Rolling with advantage:
Why *Dungeons & Dragons* provides new insight into the Christian concept of the *imago Dei* for autistic Christians

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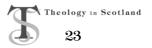
Abstract

What is clear through an exploration of disability theology is that the *imago Dei* is a crucial component of a proper understanding of disability and creation. Whilst the *imago Dei* provides excellent utility in terms of the spiritual engagement of autistic Christians, there is much to be discovered concerning new pioneering methods of approaching dialogue between autistic and non-autistic Christians. As I shall explore through an autoethnographic study drawing from my own experiences, *Dungeons & Dragons* is one of these pioneering methods that is a creative tool for autistic Christians. Thus, new methods emerge regarding what the *imago Dei* means for those on the autism spectrum.

Introduction

When exploring disability theology, whether it be focused on autism or not, three theoretical models dominate the scholarly discussion. These are normalcy, suffering, and the *imago Dei*. In this article, I shall argue that *imago Dei* provides the most appropriate theological basis for a disability

ethic. Subsequently, a critique will emerge upon which a rich and insightful theology of autism can be built. Whilst this theology provides insight into creation and disability, what remains lacking is how those who are autistic are enabled to engage in theological reflection in a way that is uniquely autistic. Consequently, I will explore one such way that I believe creatively demonstrates how autistic imagination is a tool for theological reflection – a tool that provides a richer insight into the *imago Dei.*

For this study, I shall highlight the strength of the *imago Dei* as a theme for a theology of autism. Then, after a brief exploration of Paulo Freire's pioneering dialogue to address oppression, I will illustrate via an autoethnographic study my own experience of how the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* can be used as a tool for autistic theological self-expression. I will argue that through the mechanics of the game, I was able to address anxieties I had concerning my diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and was led to theologically reflect on autism and the *imago Dei.*
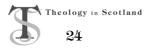
The lies of normalcy and suffering

In my dissertation, I explored in detail three major theological themes within disability theology.[1] These are normalcy, suffering, and the *imago Dei.* To keep the focus of this article precise, however, I will provide a brief overview of the first two themes (normalcy and suffering), which I argue are limiting to a theology of autism, to fully illuminate the third theme (*imago Dei*). It is this third theme that will provide the basis for this study and become the central idea for the rest of the article.

Normalcy is primarily focused on the elimination of differences.[2] For there to be an acceptable norm, there must be an unacceptable non-normal. This runs in direct competition with the essence of disability. Disability

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[1] This article is based on the conclusions I drew at the end of my dissertation that was written for my MTh in Theology at the University of Aberdeen, supervised by Brain Brock. This is not, however, a simple summary of my research, but a progression into one area I believed there was further insight to be gained. I would like to thank Brian for his guidance in this study and hope that one day he will try *Dungeons & Dragons* for himself.

[2] Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 208.

becomes the thorn in the side of a worldview where the *telos* is to uphold the acceptable norm. At a basic level, conversation surrounding disability is often directed towards the social care sector and, more specifically, with great emphasis on children.[3] This is not a wholly inappropriate understanding; however, this subsequently points towards a distorted understanding of the disabled person, one in which infantilisation is common. Here disabled people become socially paralysed unless they can adhere to the criterion placed upon them by the 'normals'.[4]

This definition is but one dimension to normalcy but is one which presents theological utility concerning autism. What is drawn out from this understanding is a societal fear of difference.[5] Individuals who step outside of the acceptable norm, whether due to a disability or by another factor, challenge the structural integrity of a society built to benefit those who can most closely follow this social adherence. Autism, therefore, runs as a direct antithesis to this model. Normalcy cannot be an appropriate model for understanding autism for this very reason. By definition, autism is non-normal. If the lens through which social care practitioners view autistic people is *only* based on how they can better socially adhere to prescribed norms, all that has been achieved is the behavioural control of those who disrupt the norm, thus highlighting the unease the 'normals' have when they cannot control non-normalcy.[6] As a result, normalcy, in terms of a theological study of autism, is insufficient at describing lived autistic experiences. Its only utility is in the illumination of its limits.

A similar argument is perceived when examining suffering as a theme for highlighting the needs and desires of disabled people. Theologically speaking, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the human experience through the rejection of separating the earthly physical reality and the divine spiritual reality.[7] These two realities are not two different cognitive states in which separate examinations can take place. Rather, the physical and spiritual are combined through the God-human incarnate Christ. Suffering, therefore,
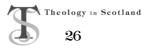
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[3] Hauerwas, 196–97.

[4] Hauerwas, 198.

[5] Hauerwas, 208.

[6] Brian Brock, *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 105.

[7] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*, ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 55–58.

becomes a necessary part of the whole human lived experience as Christ shared in this suffering in his redemptive act on the cross; suffering takes on a new salvific quality.[8] This is not to argue that suffering is always good. Doing so would minimise the testimonies of those experiencing incredible hardship. Instead, Bonhoeffer is arguing that the rejection of suffering, in not recognising that Christ becomes 'like us' through his suffering, points to a narrow Christological understanding.[9]

This is not a perfect illustration however, as Bonhoeffer's historical context begins to shine through his words.[10] In the original text, Bonhoeffer is framed by the rise of National Socialism, a regime that similarly sought the eradication of suffering through the removal of undesirables. This, unsurprisingly, included disabled people thus leading to Aktion T4, the Nazi eugenics programme.[11] On the other hand, I want to bring his theology into conversation with disability ethics to illuminate what it might glean for a study of autism. This framing of suffering draws comparisons to the medical model of disability where the *telos* is to avoid suffering at all costs. Disability acts as the embodiment of suffering; disability's removal thus improves the lived experiences of all humankind. In terms of the lived experience of autistic people, this translates to the suppression of autistic expression. Behaviours become labels for appropriate and inappropriate with little consideration for the sensory needs of the autistic individual. If an autistic person can successfully act non-autistic – in other words, to socially adhere – their transition out of an assumed suffering is celebrated. There is a deep but saddening truth in that this often *increases* sensory discomfort, or even acts as the primary cause of suffering in the first place.

In summary, suffering is an inappropriate method of understanding the lived experiences of autistic people. To place such an emphasis on suffering as the primary concern of disabled people, autistic individuals are moulded into acceptable non-autistic marionettes, thus carving

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[8] Bonhoeffer, 285.

[9] Bonhoeffer, 287.

[10] Bernd Wannenwetsch, "'My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness': Bonhoeffer and the War over Disabled Life", in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 277.

[11] Clifford J. Green, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition", in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 18.

pathways between this theme and the previously explored normalcy. The emphasis should not be, therefore, on seeking to remove autistic people from this equation, as to do so would be adhering to the Nazi *Übermensch* philosophy that Bonhoeffer so adamantly opposed. Emphasis should be instead placed on the opportunities that autism can bring for the whole human lived experience. To remove autistic-ness from this reality seeks only to define a very narrow understanding of this experience where only one fragment of it becomes legitimate.

In the following section, I shall in more detail explore how the Christian concept of *imago Dei* may address the concerns raised.

Made autistic in the divine image – *imago Dei*

Autism is commonly referred to via a triad of impairments: impairment in social communication, social imagination, and social interaction.[12] While it is important to note the clear medical model terminology being drawn from here, it is equally important to recognise the centricity this theory has regarding autism. Through this model, autistic people become subjects of challenge rather than opportunity. Regardless of the accuracy from person to person that this triad speaks to, a medical model of impairment seeks only to identify what is 'wrong' with a person.[13] As a result, autistic people become puzzles to solve, and similar conclusions are brought forth in comparison to what has already been explored. Here, however, I want to present how the *imago Dei* demonstrates how theology can speak to the opportunity of autistic minds as opposed to the challenges the triad attempts to identify. *Imago Dei* is primarily concerned with the dignity of disabled people.[14] As has been demonstrated by the already identified themes, too heavy a focus on a perfect image of humankind has dangerous ramifications not just for people who are different, but for *all* people. On the other hand, the Christian theological concept of *imago Dei* presents a new perspective, one that is very popular within the field of disability

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[12] Lorna Wing, *The Autistic Spectrum: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (London: Constable, 2001), 26.

[13] Erin R. Burnett, "'Different, Not Less': Pastoral Care of Autistic Adults within Christian Churches", *Practical Theology* 14, no. 3 (May 2021): 216.

[14] Brad F. Mellon, "John Kilner's Understanding of the Imago Dei and the Ethical Treatment of Persons with Disabilities", *Christian Bioethics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 288.
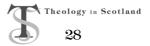
theology. With this in mind, I look to examine what this might mean for a theological study of autism.

Keith Dow highlights three different ways of conceptualising the *imago Dei*: the substantive view, the functional view, and the relational view.[15] Firstly, the substantive view positions the *imago Dei* as the mechanism for the human ability to reason. It is coincidentally this theology that is appropriated by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* where he used it to justify the already mentioned Aktion T4.[16] Dow's illustration of considering the *imago Dei* in terms of human reason has its serviceability, however, the focus on intellectualism becomes unsurprisingly dismissive of those with learning disabilities. It is here that an initial concern emerges regarding what benefit *imago Dei* has for a theological study of autism. The risk is obvious, if the *imago Dei* is the divinely-given human ability to reason, where reason is an inherently divine characteristic that humankind is gifted when created in the divine image, then do those with learning disabilities possess a lesser or no image?[17] The concern here is that there is the potential for an unconscious bias against those with learning disabilities as those who pastor and care for them believe that they cannot fully participate in the Christian faith.

A similar path is walked concerning the functional view. Here, the *imago Dei* is emphasised as humankind exercising dominion over creation as seen via God's commandment to Adam in Genesis.[18] Those with disabilities begin to cast a similar shadow over this concept as their difference interferes with a capacity to exercise dominion.[19]

Where there is a more palatable understanding of the *imago Dei*, one in which autistic people become equal participants within faith communities regardless of human ability, is in the relational view. The Genesis account which Dow illustrates as being formative for the functional view never explains what is meant by the phrase 'the image of

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[15] Keith Dow, *Formed Together: Mystery, Narrative, and Virtue in Christian Caregiving* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 56.

[16] Dow, 57; cf. Green, "Editor's Introduction", 18.

[17] Dow, *Formed Together*, 57–58; cf. Philip Thomas, "The Relational-Revelational Image: A Reflection on the Image of God in the Light of Disability and on Disability in the Light of the Image of God", *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 16, no. 2 (April 2012): 136.
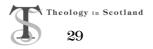
[18] Gen 1:28.

[19] Dow, *Formed Together*, 58.

God'.[20] This may be deliberate, so as to shroud the concept within a divine mystery. The relational view, however, seeks to bridge this gap, identifying this 'shrouding' as untheological and assumptive. In the relational view, the *imago Dei* forms itself around the relationships between one another, emphasised by the commandment to 'love thy neighbour'.[21] As previously highlighted, viewing humanity as something an individual can be less or more of is theologically unjustifiable and conflicts greatly with the reality of autistic lived experience. Accordingly, the relational view provides the most potential for a doctrine of *imago Dei* that addresses the need to care for one another regardless of intellectual ability.[22]

The relational view is not, however, perfect. There is a risk of falling into the same theological pitfalls as the substantive and functional views. By placing the *imago Dei* within the amount one loves another, a 'hierarchy of "godlikeness"' may still be formed. Loving one another, in this sense, is still rooted in the human ability to act. This is, alternatively, a narrow definition of love. Love, theologically speaking, is not formed primarily from human consciousness. Humankind loves because God loved first.[23] If love was simply what an individual *does*, then love is at risk of being self-serving. Here, nevertheless, the *imago Dei* points to a basis on which a theology of autism can thrive. In terms of what this means for autism research, there is a consequence that I will explore below before moving on to the second part of this study.

I wish to return to the triad of impairments mentioned previously. The connective tissue between the triad and the *imago Dei* is within the social framing of both areas. It is common for autistic people to feel like social outcasts, and to struggle with the social conventions of everyday life that non-autistic people may find far easier. This leads to autistic people becoming isolated, often leading to further mental health challenges. Autistic people are more likely to have depression, anxiety, and even to have attempted suicide, although to what extent is unclear.[24] It,

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[20] Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 177.

[21] Dow, *Formed Together*, 59; cf. Mark 12:31.

[22] Claudia Welz, "*Imago Dei*: References to the Invisible", *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 65, no. 1 (June 2011): 81.

[23] Dow, *Formed Together*, 61.

[24] Sami Richa, Mario Fahed, Elias Khoury, and Brian Mishara, "Suicide in Autism Spectrum Disorders", *Archives of Suicide Research* 18, no. 4 (2014): 336–37.

nevertheless, may seem insensitive to frame the *imago Dei* through a relational mindset. Where I think, however, there is room for a pioneering method of autistic engagement within Christian communities, one which recognises the theological truth of the relational God, is by pursuing pioneering methods of dialogue between autistic and non-autistic Christians. Thus, just as God who through the incarnate Christ was and is in community with their creation, the unified Church of Christ sees the strengths that lie in its diversity. A diversity that should be explored and promoted and that seeks to free autistic Christians from their oppression.
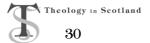
Freedom from oppression through dialogue

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* concentrates on one key theme, a theme that will illustrate how to bridge this identified gap in a relational construction of the *imago Dei*. Freire's suggestion is initially simple: for the oppressed to be liberated from their dependence on the oppressors they must first acquire the knowledge of their oppression.[25] Through this, Freire calls the oppressed away from seeing each other as the enemy, instead pointing them toward the system that seeks to keep them in the false knowledge that they are ontologically incapable of the generous gesture of the dominant class.[26]

Repositioning this toward autism once more, autistic people become situated within a system that seeks to persuade them of their dependence on the neurotypical. Freire highlights how pedagogy, as an effective method of liberation, illuminates this oppressive system. The strength of Freire's theories is in his emphasis on the oppressor vs. the oppressed dynamic within many social contexts, yet he uncovers a great challenge. How does a person, autistic or not, begin to deconstruct such a system? Freire's answer is simply a dialogue.[27]

Freire illustrates the strengths of dialogical problem-posing as a pedagogical method. By encouraging a formative and equal dialogue between two parties, the participants are directed towards the critical thinking skills required to challenge the cycle of false dependence, thus recognising the systemic oppression of the oppressed. For example,

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[25] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, new rev. ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 206.

[26] Freire, 41.

[27] Freire, 74.

through a truly equal dialogue no longer is education carried out by 'A' for the sake of lifting 'B' out of creative poverty, but rather 'A' and 'B' create equally through their dialogue.[28] Dialogue assumes that these constructed concepts of a ruling class must be uprooted, for true dialogue is only possible when an environment is fostered where two agents can exchange freely, mediating conflicting ideas and creating something new.[29] How then, do we create something truly new?
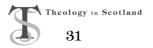
Before continuing to the final section, I believe it is beneficial to retrace my steps to provide clarity as to where I am in my argument. Both normalcy and suffering are common themes within disability theology that provide little insight into the lived autistic experience. In both cases, they seek to remove disability, and thus autism, from a population to uphold a societal norm. Autistic people are, consequently, placed in a position where social adherence is demanded either for the purposes of upholding an appropriate norm or for removing suffering from the greater lived experience of a whole population. On the other hand, the Christian concept of *imago Dei*, that all people are made in the divine image and that this is expressed through the relational call to love, provides a far stronger theological foundation for exploring the lived experiences of autistic Christians. As Freire highlights, to fully approach this relational element of the *imago Dei*, a constructive dialogue must be struck that seeks to level the field between autistic and non-autistic, or, as he illustrates, the oppressed and the oppressor. Autism, however, demands a re-evaluation of what a dialogue can be. As I shall now explore, the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* is an excellent example of a new pioneering method of dialogue that can lead to theological reflection.

Dungeons & Dragons is great and here's why

Before continuing it would be beneficial to give a brief introduction to *Dungeons & Dragons* (henceforth referred to as *D&D*) for the uninitiated. *D&D* is a tabletop role-playing game created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, first released in 1974.[30] As of the publication of this article, there

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[28] Freire, 73–74.

[29] Freire, 76–77.

[30] Christopher Robichaud, *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 1, 180.
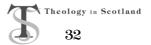
have been five main editions of the game published via a selection of rulebooks that guide the players on their journey. In its most recent edition (Fifth edition, or 5e) players are encouraged to 'build' a character, considering a background, personality traits, various strengths and weaknesses, and are then placed in a game world by one central 'leader' player known as the gamemaster (or GM). The GM then provides a structure, this can be as simple as a problem that the player characters must solve, or a large-scale living world in which events happen around and even in absence of the player characters. Consequently, *D&D* exerts an aura of collaborative creative writing with each player working together – or perhaps in opposition – to achieve one fundamental goal: tell a good story.[31] *D&D* often takes a high fantasy style approach in the vein of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series of novels, from which the original designers took heavy inspiration,[32] but can exist within a myriad of settings such as a post-apocalyptic future or an alternative take on real-world history. The only limits are the imagination of the players involved; the story they tell is equally their own and a formative relational experience between the players. In a world overshadowed by consumerist storytelling, where cultural lynchpins are guarded by the purchase of a book or movie ticket, *D&D* harkens back to biblical oral tradition and encourages creativity that does not rely on its producibility or financial viability. Instead, it exists truly in service of the message behind the story being told.

It is with great interest that I approach *D&D* through the context of autism research. I argue that *D&D* stands in opposition to the triad of impairments commonly referenced concerning autistic ability. *D&D* fundamentally demands a social, imaginative and interactive experience. Surely, therefore, it would be easy to assume that *D&D* is difficult for autistic people to engage with. Whilst I do not claim to speak for the experience of *all* autistic people, it is valuable to highlight how popular *D&D* is with autistic young people. In recent years, thanks in part to television programmes such as *Stranger Things*, *D&D* has soared in popularity.[33] This has garnered attention from researchers who have

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[31] David M. Ewalt, *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 6.

[32] Ewalt, 5.

[33] Dan Selcke, "Stranger Things Inspires 600% Search Increase for Dungeons

highlighted the strength of the game as a therapeutic tool. Young people who found traditional therapeutic methods challenging, such as one-to-one counselling, found it far easier to approach real-world conflicts in their lives via the game mechanics of *D&D*.[34] *D&D* would exist as an environment where individuals can 'practice' the person they are in the real world. A player would often create a character who was either a reflection of themselves or who exhibited characteristics they wanted to have.[35] This is where the value of *D&D* for autistic people begins to emerge. Stereotypes about autism and 'nerdy hobbies' aside, being able to practice social interaction within a safe space, within a fictional universe where there are no real-world consequences, presents great value to the autistic person. What does this value, however, reveal about a theology of autism?

My own experiences

I am writing this sitting on a train from Aberdeen to Stoke – perhaps poetically from where I am doing my postgraduate study back to where my undergraduate degree is from – and, to put it simply, I'm having a pretty awful time. At 22:45 last night I got an email notifying me that a connecting train had been cancelled and that, whilst my ticket would allow me to board the next service half an hour later, I would miss my following train. My only option was to re-book tickets for a later train for the next leg of the journey. All in all, this was not a big problem. At the time, however, my entire world started to collapse. It was as if my brain stalled. I could not effectively articulate my thoughts to my wife, and I spent most of the rest of the night lying awake awaiting a troubling journey down south. As stress continued to build my hearing got worse and my

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& Dragons", *Winter Is Coming* (blog), 12 July 2022, https://winteriscoming.net/2022/07/12/stranger-things-inspires-600-search-increase-dungeons-dragons/.

[34] Sören Henrich and Rachel Worthington, "Let Your Clients Fight Dragons: A Rapid Evidence Assessment Regarding the Therapeutic Utility of 'Dungeons & Dragons'", *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* (4 December 2021), 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1987367.

[35] Ian S. Baker, Ian J. Turner, and Yasuhiro Kotera, "Role-Play Games (RPGs) for Mental Health (Why Not?): Roll for Initiative", *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 11 May 2022, 5, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00832-y.
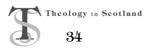
concentration disappeared. I felt itchy and hot; my clothes felt tighter than they were before. This is all because I am autistic. What I am describing is a tiny snapshot of autistic lived experience and, therefore, should not be representative of all autistic people. Despite this, having immense difficulty processing change is a commonly held trait across the autism spectrum. This has put me in a very vulnerable position. I know that for some people reading this, it might be the first time you have heard me disclose my diagnosis and perhaps that is confusing, or, on the other hand, it makes certain interactions we've had together more understandable. Where I think the biggest line in the sand for how I respond to my autism now, in comparison to how I was as a child, is how I approach and maintain relationships. I am married, I have two children, and I have plenty of people whom I would call my friends. But being able to describe how I am feeling to any of them is especially difficult for me.

I did not receive a diagnosis until I was an adult. Whilst I initially believed that this diagnosis would explain some unusual behaviour I exhibited, my diagnosis simply awoke further questions in comparison to the few it answered. As will now be explored, *D&D* became a tool for me to explore this newly discovered part of myself that had been there the whole time. *D&D* acts as the dialogue I utilise to discover and explain what it's like to be autistic. Consequently, the game helped highlight for me the theological truth that has been already established, that I have been divinely made in the image of God and that my autistic-ness does not and never will deny me this. Rather it informs it.

Once a fortnight I play *D&D* with the same five people, all of whom bring different theological insights to our game. Amongst us, we have one curate, three ordinands, a theologian (myself) and an ex-Christian. This creates an interesting theological environment where we can share our different experiences of faith via the game. What is consistent across our experiences is how our characters emote in ways that are an outward reflection of our inward selves. In the same sense that an actor *becomes* the character they are playing, we *become* our characters. It is difficult to say where I ontologically end and my character begins because it is almost an impossible question to answer. Instead, I am much more interested to know the other direction of the relationship. What is it that the character I play tells me about myself? How does a fictional part of my imagination *speak* to me? It is with this that I will now introduce Nine.

Captain Nine, Barron of Meadway

Nine – or to call him by his full name, Captain Nine, Barron of Meadway – is a level thirteen tabaxi paladin.[36] Nine is not real. He is a creation of my imagination and deeply inspired by my love of *Doctor Who*. He is no more real than the characters in Jesus' parables and yet his real-ness, Nine as an embodied reality, comes into being when I sit down to play the game. This is not to speak of a sort of mysticism or to over-spiritualise what continues to remain as my imagination. Nine is not *real*, but he does exist as part of my reality. This is because I wrote Nine very intentionally as an outward reflection of my inward self. Nine, in this sense, is autistic. His interactions with the other members of the team are socially awkward, he becomes hyper-fixated on details often missed by the others, and he has an overall dispassion for gossip. This, again, is not to say Nine represents all autistic people but simply to say that Nine and myself are somewhat the same and, therefore, it is not facetious to say that his interactions are autistic in the sense that they are also autistically me.

Nine as a fictitious yet embodied reality becomes most prevalent in that he has a history. He did exist within moments that happened both within the context of a game (acted out by the players) and within a moment that cannot be retrodden (that moment in the game is not 'replayed'). From a narrative perspective, there is a chronology to Nine that is set, a series of events he lived through, decisions he made that have created the person he is in the present (or, I suppose, in the moments I'm playing *D&D*). This is all very philosophical, but I think Nine's importance to me is best summarised in a single interaction.

O.B. is a half-orc bard[37] who is another player character. Nine, through the events of the game, built up a rapport with O.B. and they have become good friends. After meeting a new member of the team, O.B. was asked 'What's up with Nine?' perhaps in reference to Nine's slight difficulty performing socially in a way that would be considered normal. O.B. in response thought for a second and then simply replied 'Nine's just … Nine'. In this short sentence, O.B., or the player playing him, summarises

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[36] For readers who are deeply confused by this, you can find more details about what a level thirteen paladin is in *Dungeons & Dragons Core Rulebook: Player's Handbook*, Fifth Edition (Renton, WA: Dungeons & Dragons, 2014), 82.

[37] *Dungeons & Dragons Core Rulebook*, 40, 51.

everything that Nine, and by extension *D&D*, means to me as a tool for autistic expression. Nine is more than a series of insecurities, differences, oddities and issues. He just *is*, just as I *am*. At this moment the player playing O.B. provides wisdom through an interaction between two people who do not exist in the traditional sense and, consequently, teaches all those sitting at the table about the way that I want to be recognised.

In summary, *D&D* has become a method of pioneering dialogue between myself and my friends as I seek to explore who I am as an autistic person. The game acts as a dialogue because I must do it together with the others. *D&D* as a collaborative medium reveals further truth about who I am that I may have been ignorant of had I been without it. Theologically, just as I breathe life into Nine with every word I speak as him, within every interaction I role-play as him, God too breathed life into me. This is but one example of the 'outside the box' thinking that is so beneficial to autistic Christians who are seeking these theological answers. This is not to say *D&D* is for everyone, or that everyone's experience of the game will be as positive as mine. It is, however, good to highlight how both the assumptions of autistic abilities are challenged and the agency of autistic people is promoted heavily in the example given. By seeking out these pioneering creative methods in which agency is promoted and stereotypes ignored, autistic Christians will be able to tell their own story, as well as to examine and illustrate their spirituality without the need to conform to a necessary social norm.

Conclusion

It is clear from this exploration that inventive, creative, and pioneering methods of dialogue between autistic and non-autistic are of great benefit to autistic people. Through the example given, there is space for autistic Christians to – through their agency – theologically reflect on their divinely-created goodness in the *imago Dei*. This is not despite being autistic but fully embodied as an autistic person. The question 'Why are some people made autistic?' is, therefore, lacking in theological nuance. The more expansive question, a question in which a richer understanding of the breadth and depth of creation lies, is instead 'How does autism challenge our theological assumptions about ability, about our relationships, and about God?' There is an opportunity to explore further how creative research methods can illuminate further truth about the

autistic lived experience and, likewise, how creative and pioneering methods of dialogue can be utilised by those who may find traditional methods challenging.