

## *A Liberating Approach to Human Contingency*

### *Awkwardness and insensitivity*

The American deaf Catholic priest Thomas Coughlin<sup>1</sup> had founded a house of studies where young deaf men could be trained for priesthood. One day the superior of a religious order came to visit this house, in order to discuss these deaf men's wish to insert their community into a religious order. This discussion was very disappointing. The superior spoke only about problems and obstacles and not about opportunities. The worst thing happened, however, when he left. He looked curiously around him and asked the deaf men if they had a voice, a real voice that he might be able to hear. An turning himself to one of the seminarians he asked him: «Are you able to talk? I want to hear your voice!» The man could not do else than comply with the superior's request and he mumbled some words. The superior exclaimed in complete bewilderment: «They have a voice! They have a voice!», and he left. After he had left, the seminarian told he felt abused for the gratification of the superior's curiosity. He left the program.

Awkward and insensitive events are not rare in the relationship between Christianity and persons with a functional impairment.<sup>2</sup> This awkward insensitiveness stems from views on functional impairment based on theological and cultural prejudice.

<sup>1</sup> Th. COUGHLIN, «Ephphatha: a Challenge for Deaf People's Responsibility For Deaf Ministry» in M. BROESTERHUIZEN (ed.), *The Gospel Preached by the Deaf*, Leuven, 2007, 15-39 (15).

<sup>2</sup> In this article we prefer the term 'functional impairment', and not 'disability'. We use the terms 'disabled' and 'disability' only where they are used by other authors. Impairment is any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function. Disability is a lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being, that results from impairment. Handicap is the disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that would be normal for that individual. In disability and handicap expectations of other people and society in general play a disabling and handicapping role (cfr. WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, *International classification of impairments, disabilities and handicaps*, Geneva, 1980).

### *Theological prejudice*

Traditional Christianity has a problem with reconciling functional impairment and the notion that God created human persons after His image and likeness.<sup>3</sup> In the view of the blind theologian Hull the traditional view divides cosmic story in three periods. In the first period universe was in a state of perfection. Adam and Eve were in the Paradise, they were perfect in their relationship with God and each other, and they were unblemished in their bodies: there was no illness, no death, no functional impairment. With the fall of Adam and Eve a second period began, the period of sin and redemption. The human person's being image of God is broken, and this brokenness is understood as a loss of original human perfection. In the third period, the final period, Messianic age, history will be consummated, all pain and suffering will be banished and the human person will be restored in his original perfection.

In this view functional impairment is conceivable only in the second period, the period of brokenness as a consequence of original sin. God created the human person without functional impairment and functional impairment will be taken away from people when history is consummated. It is not necessary that people with functional impairments or their parents have sinned, but functional impairment itself is a sign of the brokenness, imperfection and sinfulness of the world. In the Messianic age this brokenness will be undone, and therefore, we say to the deaf that they will hear, to the blind that they will see, and to the lame that they will dance. We intend this as a message of hope, but in reality for many people with functional impairments it is understood as a message of non-acceptance. Not only human people do not accept my functional impairment, but even God will let me in only if I get rid of it. Thomas Coughlin stated:

When I speak with deaf children, I ask them: «When you die and go to heaven, you will become hearing, is that right?» Ninety-nine percent of the children say, «No, I don't think so. I will still be deaf when I get there. We are happy for who we are». That is liberation. Liberation from the feeling that I have to meet what is the norm, what people say that I should be.<sup>4</sup>

### *Cultural prejudice*

It seems that for Western culture functional impairment cannot go together with full and complete humanity. Functional impairment is 'disability', in the literal and original sense of the word.

<sup>3</sup> After J.M. HULL, «The Broken Body in a Broken World; A Contribution to a Christian Doctrine of the Person from a Disabled Point of View» in *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 7/4 (2003) 5-23.

<sup>4</sup> «Forum Discussion» in M. BROESTERHUIZEN (ed.), *The Gospel Preached by the Deaf*, 93-102 (96).

In their book about the history of deafness, Branson and Miller<sup>5</sup> describe that in former times and present time alike in various places of the world there have been communities with a high percentage of deaf people, like in Bali (Indonesia) and the isle of Martha's Vineyard (USA). When deaf people in these communities contributed to the family income, they were considered people like everyone else. In such societies persons were not defined in terms of normality or deviancy but in terms of their ability to give a contribution to the family income. This changed, however, in the period of Enlightenment. Human persons were more and more evaluated in terms of how they should be; the expressions 'normal' and 'normalcy' date from that period of time. 'Abnormal' indicated that persons were not what they should be, and that they should be brought back to normalcy, by means of education and moral therapy.

When evolution theory spread, abnormality and difference were more and more described in terms of superiority and inferiority. People who were physically, sensorily or mentally unconventional, were seen as relicts of a lower state of evolution and as a threat for the integrity of the human race. The eugenic movement arose, the most overtly discriminating movement in the history of Western civilization. Deviant people were not only to be confined out of society, but they had to be prevented from procreation, for the well-being of all humankind. Hereditary pathology was to be treated with forced sterilization and a ban on marriage.

In its extreme form eugenic ideology formulated race characteristics of noble and inferior races. The history of Germany is well-known: it was the most extreme example of rejection of difference in the Western history. Communities of people with functional impairments in Western countries were severely traumatized by these excesses of eugenic ideology,<sup>6</sup> and it is not without reason that in circles of people with functional impairments genetic research and prenatal diagnostics arouse a lot of suspicion.<sup>7</sup>

In a mild way these ideas were widely accepted. Those who were different and pathological, were seen as an obstacle for humankind's progress.<sup>8</sup> In schools for the deaf spoken language was introduced and sign language was banned, as the gibberish of primitive people in a lower stage

<sup>5</sup> J. BRANSON – D. MILLER, *Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as Disabled*, Washington (D.C.), 2002, xi.

<sup>6</sup> For a report see J.S. SCHUCHMAN, «Deafness and Eugenics in the Nazi Era» in J. VICKREY VAN CLEVE (ed.), *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness*, Washington (D.C.), 2004, 72-77; H. BIESOLD, *Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany*, Washington (D.C.), 1999.

<sup>7</sup> A. MIDDLETON, «Deaf and Hearing Adults' Attitudes toward Genetic Testing for Deafness» in J. VICKREY VAN CLEVE (ed.), *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness*, 127-147.

<sup>8</sup> J. BRANSON – D. MILLER, *Damned for Their Difference*, 33.

of evolution. Participation of deaf people in deaf clubs was thwarted, because it would bring them in contact with sign language and it would heighten the risk of deaf marriages. There was even a fear that deaf marriages would lead to a deaf subhuman variant of humankind.<sup>9</sup>

When from the fifties of the twentieth century on the disabled people's rights movement arose, it gave a strong impetus towards the overthrow of disabling practices and the inclusion of people with functional impairments into general society. But in spite of all initiatives people with functional impairments remained at the margins of society, physically present in a normal environment, but still excluded from normal interaction. They are different, not like 'us'.

More than one century of eugenics and segregation continues to influence the way in which Western culture deals with functional impairment: through a dynamics of exclusion. 'Disability' is the core concept of this dynamics of exclusion: it denotes functional impairments as a form of inferior, incomplete humanity, that makes a person different from others and as such impossible to empathize with, a life of lower quality, that better should not exist. Using the term 'disability' is just an example of misleading use of language.<sup>10</sup>

### *Toward a Humanizing Approach*

Just like other persons belonging to their religious and general culture Christian believers may be influenced by prejudice about people with functional impairments. They can be liberated from it by the ideas of theologians and pastors with functional impairments. We present here three of them: Jacqueline Kool, Cyril Axelrod, and John Hull.

#### *Jacqueline Kool*

As a believer and a person with a functional impairment Jacqueline Kool struggled and still is struggling heavily with Christian tradition. She was born with muscular dystrophy, and grew up in a right-wing Calvinist environment in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> In Kool's view, the Jewish-Christian tra-

<sup>9</sup> B.H. GREENWALD, «The Real 'Toll' of A.G. Bell: Lessons about Eugenics» in J. VICKREY VAN CLEVE (ed.), *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness*, 35-41.

<sup>10</sup> J.C. WARD, *The Disabled God? How a Theological Anthropology that Embraces Human Disability Changes how we Image God*, Perth (Master of Arts in Theology, Murdoch University), 2000, 12.

<sup>11</sup> J. KOOL, *Goed bedoeld: levensbeschouwelijk kijken naar handicap en ziekte*, Zoetermeer, 2002, 23-24. We use here the term 'disabled' where Kool uses it.

dition the relationship between disability and God has never been 'normal'. Persons with a disability are either blessed by God or damned, either evil or spiritual hero. Christian images of disabled people derive from texts in the Bible that are written by non-disabled people, and not from ordinary life of disabled people themselves. By consequence, these images contain three themes that make Christian faith awkward for disabled people: the relationship between disability and sin, the relationship between disability and suffering, and the ideal of charity.

#### Disability and sin

A long tradition relates disability to sin and desecration. In the Jewish Bible disability has a connotation of impurity. Impaired corpses are suspect corpses, remote from Holy things and the Holy One. Leviticus 21:17-23 forbids that persons with a physical defect come near to the sacred places, because they would profane the holy things. Even the sacrificial animal should be male, perfect and unblemished. In a careful analysis of Jewish texts, not only the Jewish Bible, but also rabbinical writings and the Talmud, Judith Abrams shows that physical and psychological perfection was seen as a prerequisite for a relationship with God. This perfection was embodied in the male, free and learned priest without any defect, who stood in a sharp contrast to the disabled, mentally ill, mentally retarded, physically disabled, deaf, and blind.<sup>12</sup>

Although God takes his responsibility for persons' disability, and people are admonished to protect the rights of disabled people, disability serves also as an image for stupidity, weakness and reluctance to the Word of God. Deafness and blindness indicate unbelief, lameness unwillingness to act. These images are taken over by the New Testament, where the Kingdom of God manifests itself when the deaf hear, the blind see and the lame can walk.

Echoes of this ambivalence can be heard in healing stories in the New Testament,<sup>13</sup> for example when Jesus says to a person who He healed, «Your sins are forgiven». In other stories, however, Jesus opposes the idea that the disabled person or his parents had sinned, like in the story of the blind born person, about whom Jesus says: «Neither he nor his parents have sinned, but the works of God had to become manifest in him» (John 9:1-3).

One might object that in the Gospels the blind, the lame, and the poor are only symbols, character types for anonymous, powerless, vulnerable

<sup>12</sup> J.Z. ABRAMS, *Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from the Tanach through the Bavli*, Washington (D.C.), 2003.

<sup>13</sup> J. KOOL, *Goed bedoeld*, 42.

people, the lowly. This does not satisfy Kool, since disability is still presented as a weakness that creates a distance between God and human people.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, many people take these stories literally and derive a double message from it: disability as God's will, either as a punishment or as a pedagogical measure. People have to pray for healing, and if healing does not occur, that might be a sign of lack of faith in God's healing power. The real cause of enduring disability, sin, lack of faith, or divine pedagogy, can never be known. In Kool's opinion, this kind of faith reduces God to a capricious sadist.

In most healing stories, Kool observes, the identity of the person healed seems not to be important: they are only an anonymous incarnation of defectiveness. These attach too much value to physical perfection, making it impossible for disabled people to be complete persons. Why do not the Gospels speak about a world in which people are accepted just like they are? Kool advises disabled persons to read these stories with a hermeneutics of suspicion, and reading the Bible in such a way she discovers that it contains also stories and images that are liberating for disabled people.

An example of such a story is the book of Job, in which Job's friends put forward all the arguments of those who see a relationship between disability and sin: Job had deserved it, his suffering will lead him to something better, he will definitely be guilty. But Job sends his friends away and God agrees with him. And finally Job understands that God's love is absolutely free, transcending all human discourses about guilt and divine pedagogy. Like every other human person the suffering person is not a broken image of God, but simply image of God.

#### Disability and suffering

The second theme with which Kool struggles, is the relationship between disability and suffering. When people become disabled, often they ask why, which is a question not about the technical cause of disability, but about its existential meaning. People hope to find explanations of their suffering that make that suffering more bearable. Many Christian answers, however, make suffering more bearable for the afflicted persons' environment, but less bearable for themselves.

As a person born with a disability Kool never asked why she was disabled. In her firm belief asking why inevitably leads to a moralistic view on disability.<sup>15</sup> She proposes to ask the opposite question: «Why not me?» Why

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> In the translation of the cross words, «My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?», the Hebrew word *lema* is mostly translated as «why». In the opinion of Lapidé and Frankl this translation is not correct, since the Hebrew word *lema* means «towards what». A why-question looks back, looks for someone or some circumstance to be blamed, and it indicates a lack of

should not happen to me what can happen to every person? Disability does not need an explanation. It just happens, like other things in life just happen. Disability is just a part of the created reality of human life.

This point of view seems to be very distant from the Christian view in which suffering has a precious redeeming value. Christian tradition is full of stories about physical suffering, stories in which people become better people and are saved through suffering. These stories come from the heart of Christian theology, in which redemption takes place through Jesus's suffering and death. People are better off with suffering, if not in this life on earth, than in life after death.

Kool does not deny that suffering can lead to a more intense and spiritual life. This is, however, a very personal process, which can be expressed only by persons themselves. Coming from other persons, it might sound as easy and even insensitive words that do not meet individual persons' need for support.

In Kool's opinion, the traditional view on suffering makes it impossible for disabled people to remain normal people and to have a normal life. It condemns them to become either martyrs or heroes. Martyrs, when their life is full of suffering, and heroes when they defeat the enemy and lead a normal life as if their disability does not exist – that is, as if they were not themselves. These images of martyrdom and heroism prevent disabled people from seeing that life is more than suffering and that there so many things to enjoy. In a disabled life too there are many things to enjoy, and there are many things that are much more a cause of suffering than disability, such as the loss of a loved person. Suffering is often not a direct consequence of disability itself, but of the way in which other people deal with it.

#### The ideal of charity

A third problem for Kool is the ideal of charity. Christianity incites people to do good to others, and since people want to be good Christians, disabled people are for them rewarding objects of charity. Disabled people, however, experience this form of charity as abuse. Kool does not reject the Christian ideal of charity, since attention and care for people in need is an important characteristic of social justice. The trouble with narratives about charity, however, is that the goodness of the benefactors and their reward are far more prominent than the dignity and the rights of the receiver.<sup>16</sup> The

faith in God. It asks for a theodicy. The question «towards what» is oriented on the future, it asks how I as a person can reconcile myself with my future. Lapidé and Frankl call it a question for pathodicy, a question how the place of suffering within the total context of my life can be justified (V. FRANKL – P. LAPIDÉ, *Gottsuche und Sinnfrage: ein Gespräch*, Gütersloh, 2005, 122-123).

<sup>16</sup> J. KOOL, *Goed bedoeld*, 79-80.

main goal of charity seems to be saving one's own soul, and such charity reduces disabled persons to a means for salvation of the benefactor. This form of charity separates disabled people from other people. When in the past big institutions for disabled people were founded, their first goal was charity, but the effect of their work was that disabled people were separated and excluded from society. Kool is convinced that a wrong concept of charity plays a central role in the dynamics of exclusion of people with disabilities. Much more than this form of charity an effort of recognition and transformation of the dynamics of exclusion is needed. Communities have to be accessible for disabled people, not only materially but also spiritually, in true solidarity. That means an effort to enter into a real dialogue with each other. Kool is convinced that such a dialogue would enable religious communities and theologians to come to a more balanced view on modern ethical debates on themes as euthanasia, prenatal diagnostics and medical technology.<sup>17</sup>

#### Embodiment?

Kool bases herself on a feminist theology in which the concept of embodiment plays an important role.<sup>18</sup> Embodiment, the normal condition of the unconventional body in daily life, is a central theme in her theological approach of disability. This emphasis on embodiment is logical from the perspective of Kool's own condition, but the question should be asked if this is valid for all people with a functional impairment. For many deaf people a strong, healthy and sportive body is a source of self-esteem: for many deaf people sports and physical activities with other deaf people are important sources of pride and compensation for communication problems experienced in daily life.<sup>19</sup> Communication and not embodiment is for them the central aspect of deaf experience. Kool, however, applies her argumentation on all kinds of people with functional impairments. She puts all people with functional impairments into one category, the category of disability. She is misled by the use of the concept of 'disability'.

#### Cyril Axelrod

Cyril Axelrod was profoundly deaf from birth and the only child in an orthodox Jewish family in Johannesburg, South-Africa. He studied philosophy and history at Gallaudet University, a University for deaf people in Washington D.C. As a young adult he converted to Catholicism and he

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31ff

<sup>19</sup> P. LADD, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, Clevedon, 2003, 47.

decided to become a priest. As a Catholic priest he devoted forty years of his life to helping deaf people to gain justice, equality, and dignity in his own country, South Africa, and later on in Asia. Defying apartheid rules, he established a multi-racial school for deaf children in Soweto, set up a hostel for deaf homeless people in Pretoria, and pioneered an employment centre in Cape Town. In Cape Town he gave a major contribution to the reintegration of the deaf community which was fragmented along racial lines. Later on, his congregation of the Redemptorists asked him to go to Macau, China, where he founded a deaf association, and with the aid of the government of Macau he established an educational and cultural centre for deaf people. In that period of time the consequences of a congenital eye disease, the Usher syndrome, became more and more manifest and he became legally blind. Deafblind himself, he paid an important contribution to the development of Chinese tactual sign language.<sup>20</sup>

Axelrod's experiences with deafness, deafblindness and faith can be understood only within the context of his Jewish youth and his work for the liberation and emancipation of the deaf. As the only son of orthodox Jewish parents he had experienced a deep relationship with Jewish life in his family<sup>21</sup> and he had even felt the desire to become a rabbi.<sup>22</sup> It was, however, a hard blow for him when he was told that a deaf person cannot become a rabbi. At the end this led him to the decision to convert to Catholic faith, such as he had got to know it from the religious sisters in his deaf school. Nevertheless, he kept a deep love for his Jewish family and for Jewish life, and he put much effort into the creation of opportunities for Jewish deaf children to receive Jewish religious education. In his autobiography he describes that, seriously depressed after his admission to a rehabilitation centre for the deafblind, he found new hope when he prepared an orthodox Passover meal for a Jewish man admitted to the centre shortly before, who could not celebrate Passover for the first time in his life:

At the end of the meal I recited the song *Let us Build a New Jerusalem*, while we held our hands together, clapping them joyfully. He was delighted. Then, at the end of the evening [...]. I could tell that he had really enjoyed our Passover celebrations. Both our hearts uplifted [...]. It was also a great moment of joy for me too because I had been able again to touch my own Jewish identity.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Tactual sign language is the sign language as it is used in the communication with deafblind people: the 'listener' touches with his or her hands the hands of the 'speaker', perceiving in this way the signs that otherwise would have been seen.

<sup>21</sup> C. AXELROD, *And the Journey Begins*, Coleford, 2005, 37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-57.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

In that moment he realized that his faith and spirituality were rooted in his deep relationship with his parents. But at the same time he realized that the religious sisters in his deaf school had given him what he had lacked at home: adequate communication, language as a means to come into contact with other people. Both, his relationships with his parents and the communication learned from the religious sisters had given to him the tools to shape his life, and to serve deaf and deafblind people through his Catholic priesthood.<sup>24</sup>

Axelrod states that for many deaf persons deafness is, from early life on, such a constant aspect of their life, that often they are not aware of being deaf. They do not have a concept of hearing loss, because they do not know what hearing is. Deafness remains an unconscious part of their life until they experience that they cannot communicate with others, as outsiders in a hearing world. Then deafness becomes principally an experience of oppression in a hearing world, and at the same time the experience of having good communication with other deaf people, by which the deaf community can become a family of choice that is preferred over their family of origin.<sup>25</sup> Such it was for the young students in the school for deaf Xhosa children, where Axelrod worked as a young priest. Apartheid law made it impossible for many deaf children to keep contact with their families, with the consequence that their families had no opportunity to learn their children's sign language. This led to such an impairment of communication between deaf children and their families, that the children considered the deaf school as their home and the other deaf people as their family.<sup>26</sup>

In various places in South Africa Axelrod saw the destructive effects of apartheid politics on the deaf community. Deaf people from different ethnic groups could not gather together and they even did not have a common sign language. Deaf people did not have the possibility to give support to each other, and by consequence deaf people in South Africa belonged to the poorest groups in society. With the support of other deaf people and in spite of apartheid laws Axelrod succeeded to found the first multiracial deaf organization in the country, in which white, black, coloured people and Indians met each other in one deaf community and could share faith, support and solidarity. This deaf organisation became for them an experience of liberation from isolation and fragmentation. Axelrod remarks:

My eighteen years of service in South Africa showed me the real suffering of deaf people, the poverty, the deprivation, injustice and inequality. In my pas-

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>25</sup> C. TIJSSELING, *Anders doof zijn: een nieuw perspectief op dove kinderen*, Twello, 2006, 53.

<sup>26</sup> C. AXELROD, «The Liberatory Role of Evangelisation among Deaf and Deafblind People» in M. BROESTERHUIZEN (ed.), *The Gospel Preached by the Deaf*, Leuven, 2007, 40-56 (42).

toral work I have not only tried to share with deaf people the richness of faith but also the richness and importance of human self-worth.<sup>27</sup>

This work in behalf of the oppressed is for him a direct consequence of an essential point of Christian faith, the fact that Jesus himself had become an object of political oppression, but that his oppression had been followed by liberating action in which He showed the true image of God; this liberating action culminated in resurrection.<sup>28</sup>

Axelrod continued this work on behalf of the oppressed when he moved to Macau. In Macau too the social position of deaf people was miserable. Still in that time there were deaf children and adults living in solitary confinement within the homes of their families. School education and job training for deaf people were very limited, and deaf people had either no job or very humiliating jobs.

When Axelrod started to celebrate Eucharist in Chinese Sign Language, he discovered that the deaf people present in Church did not show any reaction. He discovered that these Catholic deaf did not know anything about Catholic religion. They called themselves «rice Catholics»: people who had become Catholic because they received every day a bowl of rice from a Catholic organisation; only baptised people could get such a bowl of rice. They were people without schooling, abandoned by their families, people whose life was a continuous struggle for survival. Axelrod realised that any pastoral service would be useless without a programme for human development. And so, various programmes were set up, a guidance programme for families of disabled people, an educational centre for deaf children, a vocational centre for deaf adults, a sign language interpreting service, and a centre for deaf senior citizens.

After twelve years Axelrod had to give up his work in Macau, because of his progressive eye disease. Becoming deafblind was a very painful experience for him. When a deaf person becomes blind, he describes, his position in the deaf community changes. Until then such persons have felt at home in the deaf community and with sign language, but now they have to change their way of communicating with other persons. Other persons in the deaf community cannot see the deafblind person any longer as «deaf like us». The deafblind person feels alienated from his deaf community and forced to integrate into an unfamiliar new community and unfamiliar new social interactions with other people with totally different backgrounds, like deafened blind people, who find it difficult to socialise with such a *mute* person.

<sup>27</sup> C. AXELROD, *And the Journey Begins*, 153.

<sup>28</sup> C. AXELROD, «The Liberatory Role of Evangelisation», 40.

For normally sighted people, also for sighted professionals who work with deafblind people deafblindness is the most terrible thing that can happen to a person. They see deafblind persons as incapable of being independent and self-assertive. The consequence is that they overprotect and belittle deafblind people. Often these professionals have more experience with the world of the blind than with the world of deaf persons who have been visually oriented and signing during all their lifetime. For Axelrod, who had been a very active leader of the deaf community, this was an almost unbearable experience of oppression. He went through a deep personal crisis, but he came out as a stronger person with a stronger faith.

He learned from this experience that God created each person, disabled or not, after His own image. Every person is unique and every person has a task in life. Every person is called to live life in a meaningful way, sharing it with others. For him deafblindness became a mission given by God, in order to show to sighted people that deafblind persons too are true human beings created by God and equal to them. In this way he tried to help the sighted deaf community to get more information and knowledge about deafblindness and to remain open and hospitable for their members who become blind, so that these members can continue to live in this community where they have been happy all over their life time.

Axelrod's story is a very *deaf* story: it is about communication and community, also as sources of faith experience. It is not about disability, but about oppression by hearing society that puts people in an outsider position, and about the self-worth of deaf and deafblind as purposefully created by God. His faith answer is a praxis based on the consciousness that life implies a task, the task to show that deaf and deafblind people are image of God, just like every other human person.

### *John Hull*

John Hull contracted bilateral cataracts at the age of thirteen years and he was blind for several months. He recovered from blindness, but later on he was struck by several retinal detachments, which resulted in blindness when he was 45 years old.

As a student he was already partially sighted.<sup>29</sup> During his studies he wrote a paper on the symbolism of light and darkness in the fourth gospel. The symbolism was clear: light symbolises faith and darkness stands for unbelief and sin. In this symbolism the healing of the blind man has a central place. He had written this paper with much fervour and enthusiasm.

<sup>29</sup> J.M. HULL, «How I Discovered My Blind Brother» in *The Bible in Transmission* (2004) 9-11, 9.

Twenty years later he had become blind. He put much effort in learning braille and after a period of time he was able again to read the texts that he loved so much. As first text to read he chose the fourth gospel. But as reading went on, he felt more and more uncomfortable; at the end he was really shocked by the texts that had been so familiar to him. The meaning of the texts had become totally different. Now he found himself at the wrong side of the dualistic symbolism between light and darkness. And then the healing stories, the comparisons between blindness and lack of faith. It became clear to him that these texts had been written by sighted people for sighted people and not for the blind. In an open letter to Jesus he states:

When I studied the New Testament as a sighted person, it did not occur to me that you, Jesus, were yourself sighted. We were in the same world, but it did not occur to me that being sighted was a world. I thought that things were just like that. When I became blind, then I realised that blindness is a world, and that the sighted condition also generates a distinctive experience and can be called a world. Now I find, Jesus, that I am in one world and you are in another.<sup>30</sup>

Hull had understood that human life happens to find itself in different states and different experiences, which may differ so much between individuals that it is justified to say that people live in different worlds. They are «world generating states»,<sup>31</sup> that come forth from a combination of physical and social characteristics. Blindness, deafness, physical impairment are such world generating states. If a theology of blindness were to be designed, it should be a theology of these world generating states. It should put the negative image of blind people in a sighted world under criticism and put the absoluteness of a sighted world and sighted reality into perspective. It should show that blind people are image of God in their very blindness, and it should give practical suggestions for social and political life derived from a blind way of being in the world: taking one step at a time, and concentrating oneself on the concrete details of a problem that otherwise would be abstract and ungraspable. It should deconstruct dominant views on normalcy and insist on an inclusive view on normalcy, trying to liberate people from the oppression by exclusive thinking.

In his work *Broken body in a broken world* Hull speaks more in general about a theology of disability. He has come to the conclusion that being created as an image of God is not the right starting point for such a theology,

<sup>30</sup> J.M. HULL, «Open Letter from a Blind Disciple to a Sighted Saviour: Text and Discussion» in M. O'KANE (ed.), *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible*, Sheffield, 2001, 154-177, 159.

<sup>31</sup> J.M. HULL, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations With the Bible*, Norwich, 2002, 172-173.

and he proposes to take the human body as a starting point, the broken body of disabled people as the source of theological knowledge. He has his reasons for this approach. A first reason for him is that the concept of image of God often leads to an anthropomorphic idea of God, an image of God composed of perfect human qualities, and such an image would make it still more difficult to see disabled people as image of God. A second reason is that taking the body, embodiment as starting point, theological reflection starts with the concrete life situation of persons with a functional impairments.

I have three problems with his approach. At first the term 'broken' suggests that those bodies are not whole, or should be different. When functional impairment belongs to the created normalcy and created reality of humankind, it should not be called 'broken'.

My second point of criticism is that Hull takes the human body as a starting point of his theology. Above I stated that embodiment as a specific approach of functional impairment is not valid for the experience of all persons with functional impairments. Hull makes this error – my third point of criticism – because he lets himself to be misled by the concept of disability. It misleads him to forget that he called blindness, deafness, physical ability world generating states, that are very different from each other.

### *Towards a Theology of Human Contingency*

A theological view on people with functional impairment that takes into account the life experience of people themselves, should meet the following requirements:

1. It should not base itself on a dichotomizing concept such as disability. It should start with the deconstruction of disability.<sup>32</sup> Justice to people can be achieved only by a theology that does not create differences between people, but that is valid for all people alike. In this context I propose to use the concept of 'human contingency';<sup>33</sup> human people, by coincidence and necessity, happen to have their limits and weaknesses, physically, sensorily, morally and intellectually. The real human person is a person with limits, not the phantasy of human perfection with which culture deceives us. Even Jesus, as a really human person, was subjected to human contingency: He was Jew, male, a sighted prophet in a sighted world,<sup>34</sup> a hearing person in a

<sup>32</sup> For the deconstruction of the concept of disability cfr. M. CORKER, *Deaf and Disabled, or Deafness Disabled?*, Buckingham, 1998, 42.

<sup>33</sup> J. ROLIES, «Zorg met het hart, hart in de zorg» in *Acta Medica Catholica* 70 (2001) 243-249, 245.

<sup>34</sup> J.M. HULL, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness*, 150.

hearing world, He died and His risen body was a wounded and broken body.<sup>35</sup> He was a God that shared in human contingency.

2. Such a theology should recognize individual persons' own worlds and world views and not force upon them one concept that they are supposed to have in common, such as disability or embodiment.

3. A central question in such a theology should be how limited human persons living in their own limited world can be an image of an infinite God, i.e. how the image of the infinite God reveals itself in human contingency.

### *Image of God*

Sooner or later, most human people acquire a functional impairment. When people grow older, they can lose their hearing and their sight, or they can become demented. People become functionally impaired because of illness or incidents; they can be affected by psychological traumas because of violence, war, sexual abuse. People who consider themselves as non-disabled are only temporarily able-bodied persons. People with functional impairments are just normal persons, like every other person created by God just in the way they are, as an image of God. But how can people with so many limitation be an image of God, especially when a utilitarian culture considers the life of people with severe functional impairments less meaningful than the life of pigs and dogs?<sup>36</sup>

In the traditional individualistic view of Western Christianity human's people being an image of God is identified with individual characteristics, such as the soul, self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-love, ratio.<sup>37</sup> In the opinion of the Australian theologian Ward this view might exclude severely intellectually impaired people, and by consequence the implicitly dominating view in Western culture on these people is that they are attributed less humanity to. When the image of God is looked for in individual perfection in a spiritual, mental or physical sense, some people might be less image of God than others. By consequence such a view is not sufficient.

A second approach might start from the Christian idea of God, the triune God, God as community.<sup>38</sup> In this approach human beings are not defined by individual characteristics, but human nature is seen as essentially social and communal, and human personhood is being in commu-

<sup>35</sup> N.E. EIESLAND, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Abingdon Press, 1994, 100-101.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. P. SINGER, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*, Oxford, 1995, 201.

<sup>37</sup> J.C. WARD, *The Disabled God?*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. J. - L. BRECK, *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics*, Crestwood (N.Y.), 2005, 19-31.

nion. In this approach human persons are truly persons to the degree that they reflect in their being and actions the personal and communal relationship of love in Trinity. Human persons' being image of God means that true humanity is not found where people live in self-contained isolation, but where people live in a right and deep relationship with each other. This means that persons' humanity is not diminished by their contingency, but affirmed by the way in which persons enter into relationship with other persons. This view seems to be more complete than an individualistic view. The reality, however, is that some people are disturbed in their relationships, because of communication problems (e.g. aphasic people), or because of severe mental illness (like people suffering from schizophrenia), or a developmental disorder (like persons with autism). Some people are so disturbed that they not only are not able to enter into relationship with other persons, but even every attempt of other persons to come into contact with them causes suffering. Are they less image of God? Their condition too belongs to the created reality of human life. So, this second approach too has to be completed.

Both approaches are incomplete because they base themselves on human ways of understanding and knowing God, whereas God is beyond all knowledge and understanding.<sup>39</sup> There where cataphatic knowledge of God is exhausted and seems to turn in darkness, this darkness, if completely lived through, can generate an apophatic knowledge of God that is not only cognitive, but also mystical and experiential. Such might be a third approach of the image of God, an approach that does not base itself on the way human persons imagine God, but on God Himself, on His relationship with humankind, by which He gives His love to all people, without distinction.<sup>40</sup> I propose to relate this third approach to God's covenant with humankind, by which He desires to dwell among His people, and by which He reveals Himself when human persons realise the conditions that promise His presence among His people, i.e. when persons live in true communion with each other. This of becoming and discovering the image of God<sup>41</sup> has what Moltmann calls a dimension of eschatological hope.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> D. STANILAOE e.a., *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Edinburgh, 2001, 105.

<sup>40</sup> J.C. WARD, *The Disabled God?*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> In Orthodox theology we find the idea of growing from image of God to likeness, from our natural state as created after the image of God to a state of holiness, after the likeness of God, although this distinction between image and likeness cannot be derived directly from the original text of Gen 1, 26 (J.-L. BRECK, *Stages on Life's Way*, 26). Likeness is not a physical likeness, but it refers to the function to represent the presence of God in the world (W.A. VANGEMEREN, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament and Exegesis*, vol. 1, Carlisle, 1996, 969-970, למתא רימא).

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. R. HITCHING, *The Church and Deaf People*, Carlisle, 2003, 109ff.



Eschatological hope does not refer to Utopia: eschatology is outside the dimensions of space and time, it can be realised to some extent here and now. In this eschatology the creation of humankind, its re-creation when Jesus died on the cross and became a disabled God, and its messianic future are one same moment in which the image of God reveals itself.

The quality of such a community is indicated by the extent to which it succeeds to open its doors for every human person, however deviant from misleading ideals of human perfection. That means an attitude and concrete action that makes it possible for every human person, however subject to human contingency (physically, mentally, morally, ethnically, sexually), to have access to and participation in this community of the covenant.

In this approach, the more a community is a home for all human people, in spite of all aspects of their human contingency, the more it reveals the image of the infinite God.

This shared growing towards the image and likeness of God brings with it a form of Christian perfection which does not have individual perfection as its first goal, but that expresses itself primarily in the faithfulness and effort with which people build up an inclusive community, in spite of failures and suffering. It is the faithfulness with which God participated in human contingency and by which Jesus became a disabled God,<sup>43</sup> who in His forsakenness even lost His Father and His divinity.<sup>44</sup> This is a form of perfection that is characterised by solidarity with real human persons and their limits.

It is an approach that puts the attitude of our culture towards 'disability' under criticism. In this sense it is a counter-cultural<sup>45</sup> and liberating approach of human contingency, oriented on the emancipation of the lowly on the levels of individual experience, community, Church and society.

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<sup>43</sup> B. COOPER, «The Disabled God» in *Theology Today* 49 (1992) 173-182, 176.

<sup>44</sup> «For Christians, the greatest communication of all is the self-giving love of God evidenced in the sacrifice into death of his Son, Jesus Christ, and the taking up into the Godhead of the suffering associated with that death. The loss by God the Father is experienced as a reality by God, the Trinity, as separation occurs within the Godhead itself» (R. HITCHING, *The Church and Deaf People*, 160).

<sup>45</sup> St.B. BEVANS, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll (N.Y.), 2002, 107ff.

## SUMMARY

Religion in Western culture and functional impairment have an awkward relationship. This awkwardness stems from theological and cultural prejudice, theological prejudice as far as functional impairment is considered a consequence of original sin, which will be taken away in future life, cultural prejudice as far as functional impairment is looked upon as a relict of a lower stage of evolution. The author of this article analyses the views of theologians who have a functional impairment themselves, and derives from this analysis three starting points for theological reflection on functional impairment are derived: the deconstruction of the concept of disability, functional impairment as a world generating state, and contingent human persons as an image of God. He formulates a viewpoint in which the image of God is not only understood on the level of individual persons, but rather as the ideal inclusive communities of people aspire to achieve when they answer to the calling that stems from God's covenant with humankind.

C'è una relazione imbarazzante tra religione, nella cultura occidentale, e disparità funzionale. Tale imbarazzo nasce da un pregiudizio teologico e culturale: teologico, nella misura in cui la disparità è considerata una conseguenza del peccato originale, che sarà tolto nella vita futura; culturale, in quanto la disparità funzionale è considerata un relitto di uno stadio inferiore dell'evoluzione. L'autore dell'articolo analizza i punti di vista di teologi che hanno essi stessi disparità funzionali e deriva da tale analisi tre punti di partenza per una riflessione teologica sulla disparità funzionale: la decostruzione del concetto di disabilità, disparità funzionale come stato in cui si viene al mondo, e le persone umane contingenti come immagine di Dio. Egli formula un punto di vista nel quale l'immagine di Dio non è compresa soltanto a livello della persona individuale, quanto piuttosto come l'ideale che delle comunità di persone inclusive aspirano a raggiungere quando rispondono all'appello che proviene dall'alleanza di Dio con l'umanità