

# Autism, faith and churches: The research landscape and where we go next

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## Abstract

Although there is a growing field exploring Autistic people, faith and churches, negative attitudes remain towards Autistic people within some faith spaces. Our paper aims to unpick the theological and sociological issues behind negative attitudes, beliefs and practices. We will then tentatively suggest how this projects a neuronormative and able-bodied image of God, and hinders the flourishing of all church members, notably Autistic people. We will then reflect on the current research landscape and knowledge-to-practice pipeline in churches. Finally, we will provide some recommendations for future directions, and practical recommendations for research and practice.



Autistic people can face negative attitudes within church contexts.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we define a church not only as a building, but also the congregation

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<sup>1</sup> Kryisia Emily Waldock and Rachel Forrester-Jones, “An Exploratory Study

that may gather within the building.<sup>2</sup> Given that Autistic<sup>3</sup> people may face negative attitudes in other settings and that churches are influenced by the secular world,<sup>4</sup> this is not a surprising assertion. However, the church setting is different, with unique theological axes informing the beliefs of attendees. Worship services are exempt from the Equality Act,<sup>5</sup> demonstrating the specific context that churches inhabit.



## **Our approach to writing this article**

We both have personal and academic experience in Autism, intellectual disability and spirituality research, have authored journal articles and are facilitators of Autism and faith-related teaching and training in higher education (PS & KW) and in churches (KW). We believe in the importance of an emic perspective in research relating to Autism and faith, and have therefore developed the content of this article from these experiences and from a dialogical approach.<sup>6</sup> We engaged in a series of discussions to identify the key issues for the article, drawing from both personal and research experience as well as from a critical review of the literature. These discussions took place via email and six meetings on Microsoft Teams with both authors taking notes on a shared Word document of content discussed. The fourth meeting (duration 2 hours) on Microsoft Teams took the format of a dialogue where key issues were discussed and identified for the article, then transcribed. These transcripts

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of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom”, *Journal of Disability & Religion* 24, no. 4 (2020): 349–70.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Segal, “Who is the Church?” (2014), <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/who-is-the-church>.

<sup>3</sup> We capitalise Autistic as Autistic is a sociocultural indicator, as argued in Elizabeth M. Radulski, “Conceptualising Autistic Masking, Camouflaging, and Neurotypical Privilege: Towards a Minority Group Model of Neurodiversity”, *Human Development* 66, no. 2 (May 2022): 113–27.

<sup>4</sup> Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God’s Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Equality Act 2010, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia O’Brien, Edurne Garcia Iriarte, Roy McConkey, Sarah Butler, and Bruce O’Brien, “Inclusive Research and Intellectual Disabilities: Moving Forward on a Road Less Well-Travelled”, *Social Sciences* 11, no. 10 (October 2022): 483.

were then saved by the first author to a shared document where stylistic formatting and editing took place. Both authors met again on Microsoft Teams to code the content of the transcript; discuss and agree on themes in line with key issues identified for the article; coding took place both deductively and inductively. The first author further worked on the transcript and final stylistic formatting of the article. Themes were discussed and agreed upon by both authors at the sixth and final meeting on Microsoft Teams. The identified themes worked as content for the article, with each of us taking responsibility for expanding thematic ideas for specific sections.

In view of our approach, it is vital to outline our standpoints from which we research, and the lenses through which we explore the subject and our wider research:

**Krysia:** I am an Autistic researcher undertaking doctoral research exploring Autistic people's inclusion and belonging in religious and humanist spaces. I was brought up within a variety of churches, including Baptist and Methodist traditions. As I unpacked my own Autistic identity, I realised churches did not understand what being Autistic meant and I have faced discrimination, hostility and negative attitudes. Being marginalised, I deeply reflect on the lens I bring to my own research and how it influences the research questions I explore. Ongoing findings from my PhD demonstrate that faith spaces may not be conducive to inclusion and belonging for all Autistic people who wish to attend. My beliefs are also highly influenced by liberation theology<sup>7</sup> and colleagues have considered me to be very social justice-orientated, which informs my stance towards inclusion. I also believe we are all made in God's image,<sup>8</sup> with disabled and neurodivergent bodies as challenging normative ideals of what it means to be in God's image.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 1st (Spanish) ed. Lima, Peru, 1971; 1st English ed. Orbis Books (Maryknoll, NY, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Gen 1:27.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

**Precious:** My positionality is contextualised in my personal, academic and faith background. My faith in Jesus means trusting Him with my past, present and future. I have also had personal experiences that continually develop and evolve my faith. I see the Bible as an important book for believers. Being a Christian does not mean I do not experience difficulties in life, but I am encouraged by scriptures<sup>10</sup> and I am also led to seek other non-spiritual support when I encounter trials or challenges in life. I believe that notwithstanding our backgrounds, gender, ethnicity or neurodivergence, we all have our own unique faith experiences and journey which are important to all of us and contribute to our quality of life and identity. This is one of the factors that led me to my doctoral topic, where I explored the spirituality of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities residing in faith- and non-faith-based care services.<sup>11</sup>



### **Attitudes toward Autistic people in churches**

It can be argued that it is non-Christian to exclude people or create disabling conditions for individuals because they are neurodivergent. Although we believe that the Bible is filled with examples of inclusion, it could however be argued that the biblical representation of disabled people may have influenced the negative connotation or attitudes that some Christians may exhibit towards Autistic people. The portrayal of disabled people in the Bible can be argued to range from 'disability as a punishment from God'<sup>12</sup> to the barrier to inclusion based on the erroneous interpretation that the presence of disability places individuals outside of purity and holiness.<sup>13</sup> However, Leviticus 19:14 could be argued to show a form

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<sup>10</sup> 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 4:12–14; John 16:33; Rom 12:12.

<sup>11</sup> Precious Nonye Sango and Rachel Forrester-Jones, "Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Spirituality and Religion: A Systematic Review 1990–2015", *Journal of Disability & Religion* 21, no. 3 (2017): 280–95; Precious Nonye Sango and Rachel Forrester-Jones, "Spiritual Care for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disability: An Exploratory Study", *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability* 44, no. 2 (2019): 150–60; Precious Nonye Sango and Rachel Forrester-Jones, "Spirituality and the Quality of Life of Individuals with Intellectual Disability", *Journal of Long-Term Care* (2022): 193–204.

<sup>12</sup> Exod 4:11; Deut 28:29.

<sup>13</sup> Lev 22:16–23.

of protection around disabled people and we are encouraged instead to facilitate enabling environments and attitudes. In the New Testament, it is argued that focus is placed on Jesus healing people with different conditions<sup>14</sup> which may be interpreted by some to mean that inclusion is based on the removal of blemishes and having bodily perfection.<sup>15</sup>

The Bible includes various portrayals of disabled people and how these are interpreted can impact how we include Autistic people in churches. For example, Jesus did not only heal those who were disabled, he also healed those who were ill such as Peter's mother.<sup>16</sup> Jesus suggests how disability is not a punishment, or a sin or curse;<sup>17</sup> these are also not reasons for excluding people based on holiness.<sup>18</sup> Jesus also touches those portrayed as disabled in the Bible, such as a man with leprosy.<sup>19</sup> Another interpretation of the Bible is that all people are equal in God's sight; for example, Mephibosheth<sup>20</sup> was not singled out or excluded due to his disability. Elijah faced suicidal depression,<sup>21</sup> yet God responded to him in a caring way.<sup>22</sup> There are also people who've been interpreted to be Autistic within the Bible.<sup>23</sup>

In this light, healing disabled people to conform to able-bodied, neurotypical norms can be seen as enshrining the medical model of disability. The examples outlined can be interpreted as positioning disability as an undesirable characteristic. The negative attitudes come from the cue of stigma; some individuals will not necessarily be identified as Autistic, but may be seen as 'eccentric' or 'peculiar', with their disposition acting as the visual cue to set them apart.<sup>24</sup> This 'stigma'

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 9:37–42; Mark 1:40–45; Matt 9:1–8; Matt 15:29–31; Matt 20:29–34; Luke 6:6–11.

<sup>15</sup> Fintan Sheerin, "Jesus and the Portrayal of People with Disabilities in the Scriptures", *Spiritans Horizons* 8, no. 8 (2013): 65.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 4:38–39; Mark 1:29–31; Matt 8:14–15.

<sup>17</sup> John 9:1–3; 2 Cor 4:16–18.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor 12:7–10.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 5:11–13.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Sam 9.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Kgs 18:46.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Kgs 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Memmott, "Jesus and his friend Nicodemus: Autism in the Bible?" *Ann's Autism Blog*, (2016), <http://annsautism.blogspot.com/2016/03/jesus-and-his-friend-nicodemus-autism.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

disqualifies people from full social acceptance, as individuals are unable to perform in the expected manner. Social acceptance in this manner is socially constructed, with wider understandings of Autism (or lack of) framing biblical interpretation, and therefore stigma. In order to understand Autism from a biblical perspective, it needs to be interpreted from spiritual, intellectual, cultural and historical perspectives, notably including Autistic experience and culture. Autistic people's bodies challenge normative ideals of bodyminds<sup>25</sup> both in the church and wider society,<sup>26</sup> much like other minority identities do in belief system groups.<sup>27</sup> To avoid neuronormative hegemony in our image of God,<sup>28</sup> we need to deconstruct where the stigma of being Autistic comes from in a church setting.



### **Barriers faced by Autistic people**

Given that ideas of what Autism is are socially constructed in nature, this highlights the role of situational and environmental barriers to full inclusion. This includes barriers as exemplified by the social model of disability<sup>29</sup> (e.g., noise levels causing distress; lack of an accessible entrance) but also group behaviour within churches, where barriers to full belonging are enacted. This results in both sociocultural and biblical reasoning creating barriers. A culture of 'this is the way we do it' can be present in churches, with theologies used to increase the disempowerment of Autistic churchgoers. The 'this is the way we do it' mentality (otherwise framed as 'operant' theology) can create socially-enacted barriers, further excluding Autistic people. This also highlights a disparity between

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<sup>25</sup> Bodyminds refers to how mind and bodies are one interconnected system, with one impacting the other.

<sup>26</sup> Krysia Waldoock, "'Doing Church' During COVID-19: An Autistic Reflection on Online Church", *Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability* 1, no. 1 (2021): 66–70.

<sup>27</sup> Krysia Emily Waldoock, Michelle McCarthy, and Jill Bradshaw, "The Social Inclusion and Belonging of Minority Identities in Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Humanist Spaces: A Systematic Review". Under review.

<sup>28</sup> John M. Hull, "A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage as Both Problem and Potential", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16, no. 2 (2003): 21–35.

<sup>29</sup> See for further information: Mike Oliver, "The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years On", *Disability & Society* 28, no. 7 (October 2013): 1024–26.

espoused (a group's articulation of its beliefs) and operant theology (the embedded practices of a group<sup>30</sup>) using Helen Cameron's<sup>31</sup> four voices of theology. The inequality that exists in access and communion creates something which is not what we are supposed to be doing.

Churches have been described as social environments,<sup>32</sup> with the sensory experiences of church services as enjoyed by some (but not all) Autistic people. However, many Autistic people have reported the social nature of church to be challenging,<sup>33</sup> highlighting the neuronormative expectations within such an environment. These barriers are juxtaposed with the message of Jesus, which is that of love, inclusion and belonging. These are exemplified by L'Arche,<sup>34</sup> which focuses on community – where people belong as core members and actively participate in different aspects of the community.

Furthermore, churches do not exist in a vacuum, with ideas from the secular world informing how Autistic people should be perceived.<sup>35</sup> Resources from the secular world that further perpetuate stigma and dehumanise Autistic people<sup>36</sup> may be used in conjunction with biblical interpretation to further feed a process of negative attitude formation.<sup>37</sup> Neurodiversity-affirming and Autistic-led resources may not be well known,<sup>38</sup> it appears much information in relation to churches is siloed, with little in the way of cross-connection and networks to share this information.

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<sup>30</sup> Helen Cameron et al., *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Cameron et al., *Talking About God*, 51–56.

<sup>32</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 27.

<sup>33</sup> Naomi Louise Jacobs, "The Upside-down Kingdom of God: A Disability Studies Perspective on Disabled People's Experiences in Churches and Theologies of Disability", PhD dissertation, SOAS University of London (2018).

<sup>34</sup> More information can be found at <https://www.larche.org.uk/>.

<sup>35</sup> Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Monique Botha, "Academic, Activist, or Advocate? Angry, Entangled, and Emerging: A Critical Reflection on Autism Knowledge Production", *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 4196.

<sup>37</sup> Waldoock and Forrester-Jones, "Exploratory Study", 349–70.

<sup>38</sup> Waldoock and Forrester-Jones, 364.



## **Researching Autistic people within religion**

As two social science researchers, we have faced many misconceptions that Autistic people do not either understand spirituality or have faith, but studies have found the inverse; some do have faith, understand it and enjoy practising it as part of their journey and identity.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, a stereotype exists that Autistic people are less likely to be religious, with some studies suggesting this,<sup>40</sup> however sampling approaches and theoretical frameworks in these studies have been critiqued. This perhaps echoes the draw towards positivism and objective measurement of outcomes for Autistic people within the field. As faith, identity, spirituality and religious beliefs are not observable phenomena, they are not always seen as perhaps a valuable outcome to focus on. We need to caution narratives that only focus on observable outcomes. Rather, we need to focus on a humanity that is not exclusively neuronormative.<sup>41</sup> Previous experiences of marginalization can be neglected within interactions and need to be taken into consideration. We need to ensure that churches can enable belonging and meaningful relationships.

Funding is highly competitive in academia, but further challenges exist in relation to spirituality, religion and Autistic people due to such topics being perceived as ‘nonscientific’. During the course of the second author’s PhD, some academics asked questions that could be seen to be originating from a perspective where the importance or relevance of spirituality was questioned. The first author in response highlighted how testimonial injustice<sup>42</sup> links to this questioning, with the stigmatised

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<sup>39</sup> Sango and Forrester-Jones, “Spirituality”; Eleanor X. Liu, Erik W. Carter, Thomas L. Boehm, Naomi H. Annandale, and Courtney E. Taylor, “In Their Own Words: The Place of Faith in the Lives of Young People with Autism and Intellectual Disability”, *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 52, no. 5 (October 2014): 388–404.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Caldwell-Harris, Caitlin Fox Murphy, Tessa Velazquez, and Patrick McNamara, “Religious Belief Systems of Persons with High Functioning Autism”, in *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* 33 (2011): 3362–66; Ara Norenzayan, Will M. Gervais, and Kali H. Trzesniewski, “Mentalizing Deficits Constrain Belief in a Personal God”, *PLOS ONE* 7, no. 5 (2012): e36880.

<sup>41</sup> Hull, “A Spirituality of Disability”.

<sup>42</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).



identity<sup>43</sup> of an Autistic person providing ‘evidence’ for being ‘untrustworthy’. As researchers, we do not need to be experts, rather we need to be able to bracket<sup>44</sup> and suspend our own judgement on topics, and reflect on our positionality. A lack of knowledge and bracketing can lead to difficulties in gaining funding. Funders who fund research in the area of spirituality and religion were described as perceiving our research more favourably. Maintaining a sustainable stream of research in this light poses difficulties.



## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Autistic people’s experiences within churches is a complex and nuanced phenomenon, with sociocultural and biblical ideas influencing attitudes toward Autistic people. Furthermore, barriers exist both for Autistic people within church settings, and researchers seeking funding to further explore Autism and Autistic people within church contexts. Non-explicit neuronormative expectations and practices within churches, notably social expectations, may inadvertently exclude those who do not fit the group norm within churches, as well as how Autistic people are perceived. Considering our findings, we recommend the following:

1. Churches and other faith-based communities need a deeper understanding of Autism and Autistic experience, driven by the lived experiences of Autistic people.

We have both found a dearth of information on Autism and Autistic experience within the churches of varying denominations we have attended. Such knowledge, awareness and understanding will reduce negative attitudes in churches. Broader attitude research has demonstrated the importance of beliefs as a factor within attitude change.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, training needs to incorporate theology.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*.

<sup>44</sup> John D. Scanlon, “The Epoché and Phenomenological Anthropology”, *Research in Phenomenology* 2 (1972): 95–109.

<sup>45</sup> Kerry L. Marsh and Harry M. Wallace, “The Influence of Attitudes on Beliefs: Formation and Change”, in ed. Dolores Albarracín, Blair T. Johnson, and Mark P. Zanna, *The Handbook of Attitudes* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 369–95.

<sup>46</sup> Waldo and Forrester-Jones, “Exploratory Study”, 336.

In addition, training needs to be co-produced alongside Autistic people. The double empathy problem<sup>47</sup> must be considered; its impact has been emphasized within religious contexts.<sup>48</sup>

2. An appreciation for the variety of experiences Autistic people may have in regard to religion, with an understanding of the traumas they may have experienced.

Autistic people are proportionally more likely to be LGBTQ+<sup>49</sup> than their non-Autistic counterparts, and the Church is grappling with perspectives and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people.<sup>50</sup> More generally, individuals with minority identities may have had traumatic experiences within faith-based contexts.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, any co-production must be sensitive to the traumatic experiences that co-production partners, and Autistic people more broadly, have experienced.

3. Further research highlighting the religious and spiritual lived experiences of Autistic people (including both positive and negative experiences), presented in a manner that is accessible to churches.

There is a need for more research with Autistic people and Autistic voices in the context of their spiritual experiences and understanding. Recent studies provide springboards for future studies.

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<sup>47</sup> The double empathy problem suggests that individuals with different lived experiences will find it difficult to understand and empathise with each other due to a breakdown in reciprocity. This is notably present between autistic and non-autistic people through spoken communication and body language. See for more information: Damian E. M. Milton, “On the Ontological Status of Autism: The ‘Double Empathy Problem’”, *Disability & Society* 27, no. 6 (2012): 883–87.

<sup>48</sup> Waldock, “Doing Church”, 68.

<sup>49</sup> Nathan V. Mallipeddi and Rachel A. VanDaalen, “Intersectionality Within Critical Autism Studies: A Narrative Review”, *Autism in Adulthood* 4, no. 4 (December 2022): 281–89.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Kirby, Barbara McKenzie-Green, Judith McAra-Couper, and Shoba Nayar, “Same-sex Marriage: A Dilemma for Parish Clergy”, *Sexuality & Culture* 21 (September 2017): 901–18.

<sup>51</sup> Waldock, McCarthy, and Bradshaw, “Social Inclusion”.

4. A network to bring together existing resources, which are currently siloed and often lacking Autistic voices, in a non-tokenistic manner.

Where training and information exists, this is often very siloed and is not shared to other groups who would benefit from this information. Any co-production should include the work by Autistic people who have written resources already<sup>52</sup> to help reduce the siloing of Autistic voices. Change needs to be both bottom-up and top-down, including researchers from a variety of institutions, independent researchers and practitioners, with networks to break down the siloing that has occurred. Reflecting the three recommendations above, such a network should be Autistic-led or be steered by Autistic people in a non-tokenistic manner.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ann Memmott, “Welcoming & Including Autistic People in our Churches & Communities”, (2019), <https://trurodiocese.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Autism-Guide-2019.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Krysia Emily Waldoock and Nathan Keates, “Autistic Voices in Autistic Research: Towards Active Citizenship in Autism Research”, in ed. Damian Milton and Sara Ryan, *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies* (London: Routledge, 2022), 288–302.