

Thinking with Disability: A Review Essay

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Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities. By Deborah Beth Creamer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. viii + 156 pp. \$87.00 (hb).

Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader. Edited by Brian Brock. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. 576 pp. \$46.00 (pb).

The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability. By Nancy L. Eiesland. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. 139 pp. \$21.99 (pb).

God beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities. By Jill Harshaw. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016. 208 pp. \$85.00 (pb).

Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality. By Thomas Reynolds. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008. 256 pp. \$25.00 (pb).

“Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing: Contemporary Insights from Medieval Sources.” By Erinn Staley. *Modern Theology* 28 (2012): 385–401.

Introduction

Although disability theology is now a well-known area of research, it remains “compartmentalised” within the broader field of theology.¹ As Deborah Creamer points out, a primary reason for this

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¹ Deborah Beth Creamer, “Embracing Limits, Queering Embodiment: Creating/Creative Possibilities for Disability Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26 (2010): 124.

is the continued assumption that disability is a “special interests” issue that concerns persons with disabilities and their family and friends, and is thus subordinate to the “serious” study of theology.² In this review essay, I draw on several key texts to show why engaging with the human experience of disability ought to be understood as central, rather than secondary, to the theological task. This view of the field is reinforced by the recent turn of disability theology toward a richer and more constructive dialogue with the wider theological tradition.

Understanding disability, some may presume, is a relatively straightforward matter; after all, the term seems to tell us everything we need to know. “Dis-ability” is the opposite of ability: it is what someone has “when his or her body or mind does not work properly” (Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 22). From this common perspective, disability is a medical problem, located solely in the individual, and definable by the form and degree to which a body or mind deviates from a concept of human normalcy and wholeness shaped around experiences of the “able-bodied.”

Although this view of disability remains common, it has also been radically challenged since the birth of the disability movement in the 1960s, and the development of disability studies thereafter. “Disabilities” include forms and degrees of physical and cognitive limitations that many people will not experience for most of their lives, but scholars and activists have shown us that engaging with the experience of disability confronts us with a problem located not in people’s bodies and minds, but in the perception and treatment of persons with disabilities in societies built around the bodies and perspectives of nondisabled persons. Engaging with disability, in other words, means dealing with a problem of marginalization, just as much as reflecting on the realities and diversity of human embodiment. It means listening to and learning from the experiences and perspectives of persons with disabilities in order to understand the exclusionary organization and practices of an ableist society. And it means thinking *with* disability in order to displace the epistemological monopoly of “able-bodied” voices and perspectives in the common perception and in the representation of disability in society and academy alike.

What does it mean, then, to engage with disability in theology? Disability theology has gained increasing attention in Anglo-American theology since Nancy Eiesland published her influential

² Creamer, “Embracing Limits, Queering Embodiment,” 124.

1994 work *The Disabled God*, offering the first attempt to bring the insights of the disability movement and disability studies to bear on the Christian tradition. While not all disability theologians speak out of the disability movement as Eiesland does, they nevertheless take the lived experiences of persons with disabilities as a starting point rather than just a subject of critical reflection, and they raise ethical and epistemological concerns about the perception, representation, and treatment of persons with disabilities in theology and the church, as well as in society. At the same time, the basic intuition animating the field is that a theology that cannot embrace, and even value, the human experience of disability, and a church that pays insufficient regard to the practical demands of equality and access, are falling short of an essentially theological and ecclesiological vocation. They are not just failing to live up to the ethical or political demands of the secular disability movement. Engaging with disability thus raises issues that are at once ethical and theological; with this in mind, I turn to consider the first three works in this review article.

Nancy Eiesland: The Disabled God

In *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland develops a liberatory theology of disability grounded in the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. In accord with the disability studies perspectives she employs, her work stresses the importance of “self-representation.” For Eiesland, who herself had physical disabilities, self-representation is essential to what she calls a “two-way access” approach to theology, where “persons with disabilities must gain access to the social-symbolic life of the church, and the church must gain access to the social-symbolic life of people with disabilities” (p. 20). This access is a response to the historic ecclesial marginalization of persons with disabilities, especially their widespread exclusion from leadership roles and the concomitant absence of their voices from the Christian tradition. Her emphasis on self-representation is therefore an important part of the practical reversal of this exclusion, as persons with disabilities claim their rightful place within the discipline of theology and in the structure and organization of the church.

But there is something more than mere sociological inclusion at stake here, for the historical marginalization of the perspectives and bodies of persons with disabilities also constitutes an epistemological problem. Common assumptions about disability and human normalcy invariably reflect the presuppositions of the “able-bodied”

beneficiaries of a marginalizing status quo. Eiesland's principle of self-representation thus entails something like conversion, a *metanoia* into new modes of understanding that challenge dominant and exclusory attitudes and dispense with their normativity. When Eiesland argues that the church "must gain access to the social-symbolic life of people with disabilities," she is doing more than restating a practical demand for access and inclusion. Rather, she is claiming that thinking *with* disability opens new horizons of understanding about disability and human normalcy. This takes us beyond the exclusionary assumptions of the Christian tradition, which has too often contributed to the oppression of persons with disabilities.

Eiesland's work is influenced by the social constructionist arguments of the disability movement, which rejects the medical focus upon bodily difference and limitations in order to highlight how people are disabled by society. However, her approach evades the problematic elision of the body for which strong social constructionist approaches have been critiqued.³ Instead, Eiesland uses the embodied experiences of disability as a lens to challenge ableist assumptions about normativity. As she puts it, "talking about 'bones and braces bodies' as a norm of embodiment," enables us to "explicitly deconstruct any norms which are part of the unexpressed agenda of 'normal embodiment'" (p. 22). To achieve this, in chapter 2 Eiesland draws on Diane DeVries's experiences of living "without lower limbs and with above-elbow upper extremity stumps" (p. 33) and Nancy Mairs's experiences of living with multiple sclerosis from age twenty-nine (p. 40). Without naively suggesting that we are all disabled, Eiesland argues that these experiences confront us with realities of limitation and contingency. These realities are often difficult and deeply personal, but they also reveal truths about human existence (pp. 47–48). Disability is not, in other words, an aberration from human normalcy, but part of it. Engaging with disability reminds us of the "physical contingency that is part of ordinary life" (p. 48).

For Eiesland, disability thus reveals the fact that we all have "bodies of contingency and limits" (p. 110) and that even the "able" among us are only "temporarily able-bodied" (p. 24n8). With this anthropological vision in mind, she then turns to theological (re)construction

³ This critique has focused largely on the social model with its division of impairments (the body) from disability (the effect of marginalizing social conditions). For a good critique of social constructionism in disability studies, see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 55–69.

through two images: first, her epiphanic vision of God in a “sip-puff wheelchair” (p. 89), and second, the impaired hands and feet of the postresurrection Jesus (pp. 98–100). Such images challenge the theologization of able-bodied normativity and provide a needed symbolic assertion that the “fullness of human contingency and ordinary life” is incorporated into God in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, and that whole and true personhood “is fully compatible with the experience of disability” (p. 100). This is a powerful reminder of God’s commitment to the marginalized and a liberatory summons to equality and access in contemporary theology and the church. But Eiesland insists it also symbolically invites “temporarily able-bodied” Christians to “become known to themselves in their actually existing bodies” (p. 110). The disabled God thus exposes the illusoriness of both Christian teaching that denigrates disability, and contemporary society’s addiction to idealized bodies. We are invited instead to ground Christian thought and practice in “a positive body awareness that comes not from pursuing an ideal but from accepting the reality that bodies evolve, become ill and disabled, and die” (pp. 110–11).

The “access” Eiesland seeks in *The Disabled God* certainly constitutes a demand for persons with disabilities to have their rightful place in theology and the church; but the church and “temporarily able-bodied” Christians also regain access to the realities of human existence revealed by engaging with disability. Furthermore, by articulating these realities in theological terms, Eiesland shows us that the rejection of our contingency and worldboundness is a rejection of the God who reveals Godself in the postresurrection appearance of Christ as both triumphant and disabled.

Deborah Creamer: Disability and Christian Theology

In *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, Deborah Creamer offers a more theoretically robust approach to the same concerns raised by Eiesland. Drawing on Sallie McFague’s somatic theology, Creamer stresses the epistemological significance of the embodied experience of disability as a locus of meaning that can inform how we understand being human, as well as how we do theology (pp. 56–73). Central to her argument is the question of how we define disability. Creamer begins by outlining the medical or functional-limitation model of disability, “where attention is focused around what one can or cannot physically or functionally do” (p. 22). She stresses the importance of recognizing the

concrete realities of bodily limitations, but also the dangers of only allowing for a perception of disability as a kind of “deficit.” By contrast, she turns to the social or minority group approach common in disability studies, which argues that “disability . . . is socially constructed and results from society not being organized according to the needs of disabled people” (p. 25). This provides a lens to critique the medical model for its role in creating and disguising socially constructed barriers (p. 24), but as Creamer points out, the social construction approach offers little response to the logic of a purely medical view that treats bodily limitations as deficiencies, for it leaves discussion of the body largely to one side (pp. 96–97).

Creamer responds to these limitations by suggesting an alternative “limits model” for understanding disability, based on three premises. First, “limits are an unsurprising characteristic of humanity”; second, “limits are an intrinsic aspect of human existence—part of what it means to be human”; and third, “limits are good or, at the very least, not evil” (pp. 94–95), for they enable us to grow in ways that may otherwise be impossible, such as by developing our capacity for “perseverance, strength, and creativity” (p. 112). There is tremendous promise here, for Creamer’s limits model sets finitude and limitation at the center of anthropology. Where the deficit view of the medical model sees a liability, and the social-constructionist approach remains silent, Creamer discerns a theological and anthropological constant. Accordingly, while many would view the experience of limitation as a defining feature of disability, for Creamer it becomes a lens for understanding human existence *per se*.

Creamer further draws on this limits model to articulate her theological concerns. She argues that in traditional accounts of God’s illimitability, “there is a subtle implication that the more limits we have, the less we are like God.” This problem, Creamer argues, compares to Mary Daly’s claim that “if God is male, then the male is God” (p. 112). There is, however, a significant difference here, for while maleness may not be something experienced by all human beings, limitedness certainly is. We are dealing, in other words, not simply with an ableist logic that denigrates disability due to a deficit view of certain embodied limitations, but with a deeper problem regarding the human struggle to accept limitation as a ubiquitous and even valuable aspect of our existence. By rejecting this viewpoint and seeking a more positive account of human limitation, Creamer suggests we can speak of a God of limits (pp. 112–13). She not only counters the

negative implications for a Christian perception of disability wrought by an unlimited concept of God, she also employs disability as a lens for exposing and remedying the effects that our inability to accept the realities of our corporeality has had upon the language and concepts we have traditionally considered viable for theological speech.

Thomas Reynolds: Vulnerable Communion

One of the most philosophically sophisticated works within disability theology is Thomas Reynolds's *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*. Unlike Eiesland and Creamer, Reynolds does not write from his own experiences of living with a disability, but rather out of his relationship with his son Chris, diagnosed with "Tourette's syndrome . . . aspergers syndrome, bipolar disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder" (p. 11). Reynolds's approach to disability is based on the recognition that "to exist as a finite creature is to be contingent and vulnerable. This means we are beings that face limitations and are capable of suffering from a range of impairments" (p. 18). As in Creamer's account of limitations, Reynolds therefore categories commonly associated with disability as the starting point for a wider anthropological discussion. Unlike Creamer, however, he treats our vulnerability and dependence as the basis for a relational account of being human. Vulnerability, he argues, constitutes an exposedness before the human other in relation that is difficult and frightening, because it exposes us to the risk of suffering and rejection; at the same time, it is also essential, for only our vulnerable presence with one another makes real relationships possible (pp. 104–11).⁴

Our vulnerability, Reynolds continues, leaves us exposed in "a finite and contingent world" and thus spurs the basic human impulse to search for a place of welcome and security where we can find orientation through being "affirmed within a larger framework of value and purpose" (50). We find this framework in the sense of "the good" communicated to us through the cultural frameworks of our social contexts (pp. 53–55), as well as through the embodied practices and activities that shape how a sense of individual worth is developed

⁴ For a more recent and concise version of this argument, see Thomas Reynolds, "Theology and Disability: Changing the Conversation," in *Searching for Dignity: Conversations on Human Dignity, Theology, and Disability*, ed. Julie Claassens, Leslie Swartz, and Len Hansen (Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2013).

and communicated within the “economy of exchange” of a particular society (pp. 55–59).

Based on this view of human sociality, Reynolds develops a detailed account of how the “cult of normalcy” in our sociocultural assumptions about personhood and worth lead to marginalization. The “cult of normalcy” refers to how members of a particular group or society view and treat people whose real or perceived differences seem to contradict our sense of what is normal and good, and to whom we respond through kinds of “rituals trained upon demarcating and policing the borders of a ‘normal’ way of being” (p. 60). One of these ritualized responses is assimilation, where we accept others to the extent that we can perceive or remake them in our own image, effectively denying or trying to remove the “differences” that disturb us (pp. 46–47). When this is impossible, we resort to rejection. This rejection may be accomplished through stigmatizing differences in ways that reduce the complex reality of the human other to a one-dimensional surrogate defined entirely by those aspects of their lives that we, within our cultural frameworks and economies of exchange, struggle to understand or accept (pp. 63–65). Alternatively, we often treat difference (perceived and real) as a “taboo” by ascribing negative moral worth to it, rendering marginalization a permissible and even necessary act in the preservation of those values and norms that shape our sense of identity and worth (pp. 65–68).

Reynolds’s argument is that we often respond to the “difference” of disability through these kinds of ritualized neutralizations of difference, which help at once to preserve and to reinforce our sense of what is normal. He suggests that this is especially evident in Western societies where human personhood and worth are defined by two factors: Enlightenment ideals of rational autonomy and self-sufficiency (pp. 77–88), and the dominant narrative of market capitalism, which celebrates wealth, efficiency, novelty, consumption, and a certain understanding of physical beauty (pp. 88–97). In such a context, “disability” is the difference that seems to contradict and destabilize our sense of what is “normal” and “good” the most. However, our judgment and rejection of persons with disabilities also reveals the tragic irony at the heart of the Western cult of normalcy, for we are not radically autonomous, but deeply dependent and vulnerable creatures. Denigrating these realities thus leads, not only to the harmful marginalization of people who contradict our concepts of normalcy and wholeness, it also leaves us denying and fleeing from the very essence

of our humanity: the dependence upon and vulnerability before one another that is common to people with and without disabilities.

Like Creamer, Reynolds places the discussion of disability against a much wider anthropological horizon before turning to theological construction. Unlike Creamer, however, who only briefly sketches out the theological possibilities of her argument, Reynolds develops a detailed systematic account of God and creation with vulnerability at its core, affirming the “strange logic” of Christianity that “gives testimony to the strength that comes through weakness, a wholeness, that manifests itself in brokenness, a power that reveals itself through vulnerability” (p. 19). Our vulnerability is the gateway to recognizing that God’s presence gives us the gift of existing in a relationship of “absolute dependence”: we absolutely lack control or self-sufficiency and are utterly vulnerable and exposed (pp. 138–46). This vulnerability signals both our difference from, and dependence upon, a God who renders Godself somehow limited and vulnerable, exposing Godself “to [a] relationship with difference” that involves God’s voluntary limitation of “absolute freedom by absolute love, becoming open to the creature in its being” (p. 160). God becomes vulnerable by making Godself truly available and thus open to the possibility of being rejected by us, and our acceptance or rejection of God is dependent on our willingness to enter fully into our own vulnerability. If we accept and participate in our vulnerability with one another and with God, we live lives more fully aligned with the creative and possibility-fraught openness that imbues all creation. By contrast, the rejection of vulnerability by the Western “cult of normalcy” is a kind of idolatry where we attempt to overcome the vulnerability and dependence that we see as weakness, but is in fact the doorway to living more fully with and in God (pp. 188–97). Reynolds’s work thus plainly reveals the connection between the ethical and theological that defines disability theology, for by placing the discussion of disability against the wider horizon of theological ontology, he shows us how the same attitudes toward self and other that contribute to the marginalization of persons with disabilities also overflow into—and impoverish—our perception and treatment of God.

A Critical Interlude

There is much to commend in the approaches of Eiesland, Creamer, and Reynolds, not least their recognition of the value of

taking disability as a hermeneutic lens to both critique and construct theology. For them, as for all disability theologians, authentic theology exists and grows through dialogue with perspectives and disciplines that yield understanding from outside the doctrinal and scriptural sources of the Christian faith; above all, theology gains wisdom from listening to human experience and embodiment. In this way, disability theology reflects the broader shift in twentieth-century theology toward acknowledging “the ‘living human document’ as a valid ‘text’ for theological study, comparable to the traditional texts of scripture and doctrine.”⁵ And as John Swinton suggests, the field also bears a close resemblance to “the general ethos of practical theological enquiry,” for in the clear relationship disability theologians articulate between the ethical and theological concerns raised by disability, they recognize “the obvious fact that all theology is practical and intended to enable the church to practice faithfully.”⁶

There is, however, a danger in this approach: scholars may too quickly blur the boundaries between the ethical and anthropological issues and the distinctly theological concerns that are exposed when we think with disability in theology. This is most evident when Eiesland, Creamer, Reynolds, and others take disability as the basis for theological reflection and transfer categories from anthropological speech to speech about God. The problem here is especially clear with Eiesland and Creamer, who speak respectively of the “disabled God” and the “God of limits,” but in neither case offer any sense of how such a God relates to the wider theological tradition. It can thus appear that their political and ethical concerns govern their theologizing, which may undermine their efforts to affect real changes in theological thinking. The same is true in Reynolds’s work in a more subtle way, for he draws widely upon theological sources, and his concept of God is generally in line with process theology and social trinitarianism. However, his use of the tradition, as he himself states, is focused on reading different elements of Christian theology against each other in order to address teaching that is exclusionary of disability, and he does

⁵ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 1.

⁶ John Swinton, “Who Is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14 (2011): 274.

this by approaching disability—and vulnerability—as the primary lens that determines between “less and more helpful alternatives” (p. 34).

This trajectory is recognizable outside of disability theology, as Creamer’s use of McFague reveals, and it raises a host of concerns regarding theological grammar, the relations of immanence and transcendence, divine alterity, and so forth. Disability theologians are certainly right to insist upon greater inclusion of the diversity of human voices and experiences within theology and are right to claim that the exclusion of such voices is both epistemologically impoverishing and a sign of prejudice. Nevertheless, it is also true that even if embracing disability is a necessary condition for faithful theological speech, neither disability, nor ability, nor any purely human experience can be taken as a sufficient basis for authentic theologizing, least of all for speaking about God. When theologians take anthropological categories as a sufficient basis for speaking about the divine nature, we risk failing to engage in theological speech at all, for we are speaking not about God, but about some form of creaturely existence. This is precisely what disability theologians don’t want to do, for the essential difference they have with secular disability studies is the convergence of the ethical, anthropological, and theological. Or as Swinton forcefully argues in his analysis of the various reimaginings of God in the field, “the clear statement is: *To reject the disabled because they are disabled is to reject God.*”⁷ The vital insight here is that the way persons with disabilities are viewed and treated in the church has more than just social significance, but only a theology genuinely capable of speaking about a realm beyond the human can make such claims.

The salient challenge in disability theology has been the general lack of dialogue with the wider theological tradition, the reason for which seems to be a widespread assumption that the theological tradition is either part of the problem, or has little to offer directly to the discussion of disability.⁸ As Brock recently pointed out, this assumption leads us to ignore “the investigative task of asking how Christians of earlier ages actually lived and thought” and to overlook how “strands within the Christian tradition have also served to uphold,

⁷ John Swinton, “Disability, Ableism, and Disablism,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, 446.

⁸ Exceptions to this would include works by Frances Young (*God’s Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013]) and Jean Vanier (*Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004]).

value, and include people that today might be labelled disabled” (p. 4). Thankfully, the work where Brock highlights these issues, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, represents an important reversal of this, as the first serious attempt to reflect systematically on the explicit and implicit perception of disability among theologians ranging from Augustine and Aquinas, to Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, Vanier, and Hauerwas. This work signals a vital turning point toward a richer and more fruitful dialogue between the contemporary discussion of disability and the wisdom of the communion of saints. In the final part of this review essay, I want to examine how this transition has started to develop in the specific area of theology and intellectual disability.

Theology and Intellectual Disability

The literature on theology and intellectual disability has followed a different historical trajectory from disability theology in general, since some of the most prominent authors in this area, including Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas, began publishing in the early 1970s, before disability theology, or disability studies, existed as fields of research.⁹ Before turning to this literature, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term *intellectual disability*.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (DSM 5) uses *intellectual disability* as an umbrella term for various neuro-developmental disorders defined according to three criteria: (A) “deficits in intellectual functioning, such as reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience”; (B) “deficits in adaptive functioning that result in failure to meet developmental and sociocultural standards for personal independence and social responsibility,” with the result that “without ongoing support, the adaptive deficits limit functioning in one or more activities of daily life, such as communication, social participation, and independent living”; and (C) diagnosis before the age of eighteen.¹⁰ Alongside these general diagnostic criteria, DSM 5 also distinguishes between mild, moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disabilities. These primarily refer to different levels of adaptive

⁹ Vanier, *Tears of Silence* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1974); Stanley Hauerwas, “Christian Care of the Retarded,” *Theology Today* 30 (1973): 130–37.

¹⁰ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association Publishers, 2013), 33.

functioning (and no longer to IQ, as is still often assumed), defined by the degree to which someone's conceptual, social, and practical skills deviate from the average adaptive functioning of "age-, gender, and socioculturally matched peers" without intellectual disabilities.¹¹

There are serious dangers with the definition of intellectual disability above, since it follows the medical tendency to view a person's experiences in terms of what they lack rather than who they are, a "lack" defined homogenously according to the perceived deviation of "disabled" bodies and minds from an "able-bodied" concept of human normativity. The problem with this, as the disability movement has shown, is that persons with disabilities are united more by their experiences of marginalization in an ableist society than by their highly varied experiences of embodiment. On the other hand, understanding the real limitations that different disabilities involve is an important part of understanding the lives of persons with disabilities and it is also crucial for understanding marginalization. For although marginalization may be a product of social conditions, it is also invariably rooted in prejudicial attitudes focused on the specific limitations or dependencies that people with different disabilities experience. Understanding marginalization, in other words, requires us to reflect critically upon our societies *and* to talk about the concrete realities of living with disabilities. This is no plainer than in the case of intellectual disability.

Much of the literature on theology and intellectual disability focuses less on political questions of equal rights and access than on the suffering experienced by persons with intellectual disabilities because of a lack of personal relationships with people who value and appreciate them for who they are, outside of their immediate circle of family members and the professionals who support them.¹² This literature confronts us with the reality that we as individuals, societies, and churches have repeatedly pushed persons with intellectual disabilities to the margins. Perhaps this is because the idolization of rational autonomy in Western societies obstructs our ability to recognize and appreciate the value of their lives, or perhaps we are unwilling to learn what it means to engage with people whose ways of relating and

¹¹ See table 1 in *DSM-5*, 34–37.

¹² For example, Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2008).

communicating differ from what we are accustomed to, but who are just as whole, gifted, and valuable as any other human being.

As part of this emphasis on the lack of—and subsequent need for—mutual and loving relationships, scholars writing on intellectual disability frequently focus on developing relational anthropologies, following a similar approach to Reynolds. We hear often that the neediness, dependence, vulnerability, or limitations of persons with intellectual disabilities are a sign that they, like all of us, are fundamentally relational beings; their dependence on relationships with others in order to exist and flourish is a sign, or even the locus, of the constant and primordial dependence upon our Creator, who gives us even to ourselves.¹³ The ethical and theological converge in authors' frequent claims that entering more fully into relationships with one another also means moving closer to God. This is a fact that is deeply personal for many of these authors, who often write of their experiences of transformation in their relationships with friends or family members with intellectual disabilities, and of the effect of these relationships on their faith.¹⁴

This relational anthropological approach provides a valuable way of affirming the giftedness and wholeness of persons with intellectual disabilities. However, as Harshaw has recently pointed out, there is a danger that it leaves us valuing persons with intellectual disabilities for their “instructive capacity” to the able-bodied, in ways that overlook how difficult it is to live with heightened degrees of limitation, dependence, or vulnerability (p. 44). The result is an at times inadequate representation of both the personal experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities, especially those with profound intellectual disabilities, and of the ways that people with these life experiences are marginalized. In theological terms, this is evident in the unfortunate lack of reflection on the most obvious form of theological marginalization that intellectual disability raises: the assumption that

¹³ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*; Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); Frances Young, *Arthur's Call* (London: SPCK, 2014); Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche: A Spirituality for Every Day* (London: SPCK, 2007); Molly Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ For example, Vanier, *Becoming Human*; Reynolds, “Love without Boundaries: Theological Reflections on Parenting a Child with Disabilities,” *Theology Today* 62 (2005): 193–209; Young, *Arthur's Call*.

persons with intellectual disabilities lack the capacity to know or relate to God in this life.

The Christian tradition has, since its origins, stressed the ineffability of God, the soul, and the relationship between them. One might therefore assume that it would accept and attend to the spirituality of persons with intellectual disabilities, because they confront us most plainly with the fact that every human other, however beloved, however deeply “known” by us, remains a mystery we can receive but never solve. Yet Christians often seem to assume that knowing and relating to God hinges upon our capacity for language and ratiocination, whether for understanding and assenting to the teaching of scripture and doctrine, or for communicating—and thus verifying—the movements of our inner life to others. Our belief in the mystery of the utterly transcendent yet intimately and abundantly present God—the God who chose foolishness to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:27)—frequently ends up trapped in a ratiocentric account of the spiritual life. Absence of evidence is treated as evidence of absence when it comes to the possession and display of particular cognitive abilities in the context of faith.

In response to this question of spirituality, the literature on intellectual disability has begun to reflect the same shift toward a fuller engagement with the resources of the Christian tradition that is marked by *Disability and the Christian Tradition*. In the final section I want to consider two important examples of this approach.

Intellectual Disability and Mystical Union: Harshaw and Staley

In *God beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities*,¹⁵ Jill Harshaw writes from her experiences as mother to Rebecca, who has a profound intellectual disability. Harshaw highlights the impossibility of considering the spiritual lives of persons with profound intellectual disabilities through qualitative research, which uses methods—principally interviews—that rely on participants possessing a level of linguistic and conceptual ability these persons lack (pp. 68–75). The result is that any account of their spiritual lives will primarily be defined by the perspectives and narratives of their family, friends, or

¹⁵ My reading of Harshaw here is derived from my review of the same work, published in *Medieval Mystical Theology* 26, (2017), available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20465726.2017.1403669>.

caregivers, a picture that can never be affirmed by the person themselves, and can never provide us with a verifiable understanding of the possibilities or nature of their relationship with God (pp. 74–75).

Harshaw does not conclude from this that there is no possibility for speaking about the spiritual experiences of people with profound intellectual disabilities. Instead, she suggests that we should turn to the “rich theological sources of the Christian tradition,” which teach us “that God is not incapacitated by reason of their cognitive deficits from communicating and disclosing himself to and through them” (p. 85). Harshaw critiques the often unintentionally exclusionary assumption that God is known and humans are saved exclusively through our encounter with the word of God in the words of scripture (pp. 85–88), stressing instead that God makes Godself available to human beings beyond the language of scripture, even if scripture is the discursive revelation of that availability (p. 92). She develops a “theology of accommodation” (p. 95), arguing that “divine revelation is often, if not always, attuned to the capacities of its particular recipients to apprehend it” (p. 104). She later develops this with reference to various scriptural examples of God’s self-revelation beyond the limits of human reason (pp. 131–45), before turning finally to affirm God’s mystical presence at the ontological level as an essential aspect of our existence. This presence is entirely available to persons with profound intellectual disabilities, simply by virtue of their being human and being known by God (pp. 146–76).

Harshaw’s work offers one of the most extended and insightful responses to the question of spirituality and intellectual disability to date. However, despite her clear emphasis on the value of the mystical dimensions of Christian thought, she only cursorily draws upon the teaching of the Christian mystics, focusing instead on the “phenomenology of mystical perception” and treating the “complex theories of the Christian mystics” with suspicion about their usefulness for thinking about intellectual disability and spirituality (p. 174). This is unfortunate in light of Harshaw’s otherwise promising emphasis on the value of the wider Christian tradition and her thorough use of scriptural sources to develop her theology of accommodation.

By contrast, Erinn Staley’s important recent essay, “Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing: Contemporary Insights from Medieval Sources,” reveals the value of the Christian mystical tradition for addressing the question of spirituality and intellectual disability. By drawing on apophatic theology, which stresses God’s infinite

unknowability, Staley highlights the arbitrariness of distinguishing between different levels of human cognitive ability when it comes to “knowing” God (p. 389). Starting with Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, she describes the mystical ascent through which the soul moves “from without, to within, to above, a process which eliminates the distinction of without and within in the person” (p. 390). For Bonaventure, this ascent reaches its pinnacle in the paradox of the incarnation, and in the “still more intense paradox of the death of the Incarnate on the cross” (pp. 390–91). In the face of this mystery, the soul’s intellect falls silent, and is replaced by a knowing that comes not through reason, but through “the love of the unknowable God into which the death of Christ draws the believer” (p. 391). The soul completes its ascent to God through “affect,” not “intellect,” and while, as Staley notes, this mystical journey usually follows the order just described, in Bonaventure’s “view of the ladder of knowledge” the process is flexible, not rigid. The intellectual journey from without to within is not a necessary condition of the affective union with God “above,” for the understanding yielded by this journey is contained in the loving “unknowing” of God, which the soul reaches as it passes beyond intellect into silence (pp. 392–95). Intellect is not irrelevant, but Bonaventure’s spiritual schema allows the possibility of bypassing the intellect when necessary. Persons with intellectual disabilities may not be able to embark on the earlier intellectual stages of the soul’s ascent, because Bonaventure conceives of these stages in terms of philosophical and theological education (p. 390). However, since the stages are flexible and the initial intellectual knowledge of God is contained in the higher affective knowledge, Staley suggests that there is little reason to deny that the people with intellectual disabilities could enter this ascent. While it may seem “absurd to suggest that a person who seems to know little of the world could know the unknowability of God” (p. 395), it is possible that such a person might enter it at a higher stage, because they are receptive through love to the knowledge that they cannot gain discursively.

This inclusive vision of the spiritual life is also evident in the work of Meister Eckhart. For Eckhart, Staley points out, the soul was utterly one with God prior to its created existence, a unicity that overflows into our temporal existence as the “eternal, uncreated spark” of the soul (p. 396). This spark in the soul (or as Eckhart more often puts it, the “ground” of the soul) is the “intellect,” but Eckhart’s understanding of the intellect differs radically from our contemporary

use of the term. For Eckhart, the intellect “is not a measurable thing that people possess to different degrees but the uncreated element in the soul that joins a person to God” (p. 397). Within, and in some sense by means of, our intellect, the soul engages in what Eckhart calls “detachment,” where the soul passes beyond discursive reason, beyond its attachment to things in this world, beyond even its sense of being a distinct created self, and becomes spiritually one with God, participating in this life in that same primordial unicity that it shares with God in eternity (pp. 395–97).

Like Bonaventure’s concept of ascent, Eckhart’s teaching on detachment transcends the limits of contemporary assumptions about the role of intellect in faith and offers a mystical schema remarkably suited to affirming the possibility of union between persons with intellectual disabilities and God. Staley does not draw on Eckhart and Bonaventure to suggest that persons with intellectual disabilities automatically participate in a mystical relationship with God. She recognizes that the inner lives of people with these life experiences, especially those with profound intellectual disabilities, are finally beyond our ken (p. 393). Instead, Staley shows us the usefulness of such teaching for levering open our otherwise limited assumptions about these people’s spiritual lives, enabling new ways of understanding their participation in the Christian communion. Mystical teaching highlights the error of believing that what we cannot know of their inner lives is not there, so that we become more attentive and receptive to what may be.

Conclusion

These works by Staley and Harshaw are important examples of the growing recognition in disability theology that Christian theology, speaking on its own terms, can and does contribute directly to the field. Their works reflect an important new direction toward a far richer dialogue with the wider theological tradition. It seems that disability and theology are deeply interrelated, but this interrelationship can only be fully appreciated when we pay proper regard to each side. As disability theology continues to mature, it seems therefore to face a dual task. First, disability theologians must acknowledge that some strands and thinkers within the Christian tradition speak to the discussion of disability precisely because disability raises concerns with broad implications that extend deep into the fundamental questions

of the Christian faith. Recognizing this does not dilute disability theology or take attention away from the problem of marginalization; on the contrary, it deepens our understanding of why the ethical issues raised by disability are also deeply theological. A task for disability theology, then, is to engage with the Christian tradition on its own terms, to acknowledge the wisdom with which it may already have addressed questions that relate to disability, and to draw out new implications of Christian thought for the contemporary discussion of disability and theology. This does not do away with the need for critique, however, and the second task of disability theology is to continue prioritizing the voices and lived experiences of persons with disabilities, taking these voices and experiences as a starting point for examining the practices and attitudes of the past, and for challenging and reforming those of the present. Combining these two tasks, I believe, will reveal more plainly than ever the centrality of engaging with disability for the theological task, allowing disability theologians more success in summoning contemporary Christianity to become more just, more accessible, and more authentically itself.