of the three peoples in question, namely, Iranian, Turkish and Swedish people. The hypotheses presented here are certainly not the only possible ones to be considered. They can, however, be used as points of departures in future studies – perhaps quantitative ones – aimed at answering in a less speculative way, the questions addressed in this article about the relationship between cultural setting and gerotranscendence.

*Hypothesis one:* There is fertile soil for development towards gerotranscendence among individuals, irrespective of religiosity, in a cultural setting – like the Iranian or the Swedish one – where mystical-type ideas are integrated into people’s ways of thinking. Also, in such

cultural contexts, an individualistic society – such as Sweden – may hinder gerotranscendent development. Accordingly, long life experience is perhaps necessary for such a development, and growing into old age can be cautiously regarded as a prerequisite for reaching a state of gerotranscendence.

*Hypothesis two:* In a cultural setting where mystical-type ideas are not integrated into people's ways of thinking – like the Turkish one – secular people may be expected to have a limited ability to develop towards gerotranscendence.

I would like to conclude by stating that the present findings, at least partially, support the hypothesis that gerotranscendent development is not only a product of ageing as such, but also is dependent on culture and 'ways of thinking' (Tornstam 1996: 41–42). Hence, these findings highlight the importance of studying the impact of different cultural settings. The three studies presented here were explorative and so these hypotheses must be tested in other studies using quantitative methods. It is obvious that there are factors other than the mystical character of culture or the individualistic character of the society, which can impact on an individual's development towards gerotranscendence.

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### NOTES

- 1 Professor Thomas and I compared and empirically deconstructed the life stories and the stories of self-development that we obtained from our interviewees. He wrote two papers regarding the Turkish study: Thomas (1997a, 1997b). All information on the Turkish study is based on Thomas (1997b).

- 2 Sufism, as the generally accepted name for Islamic mysticism, can be considered a special way of thinking and living. It might also be regarded as an intuitive way of comprehending the world, an epistemological method for interpreting it and a technique for spiritually mastering it based on the Islamic world-view. To obtain knowledge about the world by means of myths, to employ rational modes for interpreting the phenomenal world and to use intuition for understanding cosmos as a whole are some of the methods which Sufis use for understanding the whole of existence (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998; Arasteh 1990; Chittick 1989; Corbin 1991; Lewisohn 1992; Schimmel 1986).
- 3 Thomas (1997*b*) refers to one person in the secular Turkish sample being transcendent. However, the person in question, although he did not identify himself as religious, believed in God and had a religious-type view of life. He regarded a 'religious' person to be a 'fundamentalist'. This was confusing so, in a meeting I had with Thomas following his presentation, we decided that we should not regard this informant as non-religious.
- 4 In Iran, Shi'a Muslims constitute 91 per cent of the population, while Sunni Muslims constitute seven per cent. Christians, Jews, Baha'is, etc. constitute two per cent of the Iranian population.
- 5 Sunnis, as the largest group of Muslims, often known as 'the orthodox', recognise the succession of caliphs as the legitimate successors of Mohammad. According to the Sunni view, the Prophet has left the task of choosing a leader to the community of believers. On the other hand, the Shi'a, which has in many respects incorporated the ancient Iranian view of rulership (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 1998; Busse 1973; Crone and Cook 1977), claims that the Prophet had clearly designated Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, as his legitimate successor.
- 6 Sufism is still present in the everyday life of Iranian people, in poems, songs and expressions. School-books in literature, used in both elementary and high schools, are one of the main sources through which the impact of Sufism on Iranian thought is carried over from one generation to the next. Most of the subjects in these books, both before and after the Islamic revolution, deal implicitly or explicitly with mystical-type ideas. Because students read and memorise the mystical poems of Sufis, Sufi ideas are able to survive across the ages.
- 7 Information was obtained from the embassies of Iran and Turkey in Stockholm.
- 8 Although the distinction between spiritual and religious is vague, spirituality has been likened to intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic, religiosity, assuming a sort of continuum. Here religion is defined as 'a system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship' (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 1975). Spirituality is regarded as a vital life principle that integrates other aspects of the person and is an essential ingredient in inter-personal relationships and bonding, 'that vast realm of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes with higher entities, with God, with love, with compassion, with purpose' (Tart 1983: 4).

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