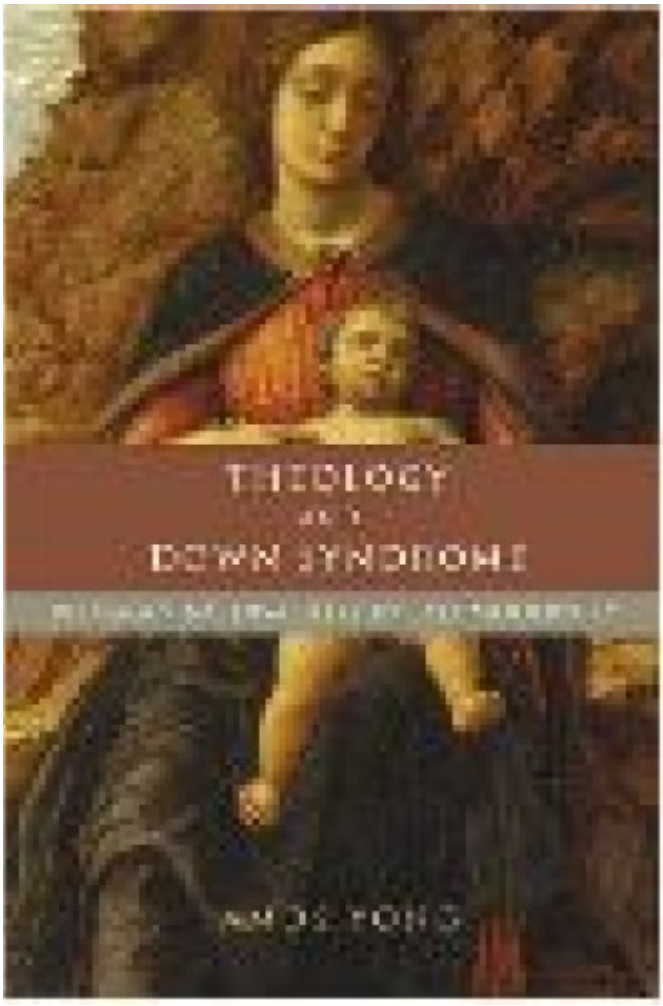
Toward a theology of disability

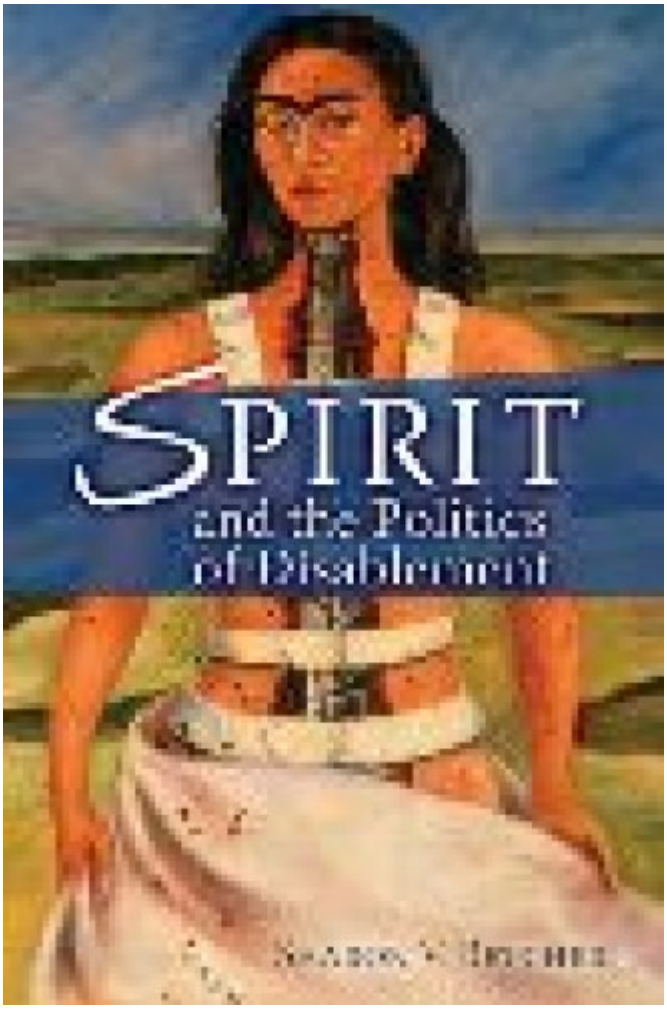
By Brian Volck in the December 2, 2008 issue

In Review



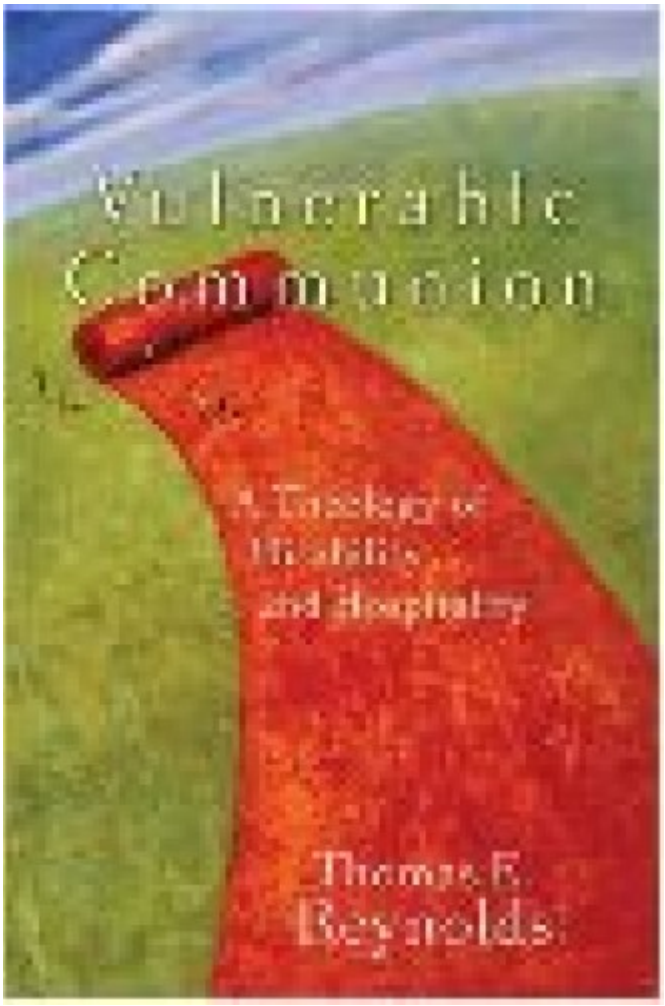
Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity

Amos Yong
Baylor University Press



Spirit and the Politics of Disablement

Sharon V. Betcher
Fortress



Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality

Thomas E. Reynolds
Brazos

Wheelchair ramps and assistive listening devices notwithstanding, Christian churches can be inhospitable to those whose minds or bodies fall outside the narrow spectrum we learn to call normal. We know that we should actively welcome persons with disabilities, but we don’t often ask why it is that we should do so. Is welcoming people with disabilities a rewarding form of charitable giving? A response to clichéd exhortations about inclusion and diversity? Or are there serious theological implications of our hospitality or inhospitality?

Three recent books by academic theologians consider the theological implications from different perspectives and with particular attention to varying forms of disability. That each writer places the Spirit at the center of what medical science

considers mere biomechanical or neurochemical disorders makes these approaches all the more welcome.

Amos Yong, who teaches theology at Regent University, wrote *Theology and Down Syndrome* in response to his experiences with his brother, Mark. Mark was born in Malaysia, where his parents pastored an Assemblies of God church, and wasn't formally diagnosed with Down syndrome until the family's return to the United States. His story is told in vignettes scattered throughout the book. These personal accounts, quotations from a variety of persons with intellectual disabilities, and Yong's care not to stray too far from lived experience ground his exploration of what otherwise might seem abstract theological terrain.

Yong begins with a historical survey of attitudes toward disability from antiquity through late modernity. The traditional Christian account locates disability within God's plan and construes it as a loss of wholeness, a defect that necessitates charity in this life and vindication in the next—conclusions that Yong finds unsatisfactory. Scientific medicine, in contrast, treats disability—and intellectual disability in particular—as a problem to be solved. Its often disturbing solutions include institutionalization, involuntary sterilization and prenatal testing combined with selective abortion. In each case, persons with handicaps, especially intellectual handicaps, are consigned to problematic otherness. Yong also surveys feminist, cultural and world religious perspectives on disability, and he addresses recent developments in the "social model of disability" employed by disability rights activists and persons with physical disabilities—noting, however, that even these more experiential accounts give little or no voice to the intellectually disabled.

The heart of Yong's book is his creative reexamination of basic Christian doctrines, using intellectual disability as probe and lens. This material is so rich, so suggestive of new directions for inquiry, that a brief summary can hardly do it justice. Using what he calls an "emergentist anthropology" and an emphasis on embodied interdependence, he examines such doctrines as sin, the Fall and the *imago dei*, concluding that "self-consciousness is neither a necessary nor sufficient criterion for the image of God; . . . it is relationship with God that counts, especially that which we now anticipate as promised in the eschaton." He uses Jean Vanier's accounts of L'Arche communities to reframe the church as a community marked by practices of inclusion and united in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. His pneumatologic approach to resurrection and eschatology, employing Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of *epectasis*, is complex, nuanced and fresh.

While Yong's work presents a valuable new departure point in the theology of disability, there are certain omissions in his account worth mentioning. In reviewing traditional church healing practices, he quotes from the book of James (5:14-26) yet is conspicuously silent on the subversive politics inherent in the liturgical anointing of the sick, as explored by M. Therese Lysaught and others. Careful explication of his emergentist anthropology would prevent him from alienating in one blow both knowledgeable evolutionists and biblical literalists. But these are quibbles given the scope of Yong's project. For pastoral and theological reasons alike, this is an important book.

Sharon Betcher's concerns, identity and approach in *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* conspicuously differ from those of the other two authors. She is a woman with a physical disability who personalizes the experience of disability and feminist accounts of social marginalization. She is also an academic (she teaches at the Vancouver School of Theology) who is demonstrably comfortable with poststructuralist discourse. Accordingly, referential ambiguity and clauses such as "Performatively reading the normal as set over against the abnormal, even so as to countersuggest inclusiveness, does not disperse social dominance" fill the pages.

But it would be a shame if stylistic opacity kept Christians from attending to Betcher's message. Her emphasis on Spirit does not arise, like Yong's, from Pentecostal theological concerns, but from a rejection of "classical theism's impassible, omnipotent God," a "comptroller of fates" she finds implausible in a post-Holocaust, post-9/11 world. *Spirit*—a capitalized noun, sans definite article, defying attempts at definition—offers, for her purposes, a personally accessible dimension of human experience resistant to "normative idealism." This in turn affords persons with disabilities a means to reinvent themselves outside the social constraints privileging the able-bodied and economically independent. Such reinvention removes disabled persons from narratives of rescue by the able-bodied—narratives that Betcher finds inherently oppressive, however well intentioned.

Betcher's moments of personal disclosure provide helpful context for the anger palpable in much of what she has to say. After she reveals her deeply conflicted feelings about wearing a prosthetic leg in public, for example, some of her harsher indictments of Christianity—and the West in general—grow clearer. Yet while I respect her authority as a first-person narrator of disability discourse, her work seems rather like other academic critiques of late capitalism, with conspicuous

academic virtuosity undermining frequent claims of marginalization. How much room is there for Mark Yong and other intellectually disabled persons in Betcher's swirling references to Deleuze, Derrida, Crossan and Borg? And my own experiences in hospitals and developing countries suggest that "reinventing the self" is a social marker of the privileged. Still, there's much here to challenge and profit the prepared reader.

Thomas Reynolds's *Vulnerable Communion* turns its attention to cognitive and emotional disability and the theology underlying the ecclesial practice of hospitality. Reynolds's son, Chris, has been diagnosed with Tourette syndrome, Asperger syndrome, bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. In some ways Reynolds, who teaches theology at the University of Toronto, steers a middle course between the other two books, covering theological territory similar to Yong's while providing, like Betcher, a sustained social critique of what he calls the cult of normalcy. Like Yong, he never strays far from the lived experience of Chris's disability; like Betcher, he draws on a wide canon of contemporary thinkers, albeit more judiciously. Those who find Yong more to their taste than Betcher will probably also take to Reynolds, who expands and reimagines certain Christian doctrines rather than leaving them behind.

Against the "productive imperatives" of wealth accumulation, efficiency, novelty and consumption undergirding the worship of beautiful, young, able bodies in the cult of normalcy, Reynolds proposes (and concretely illustrates) the virtues of vulnerable interdependence, availability, respect, fidelity and compassion. He also wrestles with basic doctrines, sometimes taking the discussions in different directions than Yong. In his final chapter, "Being Together," he turns to the practice of hospitality within the church as the ongoing presence of Christ and writes of welcoming the beloved stranger in the Spirit.

Only at this last juncture does Reynolds seriously engage the power of the Holy Spirit and gesture toward the trinitarian nature of God as Relation, but the move comes at the right moment and with welcome results. Through the communal practice of hospitality, "the Spirit is at work creating relations of reciprocity between God's children," including persons with disability, "not as an afterthought but as essential to the well-being of the household." While neither as sweeping as Yong nor as confrontational as Betcher, Reynolds makes important contributions to a Christian understanding of disability.

These authors present twin challenges to theologically informed, able-bodied Christians. First, they challenge us to move beyond the relatively easy tasks of redesigning church sanctuaries and striving for visible diversity in liturgies and committees, and to begin engaging the far more difficult mystery of desiring and entering into communion with one another. What liturgical and ecclesial practices can we embrace that will make clear our human interdependence in Christ without allowing us to merely collapse into trivializing sentimentalities like, “Everyone is handicapped in their own way”? We may face greater challenges in becoming interdependent with persons who have intellectual disabilities than with those with physical disabilities. The practices and experience of Jean Vanier’s L’Arche communities have much to teach us in this regard.

Second, disability raises thorny questions about traditional interpretations of Christian doctrine: Does God will severe disability? Does salvation through faith imply personal intellectual assent? What does it mean to be formed in the image of God? Does disability persist in the resurrection of the body? Once again, severe intellectual disability may present the greatest challenge.

Yong, Betcher and Reynolds do not present systematic theologies of disability. Instead, they offer stepping-off points for theological reflection. More important, they challenge readers to interrogate their own lives and assumptions, moving discussions past the self-satisfying mantras of inclusion and diversity and into new, potentially frightening and grace-filled territory.