Pastoral care and intellectual disability. A person-centred approach

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Anna Katherine Shurley is a Baptist Minister who has worked as a chaplain in the USA with children and adults

identified with intellectual impairments. Her work is part of a series of eight titles to date which focus on disability within the discipline of theology. Examples within the series include ‘The Bible and Disability: A Commentary’, edited by Melcher, Parsons, and Young (2017), and ‘Theology and Downs Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity’, authored by Amos Yong (2007). Shurley describes the purpose of the series as being to ‘encourage theoretical engagement with secular disability studies while supporting the re-examination of established religious doctrine and practice’ (v). She emphasises the importance of exploring the intersection between religion, theology and disability and of understanding the worldviews of disabled people and family members. Shurley is very clear in her view that the church community can play a vital role in the social inclusion and well-being of people with intellectual impairments and their families. She illustrates her discussion of these themes with examples from her own practice which come across as warm and humane. The idea of social inclusion beyond the church is outside the scope of this work. Shurley’s contribution could usefully sit alongside texts which consider broader approaches to ensuring that people with intellectual impairments and their families are embraced and valued by society. God is central to Shurley’s ideas and she is transparent about her ontological position in this respect. For people who do not believe in God but do believe in social justice, valuing people and creating a more inclusive society, the centrality of God in this work might be challenging.

*Pastoral Care and Intellectual Disability* is made up of five short chapters which explore themes under the headings of collaborating, empowering, calling, playing and witnessing. These titles are helpfully explained by subheadings. Playing, for example, is about ‘person centred pastoral care in practice’. Shurley includes an extensive section of notes at the end. While doing so makes the work easier to read in one way, it also made the structure feel a little awkward. Some of the information in the notes could have been incorporated usefully within the chapters and doing so could have elevated the discussion in places beyond the anecdotal. Undoubtedly the work is well researched, but this did not always come across strongly because of the separation of some key aspects into the notes chapter. Real-life examples included throughout the work are deployed effectively and ensure that the topic is not present in too dry a fashion.

Many of the arguments articulated in Shurley’s work will be familiar to critical disability studies scholars. She

considers the importance of valuing the individual, of agency and of respect for choice. Compassion is a recurring theme which is discussed with reference to the role of the church. Arguably, the idea of compassion without faith could have received more attention. Similarly, when considering ideas of agency the impression of a tacit assumption of belief in God underpinning the narrative rather prompted the question ‘what if you don’t?’ Vulnerability of people with intellectual impairments could well extend to reduction of opportunities to make choices and enact agency within the religious sphere. In other words, it would have been interesting for the idea that someone with an intellectual impairment may not believe in God or a non-believer could show compassion to have been discussed in more depth. The situation of disabled people as providers rather than always recipients of care could also have been explored further. At the intersection of religion, theology and disability, terms like ‘healing’ and ‘growth’ may have radically different connotations. While Shurley is very clear about the value of the individual, her arguments could have usefully been underpinned by more engagement with concepts like ableism which are so familiar to critical disability studies scholars.

The ontological perspective of the author as a person of faith working within the context of the church may well differ from that of many, but not all, readers of *Disability & Society*. Critical Disability Studies academics accustomed to marking academic work are used to asking the question ‘where is your evidence?’ Shurley’s perspective is challenging in that, although she develops her arguments with referenced points used to provide an evidence base, her faith underpins her discussion. In the field of critical disability studies this may be seen as unusual, although transparent engagement with positionality as a writer is encouraged. The work is without a doubt thought-provoking, and much common ground is apparent between scholars and activists who talk about ableism and oppression and people of faith who talk about valuing individuals, community and inclusion.

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