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Disability is everywhere once you know how to look for it. The challenge for those who study religion and theology has been to develop conceptual frameworks, intellectual practices, and pedagogical awareness that investigate disability's presence, rather than perpetuate the "absent presence" of disability within our work. Disability has been clearly present in our own lives, the lives of students and co-religionists, sacred stories, and social context. Yet until relatively recently, it has not been explicitly incorporated into our religious and professional identities, theories, or descriptions of religion.

Increasingly scholars in religion and theology are creating and adapting new theories about disability within our teaching, research, and professional identities. The emergence of this focus has not happened as a result of our spontaneous enlightenment — it has been people with disabilities who have brought these questions to the forefront. Just as the presence of women in the classroom and profession has challenged assumptions of gender norms, people with disabilities, ever more present in our educational and religious contexts, have illuminated workings of disability systems. (My use of the term "disability system" draws on and extends that of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson [2002].) Scholars with disabilities are using their own lives to examine the taken-for-granted symbols and sacred texts of their work. Students with disabilities come to classes with normalized expectations for accommodation. Religious professionals seek new ways to practice their leadership that honors their disabilities. Yet disability isn't at work only when people with disabilities are present; it is invoked anytime "normal" conditions of humanity are invoked in ways that exclude disability. Normal bodies only exist in relation to the unnamed category of "abnormal" or disabled bodies. Further disability is not constructed only as an individual issue. Collective representations, political values, and

religious mores incorporate disability whether or not we have learned to see them. In the essays that follow, individuals who know the terrain of disability guide us toward understanding all the ways and places it is present — even if not plainly on the surface.

Historically, the dominant disability system in the United States resulted in the almost total marginalization of people with disabilities. Existing under a system in which the only measures to be taken in relation to disability were preventive, curative, and rehabilitative, people with disabilities were segregated and subject to medical and moral care, attended to by doctors and chaplains. Yet the formation of the Independent Living (IL) movement in the 1960s, which asserted that people with disabilities should have the choice of living in the community with personal assistance that would allow the individual to hold a job, keep a home, go to school, and worship, began to transform postsecondary education for people with disabilities. In so doing, it opened the way for intellectual currents that have come together to create today's disability studies.

When Ed Roberts enrolled as the first severely disabled student at the University of California at Berkeley, the assumption that the work of college and university teachers *should* include attention to the educational needs of diverse learners, especially students with disabilities, emerged. Later legislative advances were made, especially with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (later called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), which established the right of children with disabilities to a public school education in an integrated environment. In the next two decades, millions of disabled children were educated under its provisions, radically changing the lives of people in the disability community and radically altering the context of postsecondary education. Our physical presence in educational settings necessitated some attention to basic architectural access and to attitudinal biases against people with disabilities.

Whereas the existence of ramps allowed physical access and laws protected from outright discrimination, people with disabilities continued to encounter intellectual frameworks for disability within most academic disciplines that were inadequate to their experience. Generally, disability has been defined as a medical problem and thus a personal tragedy. Despite diverse emphases, the ethos was that disability was synonymous with suffering — physically, psychologically, and spiritually. The pitiable state of being disabled was linked to illness, aging, bereavement, and death.

The status quo in interpreting disability was disrupted by the expansion and public attention to the disability rights movement in the United States and internationally. Disability activists adamantly rejected the tragedy paradigm that fatalistically relegated people with disabilities to a

lesser existence, and they denied claims that medical experts were the primary authorities on such people's lives. The realities that plagued people with disabilities — poverty, lack of affordable and accessible housing, low employment rates, and continued poor education — did not emanate from biology. They were the result of socially constructed factors that systematically excluded people from active participation in society. The tragedy rested not in the bodies of people with disabilities, but in the body politic. Activists trained their efforts on the passage of a comprehensive disability rights bill. Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1995 sought to ensure reasonable accommodation in the workplace, in state and local government services, and in public accommodations and commercial facilities.

Within the context of social and political activism, people with disabilities asserted “nothing about us without us” — meaning that we were the subjects of our own experience and we deserved to be at the speaking center of any account of disability. Illuminating systemic barriers, exclusionary practices, and cultural misperceptions, people with disabilities gave accounts that did not fit within the existing models of disability. While no single account of “what really is a disability?” can be given, increasingly the means for framing the question turned away from biology toward cultures and societies, asking, for example, “what are the shared cultural assumptions about disability and how do they relate to the systemic treatment of people with various disabilities?” Incrementally new and more socially attuned models have been advanced, many by scholars with disabilities themselves. Broadly understood, these models view disability as a means for scaling human variation, which assign value to bodies and which help to determine attitudes and practices toward those bodies, their appearance, and their functioning. Disability systems are integrative regimes of cultural interpretation and social organization, not unlike race and gender systems. Most societies have multiple disability systems, but generally one tends to be dominant. Within it, different disabilities are scaled differently; psychiatric disabilities may be understood to be infinitely worse than paraplegia, for example. Further, not only differences in functional limitation structure individual experiences of disability, but also differences in collective cultural interpretation and social opportunity shape how a person experiences his or her own disability. This approach allows us to reinterpret disability so that it is not only about people with disabilities, but rather a systemic means for scaling bodies in society. Understanding disability systems necessitates a careful and full account of the multiple and sometimes contradictory roles of religions and theologies in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.

Historicizing the emergence of disability as a focus of intellectual inquiry highlights the basic elements that continue to be vital as we work toward making disability fully present in religious studies and theological education. First, students with disabilities on our campuses and in our classrooms necessarily raise basic issues about the adequacy of our pedagogical practices, our built environment, and our social arrangements. Second, attention to disability within the classroom ought to situate people with disabilities at the “speaking center” — individually and collectively as subjects of their own experience and initiators of activism. Third, definitions and

frameworks of disability need to elucidate the dynamic interplay of a complicated constellation of cultural, economic, political, and biological factors. While the disability system is understood to be different things in different contexts, it always functions to scale bodies and provide moral valuations to those differences. Fourth, a systemic approach requires a willingness to reevaluate our religious practices, theories, and descriptions in light of the disability system at work in them.

Disability studies in religion is, thus, not simply any religious reference to disability or any effort to incorporate students with disabilities into the content and structure of a religion or theology class. Integrating disability studies into our teaching and research means broadening our collective inquiry and questioning our assumptions. Today disability studies is burgeoning in the study of religion and theology. As one of the founding co-chairs of the AAR's Religion and Disability Studies Group, I have seen the exciting genesis of scholarship in this area. Religious and theological studies are not simply recipients of new ideas generated elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, but are contributing new ideas about how myths of origin function in disability systems or how battles over moral meanings of disability shaped the history of asylums, for example. We are offering to disability studies a more nuanced, considered, and complex account of the multiple roles religious symbols and practices play within the emergences, fostering, and alteration of disability systems (Eiesland 1995).

The essays in this issue of *Spotlight* provide various perspectives on the extent to which disability has, indeed, become a category of analysis, a set of pedagogical practices, a social identity, a political position, a historical account, and a representational system within the context of religious studies and theological education. No single account within disability studies in religion could possibly hope to address all or most diverse experiences of disability, cultural context, and religions represented within the contemporary classroom contexts. Yet some of the insights here provide the scholar-teacher with direction and reassurance for the critical intellectual work that will facilitate greater integration. After the appearance of

*The Disabled God*

, many fellow scholars noted that they would be interested in incorporating disability into their courses, but there wasn't literature specific to their subdiscipline in the study of theology and religion. In 1998, I (with Don E. Saliers) sought to respond to that need by publishing a book that addressed some primary academic areas within theological education. Since then the expansion of scholarship on disability studies in religion has meant that more and more subject areas within religious studies and theological education have at least some scholarship that integrates disability. Now, whenever we teach a class, we can respond to our question "what is a disability studies perspective on this?" by accessing some appropriate content. Though much work remains, integrating disability into religious studies and the theological education curriculum and pedagogy is underway, and these articles further the effort.

## References

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