

Religion & Webinar Teaching Resources

Religion & Disability – Released October 2021

[YouTube Link](#)

Overview

Religious communities have often been at the forefront of providing services and support for parishioners with varying health, social, and economic needs. However, this attention to difference has not always translated to a thoughtful encounter with intersectionality and the ways in which ability operates differently across race, gender, and class. This panel hopes to address questions of access by examining the intersection of disability and religion through a lens that focuses on embodied religious practice and embodiment more broadly. Moreover, this panel will address how disability and religion provide a novel space to think critically about inclusion and visibility in the political arena, classrooms, and religious spaces. We ask: “How has disability theory and activism opened up new arenas for social protest and political belonging—particularly with regard to religious spaces?” This panel discussion will examine these and other topics considering what many argue is a renewed attention to neurodiversity, varied abilities, and access in an age of social media and distance learning. Join humanities and social science scholars for a conversation at the intersection of religion, disability, and resistance.

Host

Kenzie Mintus is Associate Professor of Sociology in the School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI. Her research interests include health and aging, emphasizing disability and chronic illness; much of her research focuses on identifying and understanding health disparities among older adults. In 2017, she was selected as a fellow of the Gerontological Society of America. Previously, she was a postdoctoral fellow at the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan. Mintus serves on several journal editorial boards, including *The Journals of Gerontology*, *Social Sciences*, *Journal of Aging and Health*, *Journal of Family Issues*, and *PLOS ONE*. She has published over 20 scholarly articles.

Sarah Imhoff is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University. She is broadly interested in religion and the body. Her research asks questions about how bodies and their attributes, such as gender, race, and ability, shaped and are shaped by religion. Underwriting many of her research projects are questions about how embodiment makes religious meaning, and how religious discourse makes bodies. She has written about the meaning of Jewishness in contemporary American contexts and is especially interested in the ways that race, DNA, and medical knowledge shape what it means to be Jewish—or even who is a Jew—today.

Panelists

Dan Bowman Jr. is Associate Professor of English at Taylor University, Editor-in-Chief of *Relief: A Journal of Art and Faith*, and author of *A Plum Tree in Leatherstocking Country* (VAC Poetry, 2012) and *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity* (Brazos Press, 2021). His work has appeared in many print and online journals, including: *The Adirondack Review*, *American Poetry Journal*,

Art House America, Books and Culture, Istanbul Literary Review (Turkey), The Midwest Quarterly, The Other Journal, Redactions: Poetry & Poetics, Rio Grande Review, Pyrta (India), Seneca Review, and others.

Meredith Olivia Harris Hope is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the College of Wooster. She focuses on protective factors that enhance positive social development and health outcomes in minority youth and emerging adults in the United States. Right now, she explores the contributions of religious communities for Black youth and emerging adult development within high-risk contexts (e.g., racial discrimination and community violence), with specific emphasis on behavioral and mental health outcomes. Dr. Hope also specializes in teaching children, adolescents, and emerging adult development, as well as the psychology of religion and spirituality.

Show Notes/ Main Questions & Points

Question 1: In your research or experiences how have you seen disability addressed or maybe not addressed in religious spaces, and the other side, how have you seen religion addressed or not in spaces that are specifically designed for people with disabilities?

Meredith

- Another question comes to mind, which is what is the theology in religious spaces for engagement of congregants? To what extent are congregants and leaders willing to reshape life to adjust or refigure when you have people in the congregation who may have visible or invisible disabilities and understanding what that might mean. Something I find interesting is how theology plays a role in this, theology around what it means to be a person in a specific space.
- When we think about mental health in many religious spaces, there remains a stigma around how we understand mental health, it makes us look at how these things are approached. For example, there is a community who has a professional counselor on their staff who helps congregants and non-congregants alike. The theology allows for looking at health in more than just a physical or spiritual way. A lot of these questions are on the line of theology and resources. So, you may have a theology that allows you to talk about and make known different disabilities, but you may not have the resources.

Dan

- My own experience is looking at neurodivergence, autism, ADHD and bipolar disorder. In the religious community I am working in, in incarnation of Christ is a central event in the story of the New Testament and faith and sometimes we engage theology as if it is this disembodied thing, i feel like we are behind. I look at and focus most on the lived experience of disability rather than the academic or scholarly viewpoint.

Scholarship and academic studies can be powerful, but people's experiences are just as powerful.

Question 2: How has intersectionality shaped the experiences of people with disabilities who hold other historical marginalized statuses particularly in the context of religious spaces.

Meredith

- With identity, sometimes people don't have a choice on if they want to identify themselves with, especially marginalized groups and people with visible disabilities. The intersection between visibility and invisibility, and what visible identities get importance placed on them. Being African American is a visible thing that you can't escape and places you in a larger marginalized community. That is something we really need to keep in mind. By the same token there are people who cannot hide their disability and that another intersection where we should look at how religious theology and communities understand what it is to be safe, seen and present.

Kenzie

- That also touches on how universal design can allow for inclusive spaces but the challenges that go along with that and the visibility versus invisibility.

Question 3: Thinking about what an inclusive space looks like for all types of disabilities.

Meredith

- For example, cognitive impairment or limitations, some religious spaces place a very high value on interreacting with the faith in an intellectual way. What can be problematic depends on how they focus on interreacting with the faith it may exclude people with disabilities from engaging. What are the bridges that these religious communities are building to bring people into these places, so that people can fully engage with the faith?
- Sometimes we forget to bring people to the table and ask people what they need and then we leave them out entirely. We need to be thinking about what make a community really a community and find ways to make sure everyone is at the table

Dan

- Mental disabilities don't present the same for all. So, the student I am working with is struggling because as an African American woman there isn't as much known or understood as there is for a white man, because most of the testing and research has been done by and on white males. Women and minorities are underdiagnosed, but it's harder

for them to access those tools and when they do they realize those tools aren't what they need.

We keep circling back to the point that finding out what needs to be done is what people with disabilities need, asking them what can make things better for them.

“Nothing about us, without us.”

Question 4: Thinking about what we have seen work and what we have seen not work in certain spaces.

Dan

- My suggestion is don't just learn about disabilities from medical texts but read some memoirs. Read work produced within the community rather than about the community. When you get the inside experience, it can help open the doors.

Meredith

- Creating a way to have both the voices of the community and leaders involved, holding everyone more accountable and creating safer, better spaces for all people.

Maintaining accessibility for all and thinking about the time and place needed for things to be accessible.

Assignment ideas

Discussion/Assignment Prompts

1. Examining our personal interactions and experiences with religion and disability. Discuss examples of the ways we see these intersections taking place. Do we see a safe, positive space for all, or are there marginalized communities within the larger congregation?
2. Dan mentions how testing and research has long been done solely on white males, pointing to an androcentric model. How else can we see these ideas at play. Think about ways in which people have been left marginalized or on the back end because there simply hasn't ever been a study done. For example, many medications have been tested and constructed around a male body, as a model, how can this negatively impact different parts of these communities?
3. What are other ways in which disabilities interact with religion. Thinking about mental health, dissociative identity disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and more, how do these function within certain religious groups?

Related Resources

[Religion, Health, and the Body in Law and Order](#) Teaching Module by Philippa Koch

[The Lives of Jessie Sampter: Queer, Disabled, Zionist](#) by Sarah Imhoff

- By charting how Sampter's life did not neatly line up with her own religious and political ideals, Imhoff highlights the complicated and at times conflicting connections between the body, queerness, disability, religion, and nationalism.

[Disney and Disability: Media Representations of Disability in Disney and Pixar Animated Films](#)
Article by Kenzie Mintus

- Since the merger of Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pixar Animation Studios, Disney has been lauded for creating more progressive content that includes representations of main characters from diverse backgrounds. However, progressive representations of disability (both physical and mental disability) have been slow to emerge in most mediums.

[Contextualizing Disability Experiences: Understanding and Measuring How the Environment Influences Disability](#) Chapter by Kenzie Mintus and Sabrina Cordon

- Scholars and advocates have long proposed that an individual's impairment is not the source of disability, but instead it is social and physical barriers put in place by society that are disabling.

[On The Spectrum; Autism, Faith, and the Gifts of Neurodiversity](#) by Dan Bowman Jr.

- Rather than viewing autism as a deficiency, Bowman teaches readers—through stories of his heartbreaks and triumphs—authentic ways to love their neighbors as themselves, including their autistic neighbors who are fearfully and wonderfully, if differently, made.

On The Spectrum [Discussion Guide](#) by Dan Bowman Jr.