

## Editorial: Autism and Faith

As the title suggests, this issue is devoted to a theme that has become much more prominent in the general public discourse over recent years, yet still lacks sustained attention or an in-depth, creative consideration in the life of the Church as well as in theological thought. The call for contributions for this particular issue has received considerable attention, which by itself may be taken as a sign of the importance of the topic in Scotland and beyond.

Several of the contributors identify as autistic; others have an intimate experience of autism through taking care of an autistic child. A clear line that runs through the articles is the recognition that the autistic spectrum encompasses multiple ways of being, thinking, sensing, and doing; the authors are very clear that they are reflecting from their own, specific, experiences. And yet from these particularities, some important larger themes begin to emerge.

First of all, it is helpful to get a sense, or be reminded, of the challenges faced in a church context by those who are autistic, as well as by their carers. Emma McDonald, Church of Scotland minister and a parent of an autistic teenager, describes her own experience of navigating her son's needs on the one hand and congregational expectations on the other. As her reflection illustrates, there can be a vast distance between rhetorical declarations of welcome and an actual willingness to practice welcome in regard to certain people whose behaviour does not conform to the 'norm'. McDonald highlights examples of both unintentional exclusion and open hostility, while also acknowledging the challenge that congregations face if they wish to become truly welcoming to different kinds of autistic persons, and thus become more representative of the diversity of Christ's body. As an inspiring example of welcome, she outlines her experience at one of the centres of the Riding for the Disabled Association.

The conversation about faith, children, and the Church is extended further in our next article. Roz Lawson seeks to explore possibilities beyond the tension existing between the familiar ways of church life and the different needs of autistic people. Her 'family ethnography', focused on the experience of her son, has led her to consider two key theories of autism, and to conclude that our understanding of autism – that is, our

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engagement with such theories – will necessarily impact our theological approach to autism, and therefore our attitudes towards serving autistic people. Moreover, as (or if) the Church embraces its calling to be Christ’s body, particularly to those who the world may consider to be ‘deficient’ or ‘broken,’ it may discover that welcoming them fully – whatever this may involve in any particular context – can bring surprising transformation in the Church as a whole.

Several of the articles grapple with authentically autistic ways of engaging in both church life and theology. Harry Gibbins introduces us to *Dungeons & Dragons*, a tabletop role-playing game which represents a creative avenue for thinking about human interactions and their theological significance, particularly for autistic people. He considers his own experience of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* in the wake of his own diagnosis of autism. He explores the potential of the concept of *imago Dei*, understood in relational terms, but specifically in terms of new ways of creating dialogue that genuinely brings autistic and non-autistic people together on a level playing field. (Here Gibbins engages with the work of Paulo Freire – and specifically his thought on the liberation of the oppressed.) Autistic imagination, exemplified in one’s playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, becomes a tool for doing theology. As such, autism challenges the role ascribed to ‘normalcy’ and the idea of a ‘perfect’ human and underscores the *opportunity* present in autism rather than the limitations it may involve.

Autism impacts different areas of one’s life, yet in popular consciousness often remains restricted to a very narrow strip of life. In his article, Edward Ceney reflects on his own recent experience of bereavement after the passing of his mother. As an autistic person, he found his grief process different from the established models and expectations, both in family and church contexts. Emotionally charged experiences such as the loss of a loved one can feel particularly alienating for those with an autistic brain. In his auto-ethnographic reflection, Ceney shares the value of embracing a less orderly, less linear, more open-ended approach to the process of grief which carves its own unique path beyond neuronormative expectations.

In yet another contribution, we switch gears somewhat to get a glimpse of some of the questions and methods arising out of the field of social science. Krysia Waldoock and Precious Sango approach the subject of autism and faith as both researchers and persons with their own experiences of

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autism and church life. Perceptions of autistic people in the Church are shaped by sociocultural factors as well as by biblical hermeneutics – and indeed a complex, interactive relationship between the two. This article provides an illustration of some approaches to biblical interpretation in regard to various expressions of disability, as well as of some barriers facing academics wanting to research autism and faith, or spirituality more generally, in social science.

The Arts and Culture Corner features Martin Donaghey, who shares one of his poems, “The Band & the Promise”, and a fascinating commentary on his approach to making sense, of texts, of art, and of life itself. Some of this issue’s book reviews also discuss works on autism, as well as recent publications on other topics. I would particularly draw readers’ attention to a multi-authored book review which explores the current state of the field of Autism Theology through a discussion of four recent publications. Claire Williams’ *Peculiar Discipleship: An Autistic Liberation Theology* is reviewed by Ian Lasch; Bryan Fowler discusses Ruth M. Dunster’s *The Autism of Gxd: An Atheological Love Story*; a review of Stewart Rapley’s *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church* is written by Henna Cundill; while Christopher Barber engages with Cynthia Tam’s *Kinship in the Household of God: Towards a Practical Theology of Belonging and Spiritual Care of People with Profound Autism*. Several key themes reflected in the individual reviews are picked up by Léon van Ommen in a discussion section which concludes the review essay. He particularly draws attention to the aim of Autism Theology – that is, its focus on the ideas and practices which enable autistic people’s thriving; the importance of the inclusion of different voices in the conversation (including those who are non- or minimally speaking); and the richness which autistic people’s presence and contributions bring to theology and to the Church as a whole.

The call to pay attention to, and celebrate, the unique gifts of autistic people is one which resonates throughout this issue. Clearly there is so much more that might lie beyond merely ‘welcoming’ autistic persons into the Church. We may discover a more profound transformation of the Church’s incarnational expressions, and a richer engagement with Scripture in helping us to make sense of the image of God in human beings, neurodiverse or neurotypical. Hence the importance of listening to different autistic voices, which is a prompt to reconsider our thinking about church spaces and the way we express ourselves, both within and outside

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the Church, as autistic or non-autistic Christians. Each congregation which embarks on such a journey will find it to be a unique task; much will depend on the specific needs of those it finds called to embrace and serve, as well as wider factors such as the congregation's size, liturgical tradition, and so on.

Some themes which this issue touches on will hopefully continue to be developed further. Among these, engagement with the Bible will be key. There is still much to be learned about how it may be read and experienced by autistic people; how particular ways of interpreting Scripture may have shaped an unhelpful, life-restricting, and certainly partial, understanding of normalcy and health; and what resources Scripture may offer for a more wholesome understanding of human life, flourishing, and worth. I do hope, however, that this issue may serve as a good start for such conversations and investigations.

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