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ONE LORD, ONE BODY: RETHINKING DISABILITY IN GHANA THROUGH BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on what it means to be human from a biblical perspective and shows how this understanding forms part of the Church's understanding and practices towards disability and persons with disability. Through our experience of the Ghanaian situation and scholarly works, we argue that as a Church, our understanding, attitudes, and practices towards persons with disability must change from the current exclusive and marginalising frameworks to thoughts and behaviours that are integrative and inclusive. The paper contributes to our understanding of how the Ghanaian and African practice of communalism can deepen the biblical and theological anthropology of the church with regards to human disability. We conclude that the absence or limited participation of persons with disability in the church is a manifestation that it is the church that is rather disabled by the barriers it has constructed about disability and not persons with disability.*

Key Words: Anthropology, Disability, Ghana, Western Theology.

Introduction

The experience of disability throughout the world is a common experience shared by a broad spectrum of persons with disabilities.[1] Among persons with disability, the visible effects of poverty and "begging" as seen in countries with lower economic viability may not be quite to the same extent in advanced technological and Euro-Western contexts. Nevertheless, persons with disabilities, regardless of their location, endure similar forms of stigmatisation, alienation, infantilisation, and dehumanisation in most societies and contexts.

[1] See Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1994), 24.

In articulating a Roman Catholic theology of disability, it is important to explore Christian anthropology as understood in the West. Deborah Creamer, a scholar of both religion and disability studies, affirms:

> [I]t is time to open the entire breadth of religious traditions to an "accessibility audit." Not only does such an examination highlight potential barriers – challenges of scripture and metaphor, for example – but it also suggests new theological possibilities in which disability is not simply a consumer or an evaluator of tradition but rather a constructive element that offers new options for theological reflections.[2]

This paper claims that within biblical and theological anthropology there exist interpretations of the human person that are correlative with the Ghanaian and African practice of communalism. This implies that, as a Church, our Christian understanding, attitudes and practices toward disability and persons with disability would require a change from the current exclusive and marginalising thoughts and behaviours to integrative conceptions and actions. Amos Yong argues that,

> … any theology of disability for the twenty-first century will have to acknowledge and confront the conventional understanding of disability manifest in the biblical text … but yet proceed to subvert conventional 'antidisability' [sic] readings of the Bible by beneath and between its lines.[3]

In this paper, we first seek to consider what it means to be human from a biblical perspective and to show how this understanding has formed part of the Church's understanding and practices towards disability and persons with disability. We then discuss the respective views of Karl Rahner and John Macquarrie, theologians of the twentieth century, whose reflections on what it means to be human have significant implications for disability studies and theological anthropology.

Next, we present three models of 'theology of disability' developed by scholars of religion and disability studies namely, Weiss

[2] Deborah Creamer, "Theological Accessibility: The Contribution of Disability," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2006): 4; http:www.dsq-sds.org/_articles_html/2006/fall/creamer.asp

[3] Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 42.

Block, Black, and Eiesland, followed by a summary and conclusion.[4]

OT Anthropology and Disability: Conventional Perceptions

In a very basic way, the practices of the ancient Israelites towards disability and persons with disabilities in the Old Testament (OT) are not all that different from those of Ghanaian and African societies. To the extent that the people of ancient Israel interpreted disability in accord with their worldview, they often were led to practices that contributed to the marginalisation, infantilisation, and dehumanisation of persons with disability. However, similar to the Ghanaian worldview, the worldview of the ancient Israelites, from which these negative practices originate, also contains elements that throw a positive light on the subject of disability.

Examples of the sources of the negative practices and attitudes abound in the scriptures. Yong reflects on two of these texts which summarize the overall view of the conventional OT position on disability. First, in Exod. 4:11, God attributes the conditions of dumbness, deafness, and blindness to God's self. Although this does not yet equate disability with anything negative, according to Yong's conclusion, this suggests that disabilities were perceived as originating from God, thus it links disability to God's sovereignty.[5] A second text that Yong reflects upon is that of Lev. 21:16-23. In this text, God instructs the high priest Aaron through Moses to exclude from the sacrificial offering service to God persons who are "blind, or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or hunchback, or dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles" (Lev. 21:18- 23).[6] This injunction directly and immediately discriminates against persons with disability, but it also means that disability or impairment makes people unholy since the whole of chapter 21 concerns the "holiness of priests."

Yong continues by drawing attention to the obvious conflicts in the literal interpretation of these two texts. In the first text, God creates

[4] See Creamer, "Theological Accessibility," 1.
[5] Yong, *Theology*, 22.
[6] See also Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 64.

disability, and in the second, disability is unclean and makes one unworthy of being in the "sanctuary" or approaching God, even if the person with disability is a relative or offspring of Moses and Aaron's family. How then are we to understand the paradox that God seemingly rejects what God creates? The conflict is resolved hermeneutically, by seeing the two texts in the light of the whole covenantal relationship between Israel and God, that is, with the understanding that God punishes the "disobedience" of Israel with such conditions including "madness, blindness and other bodily afflictions (cf. Deut. 28:15-68; Zeph. 1:17)."[7]

Within the covenantal understanding then, "disability" in both texts was conventionally perceived as a punishment and as a sign that the person or someone else had sinned, a violation against the terms of the covenant. God punished their transgression with disability. In the worldview of the OT, disability appears to be a punishment by God inflicted on a person or persons for the sins they or others in their society have committed; as such disability is a sign of iniquity that defiles or renders impure anyone affected by disability.[8] Here, we find the legitimation for excluding a person with disability from worship and other public events of society as the text in Leviticus above suggests.

The prophetic tradition continued with these "dualistic notions of purity and defilement"[9] but went a bit further by allowing for the possibility of a restoration. Thus, persons with disability who received healing were considered worthy and were included in sacrifices and other public events. In our contemporary terms, it might be said that disability was constructed on the moral model. Comparatively speaking, this model parallels current negative interpretations of the African worldview concerning disability.

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[7] See Yong, *Theology*, 23. Douglas also warns against interpreting "pollution rules of another culture" in a piecemeal fashion, as this is bound to fail. The concept of purity and impurity must be considered in "a total structure of thought whose keystone, boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation" (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 51).

[8] See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50, where it is concluded, "if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognize this is the first step towards insight into pollution."

[9] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50.

NT Anthropology and Disability: Conventional Perceptions

People in the New Testament (NT) times and in the early Church inherited the "dualistic notions of purity and defilement" regarding able-bodied persons and persons with disability as in the OT. The perceptions of disability held by people in the NT often are linked to miraculous healing stories, especially from the Gospels. Colleen C. Grant suggests that the healing narratives, or at least the way they have been interpreted and applied in the Church, are more harmful than supportive of persons with disability: "In truth, within Church communities, these stories have often fuelled destructive attitudes toward people with disabilities rather than foster visions of inclusion and participation."[10]

Yong sees three ways by which the healing narratives or their interpretations impact disability and persons with disability in a negative sense. Two of these ways correspond to Grant's two "models" of the healing narratives regarding disability. First, Yong observes that in the NT healing narratives, persons with disability are often portrayed as "passive and pitiable objects of historical forces dependent fully on God's redemptive healing by the power of Jesus.[11] Often in these texts, before Jesus heals them, persons with disability are described as downcast, unworthy, unclean, pitiful, abject, one of begging, and objects of benevolence, charity, and compassion (see Matt. 8:22; 10:47). These characterisations of persons with disability show that society regarded them as "disabled persons" because they have a disability. As such they have no rights or deserve whatever is offered them. Grant thinks that characterising persons with disability in such a passive and pitiable way has Christological motives.[12]

Persons with disability are described in such helpless ways to highlight "Jesus as healer and miracle worker," redeemer, and full of compassion.[13] This group of healing narratives correspond to the medical

[10] Collen C. Grant, "Reinterpreting The Healing Narratives," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy A. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 73.
[11] Yong, *Theology*, 25.
[12] See Grant, "Reinterpreting," 73.
[13] See Grant, "Reinterpreting," 73.

model of disability in our contemporary times, since, here, the focus is on the

professional who possesses all that the person with a disability needs. In the medical model, persons with disability are regarded as having no contributions regarding their conditions; the expert professionals and therapists determine, describe, define and carry out treatments while persons with disability are passive recipients – "patients."

A second category of healing narratives unfavourable to persons with a disability includes those that, according to Yong, "perpetrate the ancient Hebrew beliefs that connect sin, impurity, and disorder to disability. These texts are those in which Jesus enjoins a person or groups of persons, after healing them of their impairments, to go and "sin no more" or to "go and show themselves to the priests for their purification or cleansing as in the cleansing of the leper (Luke 5:12-16). In the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 Jesus told him "son, your sins are forgiven." This is the category of healing narratives that Grant groups under "models of sin."[14] Persons with disability are normally lumped together with tax collectors and prostitutes under the name "sinners" in the same healing events. This group of texts also makes no distinction between disability and sickness or illness or poor health. According to Grant,

> Bas van Iersel urges the reader not to 'presume too lightly that the symptoms of paralysis are regarded here due to a moral lapse either of the man in question or of someone else, which would mean that the story suggests a causal connection between sin and sickness, a supposition for which there is no sufficient evidence in the text.[15]

Therefore, in these texts healing as a means of restoration is equated to redemption and a kind of salvation as well, that is, the liberation from sin. As I mentioned above, the NT continues the prophetic tradition of hope for the restoration of Israel; and so also the healing of the person with disability.

However, a critical reading of these stories suggests that, far from restoration or redemption, their critical meanings have contributed to a

[14] Grant, "Reinterpreting," 73.
[15] Grant, "Reinterpreting," 73.

negative perception of disability and have been detrimental to the lives of persons with disability in the NT and early church and beyond. Clearly, the approach in the "sin model" healing narratives corresponds to the moral model of disability where disability, as was explained earlier in the OT sense, is a punishment from God which is blamed on a moral and sinful cause. This sin model also finds resonance or correlation in the Ghanaian worldview whereby, persons with disability are labelled with names that indicate punishment and curses for infractions against tradition, nature, and culture. Joseph Agbenyega explains:

> In typical traditional communities, crocodiles, and snakes are considered to have some special powers and any cruelty against them can lead to the individual giving birth to a child with a disability. Riches in some traditional societies in Ghana are viewed with mixed feelings. Many people believe that parents can exchange any part of the child's body spiritually, [for] money such that the part so exchanged will become defective. Consequently, a rich family with a person with a disability is labelled *sikaduro* (juju money).[16]

Thirdly, Yong presents a group of healing narratives in the NT that link disability to demons, evil spirits and others.[17] Many of the texts spoken of so far also fall into this category. They involve texts featuring "Jesus exorcising and curing physical and mental infirmities and 'disabilities' of all sorts (e.g., Matt. 4:24; 8:16; Mark 1:32-34; Luke 7:21; Acts 8:7)."[18] In the African context there also exist this connection of disability to evil spirits especially when disability is linked to witchcraft. This group of narratives also may fit into Grant's "Christological focus" or emphasis on healing. By healing a demoniac, Jesus proves that he has the power and authority greater than the demon and its source of power. This category of healing narratives approaches disability in the medical sense.

Grant has yet one last model of interpretation of disability in the healing narratives of the NT; this she calls the "faith models."[19] They are healing narratives that relate the faith of the person with a disability

[16] J. S. Agbenyega, "The Power of Labelling: Discourse in the Construction of Disability in Ghana," *Australian Association for Research in Education*; www.aare.edu.au/03pap/agb03245.pdf (Retrieved on October 7, 2007).
[17] Yong, *Theology*, 26.
[18] Yong, *Theology*, 26.
[19] Grant, "Reinterpreting," 77.

to the healing that Jesus gives. These texts portray persons with disability as individuals of great faith or trust in the power of Jesus to heal them. To avoid a quick jump into concluding that this model must have a positive impact on persons with disability, Grant warns about an underlying negative implication and perception of disability and persons with disability in this model as well. Faith model healing narratives are easy to recognise as they involve healing events in which we often hear Jesus saying, "Your faith has saved you." For Grant, however,

> To hear repeatedly that an individual's faith is the decisive element in his or her being healed implies that those who are not healed must not have enough faith. … As Nancy Eiesland puts it, "Failure to be healed is often assessed as a personal flaw in the individual, such as unrepented sin or desire to remain disabled.[20]

In Ghana, the situation Eiesland describes is commonplace. This also is portrayed in the film, *Emmanuel's Gift*. When Emmanuel was still an infant his mother first tried to change his impairment by seeking one spiritual or "deliverance" church after another without a solution.[21] Such a situation frequently results in frustration, discouragement and worsened social problems in the life of the person with disability. The faith model of healing narratives also locates disability in the individual and for that reason, it resonates with the medical model of disability.

In summary, the conventional biblical understanding of disability, as analysed is unfavourable to persons with disability. The subtexts of these conventional biblical texts make it possible to identify the

[20] Grant, "Reinterpreting," 77.

[21] See Lisa Lax and Nancy Stern, *Emmanuel's Gift*, Narrated by Oprah Winfrey and Directed by Lisa Lax and Nancy Stern (Los Angeles: First Look Studio, Inc., 2005), DVD. See also Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 102, where Gifford talks about the high rate at which 'deliverance' and prophetic healing churches have sprung up in Ghana and West Africa at large. These churches engage and do battle the demonic, witchcraft and spiritual forces of the traditional religions to deliver those afflicted by these spiritual forces. In this context it is not unusual that some of the sick and persons with disabilities are dubbed as people with "hardened hearts," witches, some of whom end up thrown out of the gatherings or sent into a healing camp until they are healed. Cf. the section on "Healing," in Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Ecclesia in Ghana* (Accra: National Catholic Secretariat, 1997), 71.

understanding of disability at play in the Bible. Thus, disability in the Bible is understood in the sense of moral and medical/rehabilitation models. The practical consequences of these models are that persons with disability are stigmatised, excluded, alienated, infantilised, and marginalised. In keeping with the main claim of this paper, and with the social model of disability on which it is based, it is necessary now to reread the Bible in search of a new hermeneutic that mostly contributes to a more positive perception of disability that can also emerge from the worldview and cultural anthropology of Ghanaian society. Yong's conclusion, as noted in the biblical analysis above, is that the conventional biblical perception of disability is ordained or permitted by God for God's purpose and glory, hence persons with disability must accept it but hope for the same God's intervention and plan to be fulfilled. Therefore, the Church or society is the agent through which the needs of persons with disabilities are met.[22] This is the perception of disability that many Christians today form when they read and interpret the Bible. It is also the kind of perception on which most church leaders have built their ministries to persons with disabilities today.

The Imago Dei: An Alternative Biblical Hermeneutic

The human body is the most concrete, visible, and tangible reality that the Bible uses to express what is invisible and immaterial.[23] There is for example, in the Bible, the use of 'heart' which is a physical organ of the human body to mean "feeling, desire, reason, and decision" – all are invisible actions. Other examples include the "hand of the Lord," meaning the help or the power of the Lord, and "walking with the Lord," meaning obeying or being faithful to God." Just as these parts of the human body are deemed the most appropriate physical images of the invisible realities, so the whole human being or human person is held as the *imago Dei* – the image of God in the Bible (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1-3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jas. 3:9; 2 Col. 1:15; Rom. 8:29). It follows that the human person as the image of God occupies the most central part in the Bible since the latter is about God; "the human person remains important from one end of the Bible to the other."[24] But,

[22] Yong, *Theology*, 38.
[23] See, "Biblical Anthropology," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 18.
[24] "Biblical Anthropology," 18.

just what does it mean that the human person is made in the image of God? And what is the implication for disability and persons with disabilities?

Among the many theories put forward to explain what it means to be made in the image of God, Augustine's approach to understanding the Trinity is important. With the assumption of God's being in the Trinity, and in the light of Gen. 1:26, we look for the *vestigia Trinitatis* in the human person. If we do, "Augustine says 'we must find in the soul of [the person] the image of the Creator which is immortally planted in its immortality' (*De Trinitate* 14:4). He identified the 'footsteps' in the trinity of [the person's] memory, intelligence and will."[25]

This theory of Augustine is problematic since it reduces the whole image of God to the rational part of the person. However, Augustine opens the way for us to see the human person as a trinity modelled after the Trinitarian God. We could go beyond Augustine by understanding this trinity of the person in terms of Gyekye's tripartite metaphysical makeup of a person, that is, *honam* – body, *okra* – soul, and *sunsum* – (personality or spirit). As an image of the Divine Trinity – a community of persons, so in the Akan (Ghanaian) understanding, the human person is metaphysically a community. This then is why the person naturally lives up to his or her natural self by belonging to a community through interactions with persons – communal beings. In other words, visible or invisible physical disability does not reduce or limit one's belonging to family or community. Belonging finds its deeper meaning in social relationships and not in physical embodiment, however important that might be. Persons with disability naturally fulfil this quality of interaction which is central to being a person. Their disability is part of the many unique ways that the human being images or reflects the Creator since their bodies, souls and spirits are the *vestigial Trinitatis* – the footsteps of God. Hence, we suggest that the *imago Dei* is the most significant hermeneutical key for understanding disability in the Bible.

We draw two implications of the affirmation that the person with a disability is the image of God, that is, he or she expresses the spiritual invisible God in his or her body. Firstly, the understanding of the im-

[25] "Images of God," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, et. al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVastity Press, 1988), 328.

age of God in a person "is the foundation for human dignity and the biblical ethic."[26] A person with a disability has a value that is not issued to him or her by anyone in the world but because, like all persons and all creation, he or she is created. The image of God, then, leads us to focus on our origin – creation, for affirmation of who we are, so that we can live our lives fully towards where we are going – the eschaton. This origin which is in God warrants the respect and dignified treatment of the person with or without disability. Secondly, it has been affirmed that "Biblical anthropology is an anthropology of *transcendence*."[27] This means that in the biblical understanding of the human person, the per- son is created with a capacity to transcend himself or herself beyond "the self and unto the life of the Other."[28] It implies that as human persons our imaging of God is modelled after God's incarnation (John 1:14). The person with a disability, in his or her natural interaction with the community or others, is not just meeting his or her survival needs, but fulfilling his or her human personhood which is essentially imaging God – incarnating – communicating. Thus, those who relate with persons with disability daily need to focus on this communication more than the impairments.

This concept of the image of God in persons provides a lens through which we understand and interpret scripture as it relates to disability. It is a rich hermeneutic that helps to refute the conventional interpretations of disability in both OT and NT and affirms the personhood of persons with disability.

Modern Western Theological Anthropology and Disability

Karl Rahner: The Supernatural Existential

The historical development[29] of the "supernatural existential" among theologians was constituted by the idea of the relationship between the gratuitousness of God's grace and human nature. Saint Paul's idea that salvation comes from pure grace and that the "Law" leads to sin established the separation between nature and grace, which was favoured generally to safeguard the gratuitousness of God's grace.

[26] Cf. Calvin's use of this idea, *Institutes* III. vii. 6; "Images of God," 328.
[27] "Biblical Anthropology," 21.
[28] "Biblical Anthropology," 22.
[29] For a complete historical account of the development, see the introduction, Eamon Conway *The Anonymous Christian – A Revised Christianity?* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993).

Thomas Aquinas introduced the natural desire in human beings (*obediential potency*) but this was seen as a threat to the gratuitousness of God's grace; hence, neo-Thomists and scholastics reverted to the Pauline-Augustinian separatist idea. By the time of Rahner, there were two competing positions on the relationship between grace and nature. Henri de Lubac's position espoused Aquinas' idea of the *desiderium naturelle* as a link or a medium between nature and gratuitous grace – thus grace in some way was considered intrinsic to the human subject. The other position, which maintained "extrinsicism," was articulated in Pope Pius XII's *Humani Generis*.[30]

Karl Rahner entered the God-human relationship debate with a position that reconciled the two opposing views by employing the Heideggerian[31] concept of 'existential'. For Rahner, the supernatural existential is "a permanent influence by God enhancing the human being's *obediential potency*, revealing to him or her, the ultimate meaning of human existence (God) and inviting him or her to commitment to this meaning."[32] As part of the human nature, the "supernatural existential" is always offered and accessible to the *obediential potency* in the human being as how the human subject may transcend its finitude and experience a horizon of infinite possibilities. The "supernatural existential" then mediates between grace and nature. The *obediential potency* of human nature, however, does not remain neutral; it either accepts or rejects the offer of grace mediated through the "supernatural existential," thus, there is an ongoing "permanent" interchange or interaction within human nature in such a way that the "supernatural existential" is experienced inseparably from the nature of human beings.

Rahner, therefore, succeeds in relating the free will of human nature to the gratuitousness of God's grace through the supernatural existential: the human being is a "subject" because, in human nature, the *obediential potency* can interact with the supernatural existential to choose its offer – the grace of God which God offers freely as it is not

[30] See Conway, *The Anonymous Christian*, 12.
[31] Conway, *The Anonymous Christian*, 14. According to Eamon Conway, Heidegger's "existential" meant "a permanent determination penetrating all elements of human existence, which reveals its meaning and structures, characterizing the human being before he engages in any free action." It is in this sense that Rahner uses it.
[32] See Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 16.

conditioned by human nature but is made available in the supernatural existential. Therefore, the human being, for Rahner, is "the event of the unmerited and forgiving self-communication of God."[33] In this sense, Rahner rejects any concept that suggests the idea of "pure nature" – nature is always and permanently "graced" in the sense that the grace of God is available and offered to nature, and nature has free access to it. This act of accessing gratuitous grace through the "supernatural existential," which, although it appears as human nature's action, has, in fact, God as its efficient cause; it is the transcendental experience whereby God communicates God's self in revelation to the human being: a revelation whose content is the human's own special nature and its bond with the transcendent supernatural – God. As Duffy affirms,

> [T]he opening of human transcendentality to the immediate presence of God is already 'revelation' implying the possibility of faith. Self-communication is self-revelation; the holy mystery is the light enlightening every person. Thus, Rahner does not restrict revelation to Jewish history and the Christ event but views it as coextensive with the whole course of history. Where human being is, there is grace, divine self-communication, hence transcendental or general revelation.[34]

The heart of Rahner's anthropology is the notion of the infinite human subject who, by virtue of an endowed *obediential potency*, is naturally oriented towards a transcendent horizon – a realm of infinity and of divine gratuitous grace and revelation made possible by the "supernatural existential." The human person is therefore sustained and determined as such by this ongoing communication or transcendental experience, being carried out, consciously or unconsciously. Though limited and finite, the human being is a participant in the world of the infinite, and the experience, therein, creates a dialectic in the human being when compared to the experience of his or her finitude. This dialectic may be understood as a basic perpetual longing and searching that characterises humanity. Rahner presents, as an example of this transcendental experience, the act of love. For him, love of neighbour and love of God are not two distinct acts but they are like two

[33] K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 116.
[34] Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspective in Theological Anthropology* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 295.

sides of a coin, showing "that two names have really to be given to the same reality."[35] What this means is that, by the unity of love of God and love of neighbour, Rahner draws our attention to the fact that, first, human beings essentially participate in and with the divine and second, the same love extended to the divine should be accorded them as well.

The one act of love, which Rahner considers as transcendental[36] in nature, shares an affinity with the act of the African individual who reaches out to the community, and by this transcendental act, he or she is sustained. In African communalism, the community can be compared to the transcendental realm of infinite possibilities. It is the realm in which the individual finds God, self, God's grace, etc. Rahner's supernatural existential translates into the dynamics of the community in its determination of and constant communication with the individual. Hopkins, in reference to elements contained in the link between the individual and community, claimed by Gyekye, says:

> Overarching – intergenerational, transcendent, or spiritual – [communal] values may include "sharing, mutual aid, caring for others, interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, and social harmony." … The idea of the communal … helps guarantee (if the communal is consistently adhered to) the conditions for the possibility of the self's and selves' perpetual flourishing.[37]

Hopkins recognises that these elements may be transcendental and spiritual. This means that the individual Ghanaian, for example, is engaged in a transcendental and spiritual experience by his or her seeking and investing in the well-being of the community. By this transcendental act, he or she is sustained because the community, in reciprocity and automatically, provides identification, fulfilment, spirituality and every source that grounds human existence. Here, therefore, is a clear demonstration of correlation and or shared understanding between Rahner's theological anthropology, as it emerges from his theory of anonymous Christianity, on one hand, and the general traditional understanding of the human person, as articulated in

[35] Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VI: 232.
[36] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 105. Here, Lonergan also equates the notion of 'self-transcendence' to the act of loving.
[37] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 85.

communalism by African philosophers, such as Kwame Gyekye, on the other hand.

John Macquarrie: Disability as Limitation, Possibilities and Choices

John Macquarrie was an Anglican priest and a philosophical theologian whose scholarly reputation reached its zenith "with the publication of [his] two books: *An Existential Theology* (1955) and *The Scope of Demythologizing* (1960).[38] He developed the "existential-ontological" method of theology by which he is said to have successfully found a middle ground or a balance between Karl Rahner and Rudolf Bultmann's existential demythologisation.[39] As a father of a person with a disability, his reflection greatly impacted disability as his method sought to "remove the barrier between human experience and God's presence."[40] In his "Theological Reflections on Disability," Macquarrie employs some keywords that provide the hermeneutic significance of Rahner's reflection on disability; these are "limitation, possibilities, and choices."[41]

For Macquarrie, human disability can be understood in terms of the "limitations" that characterise human existence as a whole. The "basic truth" is that "human existence is through and through finite."[42] This experience of limitation is present in all that constitutes our humanity. Thus, seen this way, no one can claim to be free of disability, for, that would mean he or she is not human. "A human being is, in essence, constituted by a contradiction or even a conflict. Such a being is through and through finite."[43] However, human limitations provide the basis for possibilities. Being limited or finite makes the human being reach out to seek help from the "infinite realm" of possibilities. To be human is to be a finite (disabled) being that seeks or is capable of seeking after the infinite; thus, the human being is a contradiction – "dialectic, in Rahner's terms.[44] As limited beings in an infinite realm

[38] "John Macquarrie Biography," *Encyclopaedia of World Biography*; http://www.bookrags.com/biography/john-macquarrie/ (Accessed April 4, 2008).
[39] J. J. Mueller, *What Are they about Theological Method?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 25.
[40] Mueller, *Theological Method?*
[41] John Macquarrie, "Theological Reflections on Disability," in *Religion and Disability: Essays in Scripture, Theology and Ethics*, ed. E. M. Bishop (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 30f, 33, 35.
[42] Macquarrie, "Theological Reflections," 30.
[43] Macquarrie, "Theological Reflections," 31.
[44] Macquarrie, "Theological Reflections," 32.

of possibilities by our transcendental experience, we gain choices as well. Furthermore, if we are limited with possibilities and choices, then whatever we choose becomes special to us and makes us special.

Hence, limitations (disability) of human existence are the basis of human "self-esteem."[45] According to J.J. Mueller, Macquarrie's position is that "humanness is not to be too tightly defined in terms of joy, happiness and health; suffering, sorrow and sickness are not of themselves barriers from God's loving disclosures of himself."[46]

Macquarrie makes Rahner's anthropology relevant to the understanding of disability and the Ghanaian conception of a person. The limited human subject who enjoys infinite possibilities when he or she takes transcendental experience finds a parallel in the Ghanaian individual, born as a person with natural insufficiency (Gyekye), or as one pole (Dzobo) who, by these natural limitations, interacts with, belongs to, and invests in the community. By so doing, the person experiences abundance and survives because the community takes care of his or her needs that cannot be met otherwise. Thus, in Ghanaian terms, it is a transcendental experience to live as a communal or corporate being – an "interactionist" being.

Models of Theology of Disability: Block, Black, and Eiesland

Until now, we have been discussing the views and positions of people with or without disabilities, in which, from our perspective and that of some of our sources for this work, elements that affirm disability may be found. These elements or issues have originated from different perspectives such as socio-anthropological, philosophical, biblical, and theological. The question we seek to answer in this section, then, is: what should a theology of disability look like? Questions like this have been rightly and effectively answered by the use of models in many fields. Hence the question may be reframed: Are there models for a theology of disability?

Drawing on Avery Dulles and Ian Barbour, Stephen Bevans says his adopted model, in his *Models of Contextual Theology*, is theoretical. He states, "It is a 'case' that is useful in simplifying a complex reality,

[45] Macquarrie, "Theological Reflections," 37.
[46] Mueller, *Theological Method?*, 25.

and, although such simplification does not fully capture that reality, it does yield true knowledge of it."[47] A model affirms something real although it does not fully capture it. Much has been accomplished in religion and disability scholarship concerning worship, theological education, and ordination, Creamer acknowledges, but she also notes the need for "complete theological systems, including conceptions or images of God that affirm experiences of disability."[48] What Creamer is calling for are models by which the reality of the image of God in and through the experiences of disability is affirmed. She identifies three models of theology or three ways of perceiving the image of God present in the experiences of persons with disabilities. They include the accessible God, the interdependent God, and the disabled God, developed by Jennie Weiss Block, Kathy Black, and Nancy Eiesland respectively.

Jennie Weiss Block and the Accessible God

Jennie Weiss Block is a middle-aged temporarily able-bodied Roman Catholic lay widow with three children living in Texas. She describes herself as "a 'secondary consumer', an expression used in the disability field to indicate a person who has a family member who has a disability."[49] Her interest in theology and disability was sparked by her life and experience with her youngest brother, Bobby, one of her five adopted siblings, who had many disabilities including mental retardation. In her book, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*, she gives a two-fold purpose for her project:

> Firstly, to forge a "conversation" between "disability" and "Christianity," and secondly, to allow the insights from this conversation to guide the development of a theology of access that ensures people with disabilities take their rightful place within the Christian community.[50]

[47] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 26. See also, Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 32, where he explains that the purpose of theological models "is not to present replicas of God or of the divine action, but to suggest ways of accounting for theologically relevant data and for explaining, up to a point, what Christians believe on a motive of faith. … theological systems, with the help of theoretical models, illuminate certain aspects of a reality complex and exalted for human comprehension."
[48] Creamer, "*Theological Accessibility*," 3.
[49] Block, *Copious Hosting*, 12.
[50] Block, *Copious Hosting*, 11.

The point of departure for a theology of access is the Trinitarian God who models a life of community and inclusion. The Triune God demonstrates to the Christian community "that a life of love and communion with others where inclusion is the rule, not the exception, can only be realised in a Trinitarian context."[51] The life of the Trinitarian God further engenders the same life of love and communion in the Christian community and also endows the Church with a spirituality of friendship which goes beyond access.

This theology of access essentially emerges from theological categories such as Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, spirituality, and morality. Firstly, from Christology Jesus is seen as a "copious gift of God," and a generous host throughout the New Testament. As such Jesus also manifests that God, Abba, is a relational God, an accessible host. With this understanding or image of the God of access, we are invited as individuals and as a community to create such accessibility in our personal and community lives to make room for persons with disabilities. Secondly, the pneumatological category reminds us of the Holy Spirit as a God of inclusion. The mere fact that the Holy Spirit is less known in the Christian community makes the Holy Spirit "a marginalized member of the Trinity."[52] Consequently, the Holy Spirit effectively portrays a God who understands what it means to be marginalized and so at Pentecost, the Spirit manifested the inclusive God by ending marginalization through fostering inclusion. We also learn from the Spirit, an Advocate, that advocacy is salient to the life of persons with disabilities both in the form of self-advocacy or others advocating. Finally, the ecclesiological category shows that, as a community that owes its origin and mission to the God of access, the church fails in its mission if it is not accessible to all including persons with disabilities.[53]

Therefore, according to Block, a theology of access presents God as accessible and inclusive. The practical consequences of this image of God are manifold, ranging from architectural accessibility to access to ministerial leadership among others. They all affirm the experiences of disability and persons with disabilities. Block's approach may be seen as Augustinian as she makes judicious use of the

[51] Block, *Copious Hosting*, 130.
[52] Block, *Copious Hosting*, 138.
[53] Block, *Copious Hosting*, 141-142.

Trinitarian concept (see 3.1.3). hence it presses home the idea of the image of God in persons with disabilities. Its practical implications and focus will have a direct and immediate effect on the transformation of the community.

Kathy Black and the Interdependent God

Kathy Black is a person with a disability, who teaches homiletics at the Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California, and has worked for many years among the deaf. As a person with a disability and an ordained United Methodist minister, her reasons for engaging in theology and disability may be obvious, however, "her interest is in the intersection of Deafness and homiletics, based on her experiences of 'the Word made flesh' as a hearing person who preaches and teaches in sign language.[54] Black's model of a theology of disability is a theology of interdependence where God is seen as a God of interdependence.

The structure of her theology is not different from that of Block except that she does not use the Trinitarian concept: Structurally, both theologies move from a quality of God and its implication for an individual or a community. For Black, God is a God of interdependence and, therefore, the church is a place for interdependence with God and others.

Black's point of departure in the development of the theology of interdependence is the origin or the cause of disability. Contrary to conventional biblical interpretations, this theological model does not see the cause of disability as God just as God is not responsible for the causes of disabilities. "This conception would place God 'in the position of being responsible for nuclear accidents, wars, rape, the hole in the ozone layer, homelessness, famine, toxic waste dumps, and earthquakes, as well as disability,' consequences which she finds unacceptable."[55] The cause of disability is interdependence. Black explains that the interdependence that exists among human beings brings about the genetic and environmental influence that causes disabilities. She argues "We are all interconnected and interdependent upon one another so that what we do affects the lives of others and the

[54] Creamer, "Theological Accessibility," 4.
[55] Creamer, "Theological Accessibility," 34.

earth itself."[56] Therefore, if it takes human choice and interdependence to bring about disability, then, it is by the same interdependence that we will bring transformation in our understanding and attitude towards disability. In this project of transformation, God is present in the universe as part of the process by which we reshape what disability means. Hence as a God of interdependence, God stays in solidarity with us and the lives of persons with disabilities to suffer, corporate, and struggle with them. This is the way of liberation for persons with disabilities in that the God of interdependence is in solidarity with them and leads them to transformation. The church then is the context for this solidarity, corporation, and interdependence.

Black's model seems to take a process theological approach where God is seen as immanent in the world, in the church, in culture, in experience and in persons with disabilities, as a catalyst to bring about change through cooperation and interaction.

Nancy Eiesland and the Disabled God

Nancy Eiesland's "The Disabled God," according to Creamer "is the most powerful discussion of God to arise from within Disability studies."[57] Eiesland is a lifelong person with a disability, a sociologist of religion and teaches at the Chandler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. In her ground-breaking work: *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, Eiesland contends that,

> …a liberatory theology of disability is a theology of coalition and struggle in which we identify our experiences while also struggling for recognition, inclusion, and acceptance from one another and from the able-bodied society and church.[58]

Here, the model sets God in the experience of disability and persons with disabilities to give disability a new meaning or symbol – one that is power for political action. Hence this model is politico-theological. The emphasis of the disabled God is not so much understood as

[56] Creamer, "Theological Accessibility," 34.
[57] Creamer, "Theological Accessibility," 5.
[58] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 29.

weakening God but rather, it is understood in terms of God siding with persons with disability.

Eiesland's starting point is her own "broken body" – the disability of persons with disabilities. The reality of one's disability must be affirmed or accepted to use it. If one does not accept or acknowledge one's disability, identification with the "minority group" is not possible. The power of the "minority group" comes from the fact that, like the civil rights movement in places like the USA, it signals the reality of a survival group or a marginalised and oppressed group. This identification empowers the group to struggle for liberation. The Disabled God then struggles with persons with disabilities because the Disabled God identifies with the surviving group. The Disabled God is seen as a survivor more than a victim because the liberation struggle is not done by any other persons than persons with disabilities themselves – they are active and not passive recipients of help or liberation; this is the conventional biblical understanding. The image of the Disabled God then is to empower persons with disabilities to demand and work towards political change.

The goal of the 'Disable God' model, then, is about mainstreaming, renormalization or re-symbolization of disability beginning with a deconstruction of the stigma, stereotype, and other socio-cultural constructions associated with disability which dehumanise people with disability. The identification of God with the experience of disability redefines disability itself, and hence, redefines persons who have them. Scripture and Christology provide bases for this identification. Thus, the post-resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples with wounds, certifying that it is normal for the glorified body to have wounds or a disability. In other words, disability and divinity are not incompatible as the conventional biblical interpretations show. Instead, like Gyekye's "person with natural insufficiency," persons with disabilities reflect the divine or resurrected body of Christ in more normal ways than temporarily 'able-bodies'. The ground for this is the Disabled God. Eiesland ends her reflection with an implication for the church:

Thus, the church, which depends for its existence on the disabled God, must live out liberating action in the world. The church finds its identity as the body of Christ only by being a community of faith and witness, a coalition of struggle and justice, and a fellowship of hope. This

mission necessitates that people with disabilities be incorporated into all levels of participation and decision-making.[59]

In this sense, then, to the extent that the church identifies with the body of Christ, and ultimately the disabled God, the church may be called a "disabled church." The models of "theology of disability" considered in this paper are theological-anthropological reflections based on the social model of disability. Hence, they are the end products of the search for an alternative understanding of the Christian experience and tradition about disability.

Conclusion: Towards a NT Anthropology of Disability Culture in the Church in Ghana

In this paper, the theological anthropology of disability we have discussed calls on the Church in Ghana to embrace all persons, which is essentially her divine character. Considering the sociopolitical and religious context of the church concerning disability, we argue for pedagogical and structural approaches which would lead to the transformation of disability culture in the church in Ghana.

The pedagogical approach should be led by both the clergy and laity who themselves must be well educated to lead the process of transforming the minds and hearts of the faithful about matters of disability. The focus of the pedagogy must centre on re-educating the faithful, especially catechumen to eschew negative epistemologies, perceptions, values, and attitudes about disabled people and to embrace a new theological anthropology of disability in which the disabled are accepted as members of the community and images of God.

The structural approach rests on a concerted effort by the church to reform its structures that act as barriers to persons with disability. In Ghana, while some church structures or architecture are disability-friendly, many others are not. As a religious institution, the church should be accessible in many creative ways through its architectural facilities, programs, and ministries. Any theological anthropology that seeks to exclude the disabled through the lack of architectural support, denies them of their God-given right to live and act freely like every-

[59] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 104.

one else and not to be dehumanized, marginalised, and stigmatised. In this way, the church will be demonstrating what this paper is all about, that, the absence of persons with disability from the church, is a manifestation that it is the church that is rather disabled by the barriers it has constructed and not persons with disability.

The church must reflect in its membership, the community in the likeness of the Trinity, of which she is an image. People with disability are very central to the very nature of the *Imago Dei*, an identity not based on human construction, but developed from the very life of God whose very essence is to include and not to exclude anyone from the divine community of life and redemption.

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