

## A SUCCESSFUL LIFE

### HERMANUS CONTRACTUS AND DISABILITY THEOLOGY\*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study contextualizes the case of the medieval disabled Benedictine monk and scholar Hermanus of the Reichenau with modern theological approaches to disability, resulting in the challenge of several assumptions. Neither Hermanus' theology nor his identity are defined by his disability. This is both confirmed and contradicted by modern theologians. Liberation from expectations such as virtuous suffering and the importance of mutuality and community emerge as keys to a self-determined successful life fulfilling Shakespeare's concept of a 'narrative'. An explicit disability theology is not only not necessary, but may be counterproductive and limiting, both of God and of self.*

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### Introduction

Hermanus Contractus was born into the aristocratic family of the von Altshausen in 1013 and became a member of the Benedictine community of the Reichenau on the eponymous island in Lake Constance. He was severely disabled and one of the leading scholars of his age. We perceive a successful and apparently happy life, a man full of energy, charm and creativity, deeply spiritual, serene, loved and respected by fellow brethren, scholars, friends and family. His works range from mathematical treatises to histories, poetry and liturgical compositions. For much of his life he was unable to walk and often incapable of eating or writing unassisted, and his pupil and biographer Berthold of Reichenau describes him in his *Vita Herimanni* as 'from a young age outwardly paralysed by a great suffering by which all his members were distorted and without strength', unable to move or even turn unaided and being carried about in a chair.<sup>1</sup> Also, he was difficult to understand – Berthold describes 'broken and barely comprehensible words, slowly produced, but he eloquently enthralled his listeners with the

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<sup>1</sup> Berthold von der Reichenau, *Vita Herimanni*, edited and translated by Walter Berschin, in Walter Berschin and Martin Hellmann, *Hermann der Lahme. Gelehrter und Dichter (1013 – 1054)*, Reichenauer Texte und Bilder 11 (Heidelberg: Mattes, 2013), 6, my translation.

power of his language, serenely prepared for any argument'.<sup>2</sup> In 1054, at the age of 41, he died a protracted death from a pulmonary complication making breathing increasingly difficult.

Hermanus' life challenges assumptions we have of disability and of attitudes held in the mediaeval period. The core enquiry of this study is to understand what made this life successful and what may be concluded from that for modern formulations of 'disability theology'. The focus is mainly on physical disability; mental disability will appear in some contextualizing case studies.

The aim of this study is to find out the nature of Hermanus experience of being disabled, and how his reactions, as far as they can be ascertained, compare to and contrast with contemporary theological responses to disability ranging from Nancy Eiesland and her radical concept of the 'disabled God' to Jean Vanier's creation of the enabling community. Another perspective being considered is that of Philippe Pozzo di Borgo who, although neither a theologian nor a believer, spiritually reflects his disability and shares some biographical descriptors with Hermanus. Historical studies by Irina Metzler on disability in mediaeval societies and comments on disability theology by Tom Shakespeare, John Swinton and others will provide contextual commentary.

A challenge is presented by the fact that Hermanus makes no explicit reflective statement about his disability in any of his writings. There are near contemporary legends suggesting that Hermanus had sacrificed physical ability for extreme intellectual giftedness.<sup>3</sup> While interesting for the assumptions they reveal, they are not the focus of this enquiry. The aim of the first part of the dissertation is much rather to try and extrapolate, from what is implicit in his work, what personal theological response Hermanus may have formed, or where we can discern a resonance between his experience and a modern voice. The key source for this inquiry is the *Vita Herimanni*, the brief biography by Berthold in which he reports Hermanus' last words containing reflection on his life and work, and a key section of this is provided in the appendix.

To understand how Hermanus thought and believed, some of his works will be analysed as the basis for the second part of the dissertation, attempting to put concepts and perspectives involved in reflecting disability from a theological standpoint in relation to Hermanus. That analysis will address three themes: the issue of liberation from disability as the assumed aim of all responses to being disabled, the concept of embracing disability in an enabling

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<sup>2</sup> Berthold, *Vita* Ch. 2, in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 18.

community, and the most internal processing of disability between self and body. Ultimately, conclusions from both parts will be applied to the question what made Hermanus' life so successful and to what extent this confirms or critiques contemporary disability theologies.

## **Hermanus Contractus – A Successful Life**

### Physical disability and disability theology

If the mind is all we have to think with, the body is all we have to live with, successful or otherwise. We relate to God as persons in bodies. According to Bultmann, a human is, rather than has, *soma*.<sup>4</sup> We are “em-bodied” and this comprises a range of states and conditions. Christ, God incarnate, was infant, child, adolescent, was subject to strong emotions - fury in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13), abruptness towards the Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:25-30), fear in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46) – and was brutally tortured and killed. This suggests that whatever an individual experiences, God is present in it. On this premise, the question must be what happens to our personhood and to our relationship with God if something happens to the body and the state of ‘disability’ applies. Eiesland, from the perspective of the disabled theologian, even suggests making our body experience a resource for ‘doing theology’ – a statement applying to all persons in bodies, which is then specified to apply to persons in impaired bodies: “... liberatory theology of disability is the work of the bodily figuration of knowledge”.<sup>5</sup>

But the relation self-God-body is complex and ambivalent: on the one hand, we are embodied and cannot do without this body, but on the other the body can be a source of evil in that we perform immoral acts with it, or its needs can dominate us. On the same basis, however, it can be the tool for doing good and on a different level, a broken body is the means of our deliverance through Christ's physical death.<sup>6</sup> From early Christianity onwards, fasting and repression of sexual desires describe one end of a range of reactions to the body as an enemy, to be controlled as far as possible in order to interact more directly with God. However, Augustine wonders how far this ‘incarnation’, the very presence of undesirable desires, also

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<sup>4</sup> Debora Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian theology. Embodied limits and constructive possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 47, points to Paul for elaborating this.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God. Toward a liberatory theology of disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 90.

<sup>6</sup> Creamer, *Disability*, 45.

shapes the relation to God in terms of learning positively to understand and manage our body.<sup>7</sup> This range highlights how dependant on context and author is the construct of the (disabled) body. Creamer points out that the terms ‘body’ and ‘soul’ did not mean the same thing in ancient or mediaeval cultures as they do in our context, and that theology has so far not accounted for this range of meaning connected with the concept of ‘body’.<sup>8</sup>

If there is a range of meaning connected just to the *concept* of body, this must logically extend to the range of *physical manifestation* of body. Bodies come in all shapes, and levels of capacity. Societies and cultures formulate criteria to decide which range is within ‘normal’ and when that range is transgressed. Forms of perceived ‘abnormality’ may need succour and resources, therefore falling under the remit of political decision-making in a society. For example, Eiesland referring to the context of the US points out that “the disabled body is the center of political struggle.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus ‘disability’ is an unstable and impermanent category, determined by who is affected, how, to what extent, when, and says who.<sup>10</sup> Mullins takes this thought one step further and turns Bultmann’s argument around: one may be a body, but one is not a disability – one has a disability, to some degree, for some time perhaps or in somebody’s perception.<sup>11</sup> The concept of disability being dependant on context and on criteria formulated by a dominant group or majority in the given society irrespective of the internal perspective of the disabled has implications not just for our evaluation of definitions of disability, but also for the evaluation of disability theologies – who formulates them, why, for whom? In the course of this enquiry it will be seen that there is a difference between disability theologies developed by those who are or are defined as disabled and are processing *this* experience, and theologies developed by those who are confronted with the fact that disability exists in others and are processing *that* experience.

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Patterson, “Redeemed Bodies: Fullness of Life,” in *Human Disability and the Service of God. Reassessing religious practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland et al., (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 123.

<sup>8</sup> Creamer, *Disability*, 37, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Creamer, *Disability*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Mullins, “Some difficulties for Amos Yong’s Disability Theory of the Resurrection,” *Ars Disputandi* 9 (2009): 62-68 /pdf 1-6, 6. <http://www.transpositions.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/difficulties-for-yongs-disability-theology-and-the-resurrection.pdf>, accessed July 9, 2016.

### The concept of disability in the mediaeval context

The difficulty when exploring theological implications of ‘body’ and ‘disability’ in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (in comparison to our time) is that the concept of disability did not exist in the mediaeval period in the sense that it is applied today. Irina Metzler in her two recent studies of disability in the middle ages shows that our stereotypical expectations mislead us, and the case of Hermanus illustrates this.<sup>12</sup>

One stereotypical expectation is to find an invariable causal connection between person and disability. The assumed pattern is that disability constitutes punishment either for your own sin or, in the case of a congenital affliction, that of your parents. This connection can be both supported and rebutted by reference to John’s Gospel: John 5:14 recounts the famous healing of the man by the pool followed by Jesus’ exhortation ‘now sin no more’, while John 9:1-3 finds Christ explaining in response to the question why the man he had just healed had been born blind that sin is not connected to the state of disability: ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned... this happened so the works of God might be displayed in him.’ Mediaeval theology also observes that a causal link between sin and disability is balanced by an emphasis on healing in the New Testament, without the status of those healed being clarified as ‘sinners’..<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Bede, key authority also to Hermanus, states that God causes illness for different reasons, not invariably as a punishment for sin. Other purposes include the teaching of patience or humility, or there may be no connection to the moral or spiritual state of the sick at all.<sup>14</sup> Later in the mediaeval period, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 begins clause 22 on the obligation of physicians of the body to consult physicians of the soul with the phrase: “As sickness of the body may *sometimes* be the result of sin.” Although the “sometimes” seems insignificant compared to the rest of the clause focusing on spiritual needs, this is a formulation of canon law and the “sometimes” is part of the opening phrase, thus giving a premise.<sup>15</sup>

The sin-disability link is therefore only one of a range of possible perceptions in the mediaeval period. Another key concept that endures is that of *virtuous suffering*; the idea that suffering is to be borne in humble submission, to learn patience or be an example to others.

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<sup>12</sup> Irina Metzler, *Disability in Mediaeval Europe. Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages c. 1100-1400* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 13, and *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Metzler, *Disability*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Metzler, *Disability*, 44-45.

<sup>15</sup> Metzler, *Disability*, 46-47; Canon No. 22 of the Fourth Lateran Council 1215, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp>, accessed 10 August, 2019.

Other variations include more active forms of virtuous suffering. For example, Yong summarizes contemporary views of Hildegard of Bingen, interpreting her sustained suffering due to chronic illness as being a *necessary catalyst* for her mysticism, which itself could be seen as one variant of virtuous suffering.<sup>16</sup> He connects this with proposing disability to be a defining characteristic of identity chosen by God. This dynamic is at work in folk tales such as the legends ‘explaining’ Hermanus’ disability.<sup>17</sup> Sickness and physical suffering as an accompanying characteristic of holiness and a strong form of virtuous suffering is again described by Metzler, who gives the life of the twelfth century arthritic Ailred of Rievaulx as an example.<sup>18</sup> These mediaeval response patterns are echoed by patterns of over-compensation in our contemporary context expressing variants of denial. Tom Shakespeare identifies resignation to the will of God, a spirit of endurance akin to virtuous suffering, or even over-compensation through over-exertion amongst modern coping strategies.<sup>19</sup>

However, mediaeval writings do not show any personal, first-person reflections upon the condition and experience of being disabled.<sup>20</sup> Metzler compares this to modern contexts, where in rural or small communities disabled children did not reflect on themselves as disabled as nobody *told* them they were not able. Secondly, exclusion is easily assumed to have been the *inevitable* fate of the disabled in the Middle Ages. But again, Metzler emphasizes that disability is a modern cultural construct, describing the consequence of physical impairment in our societies, arguing that we tend to graft onto the Middle Ages a process of exclusion that is rather a modern phenomenon, based on the industrial history of our societies ‘rating’ their members in terms of intactness and productivity. Also, societies with progressing health provision perfect themselves and ‘see’ and ‘de-select’ what does not correspond to the norm. But due to the ‘non-institutionalization’ of disability in the Middle Ages, an excluded ‘disabled identity’ was not formed.<sup>21</sup> Presumably this is partly because a greater range of what guise physical life could take was the ‘norm’, as teeth were not corrected, disfiguring diseases could

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<sup>16</sup> Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 32.

<sup>17</sup> Yong, *Theology*, 41–42.

<sup>18</sup> Metzler, *Disability*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity and Difference,” in *Exploring the Divide*, ed. Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, (Leeds: The Disability Press, 1996). <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Shakespeare-Chap6.pdf>, accessed 10 August 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Mediaeval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Metzler, *Disability*, 6, 64.

not be treated and loss of limbs was not compensated by prosthetics. Thus, the disabled can be found (but again, not invariably) as active members of mediaeval society at its different levels, as long as their *primary* function – being a landlord, or making baskets, or having children – was not compromised. Metzler suggests expressing this “functional” perception of ability/disability in the Middle Ages by using the term “impairment,” describing a defect of physical function and not the person as a whole.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, we cannot separate this physical dimension from the social and cultural construction that goes into our contemporary concept of disability involving the whole person.

However, the nature and extent of this cultural construction cannot reliably or fully be accessed by us where the Middle Ages are concerned, and function is a very pragmatic concept in this application, functioning in one’s place in mediaeval society, as a peasant or artisan or knight, not in the sense of being autonomous entailing individual freedom, as our modern construct of disability would include. Metzler sees the modern construct more linked to the ability to work necessitated by industrialization, but her own examples of mediaeval impairment in her more recent study, especially of impairment being inflicted as a lasting punishment such as pulling out thumbs to prevent an artisan from being able to work seem to show the same idea of function and also prevent us from developing the idea that mediaeval societies were relatively more compassionate.<sup>23</sup>

Another caveat is that Metzler uses evidence from a wide range of periods and regions and this might lead to generalized conclusions, while both experience and perception of disability may have varied considerably in different mediaeval societies.<sup>24</sup> Thus, for this dissertation exploring both mediaeval and modern settings, I will retain the term disability along with the awareness that in a mediaeval context it describes impairment rather more than social construct, while in the modern context it describes social and cultural conditioning along with physical impairment.

Clarifying these concepts should make the assumptions encountered when moving back and forth between Hermanus and the modern case studies used for comparison more visible. Both impairment and disability include the expectations of those described with these terms: in the mediaeval context, this is simply to function or be dependent on compassion. In the

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<sup>22</sup> Metzler, *Social History*, 112.

<sup>23</sup> Metzler, *Social History*, various in Chapter 1: Law, 12-35.

<sup>24</sup> Katherine Harvey, review of *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages*, by Irina Metzler, in *Institute of Historical Research - Reviews in History*, December 2013, <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1517>, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/issn.1749.8155.

modern context, the attributed role is more complex. Shakespeare and Watson have shown that, on the one hand, disability movements and disability theology aim to liberate the disabled from stereotyping by their social context and from the reduction to being either excluded or seen as virtuous sufferers. On the other hand they deconstruct the social model of disability and organized disability representation as ideologies *also* expecting the disabled to fulfil a certain role.<sup>25</sup> This awareness of assumptions and expectations is all the more important in the case study of Hermanus with all the limitations of mediaeval source material, as it leaves much room for interpretation.

### Hermanus' life and disability

Hermanus was born in 1013 into the aristocratic family of the counts of Althausen in the prosperous hinterland of Lake Constance.<sup>26</sup> He was one of fifteen siblings.<sup>27</sup> The family was influential beyond regional level and had a spiritual dimension; one ancestor is St. Ulrich of Augsburg, and Hermanus' brother Werinhar also became a monk on the Reichenau, the island eponymous with the Benedictine monastery occupying it, and died on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. While his father Wolfrat had a reputation as a tough overlord, even antagonizing the abbots of the Reichenau at one time, his mother Hiltrud was an example of piety and kindness.<sup>28</sup>

Hermanus himself shows how close the family was, as he for example chose to enter the life dates of his grandfather and inserted a moving epitaph on his beloved mother Hiltrud in something as monumental and public as his world history, the *Chronicon*.<sup>29</sup> Plotting such entries and other sources generates a probable chronology of Hermanus' own life, although it remains unclear whether he was born disabled or if his affliction revealed itself as he grew up. Of the two probable diagnoses, cerebral palsy<sup>30</sup> and juvenile onset Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), the latter is held to be more likely as it tallies with all the descriptions we have

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<sup>25</sup> Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson, "The social model of disability: an outdated ideology?", *Research in Social Science and Disability*, vol. 2 (2002), 9-28. <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Shakespeare-social-model-of-disability.pdf>, accessed June 8, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Nadja Germann, *De Temporum Ratione. Quadrivium und Gotteserkenntnis am Beispiel Abbot von Fleury und Hermanus von Reichenau* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 179-183 offers a good synthesis of previous scholars' findings on Hermanus' life.

<sup>27</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> Ian Stuart Robinson, *Eleventh-century Germany: The Swabian Chronicles*, Manchester Mediaeval Sources Online (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), <http://dx.doi.org/10.7765/MMSO.77340.2.1>, 108 assembles the case for cerebral palsy based on earlier Hermanus-scholars Hans Oesch and Arno Borst.

and also with the manner of Hermanus' death. Dr Thomas Meyer of the ALS centre at the Berlin Charité even calls Hermanus' biographer Berthold the first credible descriptor of ALS.<sup>31</sup> Juvenile onset ALS has no treatment apart from physical therapy to maintain mobility, and one specialized platform puts it starkly: "Prognosis is guarded and quality of life severely affected by the clinical manifestations of the disease."<sup>32</sup> These manifestations can include decreasing control of the limbs leading to a spastic gait and ultimately immobility, but also loss of bladder control, and loss of speech. Hermanus must have experienced such symptoms to some considerable extent, which gives us an idea of the demands made of himself and his environment.

That Hermanus' disability did show itself reasonably early (the average age for onset is between six or seven years old and teenage) is suggested by the fact that he does not seem to have ever started training as a knight, as would be expected given his background. Instead, he clearly remembers his first school day, for he entered it in the *Chronicon* as 15 September 1020. He started school either at Augsburg cathedral school, at that time rising in reputation, or at the Reichenau, the top institution in that part of Europe. When he did join the Reichenau, probably between the ages of 7 and 13, it was as an oblate, meaning in association with the community and not under full vows.<sup>33</sup> Aristocratic families would pay for the acceptance of their children – almost like sending them to boarding school – and disabled children were often catered for in this way.<sup>34</sup> At any rate he left home at the age of seven, either on account of his cleverness, his developing disability or a combination of both. Arch-Abbott Tutilo, head of the Benedictine community at Beuron, successor house to the Reichenau, suggests an important distinction: as a severe case, Hermanus would have been welcomed into the monastery's hospital, not into the actual community, as the Benedictine life demands participation and contribution. The Rule of St. Benedict prescribes bringing individual talent to the community as well as mutual care.<sup>35</sup> One can therefore assume a developing disability in parallel to a developing strength of personality and intellect, which in the end tipped the balance towards becoming a full and contributing member of the community.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [http://www.hermann-der-lahme.de/index\\_htm\\_files/Gedanken\\_zur\\_Krankheit.pdf](http://www.hermann-der-lahme.de/index_htm_files/Gedanken_zur_Krankheit.pdf), accessed January 28, 2016. Site of the Hermanus Society in Altshausen devoted to his memory, therefore to be treated with caution, but this seems credible.

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.orpha.net/consor/cgi-bin/OC\\_Exp.php?Expert=300605](http://www.orpha.net/consor/cgi-bin/OC_Exp.php?Expert=300605), accessed May 19, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, Ch. 26, 72, <http://archive.osb.org/rb/index.html>, accessed July 9, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Conversation with Arch-Abbott Tutilo of Beuron, May 30, 2016.

For on the Reichenau, Hermanus developed the mind that made him famous as he progressed through the Reichenau school eventually to become its most eminent teacher and scholar. Between c. 1024 and his death in 1054 he continued to teach, research and write; Berthold points out that even the list of works he himself gives in the *Vita* is incomplete.<sup>37</sup> The range Hermanus covers is impressive: applied mathematics, handbooks on computation, manuals on the construction and use of instruments, a world history, liturgical compositions, and a masterpiece of Latin verse; the misleadingly named ‘Little Work’, the *Opusculum*. For many of these a date is known or can be plotted, although many must have been created simultaneously with other work and with his teaching. He was surrounded by students who both loved and respected him, and ‘taught by Hermanus of Reichenau’ became a mark of quality in his century.<sup>38</sup>

#### Hermanus and his ‘disability’ in the mediaeval context

In linking Hermanus’ life back to the general patterns of mediaeval attitudes towards disability established above, a number of connections can be made, beginning with the assumed *invariable* acceptance of the causal link between sin and disability. While we do find some later Hermanus-legends trying to establish some explanation for his condition based on *somebody’s* sin, this is not alluded to by any of the sources at our disposal from his life-time.<sup>39</sup> Instead, the loving family life of the von Altshausens is emphasized, although this may be a conscious effort to counter exactly such legends, and Berthold describes him as a ‘model monk’. From the sources immediately connected with Hermanus, the attitude is neutral as regards his disability. We know, from other entries in the *Chronicon*, that Hermanus could and did make explicit statements about himself, but he does not mention his disability, nor does he give it any theological dimension.

The respect accorded to Hermanus by his students and fellow monks is also a good example against the assumption of exclusion. At one point Hermanus went through an ordination, and it has long been held that this represented full monastic vows, as a full priestly ordination was assumed not to be possible for the disabled. To this day the reason given in addition to Leviticus 21:17-23 is that the ability to celebrate the eucharist without mishap is a

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<sup>37</sup> Berthold, *Vita*, Ch. 3, in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 11, and commentary, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Hellman in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 18-19.

prerequisite, and Hermanus could not have done that.<sup>40</sup> Again, Arch-Abbott Tutilo adds some nuance in explaining that while the abbot of a Benedictine house had the power of discretion in ordination, Abbot Berno, at whose prompting the ordination took place, probably did stop short of a full priestly ordination. Ordination up to the level of sub-deacon, however, was and is practiced in Benedictine houses as a mark of respect and appreciation for a deserving member of the community.<sup>41</sup>

The question arises, however, to what extent this success was due only to Hermanus' achievement as an individual. It is important to remember that he was extraordinarily privileged, born into a family that was aristocratic and intelligent and joining a leading institution of considerable political, academic and economic importance and which as a monastic community provided an infrastructure of care by definition. Also, he was in an intellectual environment conducive to what he was trying to achieve. According to contemporary accounts, he seems to have been of an extraordinarily charming personality (that is privilege, too!) that engendered affection. Berthold describes how family members rushed to come and attend his deathbed.<sup>42</sup> As mentioned above, his physical condition almost turned into an advantage once he had taken full vows as it exempted him from the manual *labora* that had to be performed by his brethren; his contribution was the labour of the mind - he was 'a full-time scholar'.<sup>43</sup> This is confirmed by Abbott Tutilo, who points out that the eleventh century already practiced the division between working lay brothers and the elite of the community, mostly ordained, for whom *labora* consisted of *studium*. Also, he was supported by Berno of Reichenau, abbot for most of Hermanus' time, a leader committed to the monastic reform of the 11<sup>th</sup> century who led the abbey to a renewed flourishing.<sup>44</sup> It is not just by mediaeval standards that these circumstances add up to an unusually favourable context, contributing to the success of Hermanus' life.

#### Understanding Hermanus' mind and theology through his works

In order to be able to elicit, however cautiously, what Hermanus' response to the experience of disability might have been, the nature of Hermanus' thoughts and beliefs as

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<sup>40</sup> Albert Herzog, "We Have This Ministry: Ordained Ministers Who Are Disabled" in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing religious practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland et al., (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 187.

<sup>41</sup> Conversation with Archabbot Tutilo; Berthold, *Vita* Ch. 2, in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Berthold, *Vita* Ch. V, in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Germann, *De Temporibus*, 180-181.

<sup>44</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 18.

implicit across the range of his works needs to be explored in order to develop some understanding of his thinking and the concepts or assumptions it is based on.

Hermanus' masterpiece as a creative poet is without doubt the *Opusculum Herimanni* – a substantial, poetic conversation between Hermanus, a muse as go-between, and a community of nuns in a distant convent awaiting Hermanus' instruction in how to avoid vice and also how to read, understand and compose Latin verse.<sup>45</sup> The *Opusculum* is all about virtue through education, but it is also extremely elegant, accomplished and seen as a literary achievement comparable to classical poetry.<sup>46</sup> Hermanus plays effortlessly with over twenty different metres, he uses impersonation, exaggeration and all possible stylistic devices, and, while firmly keeping within an orthodox framework of what is vice and what it will bring, there is even flirtation. Hermanus introduces himself into the poem as "Hermanulus," cherished by the good nuns, and although this is on an allegorical and spiritual level, the precise knowledge of form and content of classical erotic poetry and how Hermanus plays with it challenges ableist assumptions about individuals' sexual dimension in the case of disability.<sup>47</sup>

A completely different talent of Hermanus is found in his mathematical work. The key study here is Nadja Germann's exploration of the calculation of time in Abbo of Fleury and Hermanus of Reichenau. The premise is that the subject group of the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy) was held mathematically to describe God's plan for creation – the calculation of time had a theological dimension beyond the liturgical purpose of calculating Easter. Hermanus goes beyond that in a number of ways. Firstly, although paying lip service to the authority of the elders, he questions or ignores the authority of Bede. This rejection of established authority is just one aspect of Hermanus' approach as, when describing the schematic structure of the cosmos and its movement, a more important and defining characteristic of Herman's thinking can be observed. What he presents is completely subject to the requirements of the object of his respective study, in this case computation in the strictest sense. Thus he does not gather random and diverse cosmological material, but introduces astronomical data only insofar as it is relevant to computation. More importantly, he remains on the empirical and mathematical level.

The key element of this is his complete forgoing of an immediately transferable/visible theological or philosophical framework offering a 'deeper meaning'. As a result, he arrives at

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<sup>45</sup> Bernhard Hollick ed. and transl., *Opusculum Herimanni: De octo vitiis principalibus*. Eine Vers- und Lebensschule (Heidelberg: Mattes, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Hollick, *Opusculum*, calls it 'one of the most varied poetic works of the middle ages', a 'virtuosic poem', 10.

<sup>47</sup> *Opusculum Herimanni* lines 40-57, in Hollick, *Opusculum*, 44-47.

original solutions and propositions. As regards the theological dimension of his mathematical and scientific work, God is present not in cosmos or mathematics, but in the yet more abstract concept of *aequalitas*, perhaps best understood as evenness, or balance, which can be modelled mathematically – Nadjia Germann shows Hermanus using advanced modelling, not working with images, but processing them into mathematical units and expressions by which he creates a reality in his mind that is built of mathematical quantifications without reference to theological assumptions.<sup>48</sup> This seems to indicate flexibility and conscious choice on which level of reality his thinking is operating. Analysing physical reality, he disregards contemporary theological ideas in a number of contexts where they were customarily found. This does not allow jumping to conclusions concerning Hermanus' idea of God, held, but it does seem to indicate that it was not moulded to explain or account for his experience of reality.

The same applies to Hermanus' work as a historian. His *Chronicon*, possibly prompted by the state visit Emperor Henry III paid the Reichenau and subsequently described by Hermanus,<sup>49</sup> is constructed within a conventional theological framework in that it takes its beginning from the incarnation. The events of the subsequent millennium are compiled from previous chronicles and synchronized very precisely by Hermanus. In his own lifetime we hear his voice as a well-informed, intelligent, reasonably objective, sometimes even expert chronicler, such as when he analyses a complex battle scenario and the military knowledge of his knightly family background shines through. He clearly supports Leo IX as a reformer pope and he evaluates rulers according to their piety and their respect for the church. He is never gossipy or dramatic in his reports on historical figures, and he includes their relation to God, expressed in their behaviour in terms of remorse or saintliness. There is gentle criticism, such as for Leo IX's ill-fated leadership of his campaign against the Normans in 1053.<sup>50</sup> There is however no mention of any divine interaction when he describes natural disasters: there was simply 'a great pestilence of cattle', or 'a harsh winter' resulting in poor harvests.<sup>51</sup> The defining characteristic of the *Chronicon* is Hermanus' own, strong presence as a historical person. Alongside reports on emperors and popes he enters biographical details for himself and

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<sup>48</sup> Germann, *De Temporum*, 178 for questioning authorities; 179 for absence of theological dimension; 209 for Herman applying his findings to explain physical reality; not a higher order; 225 for his ability to draw original conclusions; 233 and 236 for modelling,

<sup>49</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 10 and Hermanus, *Chronicon*, entry for 1048, in Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 84.

<sup>50</sup> Hermanus, *Chronicon*, entry for 1053, in Robinson 93-94.

<sup>51</sup> Hermanus, *Chronicon*, entry for 1044, in Robinson 75.

other family members. The moving eulogy to his mother fills nearly a page, whereas entire years sometimes occupy only three or four lines.<sup>52</sup> Robinson points out that Hermanus' use of the first person singular and plural in such passages indicates a 'partisanship', a strong sense of belonging to a community, and, in his view that constitutes his family and his monastic community, his *patria*, the vantage point from which he sees the outside world.<sup>53</sup> If Hermanus sees in history a *telos*, an end and purpose, it is the monastic, celibate community as a life form.<sup>54</sup>

The evidence from those liturgical texts and hymns that may confidently be attributed to him, especially his Marian antiphones again show a slightly different pattern. Once more Hermanus moves with consummate skill within a system, here, synthesizing music with an unusually sophisticated Latin.<sup>55</sup> In terms of content, Hermanus requires his audience 'to have a very thorough knowledge of the Bible and of the church fathers to boot' and to be able to recognize subtle allusions.<sup>56</sup> There are some explicit theological elements, such as the mysticism in *De Sancta Cruce*, where the suffering Christ appears as healer and comforter, which implies some resonance with Hermanus' own condition. However, this antiphone, the earliest attributable to Hermanus, is constructed with just the same virtuosity as any other work, and Berschin's comments seem to indicate that in general content and message may be conditioned by Hermanus' love of rare forms and terms.<sup>57</sup>

The works Hermanus created in different areas thus share a number of characteristics. Firstly, a consummate command of the language and concepts involved. Also, they tend to be constructed very systematically, using both established parameters and concepts and others Hermanus created for the purpose. Thirdly, there is some pragmatism or scepticism at work in that traditional authorities are often built upon, but just as frequently questioned or simply ignored in favour of better explanations. Another important aspect, however, is that all these works are in some way related to Hermanus' context; they are not the product of a disassociated scholarly mind. All his intellectual work is subservient in some way to the needs of his community: the computation of key dates of the church calendar, some mathematical works in

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<sup>52</sup> Hermanus, *Chronicon*, in Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, see e.g. the entries for 1013 on 62: "I, Herman, was born on 18 July," or for 1020 on 62-63: "... Bishop Werner of Strasbourg with the aid of certain Swabians attacked the Burgundians and defeated them in battle. I, Herman, began to be taught my letters."

<sup>53</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 74.

<sup>56</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 88.

<sup>57</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 82-83.

response to enquiries for example from a former student now running the cathedral school of nearby Konstanz, the composition of hymns, the keeping of a chronicle, practical manuals such as how to operate the astrolabe or how to operate a traveling sundial for his brother on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup> The very high level of the language and content in itself, points to other believing scholars as an audience.<sup>59</sup> The second person used in his instruction manuals, such as the one on how to use the abacus, suggests that these were direct responses and that he knew some of his audience.<sup>60</sup> Another target group is his other community, his family. Beyond the learned fellow monks and his family, any other audience is coincidental.

From this overview it emerges that Hermanus did not formulate or apply coherent theological statements, especially not in the nature of explanations, when processing physical reality or logical relations. Human experience does go beyond the physical, but impairment is a concrete event. Concluding from his thinking in other respects, it is possible to adopt as a working hypothesis that he did not formulate a complex theology to connect to or explain his disability. Instead, he seems to remain distant from his physical state when operating on levels accessible to the mind. Also, there does not appear to have been any expectation of a comment from him. Some of his writings were widely distributed and eagerly awaited, but he was obviously not expected to offer a theological response to his own condition, or to formulate pastoral or spiritual guidance on the basis of his own experience. This will provide an interesting comparison to some of the modern perspectives to be explored. In order to discern how Hermanus may have reflected on his disability at all, we need to turn to the one reflection on his physical state that is recorded.

### The deathbed reflection

Berthold, his faithful biographer, states on the one hand that Hermanus never complained about or even commented on his state. This ties in with the findings summarized above, but may also be seen to be in line with hagiographical tradition and the concept of virtuous suffering. But on the other hand, Berthold in his short *Vita Herimanni* reports Hermanus' final words, provided in translation in the Appendix. In essence, Hermanus longs permanently to attain the dimension on which his mind has long been dwelling – he literally sees his own planned works completed in a vision of the next life – and this ‘transports him in

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<sup>58</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 6-7.

<sup>60</sup> E.g. “Regulae, qualiter multiplicationes fiunt in abaco,” ed. Martin Hellmann in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 33-72.

ecstasy'. This life is 'tedious' to him, a term that appears twice in this short passage. This implies not just suffering and frustration, but perhaps also boredom:

"This reading however has impelled and prompted me very much to feel great contempt and tedium for this present world with all pertaining to it and for this mortal life – and on the other hand it has given me such a desire for the delights of the future and unchanging world and eternal and immortal life, that I now hold everything of a fleeting nature to be as nothing and void, and for trifles holding one back / weighing one down. Thus certainly I am weary of living."<sup>61</sup>

The term *taedium vitae* expresses the strongest form of 'being tired of life'; immeasurable frustration, having run one's course to the full, almost disgust with life. The state of *taedium* is, in classical perception, a permissible reason for suicide, with this precise phrase and meaning appearing in the works of Ovid, Tacitus and Seneca.<sup>62</sup> Both Berthold and Hermanus may be assumed to have known their works and therefore the significance of using this term. These few reported words of Hermanus, then, reveal for a brief moment a depth of feeling about his physical state that contrasts sharply not only with any concept of virtuous suffering or patient submission, but also with the upbeat effervescence of his *Opusculum* or the serenity of his antiphones. While the *Vita* contains set piece elements of the hagiographical tradition, it is not consistently worked to such a pattern, but is an autonomous work by a faithful student, all-round assistant and close friend, aimed at expressing Hermanus life authentically and from first-hand acquaintance.<sup>63</sup> The *taedium*, and overcoming it, offer an insight into an internal Hermanus living a much darker experience, an indication of what it took to shape that successful life.

## **Hermanus In Conversation with Modern Perspectives On Disability**

### Three perspectives: Eiesland, Vanier, Pozzo di Borgo

So far, several factors have emerged that may have contributed to making Hermanus' life so successful. Among these are certainly both the privilege of birth bringing access to exceptional resources and possibilities and the good fortune of an extremely active and able

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<sup>61</sup> Berthold, *Vita*, Ch. IV, my translation (see Appendix) based on Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 10-11. An English translation of the entire *Vita* is also found in Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 99ff, as Berthold puts his account at the beginning of his continuation of the *Chronicon* after Hermanus' death.

<sup>62</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Günter Klause from Salem International College for providing the necessary translations and references: Seneca, *Suasoria* 6,17; Tacitus, *Annales* 6,25; Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 1,9.

<sup>63</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 17.

mind. There is a strong, steady belief and there is also the strong sense of community, in the forms of his family, a virtual community of scholarly minds, and above all his *patria*, his monastic community.<sup>64</sup>

These factors offer some categories enabling comparison as regards what constitutes a successful disabled life in today's terms, expressed through a selection of voices. They include Nancy Eiesland with her own experience and that of two examples she offers, Diane DeVries and Nancy Mairs. Jean Vanier offers insight into the perception of the members of his communities of L'Arche, and there are Philippe Pozzo di Borgo's reflections on many years of extreme impairment. These perspectives have been selected for the range of response they offer and to a degree for echoing some of Hermanus' circumstances. They are not limited precisely to the condition that afflicted him, a degenerative physical disease manifesting itself early in life, but the chosen perspectives include congenital affliction (Eiesland and Diane DeVries), mental disability (many of the members of Jean Vanier's communities), adult onset of an affliction (Nancy Mairs) and the consequences of an accident (Philippe Pozzo di Borgo). They include theologians (Eiesland, Vanier), those afflicted (Eiesland, Pozzo di Borgo, Mairs, DeVries), and those caring for them (Vanier). In addition, reference will be made to a number of theologians such as Tom Shakespeare, Amos Yong, Deborah Creamer, or Martina Holder-Franz.

One particularly strong voice is Nancy Eiesland, who proposes the concept of a disabled God; the idea that God is a priori one of the disabled. The premise is that, if the disabled are, just like the poor and the disadvantaged, at the margin of society and also of the church, then that is where God is, creating a new centre. The problem is that this claim in its strongest formulation seems to exclude God from also being able-bodied. But from this premise of a disabled god-person arises Eiesland's approach to overcoming disability - in terms of gaining both positive and negative rights and possibilities - via political and social liberation. Eiesland's two case studies, DeVries and Mairs, show contrary reactions to disability, thus offering a range, but she is introduced here primarily because she suggests adapting and re-defining God in response to being disabled, presenting an extreme scenario against which to compare Hermanus' reactions.

Jean Vanier offers a different perspective and a different approach. His theology does not focus on the individual in terms of rights and freedoms, but on mutuality, on the individual

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<sup>64</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 6-7.

in the community. When starting L'Arche with its communities of able-bodied and disabled living together, he was responding to the insight that suffering and isolation exacerbate each other, whereas sharing and mutually perceiving suffering reduces it. Perceiving the fragility of the other exposes the fragility of self and makes visible a different kind of strength and of freedom. It is a process of releasing the latent human connection to God in relationship and, in this Vanier has resonance with Buber and is brought into this analysis as the voice for relationship and community.<sup>65</sup>

By contrast, Philippe Pozzo di Borgo, seems at first simply to be a case study. He shares a number of biographic descriptors with Hermanus: he is an affluent and intelligent aristocrat from a loving family, and he was able to compensate for some of the effects of his disability - tetraplegia as a result of a paragliding accident - through his own material means, such as equipping the family's historic Paris town house with everything necessary for perfect care. However, much more important is the spiritual care provided by the family; in particular, through the active faith of his wife Beatrice, herself dying of cancer, and subsequently by his principal carer, his 'guardian devil' Abdel Sellou, an Algerian migrant recently released from prison. This unusual story attracted millions of viewers when it was made into a film in 2011, *Intouchables* – the untouchables, the excluded, describing the experience of Philippe as much as Abdel.

Much more complex is Pozzo di Borgo's own account of how he found his second wind, 'le second souffle'.<sup>66</sup> Written with a mouth-operated computer, it describes a spiritual voyage in poetic language. Ultimately Pozzo di Borgo survives, he says, because of 'the other', because of the solidarity of the communities he finds himself in, for example in rehabilitation, and which he creates himself. This has brought him together with Jean Vanier in order to foster such communities. A recent crisis leading to being hospitalized again in 2014, lying flat on his back for a year, brought him to a yet more enhanced reflection on self and disability. Pozzo di Borgo also serves as a kind of control group as he claims not to be religious, but finds himself working and publishing with, for example, Vanier, expressing similar conclusions about disability. This opens the investigation into a possible universality of disability theologies and may offer mutual access across the divide between believers and non-believers. It also triggers the question to what extent the disabled thinker, a person whose key dimension is the processing of experience through reflection, reasoning and expression in writing, is expected

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<sup>65</sup> <https://jean-vanier.org/en/his-message/pathways-to-freedom>, Jaques Dufresne explaining the theology of Vanier: "To understand Buber is to have understood Vanier," accessed 10 August 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Philippe Pozzo di Borgo, *Le Second Souffle. Suivi du diable gardien* (Paris: Bayard, 2011).

to become a disabled theologian in our context. Pozzo di Borgo, Mairs and Shakespeare contribute to the debate about disability from a disabled perspective, but Hermanus, although a prolific thinker and writer, does not take on that role.

Before launching into the application of a range of concepts and theologies offered by these perspectives to the case of Hermanus, however, a caveat has to be stated. There needs to be awareness of a key aspect of the theologies and concepts considered, which is by whom, about whom, and with what justification they have been formulated. There is a fundamental difference of perspective between theologies formulated or critiqued by those responding to the disabled (Holder-Franz, Creamer, Patterson) and theologies formulated or critiqued by those processing the experience of disability (Eiesland, Shakespeare, DeVries, Mairs, Pozzo di Borgo, and Hermanus himself). Others, like Vanier or Swinton, although able-bodied, may yet live so close to disability that they stand at middle distance between the two, again illustrating the impossibility of imposing absolute categories. Therefore, whatever sorting principle is applied would be too rigid, and what is needed is a consciousness of the vantage point from which any statement is made. As Philippe Pozzo di Borgo expresses it:

The clear view of those not fitting the norm can perhaps open the eyes of others. But I am not sure, as I am so different from others that I do not know whether what I hold to be reality is still in tune with their reality. I hope so.<sup>67</sup>

Identifying these different perspectives already raises another issue: *why* formulate disability theology, who needs it – the able-bodied to tidy up the disturbing realization that there is disability, or the disabled in order to make sense of what has befallen them?<sup>68</sup> Can we identify a specific kind of disability theology that explains or can lead to a successful disabled life?

### On liberation as a necessary objective

Disability represents a constraint. A defining characteristic of liberation is that it implies the change of a state that is in some respect a constraint, and a process of liberation describes a change from being relatively less free to relatively more free. On the one hand, this can refer to freedom *from* something, for example oppression, or to freedom *to* do something, such as to realize one's individual plans. In a political and social context, this results in empowerment in its most general sense.

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<sup>67</sup> Philippe Pozzo di Borgo in Jean Vanier, Laurent de Cherisey and Philippe Pozzo di Borgo, *Ziemlich verletzlich, ziemlich stark. Wege zu einer solidarischen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2014), 17.

<sup>68</sup> Creamer, *Disability*, 22.

The premise is different in the case of disability, and once more it is helpful to observe the distinction between impairment and disability. In the vast majority of cases, although there can be relief in the shape of pain control, increased mobility or general assistance, the actual state of impairment cannot be changed. Those afflicted, at least the voices gathered in this study, know that this is a given. Therefore liberation can only happen elsewhere, on the level of disability as a construct, and as a reaction by the society surrounding the afflicted individual. Also, liberation can consist of shifting focus not on what has been lost through impairment, but on what is being gained in the experience. Yet another form of liberation is to end the experience of being impaired and in consequence disabled. Because the affliction itself cannot be lifted, this would involve the end of life itself. Central to all these aspects is the need to be liberated from any role associated with being disabled, and here one also must consider the role or expectation to be a disability theologian identified above.

Linking these categories to the modern perspectives selected in comparison to Hermanus, liberation can on the one hand refer very practically to the removal of disadvantage resulting from impairment, such as legal or material disadvantage which prompts a fight for equality in a political and social sense. This extension of classical liberation theology is what Eiesland and many of her contemporaries fought for. Such liberation is simply not on the agenda in the case of Hermanus, not because the issue of rights did not exist in the middle ages (see, for example, the diverse handling of ordination of disabled clerics mentioned above), but because he already possessed a maximum of rights: he was born an aristocrat, and joined the most respected monastic community; thus enjoying a number of freedoms. Being of noble rank and possessing material privilege ensured his family were completely free to decide what provision was to be made for their impaired child. However, while the Altshausen family's decision to send Hermanus to the Reichenau, initially as an oblate, ensured on one hand maximal care and in consequence liberation - as far as possible - from the physical consequences of impairment, it offered, on the other hand, the opportunity for maximum freedom in the sense of unquestioning acceptance as an individual within the Benedictine community. It is possible, given the spiritual tradition within the family and the fact that at least one of Hermanus' brothers also joined the Reichenau community, that this was also a conscious decision.

This connects to another 'liberation from'. On a deeper level, there is the hope for liberation from exclusion, and this is far more ephemeral and elusive than the aspect of rights and freedom of action. Vanier quotes the response of a young girl, slightly disabled both physically and cognitively: "What does disability consist of for you, Fanny?" and Fanny

answers: “Of how the others look at me”; the dismissive glance represents for her the denial of relationship, of participation with ‘normal’ life experiences.<sup>69</sup> Exclusion happens in seconds, by a quick glance, classifying ‘the other’. By joining a closed community, such as a Benedictine house or L’Arche, liberation from exclusion is achieved as this community forms a new centre – the individual excluded to the margins of macro-society is part of the new nucleus, the micro-society that is chosen. Pozzo di Borgo shares with Hermanus the basic premise of aristocratic privilege and material affluence, giving some immunity from exclusion or rather presenting a positive form of exclusion already: exclusivity. He builds his own micro-society of household, family and his principal carer Abdel and comments more than once: “At least I am a *rich tetraplegic*”; a phrase that found its way into the script of *Intouchables*.<sup>70</sup> Subsequently, he connects with Vanier in taking the step from evasion of exclusion to embracing the concept of community.

There is another aspect of liberation theology. Classically, the role of the disabled in the view of society but also, as observed by Eiesland and Herzog above, of the churches, suggests that the marginalized, oppressed or, in this case, the disabled are the more direct medium of God, with a purpose to their existence that relates to the non-disabled. As we have seen, this was present in the mediaeval view of disability, and it is perhaps the closest we come to a parallel between the mediaeval and the modern construct of disability: the impaired individual is given a role, becoming a teaching medium. To fulfil the role, virtuous suffering has to be exhibited, triggering the ‘right’ response in the beholder, which is compassion and gratitude for being spared such a life. Eiesland exposes the concept of virtuous suffering as a theology that is dangerous for the disabled, as it can extend to justifying suffering, lack of resources, lack of rights, and of full personhood.<sup>71</sup> As regards Hermanus, we see the projection of virtuous suffering in some of the legends about him and in some almost hagiographical passages of Berthold’s *Vita* describing Hermanus perseverance in his intellectual work despite his physical difficulties. But, as already noted, Hermanus himself makes absolutely no mention of his suffering, aside from his deathbed speech reported by Berthold. By contrast, the affirmative tone of any first-person statements in his works suggest that he refused to play this role beyond being manifestly impaired and manifestly overcoming impairment.

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<sup>69</sup> Pozzo di Borgo, Vanier, Cherisey, *Ziemlich verletzlich*, 47-48, my translation.

<sup>70</sup> *Intouchables*, DVD, Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011, Paris, Gaumont, 2012, at 00:46.

<sup>71</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 72-73.

This denial of a role can be observed in some of the modern case studies, for example in the account of Diane DeVries as summarized by Eiesland. The question is whether the parallel quite holds, as DeVries does not perceive herself at any point to be suffering at all, virtuously or in any other way; she is simply living.<sup>72</sup> Nancy Mairs, on the other hand, has a strong perception of her own suffering, but she angrily rejects the predicate of ‘virtuous’ in the sense of being a patient teaching tool.<sup>73</sup> This is echoed by Philippe Pozzo di Borgo, and the film epitomizes this in the short scene when a relation warns Philippe that “...those guys from the banlieu”, referring to Philippe’s new carer, “don’t know any pity”. “That’s what I want”, replies Philippe, “aucun pitié – no pity”.<sup>74</sup> As will be explored, this is not tantamount to a rejection of compassion. Liberation is much rather sought from the condescending kind of pity connected to the concept of virtuous suffering. Eiesland points out that labelling entails control by the labellers over the labelled,<sup>75</sup> and these case studies show resistance against that. However, what we see as conscious denial of this role might be viewed as a more positive process, explained by Tom Shakespeare as the creation and control of one’s own narrative, formulating one’s identity: “... we are creating ourselves for ourselves”.<sup>76</sup>

An ultimate liberation from the state of impairment is represented by death. To summarize the premise, current debates on euthanasia pivot on the concept of an unacceptable state, a point when life loses all dignity, meaning, becomes pointless, and an unacceptable burden to those afflicted and those caring for them. Some modern western societies offer legally enshrined euthanasia options (such as ‘Dignitas’ in Switzerland or Oregon’s ‘Death with Dignity’ programme). These are usually tailored to degenerative diseases, and Hermanus did have a slowly degenerating form of ALS. In the mediaeval context of unquestioning acceptance of life as God’s gift, though, self-destruction by euthanasia was not an option. However, precisely because of that perception Hermanus’ strong and explicit statement of ‘*taedium vitae*’, of being impatient at that point to leave life and all its burdens behind, is significant.

This resonates with some of the modern perspectives chosen for comparison. Having at least an episode of considering liberation in death is recounted by Nancy Mairs,

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<sup>72</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 38-39.

<sup>73</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 45-46.

<sup>74</sup> *Intouchables*, 00:34.

<sup>75</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Tom Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity,” 95.

contemplating suicide when in her small apartment away from her family,<sup>77</sup> and Philippe Pozzo di Borgo attempted, by movements of his head, to interrupt his oxygen supply when in intensive care.<sup>78</sup> In the mediaeval context, however, this meant choosing damnation, and discussing the use of *taedium* by Berthold with Arch-Abbott Tutilo, he confirmed that suicide could not have been considered by Hermanus.<sup>79</sup> However, it is important to point out that Hermanus even on the point of death indicates no theological dimension in his reflection on his disability. It is much rather that the impairment and the aggravation of his final illness prevent him from working fast enough to complete all he has planned.

What we see above all from this evidence is that attainment in some form of liberation from affliction is a general aim, which can be extrapolated to span the range from the able-bodied with a temporary condition through to forms of chronic or permanent affliction. We can also state that liberation from inequality and injustice as consequences of impairment must be a general aim of any free society. But where and how liberation is sought beyond that remains an individual decision. The section has explored a number of approaches; for Hermanus, especially immersion in the world of his mind can be identified. But the most dominant liberating factor seems to be his choice of life in a community.

#### On community, relationship and self

Hermanus lived in a number of communities. As evidence for the connectedness of his family we have seen Hermanus' affection for his mother expressed in the eulogy in the *Chronicon*, and the manual for a small travelling sun dial written for his brother and fellow monk Werinhar setting out on pilgrimage to Jerusalem (in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century this was still a peaceful undertaking, not a crusade).

Hermanus also connected to a virtual community of fellow scholars. This included those he might have known when they were on the Reichenau, such as the head of the cathedral school of nearby Konstanz. Others, such as the scholars he reacts to in his mathematical works, are removed from him in time and space, yet he addresses them directly and with intensity, exchanging theories and ideas.

Most of all, however, Hermanus was a member of his Benedictine community. We do not know to what extent his affliction had manifested itself by the time he entered as an oblate.

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<sup>77</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 42.

<sup>78</sup> Pozzo di Borgo, *Le Second Souffle*, 107.

<sup>79</sup> Conversation with Arch-Abbott Tutilo.

But although his suffering must have become increasingly grave, he *rose* in importance in the community, even receiving ‘clerical orders’.<sup>80</sup> Arch-Abbott Tutilo of Beuron, as noted above, points out that had Hermanus been seen just as a sick person, he would have been living in the hospital. While the Rule of St. Benedict in Chapter 36 also provides for mutual care amongst the brethren in case of sickness,<sup>81</sup> commitment to a Benedictine community entails the will and ability to contribute, and Hermanus’ role as full-time scholar was his contribution to the community. Furthermore, an ordination such as the clerical orders mentioned by Berthold, which raises the question whether Hermanus was ordained priest despite his disabilities, could (and may still) be given by the abbot as a mark of recognition, similar to a lifetime award for achievement and contribution.<sup>82</sup>

Hermanus, then, originated from a privileged elite and he joined an elite community. On first impression, Vanier’s L’Arche communities seem to operate very differently. Starting as small cells, they welcome mentally handicapped members, but the reason why they keep going is the true symbiosis with each member, able-bodied or disabled, giving something the others do not have. Carers stay or return because of what they receive from those for whom they care. In L’Arche these goods are not mathematical treatises, but comprise, as the portraits of individuals and relationships drawn by Vanier show, the tangible experience of trust, joy, and hope. As Swinton defines it, they enable the enactment of ‘faithfulness within which people respond with love to those God has given to them’, as distinct from mere charity.<sup>83</sup>

The principle is the same in both kinds of communities: relationship and mutuality replace the assumed one-way direction of giving or gaining. In the case studies supplied by Eiesland, Diane DeVries feels excluded when her church community denies her the opportunity to give: she is ‘discouraged’ from participating in the choir, and subsequently joins a different congregation. Again, Hermanus is remembered by the Benedictines not because of his disability, but because of his contribution as a member.<sup>84</sup>

Similar patterns are described by Philippe Pozzo di Borgo. He shares with Hermanus the strong connection to a numerous and also privileged family. His grandfather already saw

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<sup>80</sup> Berthold, *Vita*, Ch. III, in Berschin und Hellmann, *Hermann*, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Rule of St. Benedict, Ch. 36; <http://archive.osb.org/rb/text/rbemj01.html#36>, accessed 10 August 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Conversation with Arch-Abbott Tutilo.

<sup>83</sup> Vanier, *Einfach Mensch sein. Wege zu erfülltem Leben* (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 18, 36. John Swinton, “The Body of Christ has Down’s Syndrome. Theological Reflections on vulnerability, disability, and graceful communities,” Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability, previously published in *The Journal of Pastoral Theology*. (2004) ISSN: 1064-9867, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Conversation with Arch-Abbott Tutilo.

this privilege as an obligation, becoming known as a red baron of a different sort, introducing representation and fair working conditions in his companies.<sup>85</sup> This had inspired Philippe as a young man, but he found a new expression of this tradition only as he became disabled. At first his family household, in the Paris town house not unlike a cloistered community, became the support network. With the arrival of his carer Abdel, mutuality was developed as a strong element between the two untouchables. The phrase mentioned above, ‘at least I am a rich tetraplegic’, described freedom from material disadvantage through disability and this becomes visible also in this context. However, as his experience of disability continues, not least in formulating it as a consequence of the interest triggered by *Intouchables* which entailed invitations to talk shows and conferences around Europe as well as counselling innumerable fellow sufferers, Pozzo di Borgo’s experience of community and self intensifies continuously. For example, partly due to over-exerting himself, he faced a year in hospital in 2014, as a result of which *You and I* (the French title: *Toi et moi, j’y crois*) was published in 2015, evincing a clear focus on mutuality.<sup>86</sup> Again, he sees his responsibility as one of the *privileged* disabled in being a voice for *the* disabled, the invisible group in our societies; calling for a society determined by solidarity and empathy rather than individualism.

A similar publication co-authored by Pozzo di Borgo, Vanier and Laurent de Chersier, the founder of the St. Simeon communities for people with brain damage, also promotes building on the functioning togetherness of different degrees of (dis)ability on a small scale in order to re-shape entire societies on that principle. As regards the political provision for this, they find common ground with Eiesland. Similarly, Swinton points out that the capitalist concept of the individual’s functioning for the *material* benefit of wider society is challenged by communities focusing on mutuality. However, it is possible to criticize Swinton’s theological expression of this, as, with the disabled taking the place of the poor in community theology according to L’Arche, he is giving the disabled yet another role.<sup>87</sup> Another consideration is the extent to which Pozzo di Borgo, although not a believer, as he reiterates,<sup>88</sup> is taking on the role of the disabled disability theologian outlined above.

However, the objective is precisely *not* to prescribe another role to those afflicted with impairment, thereby relegating the disabled to a life in community according to such theology

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<sup>85</sup> Pozzo di Borgo, *Le Second Souffle*, 35-36.

<sup>86</sup> Philippe Pozzo di Borgo, *Ich und Du. Mein Traum von Gemeinschaft jenseits des Egoismus* (Berlin: Hanser, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> Swinton, “Body of Christ,” 6.

<sup>88</sup> Pozzo di Borgo, Vanier, Chersier, *Ziemlich verletzlich*, 14: “for me God does not exist,” my translation.

of community. The fundamental right to live as an individual has to be maintained, as highlighted in case studies by both Vanier and Eiesland. Depending on the degree of disability, this life as an individual is never a solitary or independent life anyway, given the level of care necessary. The common ground with community is that relationship with those giving care, whether it works out positively or not, is just as unavoidable in such an individual scenario.

What Hermanus, Pozzo di Borgo, Vanier and Swinton all point out, therefore, is that within the group dynamics of the community, there remains the more intimate relationship between the disabled individual and the individual carer. Care is most helpfully understood here as encompassing everything that *enables* the disabled individual, ranging from the most fundamental needs to whatever else may be required to lead a life as fully as possible. Thus we can observe Berthold in the role of both personal assistant and intellectual heir:<sup>89</sup> Hermanus hands his wax tablets with his last set of notes over to him with the instruction to continue the work, not simply to process these notes into manuscript, as was presumably one of Berthold's prime tasks while Hermanus was producing one scholarly work after the other. We cannot establish to what extent he took care also of what must have been Hermanus' great physical needs. However, Berthold was definitely also a friend, utterly distraught at Hermanus' bedside and having to be comforted by his dying teacher.<sup>90</sup>

This is echoed by the chemistry between Pozzo di Borgo and his principal carer Abdel, but with some significant contrasts to the relationship between the two Benedictine monks. Pozzo di Borgo employed Abdel because, amongst the 80 plus applicants interviewed for the job, Abdel, only there to get a signature confirming he had been looking for work upon coming out of prison, showed no pity for this person in the wheelchair. Pozzo di Borgo explains that he needed his carer to be fearless in the face not only of himself, but also the fact that his wife was dying from cancer. In his ten years as principal carer Abdel saved Philippe's life numerous times, unblocking catheters, finding doctors in remote places, or manually keeping Pozzo di Borgo's breathing going; in his reflections, Pozzo di Borgo calls him his 'guardian devil'. The devil dimension shows Abdel catering for other needs and again not fitting a stereotypical role; that of the gentle carer. He takes Philippe on adrenalin-inducing drives with Philippe's luxury cars, crashing a number of them. He gives Philippe cannabis to smoke to alleviate his phantom pain and laughs him out of depressive phases. He seduces most members of the household and

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<sup>89</sup> Robinson, *Swabian Chronicles*, 24.

<sup>90</sup> Berthold, *Vita*, Ch. V, in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 12.

enlists women to respond to the desires Philippe's body still has. But he is also the agent for Philippe finding a relationship and marrying again. Abdel, in turn, says that without Philippe and his influence on him, he would now be dead or on a life sentence in prison; the years with Philippe made him, too, rediscover life: 'we rescued each other', he says.<sup>91</sup> Their relationship with its strong mutuality and its portrayal in *Intouchables* increased public awareness in France and Germany, where it was particularly successful, and triggered debate about the perception of the disabled in our society.<sup>92</sup>

According to Vanier, based ultimately on Buber, something happens to us when we begin to relate to each other and, more so, to the excluded and the disabled. We can, for example, learn how to trust and how to surrender. The patience and coping strategies of the disabled induce reflection by the able on how to live. This is what is described in John 9:1-3. If we define virtuous suffering as the patient submission to the fate of disability, then this is certainly *an element* in the patient-carer relationship, and Pozzo di Borgo does state: "You get the carer you deserve".<sup>93</sup> But what Vanier and Pozzo di Borgo make clear, and Eiesland emphasizes strongly, is that people with a disability of whatever kind and degree are never to be reduced to *just* this virtuous suffering. Hermanus seems to hold the balance between inspiring his brethren by how he lives his disability, but also by his personality and his mind; his essential individuality.

It is, however, impossible to reconstruct with any certainty whether the openness and charm described by Berthold reflect Hermanus' essential personality, or if they are the product of the dynamics of the community that surrounds him. The latter would constitute a direct parallel to the phenomenon of interrelationship described by Vanier, supporting his idea of a theology of mutual sharing and growth in a community of differently able members. Swinton, commenting on Vanier's practical theology of community, states that:

Within L'Arche, liberation comes when people begin to let go of their individuality and to recognise the strength that comes from gentleness, mutuality, weakness and brokenness. In this way, those who accompany people

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<sup>91</sup> Abdel Sellou on Talkshow Markus Lanz, filmed April 24, 2012, youtube video, 14:15, posted July 5, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHRdITbri-E>, 00:10.00ff, accessed July 12, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> 20 million viewers in France, 9,5 in Germany, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1675434/business?ref=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1675434/business?ref=tt_dt_bus), accessed July 9, 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Philippe Pozzo di Borgo at Het Dorp, filmed November 2012, youtube video, 14:27, posted December 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XY0JIKn660>, accessed July 9, 2016, ca.02:00ff.

in L'Arche find *themselves*, who they are, what they are, why they are, in the mutuality of life with others.<sup>94</sup>

Swinton also quotes Macmurray in making the case that personhood is developed in interrelation: "I am one term in the relation 'You and I' which constitutes my existence".<sup>95</sup> This is confirmed by Martina Holder-Franz, basing her point directly on Buber.<sup>96</sup> Swinton even emphasizes that by choosing to whom we relate, we choose the development of our personhood, and this is confirmed by how Pozzo di Borgo and Abdel Sellou reflect on their meeting and active decision to build a relationship despite (or because of?) the degree of difference, which increases what can be exchanged. Based on this, it is legitimate to also imagine a mutual dynamic between Hermanus and Berthold. Swinton calls this dynamic of mutual exchange 'transvaluation' involving mutual absorption of experiencing the other into one's own perception of life, and in this process of surrendering and opening to the other God becomes present.<sup>97</sup>

An additional aspect presents itself in that the individual in mutual relationship is still also an individual, and therefore the self-perception of the disabled person, identity as formulated by self needs to be explored. Although there is so little explicit evidence from Hermanus, some cautious inferences can be offered after exploring how disabled identity appears in the range of modern perspectives.

In this context, the concept of body and how far body defines identity re-emerges. Eiesland uses the formulation 'persons with disabilities' from the Disabilities Act 1990 to show that disability is an accompanying characteristic of any person, not a defining one – "disability describes the consequence of impairment".<sup>98</sup> Holder-Frantz, in agreement, points out that the idea of normalcy limits our perception of individuals to biological functioning, when person is actually not defined by ability, but is a relational concept and thus independent even of major impairment such as that experienced by Hermanus. She also makes the point that, consequently, disability and quality of life are not mutually exclusive of each other, which can again be observed in Hermanus.<sup>99</sup> However, if we support the argument that disability is an

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<sup>94</sup> Swinton, "Body of Christ," 6.

<sup>95</sup> Swinton, "Body of Christ," 6.

<sup>96</sup> Martina Holder-Franz, "Life as Being in Relationship. Moving Beyond A Deficiency-Orientated View Of Human Life," in *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics. Why Science Needs the Church*, ed. John Swinton and Brian Brock, (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 62.

<sup>97</sup> Swinton, "Body of Christ," 7.

<sup>98</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 58.

<sup>99</sup> Holder-Franz, "Life," 61.

accompanying characteristic, then the debate concerning what happens to physical features at resurrection is also affected. As one of many factors shaping our lives and persons, we would not choose to have them disappear. In his response to Yong's argument, Mullins points out the problem of reducing a person to their disabled body, whereas Yong sees disability as dominantly integral to person in a negative sense, hence the need for it to disappear.<sup>100</sup> The hope of the early Church that bodies would be made whole in the next life might perhaps be understood as the idea of the *person* being made whole. This would be supported, for example, by Gregory of Nyssa hoping to still recognize his sister Macrina by her marks of suffering, and also ties in with Luke 24:36-39, where the resurrected Christ (though not yet gone up to the Father) appears with his wounds.<sup>101</sup>

In applying these considerations to the case of Hermanus, we know that he was called Hermanus "contractus" although he was not famous for his disability, but for his mind. However, distinctive physical features were a source of naming in the middle ages without necessarily implying a valuation, and Metzler makes the point that disability did not define identity. Berthold's description of Hermanus' mind and character is far more expansive than that of his impairment, however graphic and moving, giving an idea of what Hermanus' contemporaries perceived.<sup>102</sup> In the deathbed speech Hermanus makes no direct reference to his body, either in this life or the next. What he focuses on in his vision of finally being able to read a completed work is a *capacity*, and this is contrasted to a *state*, that of *taedium* stemming from his suffering body, although Hermanus does not say as much. Hermanus may be assumed to transcend his concrete experience of body and reality and find liberation in a non-physical reality rendering his condition irrelevant.

Looking for resonance in modern voices of strong minds in disabled bodies, there is a case for the inseparability of person and body: Pozzo di Borgo, who is reduced to just some movement of his head, states that he would like his hale body back, but only if he could keep the insights and inner growth he experienced in coming to terms with his disability, the consequence of an accident when paragliding to take his mind off the cancer destroying another body, that of his beloved wife Beatrice. One of his first discoveries in his new state was that of silence and stillness, and another, emerging over time, was that of the power of letting go, as

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<sup>100</sup> Mullins, "Some Difficulties," 3.

<sup>101</sup> Patterson, "Redeemed Bodies," 126.

<sup>102</sup> Berthold, *Vita*, Ch. 1 and 2, in Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 6-9.

he cannot rely on physical strength to tackle problems. Processing this experience led to a different strength, which his why his reflection is called ‘the second wind.’<sup>103</sup> Nancy Mairs, at first fighting with her increasingly disabled body, responds as follows: “If a cure were found, would I take it? In a minute... What in my life would I give up in exchange for sound limbs and a thrilling rush of energy? No one. Nothing.” Her artistic development as a writer is inseparable from her experience of increasing disability, which prompts the thought that we might not have the output produced by Hermanus, hunched in his carrying chair could he have lived differently.<sup>104</sup> Eiesland interprets Mairs’ reflection as a realization of the disabled God: “Mairs turning toward God is a process of settling into the Body of Christ.”<sup>105</sup> A very different experience is that of DeVries, whose impairment is congenital. Not only does she find her body functional for what she wants to live, she also finds it beautiful, comparing it to an antique torso. This is despite the experience of rejection, even in her parish.<sup>106</sup>

In the perspectives that have been explored in loose relation to Hermanus, body, disability and self thus do invariably interrelate, and it is a relationship that shapes person. These dimensions are not inseparable or indistinguishable, but as experience impacts on self and this experience is caused by and happening in the impairment of the body, self cannot find an attitude to disability without also taking account of the body. But the way in which this happens, and the nature of the outcome, does not follow a predictable pattern. This is also what Eiesland found, as she states that there is ‘no single pattern of adjusting’.<sup>107</sup> Being resurrected as a body with the ‘marks of suffering’ might however describe this process of reconciliation, in which the disabled body is ultimately perhaps not the defining element of self, in the sense described by Yong, but a key element and, perhaps, a catalyst.<sup>108</sup> Precisely what thoughts Hermanus had in this sense remains a closed book, but even that confirms one important finding: the voices of the disabled emerge as so powerfully in this brief analysis that one is led to the interim conclusion that any disability theology truly *for* the afflicted must be formulated *by* the afflicted, processed with considerable individual variants and including the option not to formulate anything.

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<sup>103</sup> Pozzo di Borgo, Vanier, Cherisey, *Ziemlich verletztlich*, 88 and 97; Pozzo di Borgo, *Le Second Souffle*, 126ff.

<sup>104</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 41, 44 and 46.

<sup>105</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 45.

<sup>106</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 35, 37, 39, 48.

<sup>107</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 58.

<sup>108</sup> Yong, *Theology*, 41-42.

This processing remains unique to the individual and is perhaps best described by the model of the *narrative* developed by Tom Shakespeare. It is characterized by the denial to conform to any set role or imposed narrative, be it as a virtuous sufferer or as a campaigner for rights. The aim is to ‘create ourselves for ourselves’.<sup>109</sup> In doing so, Shakespeare overcomes the perceived divergence of the disabled from the normal by establishing that ‘everyone is impaired’, we are all on a range.<sup>110</sup> Logically, the task of liberating oneself from being ‘made up’ by our social environment and exercising the freedom of ‘making up ourselves’ applies to all of us.<sup>111</sup> We may see Hermanus developing such a self-narrative in how he presents himself in the first person in a number of his works, and how actively he puts himself in relation with his family and with his community, or even ascribing himself a role as ‘Hermanulus’ in the *Opusculum* poem. Shakespeare points out that self-identification has ‘political, cultural, personal dimensions’,<sup>112</sup> and this is found in Hermanus’ strong position siding firmly with the imperial party or supporting the reform initiative of Pope Leo IX, while at the same time criticizing his rash campaign against the Normans. Culturally, Hermanus identifies with the classical tradition as well as with the scientific thinking of his day, and perhaps most personal is the mix of his interests and commitments. Shakespeare quotes Calhoun to sum up this process:

Identities are often personal and political projects in which we participate, empowered to a greater or lesser extent by resources of experience and ability, culture and social organisation.<sup>113</sup>

However, it has to be emphasized that Hermanus does not fulfil any role as disability theologian in this study, and would perhaps concur with Tom Shakespeare’s criticism of the instrumentalization which he perceives in disability movements, although it appears to be a role that is hard to escape. Pozzo di Borgo, despite his rejection of a religious form of faith, comes close to fulfilling it in the advocacy he has taken up for the theology of relationship and community outlined above. However, in doing so, he made a conscious choice, too.

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<sup>109</sup> Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity,” 95.

<sup>110</sup> Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity,” 96.

<sup>111</sup> Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity,” 98.

<sup>112</sup> Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity,” 102.

<sup>113</sup> Shakespeare, “Disability, Identity,” 103.

## **Conclusion – Consequences of studying Hermanus for disability theology**

The intention of this study was to put a mediaeval case study, Hermanus, in contact with a range of modern theological approaches to disability, in order to elicit what makes a successful disabled life, and to identify the resulting implications for modern disability theologies. The ultimate finding is that Hermanus' example challenges the way 'the disabled' are expected to react to their experience, including any role they are expected to take on, not only by their social context, but also by their fellow believers.

The first observation is that Hermanus' life challenges our assumptions about the Middle Ages and about disability in a mediaeval context. The assumption that exclusion and disadvantaging were default reactions to impairment in the Middle Ages needed to be qualified. The difference lies in the fact that, in the mediaeval context, any impairment led to a social consequence only if the actual functioning of this particular person in their place in society was affected. By contrast, impairment in the modern context – suffering from some affliction – leads to disability as a social construct, bringing exclusion and discrimination and making it more difficult to continue functioning. Disability in the modern sense is thus already a consequence of impairment.

The danger inherent in this is simply to replace one assumption with another, such as perceiving the Middle Ages as a better time to be disabled. The fact remains that Hermanus was extremely privileged, enjoying a greater freedom of choice regarding how to live in response to his impairment. This connects with modern approaches and experiences, as explored in the chapter on liberation, in that concerns for disability rights, individual reactions in the chosen modern case studies, and the theological response formulated by Nancy Eiesland, all express a need for freedom to choose how to attain liberation from the consequences of disability. The case study of Philippe Pozzo di Borgo and his decision as a rich paraplegic to take on responsibility for those less privileged by becoming their voice and lobbying on their behalf, shows that the fair distribution of resources to enable freedom of choice for the disabled has not yet been achieved in modern societies. In this sense, the original scope of liberation theology, offering a response to the disadvantaged, still applies when considering the disabled as a group that does not have the resources needed to attain freedom.

The core aspect to test was to what extent Hermanus, leading a successful disabled life and at the same time being described to us as wholeheartedly committed to monastic life, had developed a specific theology in response to his condition. Scrutinizing his mathematical, scientific, poetic and liturgical work, no specific theology relating to disability or to his

experience of it could be detected. His reasoning is specific to the respective field in which he operated and shows consistently the same characteristics of having a strong personal voice, great clarity, and an implicit rather than explicit reference to the natural belief prevailing at his time. We find an almost abstract Godhead, such as modelled by the concept of *aequalitas* in his mathematical studies, and there is, for only a fleeting moment, a suffering and comforting Christ in his *De Cruce* antiphone. At no point is there any indication of redefining what God is in response to his disability, or of appropriating God for self or group in the nature of Eiesland's proposition of the disabled God. Such approaches could perhaps be seen as subjective projections reflecting an emotional or, in Eiesland's case, even a political need. That makes them valid on their own respective premise, but they cannot be prescriptive or expected by default.

However, we do find a very strong commitment to living this belief in the monastic form. Berthold describes Hermanus as a model monk, and in his historical works there is strong commitment to the reform movement of the eleventh century and to his own community of the Reichenau. This resonates with the theology of community we find in the modern responses headed by Jean Vanier and including the theology of relationship formulated by Holder-Franz and Swinton. Here, God is not appropriated, but observed as the dimension constantly present in and giving meaning to human relationship. The key concept here is mutuality concerning both the exchange between the persons surrendering to each other and between the surrendering person and God. Hermanus can be seen offering additional support for the validity of this idea: it is applicable both in the mediaeval and the modern contexts, and may therefore claim a degree of universal validity. In turn, this is supported by strong parallels in the patterns detected in the interaction between Hermanus and Berthold, Pozzo di Borgo and Abdel and community members and carers in L'Arche communities.

The concurrence as regards the role of relationship continues into the examination of individual reflection and self. Accounting for the success of Hermanus in shaping a life, emphasis has to be put on his strong presence as an independent thinker and as a person at the centre of his own life, as testified by his first-person statements in his *Chronicon* and his deathbed reflection. Hermanus does not fulfil a stereotypical role expectation such as that outlined in traditional church understandings of virtuous suffering. Theologically, this challenges the idea of anybody disabled being God's teaching tool, implying passivity and being wielded in terms of changing the non-disabled for the better. At this point even Vanier's idea of the healing power of the disabled in his communities stands questioned. By contrast, in

support of strong self-determination and an understanding of an identity certainly shaped and developed, but not pre-determined by one's degree of disability stands Tom Shakespeare's deconstruction of the social disability model, forcing the disabled into a role even when aiming to act on their side. Shakespeare suggests the concept of the individual narrative, defined as the act of creating a successful disabled life through a self-perception and a pattern of action creating the person one wants to be. This model appears to match the case study of Hermanus as well as the modern case studies considered by themselves as building a successful disabled life, Philippe Pozzo di Borgo being perhaps the most prominent example of this. The model shows itself as applicable both to the mediaeval and the modern context and to believers and non-believers. More importantly, the task of formulating who we are is a defining characteristic of being human, not dependant on ability or disability.

Hermanus therefore shows that an explicit disability theology, while well-intentioned, may be counterproductive because it limits the individual to a role, or a profile, making disability necessary to identity. But if this is the case, any hermeneutic developed *for* a specific group, such as queer, black, feminist theologies comes into question along with the white male hermeneutic whose dominance those contextual theologies have been developed to challenge. No such group-specific theology should be necessary within a functioning community or, on a larger scale, society. Eiesland's idea of the 'Disabled God' formed part of a political claim to create the foundations for such a society by enshrining rights, immunities and freedoms. The other voices, including Hermanus, do not formulate a special God. The disabled God is a subset of the God in whom all human variant is contained, or in the case of a non-believer such as Philippe, disability is a subset of what it is to be human. A premise shared by all of these approaches is that society works only if all members are sufficiently free to show themselves in all their weakness, failings and vulnerability. Being disabled means having to surrender control over aspects of life, and practical provision and fair access to create a more level playing field remains a key duty of society, in order that control may be retained about determining who one is and what one wants to be. Creating our lives by how we think and act is what we are all here for regardless of our degree of ability or disability. Ultimately, then, this is what the life of Hermanus shows.

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## APPENDIX

### I. Hermanus' deathbed reflection

Berthold von der Reichenau, *Vita Herimanni*, ch. IV

(Translation based on Walter Berschin's translation into German.)<sup>114</sup>

IV. When it finally pleased God's mercy to free his pious soul from the wearisome prison of this world, a sickness befell him, in his side, and he suffered for ten days most cruelly and relentlessly from this lethal affliction. When I, whom he had deemed a friend before others, came to his bedside one day – very early, when the morning liturgy had just been celebrated – and asked him whether he was feeling at all better, he answered:

“Don't, I beg of you, don't ask me, but much rather pay close attention to what I am about to tell you, you, in whom I confide in no small measure. Beyond doubt I will soon die and neither live nor recover, therefore I commend everybody I love to you and above all my sinful soul. For this entire night I have been transported in ecstasy, so to speak, as I saw, from my mind and my understanding, just like we usually pray to the Lord, the 'Hortensius' by Tullius Cicero, and was reading him and almost reading him again with greater awareness and both literally and in terms of meaning the material about the vices I had still been planning to write, almost as if I had already written it, and many similar things of this sort. This reading however has impelled and prompted me very much to feel great contempt and tedium for this present world with all pertaining to it and for this mortal life – and on the other hand it has given me such a desire for the delights of the future and unchanging world and eternal and immortal life, that I now hold everything of a fleeting nature to be as nothing and void, and for trifles holding one back / weighing one down. Thus certainly I am weary of living.”

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<sup>114</sup> Berschin and Hellmann, *Hermann*, 11.