Injustices of ableism and ageism during the pandemic

A call for intergenerational solidarity

Sunder John Boopalan

Introduction

Isolation from friends, extended family, and public gatherings has become an all-too-common phenomenon in a time of pandemic. And yet, as I reflect on systemic injustices during this time, the image that comes to mind is of a crowd. The image comes from a south Indian city I know well: Bengaluru. If one waited at a bus stop during rush hour for the next bus, one would commonly see commuters hang from the steps of buses that are filled beyond capacity in an overworked metropolitan transport system. The overflow of the crowd can scare off the most (temporarily) able-bodied persons. I would see a bus approach the stop. The bus number on the display would be the right one for me to get on, but the hanging bodies—with one foot on the steps and one dangling just beyond the lowest step—would often make me think, *Perhaps I should just wait for the next bus.* Knowing, however, that waiting for the "next bus" is futile, I would hop on, finding enough space to fit one foot on the outermost step and eventually push my way inside. Nonetheless, on other days, such bravery—a luxury of my able-bodied state and younger age—would take a backseat, and I would simply wait for the next one. On such days, I would ready myself, taking a deep breath, but also using the occasion to observe.

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Buses do not halt long enough for everyone to board. By the time some would walk up to it, the bus would be gone. During those occasions

when they do make it to the bus door, elderly persons often lose their balance as they place one foot over the other. During such times, it is not uncommon for them to be literally caught by younger persons whose bodies dangle from the sides.

Is such kindness motivated by the realization that younger and older persons are united by a common bodily vulnerability? Human persons are certainly bonded by a shared creatureliness that makes us dependent on each other. How might such mutual bodily dependence aid in forging bonds of solidarity during this pandemic and beyond? The pandemic ignited by COVID-19 has jolted the world. Our daily rhythms have been thrown out of sync, and we have been forced to become observers of the cultures we have created or inhabit. What are our observations, then?

The consequences of ableism and ageism have been made manifest by the current pandemic.

North America has been my context for the last decade. Comparatively speaking, public transport for the elderly seems to be better here. One does not witness an overflow of bodies at bus doors. Elderly persons do not get left behind as they wait to board a bus. This does not mean, however, that ableism and ageism are absent. The consequences of ableism and ageism have been made manifest by the current pandemic. If we are to make an intervention in the multidimensional juggernaut of systemic injustice, we will do so by following the bodies of the most vulnerable and allowing them to interrupt our conceptualizations and habits. Because this entails becoming more and more aware of our own bodies and social locations, let me begin there.

Being aware of social location—ours and others'

Social location is not a perspective. It is a fact. I, for instance, am Dalit, South Asian, male, heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied, and so on. Social location is particular to each individual. Social location is the combination of factors such as gender, race, class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, geographic location, and so on.

All of us are marked by time, history, and context. Oftentimes, time, history, and context mark persons in not-so-inclusive ways. They condition our imagination. They condition our habits. They condition our senses. Deeply considering the combination of factors that make up one's social location is a responsibility that comes with being human.

Social location affects how we see ourselves and the world. Take, for instance, that I identify myself as able-bodied. What does that mean? That means that I acknowledge that my place in the world as an able-bodied person affects how I see the world and how I do not see the world.

If I do not understand social location, I might not understand the world. For example, I might walk into a shower and reach for the soap at almost shoulder height because that is simply the way I am used to it. If I do not find the soap at the height I generally look for it, then I might think there is a problem with the bathroom, and I might even curse rather than appreciate that the bathroom is wheelchair accessible.

Because I am able-bodied and am used to being and moving in certain ways, it would be easy for me to superimpose that reality onto other persons who are different from me.

Now imagine a person in a wheelchair who enters a bathroom that is not wheelchair accessible. The soap holder is not at a reachable height. There is no railing or other support fixed to the walls. It makes her life difficult. She might curse too and come to the conclusion that there is a problem with the bathroom. Which of us is right? Saying *both* is the wrong answer. The fact is that she would be right, and I would be wrong.

Because I am able-bodied and am used to being and moving in certain ways, it would be easy for me to superimpose that reality onto other persons who are different from me in more ways than one. And yet, the truth of the matter is that human persons often do that uncritically and thereby become complicit in furthering social inequalities. This is a crisis of our time.

As philosopher Jacques Ranciere writes, "Disagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it."[1] In his book *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment*, Robert A. Ferguson, professor in law, literature, and criticism at Columbia University, describes a common encounter in the classroom. He writes, "At Columbia Law School, I can design scenarios in prosecutorial discretion that will lead seventy students

1 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), x.

to divide sharply over proposed sentences for a given crime. Their recommendations for punishment will extend from six months of house arrest all the way to twenty years in prison for the same offense. Arguments over the differences are intense, and the recommenders are budding lawyers who know some criminal law. How can responsible citizens with that much knowledge come to such divergent views over the same facts?"[2]

Think about that scenario for a minute. How is it possible that responsible citizens with that much knowledge come to such divergent views over the same facts? Today's crisis is that the able-bodied person and the person who uses a wheelchair both say *bathroom* but mean two very different things. In this situation, coming to terms with social location enables the able-bodied person to say to the wheelchair user, "My idea of a bathroom has excluded you. I now recognize the problem and will strive to create a more inclusive space."

This changes everything. Think, for instance, about the number of times that able-bodied persons refer to something they think is not-so-great using the word "lame" to describe it. Exclaiming *That's so lame!* can, in fact, be *injurious* to persons with disabilities or persons who are differently abled. In this way, recognizing my able-bodied privilege allows me to stop myself and others from causing harm.

The injustices of ableism and ageism during the pandemic

In March 2020, referring to the economic impasse occasioned by COVID-19, Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick suggested that older persons should sacrifice their lives so that the economy could be "saved."[3] Commentators call such statements "calculated ageism." It is a term that points to an intentionality of a statement or perspective that "is bold in its ageist claim that older lives are expendable."[4]

Other disparaging remarks such as "Boomer remover" in reference to older adults who may be more prone to COVID-19 or just expressions of

2 Robert A. Ferguson, *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2.

3 The exact quote reads, "There are more important things than living, and that's saving this country for my children and my grandchildren." Cited in Nicholas Jon Crane and Zoe Pearson, "'Liberation' as a Political Horizon amidst the Coronavirus Pandemic in the United States," *Human Geography* 13, no. 3 (November 2020): 315, https://doi.org/10.1177/1942778620962022.

4 Anne E. Barrett, Cherish Michael, and Irene Padavic, "Calculated Ageism: Generational Sacrifice as a Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *The Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 20, no. 20 (2020): 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa132.

"relief that it is the older adults who are dying"[5] are part of a larger culture of ageism and ableism that has seen an increase during this pandemic. In addition to all this is another insidious claim that Liat Ayalon and her coauthors analyze in an essay that includes a table of instances of ageism in different parts of the world. "What we are seeing in public discourse," the authors note, "is an increasing portrayal of those over the age of 70 as being all alike with regard to being helpless, frail, and unable to contribute to society."[6]

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Older persons generally have more bodily vulnerabilities, but ageism—intentionally or otherwise—scapegoats the elderly in ways that harm both older and younger persons. Recent research suggests that "younger adults are at greater risk of psychological distress and loneliness during COVID-19 lockdowns than older adults."[7] Taking such evidence into account, a psychological reading of ageism can be viewed as a scapegoating mechanism—that is, blaming older adults for the crises that young people are suffering.

"Ableism, like other forms of structural domination," notes Kathy Dickson, "need not be overt or even the result of negative intentions."[8] Noticing such implications, Ayalon and her coauthors note that younger people "engage in risk behaviors" that put pressure on "an already stressed health care system."[9] This risky behavior arises out of the mistaken belief that younger persons are safer against the virus. This mistaken belief also instigates resentment against older persons who are, in this view, seen as those holding back the "free life" of the young. From a psychological perspective, such negative views of the elderly can lead to the internalizing

5 Marla Berg-Weger and Tracy Schroepfer, "COVID-19 Pandemic: Workforce Implications for Gerontological Social Work," *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 63 (2020): 525, https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2020.1772934.

6 Liat Ayalon et al., "Aging in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Avoiding Ageism and Fostering Intergenerational Solidarity," *The Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences* 20, no. 20 (2020): e49, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa051.

7 Ayalon et al., "Aging in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic," e51.

8 Kathy Dickson, "Disability and Mennonite Theologies: Resisting 'Normal' as Justice Anytime and in a Global Pandemic," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 113.

9 Ayalon et al., "Aging in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic," e50.

of negative images and messages about aging that are devastating to both old and young.[10]

Still, all is not lost with the young. After Dan Patrick's statement that older persons should sacrifice their lives so that the economy could be "saved," many younger persons opposed it on moral and other grounds. Anne E. Barrett, Cherish Michael, and Irene Padavic analyzed 188 tweets in response to Patrick's remarks and found that 90 percent of those tweets opposed Patrick's calculated ageism. They conclude that "younger generations' opprobrium raises the possibility of intergenerational coalitions."[11] This is laden with possibilities for solidarity, as the authors note, "during the pandemic and beyond."[12] It is to this possibility of intergenerational solidarity we now turn, with an accompanying theological reflection.

Theological reflections on intergenerational solidarity

Notions of ability and disability inform the gut reactions of those who are younger, contributing to ageism and ableism. Paul G. Doerksen, who recently coedited a collection of essays on Anabaptism and disability theology, cites Tim Basselin to observe that "the church needs a theology of disability to deconstruct societal and theological ideals of self-sufficiency and autonomy and to reconstruct ideals of community born in vulnerability, weakness, and dependence."[13] We may draw on such insights as we look towards an intergenerational solidarity that eschews autonomy and embraces mutual bodily vulnerability.

Melanie Howard notes how a Christological impulse in the Anabaptist tradition—a tradition I belong to as well as a Baptist—often prompts interpreters to follow a "medical model" of disability wherein the "goal is to 'heal' those with disabilities."[14] Howard names a misguided logic in this model: "to be a good follower of Jesus," one should "'fix' individuals with disabilities."[15] This has consequences for embracing bodily vulnerability. If we were to phrase this consequence in the form of a question, we

10 Ayalon et al., "Aging in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic," e50.

11 Barrett, Michael, and Padavic, "Calculated Ageism," 4.

12 Barrett, Michael, and Padavic, "Calculated Ageism," 4.

13 Tim Basselin, cited in Paul G. Doerksen, "Introduction: Anabaptist Theology Needs Disability Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 91.

14 Melanie A. Howard, "Jesus' Healing Ministry in New Perspective: Towards a Cultural Model of Disability in Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 96.

15 Howard, "Jesus' Healing Ministry in New Perspective," 98.

might ask, *Why should we embrace bodily vulnerability if our Lord sought to cure physical vulnerability?*

It is here that another Christological possibility arises. In his book *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body*, Rubem Alves observes that those around Jesus "expected that he would talk about divine things. But [Jesus] talks only about human things. Little ones. . . . About life. About our bodies."[16] *Bodies*. In our existence as God's creatures, human persons are deeply connected through bodily reality. If we are to make an intervention in the multidimensional juggernaut of systemic injustice, we may begin by responding to the bodies of those most vulnerable.

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As in the image of the bus stop that I described in the introduction, observing bodily vulnerabilities allows for the possibility of intergenerational solidarity. Instead of allowing ageism and ableism to pit the young and the old against each other, embracing our common vulnerability allows persons to catch each other when we fall. In the end, embracing bodily vulnerability is a simple acknowledgement that as persons, we are dependent on each other.

In thus choosing to be moved by bodily vulnerability, we draw from a well-attested theological tradition in Scripture. The story of the Exodus, for instance, presents the God of the Bible as being *moved* by persons' bodily vulnerabilities. Exodus 3 presents God as coming down in response to the world's injustice and pain. This *coming down* is the same movement that informs God's incarnation in Jesus. God permanently chooses bodily vulnerability as part of the divine life. As followers of the incarnate Lord, Christians are to embrace bodily vulnerability as well. Ageism and ableism do not have a place in such an embrace.

Tweets against ageism and ableism or catching elderly persons who may lose their balance are good acts. While they might not solve all of the world's systemic injustices, laden in them, nevertheless, is the real possibility for intergenerational solidarity. Similar to the way in which Jesus's incarnation was not a picnic into the earthly realm filled with vulnerabilities, let us hope to engender intergenerational solidarity in a permanent

16 Rubem Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body*, translated by L. M. McCoy (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 32.

way during and beyond this pandemic. Fixes cannot be temporary, feel-good mechanisms.

Crises such as this pandemic have a way of revealing the deep fractures of our societies. For those with open hearts, this crisis might be a moment of reckoning to realize how much one's social location affects the way in which bodily vulnerabilities distribute precarity unevenly. Instead of freezing us in states of guilt, this realization can *move* us toward creating, sustaining, and furthering habits and structures that lift up and honor those who are most vulnerable.

About the author

Sunder John Boopalan is assistant professor of biblical and theological studies at Canadian Mennonite University. Learning, teaching, and writing, for John, are more than simple intellectual pursuits but are part of a larger calling to be part of an embodied transformation of self and world. His most recent essay, "Hindu-Christian Relations through the Lens of Caste," is published in *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu-Christian Relations* (2021).