

# H-Net Reviews

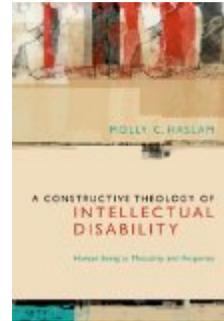
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Molly C Haslam. *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. 144 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3941-2; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3940-5.

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I start with a personal confession. I am neither a theologian, nor an American. My background is as a historian of British policy towards disabled people in the late twentieth century. This review, therefore, cannot place Molly Haslam's work in the canon of theological anthropology. Rather it seeks to understand what this work can add to an area of scholarship with which traditionally there has been little dialogue.

Haslam starts with the claim that Christian theology has denied full humanity to people with severe intellectual disabilities. For those who are considered human, they are seen as defective, or lacking essential human capabilities. She particularly highlights the work of Gordon Kaufman who defines humanity as the capacity for language and agency. Her aim is therefore to provide a place for those with intellectual disabilities within Christian theology. But this work does more than that. Haslam fundamentally questions the privilege given to the use of language and symbolism in Western philosophy. It is this central plank of the monograph which is most useful to all students of disability and the construction of disability, so the book is of value not just to theologians.

In the introduction the author argues that humanity is not based on abilities inherent in the individual. Our humanity is based on our relationships with each other. Although traditional theology would have it that our relationship with God is based on our ability to communicate through symbols and language, this narrow conception of humanity denies that people with profound intellectual disabilities are capable of communion with God and suggests that they are therefore defective as human beings. For Haslam, humanity is not an attribute inher-

ent to a person, but is found in the relationships between humans, and between humans and God. A disabled person may not be able to communicate verbally or symbolically but, through their responses to stimuli provided by other humans, a mutually beneficial relationship of love exists, and it is through this that we are created in God's image.

The book goes on to outline traditional theologies and their flaws. Haslam starts with Gordon Kaufman, who emphasizes symbols and the ability to conceive of the self as the basis of humanity.[1] It is this insistence on the primacy of language that she sees as discriminatory in Western philosophy. Interactions need not be symbolic to be important or to experience the world. However, she believes that Kaufman's main claim—that humans are biohistorical beings—is very important if we are to find a place for those with intellectual disabilities. Our idea of what it is to be human will always be constrained by our biology, but our historically constructed culture changes what "humanity" means in different epochs. There is no essential "human nature"; there are many human natures in various times and various places.

The second chapter investigates George Lindbeck, who argues that religion is also constantly changing, based on discourse.[2] Doctrines are conditional rules which exist because they allow and aid the expression of religion at any one time. Thus, religion is just as changeable as human nature depending on the cultural norms of those who practice it. In a world where those with intellectual disabilities are seen as deserving of a place in society, religion and theology must change to accommodate these new views. However, at all times we must be

aware that this philosophy is also predicated on the idea that our religion is defined through our experiences of the world, and those experiences can only be understood through symbolic language. Haslam is keen to stress that those who cannot think symbolically or express themselves linguistically should not be excluded from religion and therefore excluded from God.

Haslam goes on to use her own experience as a physical therapist and in chapter 3 tells the story of a profoundly disabled man called Chan. She describes his daily routine and shows how he engages with his caregivers and his environment. His caregivers in turn respond to him. This mutually responsive relationship means that Chan is very much a human being, and both sides of the relationship are enriched by their communication. This is then used as the backdrop to chapter 4, where Martin Buber's theory of humanity as discourse is employed to explain the humanity of Chan's relationship with those around him.[3]

The author ends with a re-investigation of the idea that man was created in God's image. Throughout the book, Haslam argues that previous theologies have shown that we are in God's image because we have the capacity for agency. We do not work solely on instinct and we can create new realities through our use of language and the ability to plan. It is these strands of thought, highlighted previously with Lindbeck and Kaufman, that she seeks to change. We are in God's image because of our ability to respond to others in mutually responsive relationships. Having dominion over the world is not integral to our *imago Dei*.

So, how is this work useful to historians in my area, the political rights struggle? Certain differences do stand out. The description of what, in crude terms, might be called the "social model of disability" in Europe is called the "minorities model" in North America. What I know as the "capacities model" is termed the "limits model." These do not deter from the bulk of the text, which focuses on the construction of humanity rather than the political rights struggle, but they do make the British reader aware that they are reading a text from a different political tradition. The biggest difference, of course, is the distinction between "disabled people" (United Kingdom) and "people with disabilities" (United States).

The central thesis that our humanity is about more than our ability to communicate verbally or symbolically is crucial, and something of which all researchers can make use. The political and social place of people with intellectual disabilities has long been an area of contention.

As the author correctly points out in her introduction, we can only understand those who cannot communicate by placing our own interpretation on their needs, wants, and aspirations. What other option do we have, she asks, other than our "best guess" (p. 17)? However, we need to employ a definition of humanity that sees all humans as equal. A discourse that sees people with intellectual disabilities as defective or "sub-normal" will condone *in-humane* treatment of those unable to express themselves.

There are two major pitfalls which do not invalidate this work but do make it problematic, especially for people in my field. First, the guiding assumption has come from the belief that people with intellectual disabilities are human. This does not seem like a position which needs to be morally justified, but academically it must be. It may be enough simply to say that because our culture has constructed disabled people as human, this is enough to persuade theology to also construct disabled people as human. Morally I see no issue with this position, though I am concerned that the work may find what it is seeking by writing its conclusions first and working back through a theoretical position which best encapsulates this worthy desire.

The other is the elephant in the room which I have sought to avoid—God. The entire book falls apart if we see communication with God as utterly irrelevant to the position of disabled people. This might seem an unfair criticism of a theological text, but as a non-theologian I must ask what I can gain from this interpretation. To me, it does not seem like too much of an intellectual leap to say that if religion is a social construct (one of the central themes of the book), perhaps God is too. This is a personal political issue with theology more than with the text, but is inescapable if I want to apply what I have learned from this book to my own work.

I am therefore left with two choices as a non-theologian. I can interpret "God" as an irrational-yet-legitimate and romantic expression of love and the intangible connection that humans experience with one another. However, this unravels the monograph by denying the crucial place of communion with God through mutually responsive relationships as the key to defining the human being. Rather, I take the second option—that we can take this relational definition of the human and apply it to other areas of human existence which we study. In my case, is "citizenship" dependent on these relationships? By existing as beings who respond to other people, do those with acute intellectual disabilities become citizens of the modern state? In so doing,

is their right to healthcare, social security, and community participation enshrined in legal conceptions of human rights? If not, is it time to redefine the “citizen” or the “state” in the same way Haslam seeks to redefine the “Christian” or “theology?” More importantly, as a historian dealing with socially constructed states of being, can I apply this sort of knowledge to understand why certain authorities did or did not involve and incorporate people with intellectual disabilities into their social programs? I argue that it is worth exploring this line of enquiry. It can be applied to other areas where certain biological and essentialist truths about humans have been expressed in the past to deny full citizenship to the “inferior.” Conceptions and social attitudes towards the woman (which Haslam mentions on p. 21), the idiot, the cripple, the homosexual, the savage, and so on, might all be interpreted in similar ways. The obvious issue we have here is that historians have been doing this for decades. There is a wealth of extant theoretical and methodological material to draw upon.

These questions and others mean that this book provides a valuable insight into the debate over the place of people with intellectual disabilities. It is well written and easy to follow, even for a non-specialist such as myself. Much of the analysis of socially constructed beings through discourse will be familiar to readers of David

Armstrong or Michel Foucault, even though it was not expressly referenced in these terms.[4] Similarly, scholars on the eastern side of the Atlantic will be all too aware of the problems with prioritizing self-awareness and language as preconditions of humanity. The author acknowledges there are more questions to be asked—where do coma patients, or the higher-functioning animals, feature in this cosmology, for example—but as an introduction to a concept, this book has given me useful insight into new ways of interpreting my own work.

#### Notes

[1]. Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner, 1968).

[2]. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

[3]. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[4]. David Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body: Medical Knowledge in Britain in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. and ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).

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