

# Disability Theology

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## Abstract

Disability theology explores the ways in which religious traditions have engaged (or failed to engage) notions of disability and impairment, and offers constructive possibilities for inclusive theological work in the future. This essay reviews four primary models of disability (moral model, medical model, social model, and limits model) and explores how these relate to religious understandings and practices. The image of the Disabled God is highlighted, as are the ways this field has come to engage varieties of disability experience (including cognitive disabilities and autism) and diversity more broadly. Philosophical notions (such as those around normalcy or human flourishing) are explored alongside advocacy and access issues (particularly with regard to religious practices such as preaching, religious education, and biblical interpretation). Future possibilities and directions for disability theology are also proposed.

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## *Overview*

Disability theology begins with the observation that experiences of impairment (physical, intellectual, psychological, and social) are a significant and relatively unsurprising element of human life, and as such are worthy of theological reflection. There is no single approach to disability theology because understandings of disability as well as styles of theology vary widely across contexts. Yet most share a few common elements, including attention to embodiment as a source for theological reflection, a belief that there is nothing inherently wrong with a person who experiences disability, a commitment to justice for people with disabilities, and a fundamental conviction that theology and disability have something significant to say to each other.

## *Defining Disability*

The first task of any theology of disability is to define the word “disability” itself. Our commonsense understanding of this word might make definition seem unnecessary, at least at first. Most of us would say that we know what disability is, and that we recognize it when we see (or otherwise encounter) it. Yet when we do not pause to ask ourselves what we mean by disability, we let our unexamined assumptions block our ability to engage disability more fully. For one thing, this leads us to think about disability in particularly narrow ways (e.g., stereotypical portrayals of wheelchair users, blind and deaf people, and those with developmental disabilities), leading us to ignore the vast diversity of people with disabilities, let alone the diversity of disability experiences themselves. We too easily forget that people with disability hold a wide variety of other identity characteristics as well (such as gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, political views, and so on) and that each experience of disability is somewhat unique (and so, for example, that not all wheelchair users or people with Down Syndrome are the same). This lack of attention to definition also leads us to simply skip over harder queries such as whether

experiences like depression, PTSD, or obesity might count as disability, answering such questions without pausing to ask what we mean by disability. Second, this leads us to caricaturize disability rather than to engage it complexly, and so we imagine it to be primarily an experience of loss, we imagine people with disabilities as worthy of either pity or admiration, and we rest more on cartoonish imaginations than on thoughtful engagement with the complexity of life with disability. Finally, our unexamined assumptions about disability lead many of us to think about disability as an “other” experience – something that is unusual, a rupture to normal life, and something we only need to think about when it happens to us or someone we care about – a perspective that is surprisingly at odds with data that shows that as many as one in five residents of the United States report some level of disability (Census Bureau 2008), that many of us have experiences that fall on a continuum with disability or that benefit from accommodation (eyeglasses to help us read, curb cuts that assist with strollers), or that most of us are likely to experience significant impairment at some point in our lives, particularly as we age. Most of us live with illusions about disability and non-disability, without ever pausing to ask what values such understandings evoke.

Disability studies scholars and theologians have identified at least four different models of how to think about disability: moral, medical, social, and limits. Within the *moral model*, attention is paid to how disability is interpreted as either good or bad, and how people with disabilities are imbued with moral weight. This can be observed in literary depictions from Shakespeare and Dickens to comic books and reality TV shows, where a villain is often marked with some sort of hideous scar or deformity or where a person with a disability is immediately identified as a hero and simultaneously as deserving of pity simply by basis of their impairment, long before we know anything else about their character or life story. Religious studies scholars pay particular attention to the ways in which disability is attributed moral value in sacred texts, from Leviticus 21:16–24 which forbids anyone with a blemish from approaching the altar to stories of Jesus in the Christian gospels that seem to equate belief and faithfulness with physical healing. A modern companion to the moral model is the *medical model*, which understands bodies to be like machines that work to greater and lesser extent, and where disability is identified as a defect in the body. While perhaps less obviously so, this model is still thick with value claims, particularly insofar as bodies with significant “defects” are considered to be less desirable (and thus, less good) than those without, and in which the preference is always towards modification: to fix the defect if one can, to normalize it as much as possible if it cannot be fixed, and to hide it if neither fixing nor normalizing are effective. These two models are so embedded in the dominant United States culture that most of us do not even recognize them as interpretations, but instead either treat them as accurate and sufficient depictions (e.g., assuming that every experience of disability is best understood as a problem or defect to be fixed) or simply do not even notice them at all (e.g., failing to recognize that the villain so often has a scar or limp).

Disability studies scholars and advocates challenge the assumption that these interpretations are the best ways to make sense of disability. The *social model*, based on the principles of disability rights advocacy, parallels in some ways the commitments of liberation theology or of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. It begins by noting the ways in which disability is a minority group experience insofar as people with disabilities experience prejudice, exclusion, and discrimination in employment, housing, recreational opportunities, and countless other aspects of life. It goes beyond this observation, though, to challenge our idea of disability itself. Rather than equating disability with physical (including cognitive or emotional) impairment, the social model suggests that the

“problem” of disability lies in society itself – in architecture, attitudes, and assumptions. This model suggests, for example, that if physical spaces were sufficiently accessible, the inability to walk or see would not be disabling. Or, similarly, it proposes that if we were to engage people with disabilities as people first, rather than as diagnoses or (im)moral caricatures, we could go a long way toward addressing the problem of disability. In other words, this model changes the emphasis from a person who cannot navigate an environment to that of an environment (physical, social, and so on) that excludes certain people based simply on a perceived difference. One can easily see similarities here to other liberation movements, which claim, for example, that people should not be judged on the color of their skin but by the content of their character (King 1963). This social model of disability has become the foundation for most advocacy and scholarly work on disability today.

The *limits model* takes this a step further by questioning our assumptions about what it is to be “normal” or “disabled” in the first place. It highlights impairment as an unsurprising aspect of the human condition, something that we all experience at some point in our lives. Not only do our lives often progress toward impairment (e.g., as we age or take risks in life), but we are surrounded by limits (which we do not consistently describe as impairment) all the time – we cannot fly, we experience scarcity in natural resources, we all tire and die. Human life is, in so many ways, an experience of limits. This model observes that our notion of “normal” is an illusion, and a dangerous one at that. Instead of cementing disability as a distinct and separate category of otherness, this lens encourages us to consider the ways in which limits are normal, unsurprising, fluid, and even good. While rejecting sappy notions such as “we are all disabled,” this model allows us to engage and assess the particularities and specificities embodied in each experience of disability. For example, under this model we can observe that it is a bit absurd to lump together a person who is blind from birth, a person who uses a wheelchair as the result of a skiing accident, and a person with Down Syndrome as if they all have something in common simply by virtue of being labeled with disability. Similarly, we can ask why it is we interpret a wheelchair as a sign of disability (rather than as a piece of technology that assists the human journey, as does a car, calculator, or eyeglasses), or what life would look like if we highlighted more positive characteristics of disability, like creativity, interdependence, or perseverance, rather than defining disability as an experience we would like to avoid as much as possible.

### *The Disabled God*

Embodiment and healing have been issues of particular interest since the beginning of Christianity (Avalos 1999; Pilch 2000), and even some of the earliest Christian theologies have thus had something to say about disability (both as physical impairment and as social exclusion), even if by their silence. The body in general was often a contested site in early Christianity, often in relation to questions around Jesus’ nature and whether God took on earthly form because the body is part of the goodness of creation or whether incarnation was a necessary evil (or, even that Christ only appeared to be enfleshed). Some early church thinkers engaged questions of impairment directly, often within the context of moral understandings of difference (Brock & Swinton 2012). And, of course, people with disabilities have been participants in religious communities all along, and even many of Christianity’s significant theologians, from Paul to Luther, experienced some level of physical impairment themselves. However, as much as Christianity can be described as a religion of the body, attitudes toward disability and impairment are

complex and, in most cases, more negative than positive. Christian interpretations of disability include describing it as a punishment for sin, a test of faith, an opportunity to inspire others, a potential demonstration of God's healing power, or simply a mysterious act of God. While some of these perspectives may seem outdated today, they still linger in hymns (such as *Amazing Grace*), sermons, bible studies, and other elements of religious practice. In addition, religious communities have often been resistant to disability advocacy, arguing for exemption from the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and being slow to embrace architectural modifications or inclusive hiring practices (Eiesland & Saliers 1998).

A significant shift in religious engagement with disability came with the publication of Eiesland's *The Disabled God* in 1994. Prior to this, few religious resources about disability were available, most of which focused on pastoral care (e.g., Colston 1978), adaptive religious education (e.g., Bogardus 1963), or devotional pieces (e.g., Tada 1976). Eiesland's work was unique in that it built off of feminist and liberation theologies and engaged the social model of disability rather than simply perpetuating medical or moral understandings. As a religious scholar with a disability herself, she experienced what she described as a significant rift between her activism and her faith, as religious communities seemed unaware of (and sometimes resistant toward) the disability rights movement and disability rights groups were inattentive to or dismissive of religious or spiritual issues. As she looked for answers, she considered an image of God as disabled – specifically, “God in a sip-puff wheelchair... Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant” (Eiesland 2002, p. 13). This resonated for her with the resurrection stories of Jesus (Luke 24:36–39), where Jesus invites his followers to see and touch the scars on his hands and feet – scars that remain even after resurrection, even as part of his restoration to wholeness. From this, Eiesland began to imagine ways in which we might reexamine the Christian story as one that is open to and even on the side of people with disabilities. As Rebecca Chopp notes in her introduction to Eiesland's book, “The most astonishing fact is, of course, that Christians do not have an able-bodied God as their primal image. Rather, the Disabled God promising grace through a broken body is the center of piety, prayer, practice, and mission” (Eiesland 1994, p. 11).

Eiesland's proposal of the Disabled God became far more than just an image or metaphor, but rather has served as an impetus for reimagining intersections of religion and disability more broadly. It begins by noting that disability is fully compatible with our ideas of what is good and holy, that disability itself can be holy and good. The image of the Disabled God rejects the notion that disability is in any way a consequence of individual sin (Jesus did not sin and yet became disabled) and protests the exclusion of people with disabilities from worship or leadership (Jesus' scars did not make him ineligible for continued leadership). The invitation to touch Jesus' scars shows that taboos against disability are inappropriate, as are shallow expressions of sympathy or pity. Beyond this, Eiesland argues that people with disabilities have an epistemological privilege – that they know things (about God, about themselves, about life) that non-disabled people do not know, by virtue of their complicated bodies and by their experiences with social injustice. She also claims that God actively sides with people with disabilities (drawing here on the precepts of Latin American liberation theology, where God is proactively on the side of the poor and the oppressed). Rather than beginning with the belief that physical impairment is the problem to be addressed or solved, this approach names intolerance, injustice, and exclusion – and, importantly, the people and structures that perpetuate these injustices – as the “problem” of disability. And, Eiesland persuasively argues, God is not one of the perpetrators of this injustice, but rather sides with the oppressed and their allies.

As disability theology has developed from Eiesland's initial proposal, it has attempted in numerous ways to reveal and deconstruct the impairments of the moral and medical models and to build upon the constructive possibilities embodied in the social and limits models. Additional images of God that embrace disability have been offered, such as the Interdependent God (Black 1996), which proposes God to not be a giant puppeteer who causes impairment but rather that God is present in the midst of life and the midst of suffering, the Authentic God (Creamer 1995), where God authentically claims I AM rather than assigning or accepting value based narrowly on ability or capacity, or the Accessible God (Block 2002), which highlights the stories of Jesus welcoming all to sit and eat with him, and with particular attention to those who were typically considered unwelcome. Others built on these liberatory images and carried them forward into particular contexts and practices of ministry, such as preaching (Black 1996), religious education (Webb-Mitchell 1996), biblical interpretation (Bishop 1995), and other elements of religious practice (Eiesland & Saliers 1998). Still others explored religion as it emerged within communities that intentionally include people with disabilities, such as those within the L'Arche movement (Hauerwas & Vanier 2008; Hryniuk 2010; Reimer 2009).

### *Expansion of the Field*

As scholars built on this early work in disability theology, the field gained depth and complexity. One significant development relates to the creative potential in the image of God (the *imago Dei*). Eiesland's proposal of the Disabled God as a sip-puff wheelchair user, or of an impaired Christ with visible scars on his hands and feet, was clearly revolutionary in ways that resembled James Cone's proposal of the Black Jesus (Cone 1975) or of feminist theologians' suggestions that we consider God as a woman. But a wheelchair-using God was not as impossible to imagine as some of the proposals that came next. What if we propose a Deaf God (Lewis 2007; Morris 2008)? Or, perhaps more provocatively, what if we imagine God with a cognitive disability or mental illness? Reflection on intellectual disability in particular not only raised a challenge against anthropocentric models of God (i.e., that imagining God as a person may have creative potential but also carries significant dangers and limitations) but also highlighted some of the problematic assumptions of the social model, particularly the implied claim that people with disabilities are "just as good" as the non-disabled, where "good" actually meant competent, smart, capable, and so on. Theological engagement with experiences of autism (Gillibrand 2010; Reynolds 2008), Down Syndrome (Yong 2007), or profound intellectual disability (Haslam 2011; Reinders 2008) has also led to interesting epistemological questions around what it means to be human and how we attribute value to individuals and relationships. Attention to such issues continues to be one of the most provocative areas in disability theology today.

A second significant development focuses on complexity beyond the image of God, looking at the core assumptions of disability models and representations more deeply. Some of this work emphasizes the inadequacies of the social model and the need for additional ways of thinking about disability, but it also highlights the instability of disability identity itself (Davis 2002). Drawing on insights from postcolonial and queer theories, this stream of work rejects not only the hierarchical structure but also the binary division of able and disabled, and proposes that "normal" is nothing but an illusion – and one that is dangerous, deceitful, and needs significant deconstruction (Creamer 2009). Thus, a disabled reading, or a disability theology, is not only a more liberatory perspective than the alternatives, but it is, in many ways, the only legitimate option. This awareness offers

openings for a critical analysis of structures, conventions, and worldviews that go far beyond what we typically think of as residing narrowly within the category of disability (Betcher 2007).

A third significant development has come as this work has gained greater acceptance as a legitimate scholarly undertaking rather than solely as a personal interest or specialty area. Just as the institutionalization of disability studies in academic departments and programs led to an explosion of research and publications (Davis 2010), the scholars and graduate students who followed this first generation of disability theologians have taken this work out into a wide variety of disciplinary undertakings. Active groups at both the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature offer a range of papers and panels each year, the *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health* publishes a wide variety of scholarly papers, and programs such as the *Summer Institute on Theology and Disability* and the biennial meeting of the *European Society for the Study of Theology and Disability* offer opportunities for scholars to share and critically engage each others' work. One of the best examples of the explosion of scholarship being done at intersections of disability and religion is within biblical studies, where exploration of disability is becoming to be understood not as a specialty concern but rather as part of responsible interpretation, perhaps like feminist interpretation before it (Avalos *et al.* 2007; Moss & Schipper 2011; Yong 2011). More and more, it is recognized that the insights from disability are widely relevant within theology and religious studies, both because disability is a common experience and because insights about embodiment, categories of normal/abnormal, themes of inclusion and exclusion, and so on, have broad and wide significance. To borrow a term from queer studies, disability is finally coming out of the academic closet.

### *Future Directions*

While disability theology has come a long way in a very short time, much work remains to be done. As with disability studies more broadly, disability theology has been largely inattentive to issues of race, ethnicity, and class, and has only had minimal engagement with queer studies (Creamer 2010). Without greater attention to intersectionality, disability theology will likely remain a segmented field, and will fail to benefit from the theoretical work already done in these other fields let alone represent fully the lives of real people with disabilities who also hold other identity characteristics. Similarly, published works on disability and religion have primarily been Christian in focus, with scarce attention to other traditions (notable exceptions: Abrams 1998; Ghaly 2010; Schumm & Stolzfus 2011). As the field continues to mature, greater attention to religious and other types of diversity will be essential.

As disability theology continues to move toward greater complexity, it will continue to stretch and challenge our notions of disability. This will likely include greater recognition of the diversity of experiences of disability, both that even people with similar impairments may still have very different perspectives on disability and theology (e.g., that there can be no single "Deaf Theology" or "Theology of Autism") and that disability includes experiences that have not yet received much theological attention (e.g., chronic pain). One might look to earlier contextual theologies, such as feminist theology and Black theology, to imagine ways in which disability theology might grow, including a possible division into those that claim a redemptive core to the tradition and thus engage in historical reconstruction as opposed to those who might find Christianity to be based on problematic notions of healing and histories of oppression and, as a result, to be largely irredeemable or in need of new models and practices. At the same time, it is

important to recognize that disability differs from gender, race, and other identity markers in significant ways, particularly in its fluidity and porousness. As a result, future work in disability theology will need to take its distinctiveness seriously, claiming its unique perspective and niche while simultaneously continuing to push religious studies more broadly to engage disability and for disability studies to attend more carefully to religious themes and practices.

Finally, in the midst of all these theoretical explorations, it is essential to recognize that disability still remains a significant issue of civil rights. People with disabilities experience some of the highest levels of poverty and unemployment within any group in the United States and are disproportionately the victims of crime and abuse (Census Bureau 2008). Current political challenges to health care funding, government programs, and rights-based legislation makes this population even more vulnerable. Such issues require attention of theologians and other religious leaders, both to address ways in which worship and faith communities can be models of inclusion and access (Carter 2007; Webb-Mitchell 2010) and to speak to issues of justice more broadly.

### Short Biography

Deborah Beth Creamer is Interim Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Director of Library and Information Services at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. She is a founding member and past chair of the Religion and Disability Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion and is the author of *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford University Press, 2009) as well as numerous other articles and chapters on disability and religion. Her teaching interests include constructive theology, practical theology, feminist theory, and disability studies. She holds a BA in Religious Studies from Carleton College, an M.Div. from Vanderbilt Divinity School, an MLIS from the University of Denver, and a Ph.D. in Religious and Theological Studies from the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology.

### Note

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