A disabled God

Disabilities as divine possibilities

Heike Peckruhn

> *"I just feel like you took the holy out of God and dragged it into the mud."*
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> *"What good is an anxious God to me? I'm already anxious enough myself."*

The above statements were made by students in my disability theologies course who were eager to explore images of God. I have taught this material in a variety of settings and find that people come hungry for conversations on potentialities regarding our visions of the divine that can transform communities. In these classes, I have encountered a desire to resist the harmful valorization of normalcy and productivity that shapes our real-life embodied experiences and permeates religious spaces. But this eagerness to learn is sometimes mixed with resistance when disability theologies seem to go too far.

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In her groundbreaking work *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland laments that disabled persons in Christian communities are at best accommodated and tolerated and at worst excluded and degraded.[1] Eiesland criticizes the insufficiency of theological articulations in church doctrines and urges Christians to engage with and articulate theologies from disabled embodiment. She challenges communities to go beyond gestures of hospitality and to reorient radically towards justice and inclusion: the problem we face is not simply practical (ramps, microphones, lights) but also appears in theologies that fundamentally exclude and deny justice to disabled persons. Theologies that only emphasize access are based on a paternalistic framework in which "we" welcome "them." What is needed, Eiesland emphatically argues, is disability theologies—liberation theologies

1 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 82–86.

from within the embodied experience of disability, theologies that begin with embodied differences as a normal, unsurprising part of life. These are theologies that conceive of impaired bodies not as a problem but as an *is* in the world, a given context that offers value and gifts to all. Differences in how our bodies, minds, and emotions manifest in the world are fully compatible with how we ought to imagine what is good, holy, and divine.[2]

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Eiesland proposes that we make experiences of disability central to our theological imagination and take seriously the power of language and metaphor in the construction of our lived experiences. She reexamines the Christian story for openings toward justice for disabled people. She turns to the resurrected Jesus, highlighting that Jesus's wounds remain; the resurrected Christ is therefore a symbol of a God who is disabled. As such, Jesus does not overcome human embodiment but displays redemption in all variations of it. Jesus continues to share the human condition of vulnerability and limitation, scarred but not broken, interdependent and in need of community; thus disability in Jesus also emphasizes that disability does not contradict or take away from the integrity of God.[3]

Eiesland's challenge to re-imagine theology was taken up in important engagements from various disciplines, from biblical studies exploring the range of disabilities in texts and contexts, to practical theologies investigating communal responses and responsibilities.[4] In addition, disability theologies have focused on disentangling the idea that humans are created in the image of God from its ableist permeations and on significantly rethinking what it means to be created and beloved as human.[5] While re-imagining theological anthropologies via disability has been a much

2 Eiesland, *Disabled God,* 103–105.

3 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 101.

4 See, for example, in biblical studies, Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper, eds. *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); in practical theology, Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022).

5 See, for example, Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Hans S.

needed liberative correction, imagining a God who is and remains disabled has not found as much traction in disability theologies. With some exceptions, Eiesland's call to radically re-imagine *God* as disabled has been repeated but not much heeded.[6]

An intellectually or emotionally disabled God

Perhaps some of the hesitation to fully imagine disability in God can be explained via critiques directed at Eiesland, as Lisa D. Powell notes in her recent book *The Disabled God Revisited*. For example, for some theologians, the resurrection narratives portray Jesus's body glorified and transformed (a sort of re-ablement, perhaps), and this complicates locating disability in the divine. Others point to the risk of naturalizing debilitation (disablement caused by violence, personal and structural), arguing that maintaining disability in God could lend itself to justifying oppression and the disabling harm it creates as potentially divinely designed.[7] Yet by far the strongest resistance I have encountered to a disabled God (in students and scholars alike) emerges not when we imagine a physically wounded Jesus who empathizes with our experiences of architectural and social barriers, but rather, when we imagine a cognitive or emotionally impaired Jesus, especially post resurrection. For many, it seems relatively palatable to imagine God's bodily experiences of trauma and impairment via incarnation in Jesus, thus articulating God's desire and ability to suffer-with. But a God with cognitive differences or emotional difficulties appears to be a no-go zone for the theological imagination. When I explore cognitive or emotional differences with my students as metaphor for divine possibility, our conversations often return to framing these kinds of disabilities as loss, deficiency, or lack—ideas difficult to reconcile with the being of

Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

6 One such exception emerged in Deaf Liberation Theology that imagines a Deaf God—or, specifically, a God who signs and does not privilege hearing or oralism. See Hannah Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Wayne Morris, *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (New York: Routledge, 2016). Deaf communities emphasize Deafness as linguistic and cultural difference (Deaf as culture versus deaf as physical symptom) toward liberatory ends rather than an identity grounded in disablement via denigrated impairment.

7 Lisa D. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2023), 21–22, 26. Powell succinctly and clearly presents different critiques (especially that of John Swinton) and their salience in her work and offers her own critical constructive proposal.

God. Instead, my students find more comfort in John Swinton's theological exploration of experiences of dementia, in which he constructs a God whose steadfast memory holds our self and personhood even when our minds fail. (Is this an omnicogniscient or hypercognitive God?)[8]

I notice a persistent resistance (or refusal) to flesh out anything other than a God who is removed from disability, enables the overcoming of disability, or was formerly-wounded-but-is-now-beyond-disability, and I wonder if this might be grounded in a deeply embedded linkage between normalcy and potency, especially where cognition is concerned. A desire for a potent and omnipotent image of God is not threatened anymore by any (temporary) earthly experience of physical limits in Jesus or even in the remaining wounds in his glorified body. But a theological construction of God with cognitive or emotional limitations seems too much, too destabilizing of "everything that is holy," and something that could shatter our theologies.

Why are cognition and emotion the areas in which capacity, strength, and autonomy must be preserved in representations of the divine?

To those harboring these fears, I ask, Why can't we go there? Cannot a (disabled) God, in whose image we are made, whose being is relational, vulnerable, and in need of mutually caring relationships—cannot this God experience, embody, and know the world with intellectual or emotional differences and disabilities? Why are cognition and emotion the areas in which capacity, strength, and autonomy must be preserved in representations of the divine? Is it not imaginable—and even more than that, liberating—to construct a God with Down syndrome, an anxious God, or an autistic God? If our response is that we ought not to imagine such a God, lest we shatter the divine image into something less holy or less divine, then I wonder if our resistance is grounded in a deeply held desire for human progression toward competency and saneness—that is, in an ableist imagination of what is beautiful, right, and good. This kind of imagination links mental and emotional competency with productivity and worth, and it links potency with progress, not unlike the ableist imagination that fuels life under capitalism. And this kind of desire for saneness reflects values that make it impossible, even unholy, to see cognitive

8 John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (London: SCM, 2012).

and emotional differences as anything other than deficit or lack, rather than part of the beautiful kaleidoscope of being in the world.

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One way to get around such issues would be to move further away from an anthropomorphized God (as plenty of theologians have done). But metaphors of a person-like God are still powerful and moving; they are visceral and can make us feel truths, and so we must risk constructing new metaphors that move toward greater inclusion.[9] Perhaps we need to remind ourselves first of what can be gained by seeing the disabled experience in God. Such a commitment demands we look to disabled persons as teachers and interpreters of God and divine action in the world.

In the exquisite book *Loving Our Own Bones*, Julia Watts Belser, a Jewish rabbi, professor, and wheelchair user, writes about reading scriptural passages that describe God on wheels (e.g., Ezekiel 1) and feeling the utter joy of that image.[10] Belser (who lives with a form of multiple sclerosis) finds using wheels freeing and joyful, a powerful and sensual experience of moving through places and sensing vibrations of earth in her body. She explains how her bone-deep knowledge of the interplay of world, body, and emotion illuminates her sense of God's presence and action in the world. Belser notes that if God has wheels, then God knows the disability experience from the inside out—the joys and exhilarating pleasures of disability life and the shape of disabled pain, the frustrations of being excluded, the hurts and anger that emerge from encountering ableism. And perhaps God, too, has an "access problem" in this world and laments structures that deliberately exclude.[11]

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9 I am leaning here on Sallie McFague's work on metaphors and models in theological language: god metaphors are more personal than doctrine, capture imagination, link to story, and describe relationship. Belief and action are related to credible metaphors that capture our relationships and can move us towards action. Models of God are metaphors with staying power and cannot be prescribed. Speaking of God with metaphors must reflect our knowledge of the world and have an inclusive vision. See Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

10 Julie Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole* (Boston: Beacon, 2023).

11 Julia Watts Belser, interview, in Jak Soroka and Claire Cunningham, "5.1: Carving a Crip Space," in Guide Gods: Digital Collection, Beautiful Disabilities, podcast audio, 8:55, https://www.clairecunningham.co.uk/guide-gods-digital-collection/beautiful-disabilities/.

Without imagining and speaking of a disabled God, a God who shares and knows *all* disability experiences intimately, we cannot begin to investigate the social and theological structures that impede God's full presence in this world. Contemplating, perhaps even feeling, the presence of a disabled God can confront us with the deliberate choices and casual thoughtlessness we may enact toward disability and with how we often excise God's presence from spaces, theologies, communities, and within ourselves.[12] When we explore the variety of disabilities as divine possibilities, we begin to desire and work toward a future that is interdependent and inclusive. When certain parts of the human experience continue to be unimaginable in the divine, we continue upholding ableist notions of wholeness, goodness, and purpose. If it is destabilizing, threatening, or even blasphemous to speak of God as embodied in cognitively or emotionally disabled experiences, it speaks less to the nature of God and more to who in a community is allowed to represent the divine. In this way, communities of faith can (unwittingly) reinforce debilitating social structures that ostracize, stigmatize, and exclude from dignity those who are cognitively and emotionally different from what is considered acceptably normal. When loss of cognition, emotional imbalances, or neurodivergence cannot be part of the exquisite brilliance of God in the world, ableism remains the pulse of God-talk.

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I personally cannot articulate the neurodivergence of God because I am a fairly neurotypical person and cannot speak from this particular human embodiment. But I am interested in learning from neurodivergent folks about needs and wants, limits and joys, pain and determination, suffering and hope, community and an inclusive present and future, obstacles and embodied justice. This is what exploring God's kaleidoscopic presence in the world through the varieties of disability can look like. It is not just wheelchair access and proper safety measures so all can participate in communities according to their desires; it is creating a world in which disabled people can be at home and *teach* and *lead* and *represent the future*.

12 Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 234.

It is about creating a world with access to emotional and sensory refuge and developing sensory-friendly gatherings that support neurodivergent people's joyful experiences in community. For people with intellectual disabilities, it is about cognitive access to meaningful conversations and to agency in our communities. Imagining a disabled God means wondering what a Deaf God knows and how a Deaf person encounters God; it means marveling at how an autistic God perceives the world and what she might teach us about the divine in the world; it means pondering the depths of a nonspeaking God and their expressions of love. To imagine a disabled God is to "know the sacred through a thousand disabled languages,"[13] all of which are glimpses of God unfolding in the same way that disability manifests in the world through our bodies, "through your flesh and mine."[14] And to know all those ways of God, we must turn to the many ways people are at home in and as bodies in this world and learn to love ourselves and each other, in all our limits and varying capacities, without desire to change. Imagining the source of life through the kaleidoscope of disability experiences is one way we might move toward this kind of being together.

About the author

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13 Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 236.

14 Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones*, 236.