

REVIEW

Title: Disability in the Christian Tradition. A Reader

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Disability in the Christian Tradition. A Reader is edited by Brian Brock, lecturer in moral and practical theology and John Swinton, professor of practical theology and pastoral care – both at the University of Aberdeen. The publication aims at showing “a way beyond modern secular disability discourses” (p. 19) by going to the sources to discover what the discourse is all about, and it aims at proposing how to deal with disability in contemporary societies. The essays are written by nine men and five women from Europe (Britain, Germany, The Netherlands) and the United States of America. The reader is not only reflecting a geographical western spectrum, it also shows a variety in terms of academic and/or practical background of the contributors (Th.D. candidate, PhD-student, lecturers, Associate Professors or Professors). The authors meet in their engagement in the discourse about what has come to be labelled disability.

The essay collection is organized chronologically starting with some of the Church Fathers (Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Lactantius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine), moving to two medieval theologians (Thomas Aquinas and Julian of Norwich) and thereafter presenting the reformers Luther and Calvin. The later Enlightenment period is exemplified with nineteenth and twentieth centuries thinkers like Hegel, Kierkegaard, Van den Bergh, Bonhoeffer and Barth before ending with contemporary theologies of disability represented by Radford Ruether, Eiesland, Coakley, Vanier and Hauerwas. The reader shows how thinkers throughout history deal differently with what is now called disability: some are oriented by an activist approach, others by a definitional approach, whereas others again are oriented by an existential approach. Rarely all three strands are present in one thinker. In order to hold the publication together the contributors are encouraged to follow a three step recipe: First, what did the thinker say directly about disabling conditions? Second, what is problematic about such an account? Third, what can we learn from such an account of disability?

How does the reader relate to the interdisciplinary field of disability studies? This publication sees itself as more appropriate than disability studies to engage with the concept of disability in historical, dogmatic and practical discourses: “The discourse of disability cannot be only a discourse about politics or disability studies, because it raises wide-ranging questions for constructive practical and dogmatic theology.” (p. 9). And it does not share the goals of disability studies “[...] with its

strong emphasis on politics and political intervention as the most appropriate way of enabling the acceptance and participation of people with disabilities within church and society.” (p. 512). Instead, the publication wants to emphasize the need to think theologically about disability. One should not embrace the secularization of knowledge which is typical for modern intellectual life: “This contemporary renaissance of explicitly theological and doctrinal approaches to the question of disability offers a way beyond modern secular disability discourses [...]” (p. 19).

The title *Disability in the Christian Tradition* is ambitious. Obviously there ought to be historical gaps in any survey of “the Christian tradition” on any topic, so also in this attempt. What about thinkers between the Reformation and the nineteenth century, for instance? And what are really the criteria for choosing the included thinkers to the exclusion of others? There is no systematic discussion of this, and one is tempted to ask whether the contributors were chosen over the thinkers? However, one of the main weaknesses of this publication – which perhaps at the same time is its strength – is its hesitance to define the term disability. On the negative side, when a working definition of disability never is given this results in various terms used in a variety of ways by the contributors (even the now politically incorrect term “handicap” is used, p. 10). On the positive side however, the strength of not providing one definition of disability is that it does open up for a wide discourse on what it means to be human – a discourse the readers of *Disability in the Christian Tradition* can take further into their respective fields.

As already said, the over-all aim of the publication is to go to the sources to discover what disability and disability discourse is all about. As a critical reader I am therefore curious about why contributions from biblical studies are not included in this publication. What is today labelled as disabilities are described in both the Old and the New Testament and writers in the Christian tradition do refer to the Bible – cf. the index of Scripture on pp. 562-563 in the essay collection. If and when the human body is described in biblical texts it is most often done when the body does not function according to how one expects it to function (see J. Schipper, “Embodying Deuteronomistic Theology in 1 Kings 15:22-24” in *Bodies, Embodiment, and the Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, S.T. Kamionkowski & W. Kim (eds.) 88. New York: T & T Clark 2010). The deeper argument of the essay collection would have been strengthened if there were a few essays also on (i) biblical portrayals of disability and on (ii) how powerful the Bible has been throughout the Christian tradition – and still is – in creating notions about disability. Even though I agree with the editors that disability is a modern construct it is present in the Bible, and the Bible – explicitly or implicitly – is present in contemporary discourses on disability.

Despite these few points of criticism, the contribution is a welcomed one for anyone who wants to know how selected thinkers throughout history reflect upon what today is called disability. It succeeds in providing the reader with glimpses into a wider discourse not only about disability, but about what it meant and

means to be a human.

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