

Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader

Theological Contributions to Disability Discourse

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Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader,¹ edited by Brian Brock and John Swinton, is an indispensable contribution not only to the field of disability studies but also to any contemporary attempt at engaging in serious anthropological, theological, and ethical discourse.

This article provides a summary sketch of the book tracing some of the issues it addresses.

Introduction

Contemporary anthropologies frequently locate disability, and persons with disabilities, on the margins of both anthropological discourse and society, deeming them to be 'special cases' and thus problematic. Brian Brock begins this Reader with the following claim: 'Any approach to the topic of disability inexorably leads to the "problem of the human"'.² *Disability in the Christian Tradition* is fundamentally about what it means to be human.

The Reader surveys the reflections of classical and modern theologians who are often perceived as representing a minority within the Christian tradition. It presents key primary sources that address questions related to disability (11) with a view to enriching contemporary thinking about the topic. The book approaches the works of commonly known theological figures within the tradition—including early Church Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Julian of Norwich, Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, Barth—as well as modern day voices such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Nancy Eiesland, Sarah Coakley, Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas. In doing so it provides a uniquely valuable platform for exploring alternative ways of conceiving what it means to be human and what constitutes health, or more precisely, 'normality'.

The Reader exposes many of the problematic anthropological assumptions and theological pre-judgments within the Christian tradition that, in the light of modern accounts of disability, can today be seen as disabling. Underlying these aims are two assumptions: first, that modern Christianity lacks familiarity with its own contribution to the stigmatizing, marginalizing or under-valuing of vulnerable persons who were adjudged 'disabled' in past ages (4); second, that it lacks an awareness of how to remain responsive to the mentally and physically marginalized within our societies (4–5) and of the place and role of the vulnerable in the shaping and fulfillment of God's economy of redemption.

Patristic and medieval voices

Almut Caspary surveys early Christian accounts of the intrinsic goodness of human life and God's love for humanity and reminds us of Christian condemnation of the exposure of healthy and defective newborns. She shows how the countercultural practices of Christian *philanthropia* undergirded and shaped a manner of liturgical life in which poor and disfigured bodies were valued within the body of Christ, the church.

Brian Brock draws attention to the paradigmatic ways in which Augustine's theological assumptions about humanity, health, and sickness have influenced conceptions of disability in the West. He outlines how 'humanity', for Augustine, was read from the perspective of Christ, 'the perfect human' (70). According to Brock, this Christological norming of the human leads Augustine both to affirm 'that the perfect human has appeared in Christ', but also 'to deny the ascription of physical, intellectual, or volitional perfections to any human being' (69). Augustine establishes an account of Christ as the 'promise of human wholeness' (70). This theological conviction stands in the foreground of Augustine's anthropology of 'humans as beings with rational souls, in each and every case' (73), and of his revaluation of the role that impairment plays within the *missio dei*.

Miguel J. Romero offers a fascinating engagement with Aquinas on human creaturely existence (*corpus infirmitas*) and 'corporeal operation'. Romero examines the ways in which, according to Aquinas, all human creatures—including 'newborns, the comatose, and profoundly demented persons'—possess 'an essential and incorruptible aptitude for knowledge and love of God' (103-4). Moreover, he highlights how the *imago dei*, for Aquinas, is an integral constituent both of what makes the rationality of the rational soul possible and of its 'aptitude for knowledge and love of God'. For Aquinas both are essential and incorruptible,

so that he 'vehemently rejects all attempts to reduce human nature to a corporeal operation' (105). Romero then outlines the role a 'theology of weakness' plays in the shaping of Aquinas's 'grammar of grace'. He shows how, within Aquinas's theological anthropology, profound cognitive impairment cannot 'destroy the capacity of the human creature to be moved by grace toward her ultimate good... that is, our participation in the life and love of Triune God' (113). Romero concludes with a reflection on the place and role of persons with disabilities within the communal life of the church, the body of Christ.

'To see with Julian of Norwich is to know something about sin itself: that which separates us does not keep us safe', writes Amy Laura Hall. Julian conveys an embodied vision that witnesses to the ways in which Christ's blood not only 'feeds, nourishes, joins, and transforms us' (154) but also displaces the prevailing fear of having contact with the other. Julian challenges two then prevailing cultural assumptions: first, that lay persons could not receive the blood of Christ during Eucharistic celebration; second, that a male dominated Christendom 'stood against chaos by punishing the transgression of boundaries, both individual and corporate' (157). Drawing on her own account of relational accessibility with Christ in suffering, Hall suggests that Julian's perception of the blood of Christ and, in particular, the atonement, 'disallows separation' from the other (158). Julian establishes a new vision that Christ's suffering is our safety, the very foundation for pursuing universal kinship with others.

Reformation voices

In chapters five and six Stephan Heuser and Deborah Creamer survey how Luther and Calvin establish a theological account of the ways in which 'others' in their particularity are conduits of God's work within the world and church. Heuser draws attention to Luther's understanding of how attending to the other is a visible expression of one's responsivity to the divine call to faithful exploration of God's will. He also shows how Luther's theology of the Word calls into question the widespread modern propensity to conceive of disability as limited to, and by, a discourse (184-9)³ and suggests that Luther's theology of the Word provides constructive ways of responding to challenges of disability. Creamer outlines Calvin's engagement with issues of disability in his sermons, biblical commentaries, works on ecclesiastical structure and organization, and the *Institutes*. She demonstrates recurring tensions in Calvin. On the one hand, we see Calvin's advocacy of the value of all human bodies, his interest in those who lie at the margins of Church and society, and his insistence on the universal impairment of all human beings, that is, their common inability to see God. On

the other, we witness his exclusion of persons who lack 'normate'⁴ intellectual capacities (220-1). For those who have eyes to see, these tensions in Calvin not only help us admit certain theological prejudices within the tradition of Christian faith (4) but also lead us to the discovery of areas in which we lack understanding or impartiality in conceiving of disability.

Modernity, disability and Christianity

Martin Wendte approaches the theme through a constructive engagement with Hegel's philosophy. He shows how Hegel's emphasis on a person being a 'spirit' displaces oppressive anthropological assumptions concerning persons with *physical* disabilities. Wendte shows how Hegel argues that disabled persons, through 'process', 'resistance', and 'negation', 'develop their true nature, spirit, to a greater degree than non-disabled people' (261), and on that basis suggests that persons without disabilities 'can learn from the physically disabled what true relational autonomy is' (261). Wendte reconceives Hegel's dialectical process of development to show how the communal nature of persons with *mental* disabilities allows them to 'partake in the realm of the objective spirit, as all humans do' (262). Using contemporary anthropological and theological sensibilities, Wendte thus offers a corrective to the unsettling Hegelian assumption that these persons are inferior due to their inability to participate in higher stages of spirit's development (251).

Christopher Brittain's engagement with Kierkegaard's philosophy of existence demonstrates how 'physical and mental disabilities' are, for Kierkegaard, 'largely beside the point'. This is especially so in the light of the weight of the problem of sin, or more precisely, what Kierkegaard calls 'sickness unto death' or 'sickness of the spirit', which renders all human beings 'effectively "disabled"' (289). Brittain draws attention to Kierkegaard's lack of interest in developing a theological anthropology that focuses on establishing 'a standardized form of human existence', and to his insistence that 'God is the source of both human community and the individual self' (290-5). This allows Kierkegaard to assert that God 'interrupts the banal social customs that shape inauthentic conformism, as well as self-absorbed conceit' (295). On this basis Kierkegaard establishes a theology of love that is relevant for conceiving of the rightful place, role, and value of the disabled in contemporary society.

Marjolein de Mooij's discussion of Willem van den Berg traces how van den Berg was able to view the world with realist eyes (333) even amidst the then prevailing nineteenth-century Romantic cultural assumptions. In doing so, de Mooij

highlights how van den Berg offers a new and creative reading of the theological works of Calvin (329-30). From that reading, van den Berg develops a distinctively Christian political vision that was to be carried out through Christian *philanthropia* toward everyone within society, and a theology and practice of social inclusion that incorporates the practice of care and compassion for persons with disability.

Christology and disability

In chapter ten Bernd Wannewetsch highlights Bonhoeffer's distinctive theology of humanity and of human weakness. He shows how, for Bonhoeffer, weakness is an integral constituent of what it means to be human. At the centre of Bonhoeffer's understanding, Wannewetsch suggests, is 'an embodied recognition that all human life is essentially feeble, defenseless, and dependent', so that it 'revealed neighborly love as the matrix of all human sociality' (355). Wannewetsch explains how Bonhoeffer's experience of living with persons with disabilities at Bethel — 'a village that existed for the sole purpose of caring for the weak and fragile' (354) — influenced the development of this 'view from below'. From such a view 'fragility' is fundamental to all of human life and thus shared by everyone (355). This anthropology would later be given concrete shape in his major work, *Ethics*, where it leads to this conclusion: 'The question whether life, in the case of persons severely retarded from birth, is really *human* life at all is so naïve that it hardly needs to be answered' (361). It was from such a platform that Bonhoeffer was to call into question the Nazi regime's perverse ideology of the 'superhuman'. Underlying Bonhoeffer's vision, suggests Wannewetsch, is his radically Christocentric reading of all of creaturely existence in which Christ is interpreted as alone the revealer of true humanity (364–7).

Karl Barth's theocentric account of humanity is comparable to Bonhoeffer's Christocentric reading of humanity from the perspective of Christ. Donald Wood describes how Barth's refusal to speak of human 'normality' emerges from his exegetical work. Scripture articulates true human identity in the light of Christ 'by directing all of its energies to identifying one man among all others: Jesus Christ' (395). 'The nature of the man Jesus alone is the key to the problem of human nature. This man is man', writes Barth (395). In the light of Barth's reading of the gospel, Wood sketches a theological ethic in which *all* human beings are 'given' life and directed to fellowship with God and with others. Wood shows how, from this perspective, the reception of one's life as gift demands humility and the recognition of life's creaturely limits (397-400). Barth teaches us that human life ought to be embraced *precisely in its limitations* (400).

Women and disability

Beginning with the provocative claim that 'women are disabled', Jana Bennett considers the ways in which 'women's problems have been curiously similar to those experienced by people with disabilities' (427). She seeks to offer for women and persons with disabilities a 'space' for a better understanding of who we are as God's creatures (428). Bennett draws on the works of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Nancy Eiesland, and Sarah Coakley, narrating the significance of feminist theology for thinking about disability (428). 'The concern for bodies', for Bennett, is the 'common issue that unites these diverse feminists together', providing an opportunity to think theologically about disabled bodies and, in particular, about how all human beings are 'disabled in some way, needing to be redeemed by Christ whose own body is broken' (440). All three theologians agree that a world predominated by a 'normate' perspective on bodies is antithetical to God's perception of creaturely life. They also show that God's in-breaking within the world is a work of liberation from patriarchal and 'normate' sensibilities and structures that alienate bodies from other bodies and even estrange us from our own bodies.

The disabled as our teachers

In chapter thirteen Hans Reinders reflects theologically on the writings of Jean Vanier. Reinders traces Vanier's transition from the 'first call' into the church's *mission* (469–70) to the 'second call': his acceptance of the need to displace commonly held distinctions between 'helper' and 'helped'. This second call emerged from his relationship with Eric, one of the most vulnerable people in the L'Arche community. Reinders reads Vanier's work from the perspective of a theological realism which makes Vanier's voice unique in disability discourse. He demonstrates how, for Vanier, persons with disabilities — 'the poor' — 'have taken the lead in showing [others] how to find God' (467), thereby constituting the essence of 'Christian witness' (468). Like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, the very *being* of persons with disabilities reveals the work of God. For this reason, Reinders suggests, these persons become our 'teachers', making known the truth and reality of human life (474).

In the concluding chapter, John Swinton shows how Hauerwas's work underlines Vanier's claim that persons with disabilities constitute the essence of 'Christian witness' (468). Hauerwas, suggests Swinton, 'is convinced that understanding the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities is crucial for enabling the faithful interpretation and practice of Christian theology and for developing a

proper understanding of what it means to be church' (512). The writings of Hauerwas on intellectual disability have less to do with disability *per se* and more to do with *challenging the disabling presuppositions* that underlie, inform, and give definite shape to a 'normate' perspective according to which persons with disabilities are problematic. The important issue is not what can we do about the problem of the disabled in society but rather why society perceives disability as a problem or an ethical dilemma in the first place (514). Swinton ends by highlighting how Hauerwas's critical reflections on disability call into question the illusory notion that autonomy, not dependency, is one of the ontological characteristics of creaturely life (518). His work thereby calls for a radical reorientation of how we perceive people with profound intellectual disabilities.

¹ Brian Brock and John Swinton, eds. *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Eerdmans, 2012).

² Brock and Swinton, eds., *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 1. Subsequent page references in the text are to this book.

³ Heuser writes: 'Luther provides a theological semantics which stands against the turning of disability into a discourse in which a group called "the disabled" is constituted, classified, and separated from the "normal". Luther's theology is suggestive precisely because it takes for granted that disability is entrusted to humankind just as much as ability' (189).

⁴ For more information on the 'normate' within disability studies see Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Eerdmans, 2011), 10–11. See also Kerry H. Wynn, 'The Normate Hermeneutical and Interpretations of Disability within Yahwistic Narratives', in *The Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, edited by Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 91–101 and Rosemary Garland Thompson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997). Stanley Hauerwas locates what many consider 'normate' in a more critical register, namely, the 'tyranny of normality', in 'Community and Diversity: The Tyranny of Normality', in *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*, edited by John Swinton (Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004), 37–43.

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