"Who Causes the Blind to See": disability and quality of religious life

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ABSTRACT   *Persons with physical or mental disabilities often turn to religious institutions for comfort and belonging. They are not, however, always openly welcomed into religious circles. Many churches and synagogues fail to make the necessary accommodations for parishioners with disabilities and some show covert signs of hostility towards them. Possible reasons for this exclusion are examined, theorising that they stem from the most ancient of beliefs about the nature of disability and its relationship to God. Sources within the Jewish and Christian faiths are examined and it is hypothesised that there are four central views inherent in these religions that act as barriers to those with disabilities. These beliefs must be challenged so that all may find fulfillment and inclusion within their religious faiths. Religious leaders and followers must also acknowledge and redress the fact that such beliefs have contributed to the establishment of disability and an oppressed political minority within Western society.*

> And the Lord spoke unto Moses saying: Speak unto Aaron saying: Whosoever be of thy seed throughout their generations that hath a blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God . . . A blind man, or a lame or he who hath anything maimed or anything too long . . . crook-backed or dwarf . . . he shall not go to the veil nor go nigh unto the altar because he hath a blemish; that he profane not My Holy places. (Leviticus, 21:17–24)

Introduction

Quality of life for many individuals typically revolves around religion and its associated organisations. Religious institutions offer meaning and comfort to many who seek guidance and support in a world seen as troubling and confusing (McAfee, 1988). Community is often formed out of religious experiences and the commonalities which draw individuals together to form a cohesive and supportive group (Hoffman, 1969). Whatever level of religious commitment and involvement the

individual chooses, most participants feel that religion is central to the make-up of their quality of life (Park, 1975).

Those with disabilities too, often express an interest in and find fulfillment from religion. Scuccimarra (1990) found that after television and movie viewing, attendance at church ranked as one of the most favoured activities of young persons with disabilities. Similarly, Schalock *et al.* (1981) studied the adjustment of adults with developmental disabilities who had been placed into independent living situations. Data from this study revealed that churches were the most frequently accessed community facilities, coming before restaurants, launderettes and grocery stores.

Although many persons with disabilities feel connected to their religious communities, they are not always welcome participants (Bryant, 1993). An early study of church involvement among individuals with developmental delays by Baller (1936) found that although attendance rates among the population were quite high (at more than 50%), participation in church related activities and responsibilities were severely restricted. Later studies found that while attendance rates among persons with disabilities remained high, memberships in choirs and clubs were substantially lower (Kregel *et al.*, 1986; Wilhite *et al.*, 1989).

Studies of clergy and their relationship to persons with disabilities highlight the fact that services and accommodations for the population are often severely restricted. Heifitz & Franklin (1982) found that although clergy felt compassion for those with disabilities, their knowledge of services available to them within the religious community was limited and their ability to modify religious education or to accommodate their services was low. In a comprehensive study of clergy and their accommodation of persons with disabilities, Riordan & Vasa (1991) found similar results. Access to those with physical challenges was reported by less than half of the congregations. Forty-four per cent of clergy reported little or no special religious classes for those with developmental delays. The authors conclude that many clergy are isolated from congregational members with impairments. Willing, though largely unable to assist those with disabilities, clergy are somewhat unrealistic in their ability to provide special services, preparation for rites of passage events and general religious functioning.

Thus, it is clear that religious communities are not making the necessary accommodations for those with disabilities. This fact seems to conflict with the general perception of religious institutions as havens for all peoples. The root of the apparent alienation of individuals with disabilities by religion may lie in the ancient belief systems of the Judeo-Christian theology which views disability in a highly negative manner. In fact, it can be argued that the views of Western religious institutions have helped to create the social construct of disability as a political state of oppression and have been instrumental in maintaining its power and pervasive nature (Barnes, 1995). Such a state goes well beyond the physical charcteristics which differentiate those with disabilities from the general population (Roth, 1983) and it can be contended that the label of disability has become a minority grouping and not merely a medical definition (Hahn, 1988, 1993, 1994). This, in turn, has lead to the exclusion of those with disabilities from many elements of political and

social power and has amplified the dependence of the population on a society which treats them with pity, disdain or fear (Abberley, 1987).

An examination of this theology finds that attitudes toward those with disabilities can be categorised under four general headings, which together can be seen to form the basis of many beliefs within organized Western religion. These are: disability as sign of punishment or evil incarnation; disability as challenge to divine perfection; disability as object of pity and charity; and disability as incompetence and exemption from religious practice. Taken together, these attitudes form a theological barrier that may be obstructing the rapid and complete integration of persons with disabilities on the part of religious institutions and may serve to deny the quality of life which so many seek. They may also provide insight into many of the assumptions and prejudices which operate in the broader secular society, as these have been heavily influenced by religious thought and doctrine.

Disability as a Sign of Punishment, Evil Incarnation and Disease

Western religious views on disability were likely influenced by early pagan attitudes towards physical or psychological difference. As Kiev (1964) notes in his examination of primal religious thought, non-normative states of being such as disability or disease, were seen as intrusions into the soul or loss of spirit, induced by witchcraft or violation of taboos. It is likely that later biblical sources took these attitudes and modified them in a monotheistic context, utilising them as a means to ensure adherence to law and maintenance of fear and loyalty to an unseen deity.

Henderson & Bryan (1984) state that biblical precepts continually make the connection between disability and evil, and physical ability with virtue and cleanliness. Historically, this attitude has left persons with disabilities vulnerable to societal practices of isolation, sterilisation and euthanisation in the name of religious purity. While these practices have (for the most part) ended in Western societies, the myth of disability as evil incarnation persists.

Religious art and writing have furthered this association by consistently portraying divinity and its associated images (angels, saints, etc.) as able-bodied. Conversely, Henderson & Bryan (1984) cite the findings of a religiously themed literature review, and note that disability has been linked to sinfulness, dirt and evil.

Biblical text abounds with images of disability as evil. Weinberg & Sebian (1980) cite many of these references in their research into Bible and disability. They note the fact that disability is often linked with diseases brought on by the wrath of God. The punishment of evil through physical torment takes several forms in biblical narrative, many of them closely linked with physical disability. The Old Testament, for example, states that if humans are immoral they will be blinded by God (Deuteronomy 27:27). In the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, the people of Israel are repeatedly punished for their sinful ways through physical disability. A discussion of ritual purity (Numbers 5) notes that blindness, leprosy and other disabling diseases are punishments for blasphemous behavior. In Exodus (20:5) God tells Moses that retribution for sin will be inflicted on the offspring of the sinners for many generations. In the book of Samuel, the prophet Nathan admon-

ishes King David for his sins and though he is repentant, he is punished through his new-born child, who is condemned to death.

Contemporary Jewish prayer includes passages such as 'who causes the lame to walk', 'who gives sight to the blind' and 'who has created me with all functioning organs and limbs' (Silverman, 1956, pp. 103–105). From this, it could be argued that in the minds of many Jewish worshippers, God is powerful over disability and disease, and the condition is not to be accepted as natural or normal.

The New Testament continues in this tradition. Weinberg & Sebastian (1980) note that in the book of John (5:14), the people are told that they will recover perfect health if they cease their evil ways. The book of Matthew (9:2) brings the most striking example of the connection between disability and sin, as Jesus cures a man with palsy after declaring that his sins are forgiven. As Barnes (1995) states, later leaders of the developing church maintained and promulgated this negative connotation. 'St. Augustine, for example, the man credited with bringing Christianity to mainland Britain, perceived impairment as "a punishment for the fall of Adam and other sins". Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, was an enthusiastic advocate of infanticide for disabled infants because they were the Devil's children' (p. 12).

Some modern churches have been active in perpetuating the connection between evil and disability, and God's role in the healing process. Many so-called church "faith healers" have demonstrated the power of religion and forgiveness by seemingly causing those who use assitive mobility devices to walk without them, restoring sight to the visually impaired and hearing to those with deafness. The message sent by these acts is clear, disability contains in it elements of disease and evil presence. Faith in God restores good health and can overcome the imperfection of disability. Disability is, therefore, seen as an abomination, an act of punishment or evil that is an unwelcome addition to the lives of the faithful.

Disability as a challenge to Divine Perfection

One of the basic theological underpinnings of the Judeo-Christian religious faiths is the belief in the perfection of divinity and the creation brought about by the Divine. A child born with characteristics which deviate from the norm would appear to seriously challenge this notion. In an article examining the theological difficulties brought on by the existence of those with developmental delays, Adams (1984) notes the theological axiom which states that if God is both omnipotent and essentially good, then all that is created by God would be healthy and complete. Thus, the existence of imperfection in creation is not only a challenge to the notion of God's perfection, but of God's basic goodness as well.

Themes of perfection and ideal forms abound in biblical sources. In describing the specifications for ritual sacrifice, the Old Testament notes the fact that animals with physical defects are not to be used for this purpose (Numbers 28:9). When outlining the qualifications for the selection of the high priest, the Bible states that a candidate (Leviticus 21:17–24) must not be disabled or imperfect in any way. Though it may be uncomfortable for modern society to acknowledge, the Bible is clear in its message that perfection and beauty should surround things religious and

that imperfection is to be rejected. The presence of those with disabilities then, presents a constant and serious challenge to the notion that divinity and creation are perfect. In addition, it seemingly subverts the divine desire to be surrounded by beauty and wholeness.

Disability as Object of Pity and Charity

Though disability may be seen in religion as evil in nature, there is great pity given to those who are sinful and those who are products of God's punishment. Addition-ally, for those who reject the notion that disability is evil, but given to humanity as a means of bringing about justice and charity (Moskop, 1984), persons with a disability are seen as vehicles for the able-bodied believer to practice acts of kindness and good.

Religion does appear to pity those with a disability. Henderson & Bryan (1984) cite an example from the Talmud ordering the recitation of a special prayer when passing an individual with obvious visual impairment. The Bible instructs the people to take pity on those who are challenged and to care for them with charity and acts of loving kindness (Weinberg & Sebastian, 1980). Historically, religious institutions were the first (and often only) providers of care for persons with disabilities. Religious orders have traditionally offered medical attention to those with impair-ments, provided schooling and have led the way in raising charitable funds to ease the suffering of those not able-bodied.

The difficulty in viewing persons with a disability as objects of pity and charity is two-fold. First, by being classified as 'disabled', persons with an impairment become objectified, thus losing a sense of individuality and basic humanity. A 'disabled' person is no longer simply a member of a congregation requiring assist-ance in order to function as an equal participant. Instead, they become a project, a vehicle for others to fulfill their acts of kindness. Their existence as a person is thus subservient to their disability.

Secondly, by becoming objects of pity and charity, persons with a disability become a charitable responsibility. Their needs are not necessarily seen as rights, but as privileges of a society that can afford to care for them. This belief has resulted in a structure of services and accommodations for those with disabling conditions that depend solely on the whim of the congregation or society. They are not determined by an overriding belief in the rights of all individuals to fair access to religious and public services and membership in communal institutions. Evidence of this can be seen in the inconsistency of services and accommodation for persons with a disabil-ity in religious communities (Hawkins-Sheppard, 1984; Fewell, 1986).

Religious attitudes have affected services to persons with disabilities in the secular community as well. Government assistance and accommodation pro-grammes have often been funded based on charity and pity, and not on human rights. This type of attitude in the education and community services branches of government necessitated the passing of legislation in many countries to ensure that the rights of those with disabilities were entrenched, and that service would be

guaranteed and not merely given as a nicety based on societal feelings of compassion and guilt.

An example of how this attitude pervades in contemporary religious political thought can be seen in the personification of persons with disabilities in debate over abortion and physician-assisted suicide. In the literature written to support right-wing Christian efforts for greater control over medical decisions, persons with disabilities are piteously characterised as 'beautiful' (Moore, 1995), unable to defend themselves against liberal attempts at euthanesia (Lawrenson, 1996) and not yet capable of recognising the issues which are central to their own survival (Moore, 1995). Such rhetoric largely fails to acknowledge the existence of self-advocacy groups, a majority of whom have not joined forces with the Christian-right. State-ments which claim to favour great self-determination for persons with disabilities seem to be philosophically opposed by the greater goal of the so called 'pro-life' movements, as it clearly advocates less individual freedom and choice. While the existence of successful persons with disabilities is used as evidence to bolster support for a ban on abortion and physician-assisted suicide (Dieleman, 1995), the use of the population as objects of pity does little to support rights and freedoms or to shatter long-held stereotypes.

Disability as Incompetence and Exemption from Religious Practice

In the Jewish legal code, persons with a disability are often seen as legally subnormal and incompetent. Legally, they are placed on the same level as minors and are prohibited or exempt from fulfilling many community functions. The Talmud notes the fact that persons with a developmental delay (known in ancient Hebrew as *Shoteh*) or a hearing impairment (known in ancient Hebrew as *Heresh*) cannot act as agents or principals in legal transactions of ownership transfers (Talmud Gittim 23A), nor can they normally make gifts of property (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah). Other references to those with a disability state that they cannot act as judges or witnesses in Jewish legal courts (Talmudf Sanhedrin 34B). Exemptions in the area of worship prohibit persons with an impairment or disability from reciting certain prayers (Talmud Megillah 4:6), leading prayer services (Havat Yair 176), or being called to the public reading of the Bible or *Torah* (Shulhan Aruch, Orah Hayim 53:14).

The implications of classifying those with a disability in this category of exemption (or prohibition) are far-reaching. As non-functioning members of the religious community, persons with a disability are incapable of full participation in the rituals of prayer and life-cycle events such as *Bar-Mitzvah* and marriage. To be certain, these laws were not created out of malice or overt hostility and may have, in fact, arisen out of a desire to protect those deemed 'incompetent'. These laws reflect a time when persons with disabilities were not educated, and often lacked the ability to communicate and relate to others. Taken together with the previously noted attitudes toward disability, and the lack of information on the nature and treatment of the conditions surrounding disability, the strictness of these laws is more easily understood. Nonetheless, these laws clearly place persons with disabili-

ties in a position of inferiority, incapacity and inequality. They also contribute to the isolation, powerlessness and poverty of a sub-group of community members, a problem which remains endemic to contemporary Western society.

Today, there is a much more lenient attitude taken toward the inclusion of persons with disabilities, though their rights have certainly not been entrenched in Jewish law and practice. The modern rabbi is held responsible for categorising an individual into the realm of the exempt and can, in effect, decide whether to grant the right of full membership within the religious community. An informal survey of some six Canadian rabbis (representing all of the major branches of Jewish practice), revealed that the majority would favor some form of limited communal participation for those with a developmental delay. None would state categorically that individuals would be given full access to synagogue participation and life cycle events. Most reported minimal participation and attendance on the part of those with disabilities in their synagogues.

While the Catholic and United Churches do not appear to have codified the status of persons with disabilities (as is the case in Jewish law), they too place great emphasis on the decision of the individual priest or minister. An informal interview with a member of the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto revealed that the receipt of the sacraments, confirmation and marriage would only be allowed to persons with a developmental delay on the advice of the individual parish priest. Anecdotal information provided by those who have worked within the church community, or who are themselves physically challenged, suggests that, in some cases, persons with physical impairments have had difficulty obtaining ordination or positions of leadership within the church community.

Changing the Prevailing Custom

The above examples serve to highlight the fact that persons with disabilities have been historically relegated to the status of *persona non grata* within religious institutions. With changes in public policy over the past two decades and the resulting move towards deinstitutionalisation, religious organisations have been receiving growing numbers of persons with disabilities in their communities. The influx of parishioners with disabilities has forced Western religion to confront its ancient prejudices and begin the process of providing this sector of the community with meaningful religious experience and affiliation. Additionally, with the development of the Disability Movement, the voices of those worshippers with impairments (as well as their advocates and supporters) calling for greater access to all public institutions, have added to the pressure placed on religious institutions to revisit their policies and attitudes which have for so long denied many the right to a normalized state of existence (Oliver & Zarb, 1989; Shakespeare, 1993).

This process, though slow in its evolution, is nonetheless taking shape. Adams (1984) presents a compelling theological argument countering the notion that disability presents a challenge to the belief in the perfection of divinity and creation. He states that the plans of an omnipotent God do not necessarily have to be revealed to humanity and may, in fact, be beyond human understanding. The existence of a

parallel world of perfection, or the lack of perfection in creation are possibilities which are logical and feasible within a theological framework, and yet do not necessarily challenge the notion of divine goodness and perfection.

In a letter to religious leaders and worshippers, Ellis (1984) calls for the opening of church and synagogue doors and minds. Ellis (a member of the clergy) states that there is much to be done to change attitudes and provide services to persons with disabilities. Rabbi Schneerson, the late spiritual leader of the Lubavitch Hasidic sect, stated in an address to his followers in 1978, that all children, regardless of the labels placed on them by professionals or developmental expectation, should be entitled to full acceptance within the community. All, in his opinion, should be afforded the right to an education that is realistic in scope yet hopeful and progress-minded in philosophy.

These pronouncements notwithstanding, Hawkins-Sheppard (1984) notes that religious education has lagged behind other educational institutions in its adaptation of materials and programmes to suit the needs of students with disabilities. The author provides an extensive bibliography of materials, programmes and curricula available for the absorption of pupils with disabilities into the religious educational classroom. Despite the availability of such materials, the author states that much of the progress being made is occurring in an informal manner. Religious institutions are relying not on specially trained experts and professionally prepared materials, but on the creativity and instinct of lay-leaders and teachers.

Some religious communities are seeking, in an organised and professional manner, to reach out to the population of persons with disabilities and to provide them with specialised religious programmes. The National Organisation on Disability has produced an inter-faith manual entitled *That All May Worship* (Davie & Thornburgh, 1992), designed to raise awareness among faith communities and enhance access to their facilities. The National Catholic Office for Persons With Disabilities, distributes a videotape entitled *We Are All One Flock* (1990), which encourages congregations to allow for the full participation of those with disabilities in religious life. It contains a statement in support of such integration from the Association of American Bishops. Goodman (1993), in an article entitled *The Disabled in the Jewish Community*, presents a plan for a two-pronged approach to complete integration, where access and attitudes are adjusted so as to begin the process of redress such that synagogues may be open to all who wish to participate.

The Reena Foundation, a Jewish organisation in the Toronto, Canada area for the employment, housing and recreation of adults with developmental delays, employs a professional who serves as a religious specialist. In addition to co-ordinating and producing educational materials for the clients of Reena group homes, this professional serves as a link between the community and clients, working for the complete integration of the population in various religious community functions. Other Jewish, Roman Catholic and United Church officials have noted the fact that similar professionals or lay leaders function in various faith communities.

This though, is the exception rather than the rule. As the preceding examples have demonstrated, the bias against the population of persons with disabilities runs

deeply within the Judeo-Christian faiths, making progress difficult and painfully slow. Those with disabilities have won many legal and moral battles in their struggle to be integrated into general secular society. Because of the strict separation of church and state, however, legal progress in the religious domain is almost impossible. This means that persons with a disability and their advocates must appeal to religious individuals and institutions to accept and integrate them fully into their congregations. It is sadly ironic that the institutions which help shape the morality of humanity, which preach acceptance and love and which have traditionally assisted those with disabilities, have been so slow to reconcile old beliefs and begin the process of complete integration.

Conclusions

Religious institutions in the Western world are being forced to confront many of the prejudices and beliefs which have allowed for the creation of oppressed minorities within the wider societal structure. It is becoming increasingly clear to scholars and activists that disability must be seen as a social construct, resulting in the relegation of persons with disabilities to the status of an underprivileged minority (Hahn, 1988, 1993, 1994). Negative attutides towards persons with disabilities have given rise to intolerable and untenable conditions for many, both within the church or synagogue and in the broader social context. These attitudes are difficult to rend from the fabric of religious beliefs and there are many who feel that doing so would ultimately serve to undermine the basic structure and makeup of religious traditions. As with attitudes which discriminate on the basis of race, gender and sexual orientation, the views held by Western religion towards disability seem to lie deep within the core of its basic beliefs.

It is the challenge of all those who value religion in its many forms, to see that there are deeper core beliefs which supersede exclusionary and oppressive dogma, and which, in fact, form the nucleic bedrock of all faiths. These are the ideals of inclusion and acceptance, the glorification of divine creation in its many forms and a striving for the betterment of humanity. It is this set of deeper-core values which not only allow religion to cast off its negative prejudices, but compel it to do so. An understanding of the negative attitude taken towards disability and an examination of their historical, political, psychological, sociological and economic etiology is warranted as a first step toward discovering the means of liberating religion from such destructive beliefs.

If it can succeed in achieving this delicate and precarious task, then religion may be in a more advantageous position to continue playing a central and emergent role in the lifestyle of modern society. If not, it runs the risk of becoming mired in its oppressive and outdated mode of rationalisation and may itself fall victim to a tide of rejection and isolation brought on by the new political and social realities of contemporary Western civilisation. Such adherence to dogma will most certainly continue to foster a climate of anger, dissention and conflict, which in and of itself seems to run contrary to the goals of religious tolerance and community building.

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