

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# AN ELDERLY'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF SPIRITUALITY TOWARDS DEATH ACCEPTANCE

Minnie Besin Mamauag\*

College of Nursing, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology, Philippines

**\*Corresponding author:**

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Minnie Besin Mamauag**  
College of Nursing, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology, Philippines  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor SET Building, Andres Bonifacio Avenue, Iligan City  
E-mail: [minnie.mamauag@g.msuiit.edu.ph](mailto:minnie.mamauag@g.msuiit.edu.ph)

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study explored the religious or spiritual beliefs and behaviors of the elderly that could somehow translate to their level of death acceptance or lack thereof.

**Methods:** A total of four (4) elderly participants, ages 60 and above whom meet the criteria set for this study was interviewed to assess their spiritual upbringing and experiences that resulted to their death acceptance. The study involves qualitative approach using thematic analysis. The narrative testimony of the old adult participants in this study which includes cases of older adult that believes in God, older adult having shifted from one religious organization to another, and older adults' instilled spirituality comes from religious imprint from family members during childhood describes the three important patterns in the religious or spiritual standing of the participants.

**Results:** The themes signified that (1) older adults are inherently religious and this nature is a subsequent factor in (2) their faith in God basing on their life experiences and life's meaning. Furthermore, this (3) belief or faith in God offers them a sense of security and hope in the afterlife.

**Conclusion:** These themes explain the pattern in the creation of a religious/ spiritual standing that leads to death acceptance among participants as evident in their interview results.

### KEYWORDS

elderly; Filipino; qualitative; spirituality; thematic analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is home to predominantly Christian religions, over 86% of the citizens in the Philippines are Roman Catholics while 9% practice different Protestant denominations ([Miller, 2019](#)). Religion here is more than a belief system of faith. Religion is often related to multifaceted life experiences, culture and tradition that define one community and race. This can define a country in its socioeconomic and political stance.

Religion and spirituality maybe similar but also have different meanings and descriptions. Religion is often regarded as more institutionally based, more structured, and more traditional and may be associated with organized, well-established beliefs, whereas spirituality as defined broadly pertains not confined to any group or denomination. Spirituality can also mean an emotional state, beliefs, practices, and conducts related to one's spirit or search for divinity or ultimate truth. Basic characteristics of religion include responsibility and obligation, with spirituality, has only one's perception and beliefs to deal with ([Mercado,](#)

[1977](#)). Some individuals may consider themselves spiritual and believes in the divine but does not belong to any religious group. I have always been fascinated by the Filipino's religiosity and spirituality, this phenomenon of faith transcending life experiences resulting to their ability to be resilient even in time of death and grief's. Of all age group, the elderly's religiosity is found to be greater since this is considered to be their major source of social support.

Although a lot of studies may indicate positive relation to health and wellness outcomes but the need to look into the spiritual journey through narrative testimonies from the older adults would somehow explain the reason as to how this religious development arises, it's growth, it's challenges and its impact to man as a whole being ([Puchalski, 2001](#)). Furthermore, the pursuit of death acceptance through religiosity or spirituality may shed some light on the patterns of this phenomenon. Death acceptance

is defined as when the individual has come to terms with one's mortality and end. This study would show and describe how one's spirituality translated into older adult's proactive stand in their own death acceptance and preparation ([Mamaug, 2019](#)). This study wanted to explore the assumption that one's spirituality such as faith in God and belief in the afterlife may have an impact the elderly's Death Acceptance.

## **METHODS**

### **Study design**

The study design was qualitative in nature using case study method. Qualitative methods are appropriate due to the complexity of death beliefs and the spirituality phenomenon.

### **Participants**

The participants comprised at three (3) Filipino older adults, selected from the town of Iligan City. Purposive sampling technique was used to selected participants who were asked about their insights about their spirituality and its impact to their death perception. Older adult that believes in God; older adult having shifted from one religious organization to another; and older adults' instilled spirituality comes from religious imprint from family members during childhood. Participants were eligible to participate if they are 60 years old and above, who is not cognitively challenged, oriented to the research query, assured of strict ethical consideration, and was willing to be interviewed.

### **Data gathering**

Using a modified Taylor's questionnaire on spirituality attitudes, the spirituality attitudes was assessed using a written questionnaire containing six open-ended questions as guide for the participant interviews ([Taylor, 2010](#)). A scheduled series of one-on-one interview with the three older adults with the duration of thirty (30) to an hour.

Older adults were made aware that they can stop anytime and should they feel uncomfortable, they can decline or stop the interview. Furthermore, they were also assured that a guidance counsellor was available should they feel any psychological and emotional stress before and after the interview. At the end each in-depth interview with elderly participants, debriefing was done through a registered guidance counselor from Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology.

### **Data analysis**

For this study, qualitative approach was utilized to explore via thematic analysis older people's spirituality using the case study method. Thematic analysis is a process to identify, analyze, and describing patterns (themes) in a given data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. Qualitative approaches are extremely varied, multifaceted and subtle in meanings on a given phenomenon ([Holloway & Todres, 2003](#)), and thematic analysis is an introductory method for qualitative analysis.

For this study investigation, the relationship between the importance spirituality leading to death acceptance was

investigated through the opportunity of the participants answer openly the interview questions. [Rubin and Rubin \(1995\)](#) stated that the scrutiny in thematic analysis is exciting due to the discovery of themes and concepts found within the data arising from the interviews conducted. A description of emerging themes is a reflexive explanation of the analysis process reported to the readers ([Taylor & Ussher, 2001](#)).

Interview transcripts were analyzed to validate the collected data. Resulting emerging categories, properties, meanings, and theoretical insights were then discovered. As the study progressed, the description was expanded with more specific information and participants with that particular issue that were intentionally sought.

### **Rigor and trustworthiness**

This qualitative study utilized four important considerations for rigor and trustworthiness namely: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation was observed by asking the same research questions to different older adults and collected different techniques to answer the same query. The older adults were then asked to review their answers that were transcribed if it was what they really implied to the questions asked. This is the credibility aspect of the research. By doing this, the transferability of study findings can be generalized and assumed that the same responses would be likely be given. Data validity or dependability is measured through the use of a data assessment and outcomes. A data audit can be conducted if the data was sufficient in form. And when the data categories were comprehensively described and was consistent in its findings, then this can confirm and provide foundation for future replicability of this study.

### **Ethical consideration**

Permission was secured from the Federation of Senior Citizen Association in the Philippines (FSCAP)- Iligan City Chapter to conduct an interview for the data gathering procedure. After the orientation among 35 older adults', permission was only secured from three (3) able, oriented and volunteer older adults and were purposely selected as the case study participants in 2017. Informed consent was given prior to the study before they agreed to participate; then I contacted the participants and arrange a time and place for an interview.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Case profile of the participants**

The following cases had shown the profile of the participants.

#### **Case 1. Older adult that believes in God**

Mrs. A is a 73-year-old, female, married woman who is a practicing Protestant (United Church of Christ in the Philippines) since birth. She is a retired school teacher for 13 years now. She is still very active, doing household chores and busy taking care of her grandchildren. Mrs. A has four (4) children, two of whom are staying with them in their family compound. She enjoys going to senior citizen meetings and going regularly to church.

She was born and baptized in the family of Protestants. She explained that it is a bible-based denomination wherein there is strong belief in God. Just like any Christian religion, they go to Church every Sunday and performed church obligation like ceremonies of baptismal, marriage, death, and tithing. She said that going to church every Sunday and other religious occasion is a must in their family. Due to her faith she appreciated her life experiences, good or bad, to be a precursor in her devout faith in God. Having shared fellowship with family and others gives life more meaningful for her. Her favorite verse in the Bible says it all about her life, it is found in 2 Timothy 4:7 *"have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"*. She derives strength and inspiration from her family especially her brother and sister. During the interview, when asked about her physical condition, she said she is healthy aside from cough and fever now and then. She tries to keep a healthy lifestyle with what she eats and doing home exercises. Mrs. A attributed her spiritual influences to her family and believes that belief in God will heal her diseases and help her in her struggles. In addition, she does not fear death since she entrusts her life to God already.

### **Case 2. Older adult having shifted from one religious organization to another**

Mrs. B is a 61-year-old, widow with five married children. She currently lives with her youngest daughter with her family. She has twelve grandchildren and enjoys doting on them whenever she sees them. She is hypertensive but is on medication courtesy from the support of her children. She informed me that she is enjoying a little pension but some of her children helped her financially when they can.

With regards to her religious/spiritual upbringing, she said that she grew-up in the Catholic religious' tradition. During those times, she has no choice because her family are all Catholics and it serves her well. She does not consider herself overly religious like some Catholics but her spirituality is more on the belief that God (Jesus Christ) is her all. Mrs. A added that what life means to her is God and God is her life. She explained that if not for God she is nothing. Furthermore, she reiterated that her life, her faith in Christ resulted from learning through life experiences and the more she learns about God's words, the more she understood and appreciated what HE did to her and family.

Right now, she is with another religious denomination called Christ life Fellowship and their Pastor is a source of strength for her. She shared that in times she needed advice and support, her Pastor is the one who gives spiritual advises. Although she is hypertensive but she does not worry because she believes that God is there to heal and take care of her. Mrs. A confidently said that with God, she can rely on HIS love and salvation and that is not worried when the time comes that HE will take her to heaven.

### **Case 3. Older adults instilled spirituality comes from religious imprint from family members during childhood**

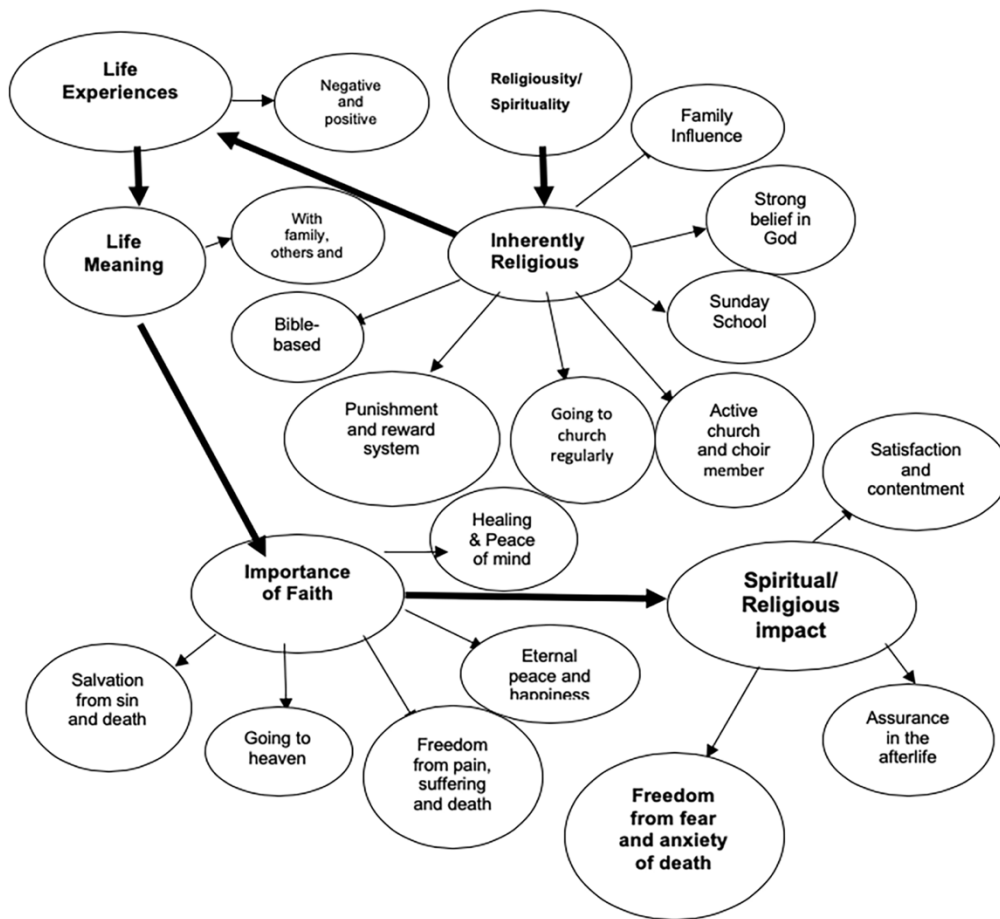
Mrs. C is a 76-years-old, female, widow who was a former school teacher. She was brought up religiously as a Protestant by her family but she attributed her strong religious faith from her grandparents. She reminisced that when she was just five years old, she remembers her grandparents always encouraging them to go to Church every Sunday. As children, they were always required to attend Sunday school and go to church even on mid-week services. This was already a routine since she grew-up with her grandparents. Although she was baptized as a Roman Catholic since her parents were Catholics, she preferred to worship with Protestant church till now, just like her grandparents instill in her when she was a child.

Mrs. A considered herself spiritual or religious since she never works or do anything on Sundays but always go to church before doing anything. She is an active member in the church as choir member up till her sickness. She confesses to me that she felt very guilty at times if she cannot go to church and sing in the choir. As a Christian, she believed that we should be devoted and serve God in all times, so that we will be blessed. Blessing according to her is important to have a peaceful mind and peaceful living. Currently, she enjoys being in senior citizen organization as well as church because she feels happy and content when doing so. Learning is a must for her, even when one is old, one should learn many things in life. There are moral lessons to be learned, the advantages and disadvantages which is good for one's self and family.

In 2006, she was diagnosed to have multiple cysts in her liver. Since there was no liver operation done for her, she was advised to maintain vitamins for her liver. Just this 2016, her left knee weakens and just last August 2016, she started using the wheelchair. In all those trials, she said that she always prays to God and asking HIM to extend her life without too much pain and suffering. And if her time comes, she said that she is ready to be with GOD.

Three older adults' narrative interviews were completed based on their spiritual/religious upbringing. Narratives were derived from older adult that believes in God, older adult having shifted from one religious organization to another, and older adults' instilled spirituality comes from religious imprint from family members during childhood (**Figure 1**). All participants were able to tell how their spiritual/religious upbringing, their perception about their life meaning and influences, and their perception about faith and death.

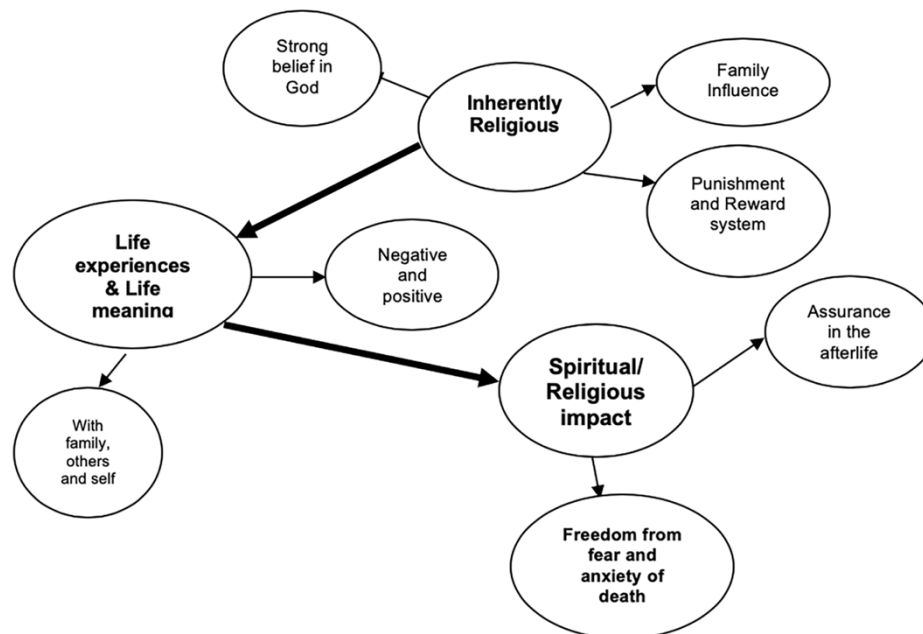
After the interviews were done, I transcribed the interview and used the thematic analysis as proposed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Wherein the thematic analysis involves the process of identification, analysis, and describing patterns found in the data.



**Figure 1** Developed thematic map showing five initial main themes

Throughout the coding and categorizing of initial themes, this was further extracted and resulted to the emergence of the final

thematic map, I finally developed the following main themes as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** Final thematic map, showing final three main themes

The following were the final titles and descriptions of the three (3) themes, as well as the perceptions, literal quotes, which were validated by participants during data analysis.

### Theme 1. Older adults are inherently religious

As one ages, the more individuals contemplate of how life has evolved and what it meant for us. The finding of meaning is oftentimes synonymous of spiritual quest. The tradition of various religions in different countries has shown a positive relationship to the psychological well-being and created a diverse effect on physical and psychological ailments (Rippentrop et al., 2005). The older adults in this study indicated that being religious and spiritual was handed down from generation to generation making it natural and intrinsic in the Philippine society.

The following statements from participants showed their testimony on being taught about religious practices from a very young age.

*"I remember when I was young my grandparents always tell us to go to church every Sunday. We were not allowed to go out if we cannot go to church first. Sunday is the Lord's Day according to the bible's teaching. That is why until now that I am old, I always go to church especially every Sunday because that's HIS day."*

### Theme 2. Older adults derived their faith in god through their life experiences and its meaning

Life experiences usually define individual's spiritual standing or status. Although Filipino's are inherently religious in nature but it is their life experiences that makes them feel closer established through many challenges encountered that they attributed strength and resiliency from God (Batara, 2015). Due to this, life experiences and its triumphs and failure are understood as lessons and direction from God. Thus, the establishment of life meaning as one age creates wisdom about the individual's journey through life and eventual end in death.

This is evident in the narrative statements of the participant regarding faith in God through life experiences and its meaning.

*"I know that in all I have been through in my life, God has always been with me, in sorrow and happiness. HE is the one who guided me in times of troubles. I pray to HIM and go to church because HE is my refuge. If God left me in times of need, then I will not be here now."*

### Theme 3. Older adults believe that their faith in god offers them a sense of security and hope in the afterlife

Being spiritual or religious oftentimes created a peace of mind in times of confusion, fear and anxiety especially in contemplating about life and death amongst older adults (Tarakeshwar et al., 2006). This intangible psychological positive emotion is advertently a form of assurance that death is not the end and that one should not fear it especially if he is religious or has lived a good life.

The following excerpts from participant described how this belief in God created a sense of security and hope in the afterlife.

*"If you are living in God's word and doing the good deeds, you should never sad and fear death. God has promise us HIS paradise in heaven for those serving HIM."*

## CONCLUSION

The narrative testimony of the old adult participants in this study which includes cases of older adult that believes in God, older adult having shifted from one religious organization to another, and older adults' instilled spirituality comes from religious imprint from family members during childhood describes the three important patterns in the religious or spiritual standing of the participants. The themes signified that (1) older adults are inherently religious and this nature is a subsequent factor in (2) their faith in God basing on their life experiences and life's meaning. Furthermore, this (3) belief or faith in God offers them a sense of security and hope in the afterlife. These themes explain the pattern in the creation of a religious/ spiritual standing that leads to death acceptance among participants as evident in their interview results.

The study result showed rich data regarding religiosity among Filipino older adult, however, the need for extensive qualitative research in a large number of participants through life review may further validate the results in this study. It is also recommended that similar studies may be done with other countries and their outlook regarding religion and spirituality beliefs and behaviors towards death to form a comparison and similarity among factors revealed. In addition, a study on the differences between spirituality beliefs and religious practices in order to describe thoroughly the stance of an individual towards his life meaning and assumed views on death

### Declaration of Conflicting Interest

This author declares that the study has no conflict of interest. All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards (institutional and national). Informed consent was obtained from the elderly participants for being included in the study.

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### ORCID

Minnie Besin Mamaug <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2190-3335>

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