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## JDR Special Issue Joy and Disability

### Editorial

Joy is not typically associated with disability. Nevertheless, as the authors in this Special Issue of this journal show, looking at disability through the lens of joy and at joy through the lens of disability provides critical perspectives that help in shaping theologies of joy and disability. Both the view that disability is something to be pitied (or worse, devalues a person) and the view that people with certain disabilities 'always laugh,' are, in the words of Koos Tamminga, "big lies." There is no straightforward relationship between joy and disability, yet bringing the two together yields interesting and fertile theological and practical avenues.

The articles in this volume are a selection of papers presented at the Joy and Disability Research conference that was organised at the University of Aberdeen, March 11-12, 2018. The conference was organised at the back of a research project undertaken by myself, with the assistance of Julie Land (see our article in this volume), in which we tried to understand what joy looks like in the context of four L'Arche communities. This project was part of the overarching Joy and Human Flourishing project at the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture, directed by Miroslav Volf. One of the things that struck me when visiting four L'Arche communities and interviewing both members with and without intellectual disabilities, was the sheer joy they had in partaking in this project. It seemed that it was not necessarily the topic of the project – joy – that caused the joy, but being heard, sharing their stories, and sharing their insights on the topic. At the same time, the joy that was present in the communities was undeniable. (That is not to say that there is no pain and brokenness in these communities – the full gamut of life and its emotions is part of the L'Arche communities.) Therefore, I wanted to find out more about joy and disability research, by inviting other scholars, practitioners, and those with various life experiences of disabilities, to shine their light on the topic. The present volume contains four articles, based on the papers the authors presented at the conference. The fifth article is the one mentioned above, written by Julie Land and myself.

The first two articles, by Chris Asprey and Grant Macaskill, provide a framework to think about joy in biblical and theological terms. The third and fourth article, by Julie Land and myself, and by Koos Tamminga, look at joy and disability in particular contexts. The final article, by Vittoria Hancock, is an autobiographical account of chronic illness, interwoven with voices from theology and society.

Chris Asprey starts his article by saying that, "Some years ago, while I was trying to take a major decision in my life, a mentor gave me the following piece of advice: "Follow the joy!" Asprey sets out to evaluate such advice theologically. What results is not simply an evaluation of piece of practical advice, but a deep reflection on a theology of joy, characterised by the paradox of the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor." In dialogue with – and contrasting – Greek philosophy and Jewish Wisdom literature, Asprey shows that joy is not a straightforward concept, let alone an easy yardstick to let our lives be guided by. "Joy cannot, then, be a reliable guide, unless we have some notion of what joy truly is and how to find it." His article helps to discern what joy truly is and points in the direction of how to find it. The article sets the stage for this issue of the journal, by

problematizing common understandings of joy as a psychological state of elation, and proposing a thorough, theological way of understanding joy.

The second article, by Grant Macaskill, continues to frame a biblical and theological view on joy by discussing ways in which such a view converges with a theological way of thinking about autism. Both a theology of joy and a theology of autism require that we give up associating joy and autism with fulfilment and achievement measured against the standards many societies uphold. Asprey and Macaskill echo each other's theological perspectives, even though arriving at their conclusions on different grounds. Whereas Asprey discusses the Jewish background to the statement that the poor are blessed, Macaskill focuses our attention on Paul's famous command to "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4:4) and on the Book of Psalms. Macaskill shows how a biblical and theologically sound perspective on joy is instructive for an equally sound perspective on autism, criticising some problematic theological accounts of personhood. Whilst the article centres on autism, in many ways Macaskill's arguments are applicable to the wider discourse on disability.

With these contributions to a strong theological framework on joy in place, the next two articles study what joy looks like in two communities with a significant presence of people with learning disabilities. With Julie Land, I studied joy in the context of L'Arche. The L'Arche communities are places where people with and without learning disabilities live and share their lives together. Struck by the joy expressed by the communities, I visited four communities in order to find out what we can learn from these communities about a theology of joy. The analysis of my observations and interviews, resulted in a phenomenology of joy, a sketch of what the 'essences' of joy are as observed in L'Arche. Land and I then interpreted these essences through the writings of Vanier and Henri Nouwen.

At this point we wish to point out that the article was written and published online before the report of an independent inquiry about Vanier was released. The report concludes that Vanier sexually abused at least six women. This is shocking and we stand with these women, and strongly condemn Vanier's abusive behaviour. Eventually it will require a re-evaluation of what this means for the written work of Vanier. These are important conversations we must be committed to having, and possibly apply to this article as well.

In the next article, Koos Tamminga explores one particular expression of joy, namely, laughter, based on his research in a church plant that deliberately includes people with learning disabilities. Parallel to Asprey's warning that not all joy is good, Tamminga points out that some laughter can be destructive. Laughter can be excluding, when laughing is laughing *at*. However, more positively, laughter can also be a positive means to make contact, and indeed encounter the other. Demonstrating how laughter can be either humanising or dehumanising, Tamminga argues that in this church plant laughter is a spiritual gift. Joy and laughter became catalysts to the church plant, that wished not just to "share a roof" with people with learning disabilities, but to "share their lives." The joy of the people with learning disabilities when meeting members of the church, turned to be a catalyst for the further development of the project.

In the final article of this issue, Vittoria Hancock weaves together autobiographical narratives of chronic illness and suffering, voices from society, and some strands from the theological tradition. Hancock points out that joy and illness are not spoken of together in a Christian context, and if they are, it is usually in most unhelpful ways. And yet, she writes, "I wanted to live a full life, not a half life." Unsatisfied by all too often easy answers and pastorally misplaced comments, Hancock sees the need for a sound theological account of joy in the midst of chronic illness. Circling back and

forth between the voices of society, theology, family members, and her own story, she develops such a theology, each circle adding colour and texture to the fabric of joy.

The authors of these articles do not necessarily agree with each other on every point. However, together they create a multifaceted picture of joy in relation to disability. All seem to agree that the key to joy is to be found in the presence of God, even if that God is struggled with. Moreover, one of the unique contributions of these combined articles is that they provide a critical perspective on traditional or taken-for-granted views on disability and illness, through the – perhaps unexpected – lens of a theology of joy. Theologies of disability require sound reflections from biblical, theological, and practical perspectives. Taking joy as a theological theme and window through which to think through questions of disability, the authors of this volume make an important contribution to disability theology.

I am grateful for the invitation of the editors of the *Journal of Disability and Religion* to publish some of the conference papers in this Special Issue. It is my hope that the perspectives presented in these articles contribute to giving joy a more central place in the theology of church and academy. Moreover, I believe that these articles provide important perspectives on theologies of disability. At the same time, reflecting on joy from a disability perspective enriches theological ways of thinking about joy.

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