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Disability and the Imago Trinitatis

Artikkelen finnes også i en lengre og mer utdypende versjon. Den kan oversendes fra forfatteren ved etterspørsel.

The early twentieth century witnessed the birth of eugenics – the study of how to improve the human race by selective breeding – and the moral questions, which this subject raises, are more relevant than ever. Parallels are found between the old eugenics and what is typically referred to today as modern public health, biomedicine, and genetics. For instance many abortions today are performed on eugenic grounds, that is, in order to prevent the birth of babies likely to be disabled. The belief that the lack of certain human traits makes people less worth, is alluded by ethicist Peter Singer who contends that people who lack the capacity of self-awareness and self-control do not inhabit a sense of personhood, and therefore euthanasia of infants and even newborn children who lack these capacities can be justified. And the geneticist James Watson apparently believes that the undesirability of children with Down syndrome is universal. He writes: "We already accept that most couples don't want a Down child. You would be crazy to say that you wanted one, because that child has no future." (Kafer, 2013, p.3).

Concern regarding genetic testing

Many in the disability community are deeply concerned about increased genetic testing. Such testing, Linda Ward writes, "signals powerful messages about disabled peoples'

fundamental right 'to be.''(Ward, 2000, pp. 187-200). Indeed, disability theorist Wolf Wolfsenberger concludes that Western society is entering upon a 'new genocide' against people with disabilities (Wolfsenberger, 1987, pp.68-69). Thus, when Alison Kafer, a queer theorist, writes, "a future with disability is a future no one wants" (Kafer, 2013, p. 3), she is expressing the near-universal understanding of disability as either defect or disease. Because disability points to a 'lack' or something that is missing, a better future "is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies; indeed it is the very absence of disability that signals this better future."(Kafer, 2013, p.2).

Biblical images to blame?

Theologians have placed much of the blame for the prejudice and discrimination faced by people with disabilities at the feet of Scripture and the discourse of theology itself. Drawing our attention to the scriptural representation of the Kingdom of God as a place where the blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame walk, – a place, in other words, where physical disability is redeemed. Amos Yong contends that Jesus's miraculous power to heal "reinforces the normate (sighted) belief that God is glorified not in disability but only in its overcoming." (Yong, 2001, p.53). Moreover, theologians argue that the explication of the imago Dei in terms of rational functions and capabilities undermines the worth of people with disabilities. For her part Nancy Eiesland concludes that the constructs and practices of theology "have assumed an able-bodied hermeneutic for deciphering human experience and developing an image of God." (Cited in Swinton, 2011, pp.276-277).

This paper explores how a Trinitarian and relational interpretation of the imago Dei can help to liberate the notion of disability from the bonds of social and theological prejudice. My thesis is that a relational interpretation of the imago Dei can help us rethink the dualism of abled versus disabled that so often leads to the dehumanization of people with disabilities. More generally, such an interpretation can lead us to a new appreciation for the place of interdependency and vulnerability in human nature.

The rational imago Dei

Disability scholars point out that disability is constructed as deviant because the goods which modern liberal societies value and hold as normal are goods that people with disability appear to lack. For instance, Thomas E. Reynolds argues that people with disabilities are deemed abnormal because they do not have the autonomy, independence, and intellectual skill – what he calls "body capital" – to participate in the accepted economy of exchange (Reynolds, 2008, p.24). The work of scholars such as Catherine M. LaCugna, Stanley J. Grenz, Charles Taylor and Jürgen Moltmann to name a few, shows that the modern values of autonomy have been strongly influenced by the Christian idea of the imago Dei as a rational substance.

Augustine

In the Early church period, St. Augustine, whose outlook was influenced by Plato, relates the divine image to a sense of "inwardness." He proves God's existence on the basis of our experience of knowing and reasoning: "I am aware of my own sensing and thinking; and in reflecting on this, I am made aware of its dependence on something beyond myself." (Cited in Taylor, 1989, p.134). He defines the rational soul as the chief seat of the divine image: "man was made after the image of Him that created him, not according to the body, but the rational mind, wherein the knowledge of God exists." (Augustine, 2002). For the soul was made rational to enable it to return to God. The return to God is accomplished by knowing God, and since knowledge is the province of the soul, one discovers God by means of an "inward" journey: "Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth." (Quoted in Taylor, 1989, p.129). In Augustine's theology the presence of truth in one's individual soul is an index of the presence of divine truth. Because the path to God lies in the inward self, the surest sign of truth lies within the self as well. He assumes that through the mastery of instrumental reason the human being establishes herself as wholly independent of anything outside of herself, including her body. As Catherine M. LaCugna explains, "largely due to the influence of the introspective psychology of Augustine and his heirs, we in the West today think of a person as a "self" who may be further defined as an

individual center of consciousness, a free, intentional subject." (LaCugna, 1991, p. 250). Augustine's identification of the imago Dei with the inwardness of self-consciousness stands in contrast to the "outwardness" of the world on which that self-consciousness depends for its existence. Some will argue that Augustine is the inaugurator of the modern concept of the individual self as autonomous and independent.

St. Thomas Aquinas

In the medieval period, St. Thomas Aquinas adopted Augustine's definition of the imago Dei as a rational human being. Aquinas is an Aristotelian who does not, like Augustine, advocate the acquisition of knowledge through introspection. He holds that knowledge of everything, including God, "proceeds from sensory to intelligible things, from effects to causes, from what is posterior to what is a priori..." (Aquinas, 1975). Notwithstanding this outward orientation of the process of knowledge-acquisition, Aquinas defines the human being as "an individual substance of a rational nature." (Aquinas, 1946). He conceives of the imago Dei as the soul's highest faculty – a mind that is a "subsistent" entity, independent of the body and anything else for its activity: "It must necessarily be allowed that the principle of intellectual operation, which we call the soul of man, is a principle both incorporeal and subsistent." (Aquinas, 1946). In order to arrive at a unified view of God, he contends, one must abandon the multiplicity of exterior things, including the body, and depend solely on the knowledge of the mind. Moreover, since image of God consists in "the very nature of the mind, common to all men," (Aquinas, 1946) proper image-bearers are intellectual creatures who actively understand and love God, because in doing so they imitate God in God's own ability to understand and love Godself. The active use of reasoning defines what is human in Aquinas's thought.

Reformation - Luther and Calvin

In the Reformation theologians emphasized human depravity as a consequence of original sin, while they retained the definition of human nature as the rational capacity of the imago Dei. For Martin Luther, the imago Dei does not consist of

intellectual capacities in themselves, but of the right ordering and functioning of these capacities. He writes: "Moses says that man is not only like God in this respect that he has the ability to reason, but also that he has a likeness of God, that is, an intellect and will by which he understands God and by which he desires what God desires." (Luther, 1958, p.337). Thus, for Luther, we are not only in the image of God because we have intellect and will, but because it is with these faculties that we actually understand and love God. While Original Sin has made our intellectual abilities deficient, Christ's grace and human faith has to some extent renewed them. For Luther, David Cairns asserts, the imago Dei is "entirely determined by man's response to God." (Cairns, 1953, p.104).

Like Luther, John Calvin holds that human beings, by virtue of our minds, and despite being plagued by the ingrained sin of Adam, are unique self-representations of God. Central to his teaching on the imago Dei is the idea that the divine image is like a mirror. God calls human beings to reflect the glory of God from their creaturely position. Identifying the image of God as the substance of the intellectual soul, he asserts that the knowledge of God represents the soul's true life because it directs us towards wisdom and obedience to God. For Calvin, rationality serves as the prime constituent of the divine image because it enables us to respond to God. Like Luther, he conceives of the image as consisting not in rational faculties themselves, but in their proper functioning. We are in the image of God, properly speaking, when our intellect is directed towards knowledge of and obedience to God in such a way that in us God can see Godself as in a mirror.

Enlightenment - Descartes

In the Enlightenment period, Rene Descartes developed a rigid conception of the person as intelligent and autonomous. Descartes asserts that existence itself is characterized by the life or activity of the rational soul, which God placed in the chief seat of the brain. He argues that the only faculties that are truly human are cognitive ones: consciousness, volition, memory, and reason. "No actions are human," he asserts, "unless they depend on reason." (Descartes, 2003, p.114). For him,

the principal duty in life is to find truth by using one's reason and by rejecting the corporeal world. In Descartes's thought, a human being's existence owes nothing to anything outside of herself; she can potentially exist independent of society and social relations.

Stanley J. Grenz argues that ever since the Enlightenment, Western philosophy has focused on 'self-mastery:' "the self takes charge of the world it inhabits in both its outer and its inner dimension, so as to constitute itself and determine its identity." (Grenz, 2001, p. 67). Locating the image of God in the rational and subsistent soul creates the illusion that human beings are capable of independently mastering the world though the exercise of instrumental reason. Indeed, Colin Gunton opines that the definition of the imago Dei as a rational substance "stands at the heart of the troubles" that are endemic to modern individualism (Gunton, 1997, p.92).

Disability and modern values

Disability scholars argue that disabled bodies are marginalized because their appearance poses a threat to modern values. The image of bodies and minds that are presumed to be suffering confronts society with the reality of human powerlessness and frailty. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, "the disabled figure calls into question such concepts as will, ability, progress, responsibility, and free agency; notions around which people in a liberal society organize their identities." (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.47). People with disabilities threaten to subvert the ideals of the modern self by revealing the false pretenses of existential normalcy. Mary J. Owen asserts, "Those of us with disabilities are precisely the people who prove to society how frail and vulnerable the human creature is." "That reality," she adds, "often frightens non-disabled people into avoiding us." (Owen, 1998, p.4). The fantasy of the abled body is constructed by conjuring up the disabled body as its monstrous "other."

When we look into how the imago Dei has been defined within the Christian tradition, those of us who are concerned with the humanity of people with disabilities are in for a disappointment. The rational imago Dei creates the notion that pe-

ople with disabilities are inferior and thus needs to be rearticulated. The following section will examine the interpretation of the Trinitarian God as a perichoretic unity (see explanation below), and interrogate what it means to be human in the imago Trinitatis.

God as a perichoretic unity

It was the Cappadocian Fathers who developed a theology of the Trinity on the basis of perichoresis – the mutual indwelling of the divine Persons – and used this concept to emphasize the intrinsic relationship between Jesus's divine and human natures. It was John of Damascene who first used it to describe the relationship of the three Persons to one another within the divine being. The Cappadocian Fathers and John of Damascene interpreted the very essence of God as relational.

Catherine LaCugna insists that God as Trinity demonstrates that God's self-expression does not belong to God alone and that God's Trinitarian life includes our life. She argues that if we want to learn what something is – whether God, humanity, or creation as a whole – we must ask, "how is it related?" LaCugna argues that the persons of the Trinity do not exist for the Trinity's sake. This is expressed in her well-known thesis, "God's To-Be is To-Be-in-relationship, and God's being-in-relationship-to-us, is what God is." (LaCugna, 1991, p. 248) God as Trinity is a theology of relationships par excellence: God to us, we to God, we to each other and the rest of creation. God exists perichoretically. The persons of the Trinity mutually permeate each other with love and extend this love outward and "other-ward" towards creation. LaCugna proposes a doctrine of the Trinity in the light of "relational metaphysics" and asserts that God has a "real" relation to creation. The persons of the Trinity are persons-in-relation; they gain their personal identity by means of their relationship to each other and to the world. Likewise Jürgen Moltmann says: "By virtue of their eternal love they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one." (Moltmann, 1981, p.175). In the Trinitarian God we find "a mutual indwelling of the world in God and God in the world." (Moltmann, 1996, p. 307).

Trinitarianism as inclusive communion

The mutual interpenetration (perichoresis) of the divine Persons establishes an inclusive communion where each Person receives everything from the Other and at the same time gives everything to the Other. Moltmann and LaCugna argue that because God's being is radically relational, ours is too. Relationality is the door through which we emerge as persons and begin to become the perfect bearers of the image of God that God intended us to become. This leads us to a basic ontological truth: we are radically dependent on each other to be: "I am because we are." (Reynolds, 2008, p.14). We are called to the kind of relationship that is based on a mutuality and interdependence: a mode of being and living that fosters nonhierarchical and inclusive relationships where we are, in LaCugna's words, "equal partners in a divine dance." (LaCugna, 1991, p. 299). Dependency also makes us vulnerable, that is, capable of being wounded: I might give myself to you, and you might not accept me. Individualism dominates Western morality because it equates vulnerability with dependency—the very failure of self- sufficiency. People with disabilities are shunned because they are seen as vulnerable and dependent. Yet vulnerability, although it can be frightening, is a condition that affects everyone and for that reason binds us together. One might say that individualism ends where vulnerability begins. Moreover, without being willing to make ourselves vulnerable to other people, we cannot earn their trust and build relationships with them. An awareness of our common vulnerability becomes a source of love and concern for others. Martha Nussbaum contends that although human life is dangerous, the virtues only become available in this realm of vulnerability. The basic anthropological constants of relationality make us vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a finite and ambiguous life. Yet they are the conditions that make love possible.

Trinitarian relations as hermeneutical location

By using Trinitarian relations as a hermeneutical location it is possible to understand relationality, dependency and vulnerability as essential to our human condition. In a world that sees people with disabilities as lacking "body-capital," recognition

of our interdependency and vulnerability can help to dismantle the ideology of ableism and demonstrate the false pretenses of normalcy. The imago Dei does not call us to be autonomous and success-worthy; it calls us to be dependent, vulnerable, and attentive to the needs of others. John Zizioulas sums it up beautifully when he says, "It is communion that makes things 'be'; nothing exists without it, not even God." (Zizioulas, 1993, p.17).

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