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Editorial – Christianity, John M. Hull and notions of ability, disability and education

Simon Hayhoe

We are delighted to welcome Simon Hayhoe as the guest editor for this Special Issue on Disability, Christianity and Education. Simon is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK and is a distinguished scholar in this field, having undertaken extensive research in arts education of both blind adults and school children and published widely in disability and education. He is also a Research Associate in the [Centre for the Philosophy of Natural and Social Science](#) at the [London School of Economics](#), where he is researching the epistemology of disability and ability, with special reference to education, inclusion, technology and the arts. Simon has also worked as a research officer at Birkbeck College and the Institute of Education, both in the University of London, and at the University of Toronto (Canada).

*In his editorial Simon reflects on the significance of the work of Professor John Hull, who is a giant amongst academics working in the theology of disability. John was my main supervisor for my doctoral studies when I was working on developing an evangelical theology of religious education for British schools. He was a remarkable tutor with whom I enjoyed the most stimulating debates. I disagreed with his basic position and critiqued that in my thesis, but was heavily influenced by his ideas and the challenges he presented me with. His book, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* first published in 1985, is still, in my opinion, one of the most important books that I have read on Christian learning.*

However, as Simon too acknowledges, it was John's personal qualities that had the most impact. I started as his doctoral student not long after he finally lost his sight in 1983 in the middle years of a distinguished academic career. Such a happening would cause many to give up. Not John. Up to the moment of his death in the early hours of 28th July 2015, he was still producing ground-breaking work. It is fitting that this special issue is dedicated to him.

Trevor Cooling

On Tuesday 28th July 2015, the editors of the IJCE and I received the tragic news of the death of Professor John Hull. John was Honorary Professor of Practical Theology in the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and Emeritus Professor of Religious Education at Birmingham University. His death came after a fall, at the age of 80. As well as writing for many years on religious education, John was also a significant figure in the theologies of blindness and disability. He was also author of the recent theology of disability (Hull, 2014a) for the Inclusive Church Series. Although he could be seen as a controversial figure, and many disagreed with what he wrote, he was without doubt a towering figure in this field. His legacy will last with us for generations to come.

This editorial is therefore dedicated to John Hull, friend and former Ph.D. supervisor to the editor of this special issue, Simon Hayhoe, and the deputy editor of the IJCE, Trevor Cooling.

First meetings

The first time I met John, I was a research student taking a M.Ed over twenty years ago. Paradoxically, my interest in John's work at the time was not related to religion. That would soon change. My thesis was on the arts education of blind adults. The people I had talked to about this topic prior to our meeting were almost entirely from the empirical psychology and sociology traditions. John was a theologian, philosopher and educationalist who had not long written what became one of the most discussed reflections on what it was like to become a blind person as an adult. In those days it was called *Touching the Rock* (Hull, 1990), but later it was expanded and renamed *On Sight and Insight* (Hull, 1997). This genre of auto/biography was unusual amongst academics in those days, and I do not think it would be too much to say that John inspired a generation of similar books afterwards.

John had also founded the Cathedrals for the Blind project some time earlier. This project provided Brailled scale models of the most important cathedrals in England, such as Canterbury and York Minster, displayed within their interiors. This would allow visitors to touch representations of these important buildings. The models later became the prototype for other models in monuments and town centres throughout England. John realised how important it was to access the structure and symbolism of these buildings, and to have their models in situ. They

could also be studied by sighted people, as they provided a bird's eye view of the buildings. It was therefore not just a symbol of faith to have access to these models; it gave the visitors a sense of identity and direct connection to the art of their history. These models still exist today, and I still enjoy touching them every time I pass one.

At the beginning of our first meeting, John made me feel instantly at home. He always had a wonderful, soft lilting voice, still with more than a hint of his Australian accent. "Siiimon, please come in, sit down". I had never met him before, but it was as if he had known me for years. We spent a following hour and a half – it was only supposed to be one – talking about his experiences as a late-blind person. He explained the difficulties of becoming blind and the release when he finally lost his sight completely. The description was almost like a metamorphosis, from a pupa to a butterfly. It was a strange concept to realise that someone could be released by being completely blind, just as someone dying could be released from pain. His was a very human experience.

At one point our conversation got onto the understanding of beauty through late blindness. To illustrate his post-blind understanding of this concept John passed me a small carved Australian animal. I cannot remember the exact animal or the name of the wood, but it was important to John that it was a reflection of his Australian culture. It was part of his home. Physically, it was very smooth, polished and had a distinct and pleasant smell. John touched it and then passed it to me, telling me what he was experiencing through touch and smell as he did so. I was now also experiencing a beautiful object in a different way, through a different phenomenology.

Our conversation that afternoon changed the direction of my research on blindness and disability. In this era it was normal to read works on aesthetics, touch and sensory experience by those who had early experiences of blindness. Perhaps the most famous of these books was Helen Keller's (2005) experience of being born deaf-blind. In matter of fact a large body of knowledge had been developed on this concept over the centuries (Hayhoe, in press). However, John discussed aesthetics in a way I had never thought of or experienced before, largely because he had experience of both sight and blindness.

For John beauty was not just in the eye of the beholder, it was also in his or her hands, ear, mouth and nose, whether the person was blind or sighted. All aesthetic sensory experience was therefore part of meaning and identity. This was when I started to think about what aesthetics meant to a sensorially disabled person, and how inappropriate that term could be when beauty was purely related to vision or sound alone. Moreover, sensory perception and emotional identity was a concept that philosophers had missed the point of for centuries. It was a concept that was still miss-understood in the last decade of the Twentieth Century. For instance, in his discussion with the blind philosopher, Martin Milligan, even Bryan Magee could not understand that aesthetics was not tied to a single sense alone (Magee & Milligan, 1995).

Christianity as a critical theology

There was another perspective that I learnt that afternoon and in many of the following conversations I had with John. What John grasped more than any other philosopher I have known is the importance of theology in the foundation of modern social and cultural criticism, thought and practice. Moreover, he understood how these social and cultural criticisms fed back into theology. In the West and large swathes of Asia Minor – and increasingly Asia Major too – the policies and the principles that evolve from them are significantly influenced by Semitic principles. These principles shape our laws, economics, media and the way in which we see each other.

Added to this principle is the reforming acknowledgement that Christianity had been fundamental to the development of Western culture and civilization through education (Zimmermann, 2015). Take our modern welfare states, for example. In the UK, our public provision of health and the right to school education for all were originally the key stone policies of the Labour Party after World War II. This party was founded by Christian Socialists, largely on non-conformist principles that increasingly became part of our national discourse after the English Civil War. This is a powerful and real example of how non-conformist Protestant Christianity shaped Britain and is shaped by British cultural and social life.

John observed that religion was moreover a significant ethical and a moral discourse of society. Underneath every stone of civilization is a moral of sainthood and evil, rights and wrongs. In the

West, Christian understanding still pervades all aspects of our culture in a subtle manner. You only have to observe that the name of Germany's largest political party is the Christian Democratic Party to recognise the cultural relationship with its Teutonic work ethic (Weber, 2001). In other religions and areas of the world, such as Islam in the Middle East, the ethic of faith is even more evident and continues to play an overt role in the definition and management of society (Hayhoe, 2014c).

John also showed me something intellectually that needed further study. As it is a construct of civilisation, disability is also a strongly religious concept. It is philosophically religious, socially religious, politically religious, culturally religious and personally religious. Religion is at the very crux of the different cultural paradigms of disability, and the development of institutions designed to control and confine disabled people (Hayhoe, 2014a, 2014b). Religion influences medicine, charity, social welfare, law and of course education that all disabled people experience in their day to day lives.

Three years ago, the Pew Forum (2012) published the findings of a survey that showed that around 80% of the world's population regard themselves as having a religion. Given Christianity's status as a world religion, a significant number of Christians are born with disabilities and are raised and experience disabilities in a number of cultural settings. In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Disabled Person (United Nations, 2006) people with disabilities have equal rights to educational and cultural inclusion. UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education made a similar statement over twenty years ago. This can present a number of challenges for the educational experience of Christian students and teachers with disabilities.

Disability is of course a significant feature of Christian educational institutionalization and research. The first English speaking educational institutions for people who were blind, deaf and mentally ill were called asylums in Protestant influenced countries such as England, Scotland and the US (Hayhoe, 2014b, in press). This was a name originally given to religious places of safety. Jesus himself was called Rabbi – teacher – by Judas, and as such the descriptions of his

healing of people with disabilities have been interpreted as a form of moral lesson (Hayhoe, 2014a)

Disability and the experience of disability is also integral to Christian teaching and literature. Many of our modern Western concepts of disability and the experience of being disabled are a significant theme in the Bible in particular. Jesus' healing of people with disabilities is seen as a miraculous act, and many figures in the Bible had disabilities. Conversely, forms of disabling, such as blindness and muting, are regrettably also used as punishments for immoral acts in the Bible. Consequently, disabilities such as blindness, deafness, mental illness and impaired limbs are seen as an important moral and practical issue by many Christians today. A number of churches encompass this in their theologies, and see the curing of people who are ill or who experience disability as integral to their acts of worship. Therefore, the study of disability is a fundamental component of Christian ethics.

Christianity and the ethic of ability

What is also less discussed in social histories, John argued, was the effect of Christian notions of ability on the development of philosophies that derived from education. For example, with education came academic assessment, and from forms of assessment came an intellectual notion of intelligence and IQ testing (Naglieri, 2015). This assessment was related largely to reading the written word, a practice that became important in the monastic tradition upon which much in our contemporary system is based (Boyd & King, 1964). Therefore, ability became linked with silent reading and writing, and the ability to write in a standardized pattern. As a consequence, people who find difficulties with reading and writing, such as people with dyslexia and dyscalculia, are seen as disabled despite their graphic and verbal intelligence. Similarly, for Christians behavior, or more particularly positive, good, moral behavior, is also seen as ability. To be badly behaved is an irreligious as well as anti-social act. Thus, we find that our modern behavioral difficulties are often classified by educators and administrators as special needs and disabilities.

The crudeness of definitions and ontologies, and the treatment of disabled people was personally familiar to John. He wrote on this issue many times. His major work in this field was *In the Beginning There Was Darkness* (Hull, 2001a), which explained the discrimination against

blindness and darkness present in the Bible. In addition, he also wrote a number of powerful academic articles on disability and his experiences of blindness in the freedom of his emeritus years (Hull, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Although these pieces were diverse in their evidence, they always returned to his central themes. John was always concerned with the treatment and equality of people with disabilities, and trying to get closer to an authentic Christian theology on disability. In the process, all knowledge – including that in the Bible – was open to question.

John was more than anything a devout Christian, but he was not afraid of questioning his own religion or interrogating others' most fervently held principles when he needed too. He was overall a critical, practical Christian theologian. However, he was also never insensitive to others' points of view, and in the tradition of John Locke was an ecumenical pluralist. When developing my own work, I often sent John manuscripts before they were peer reviewed. Each one he sent back with equal measures of praise and criticism no matter what the quality of the work - he was also pastoral in his editorial practice. His answers and commentary were deeply Christian, and he would let me know if I overstepped the mark. We also sometimes disagreed.

One example of our disagreement happened about eight years ago. My first book was on the historical development of philosophy on and education for blind people, and its main title was *God Money and Politics* (Hayhoe, 2008). John made it clear he did not like me using the word God in the title, and advised me to change it to religion. I pointed out that I was not talking about God per se, but the use and the misuse of God as a concept by people in the early development of this form of education. Moreover, I said I had decided to use the word God as it and not religion or Christianity appeared over and over again in the original literature on the education of the blind. John and I reached impasse on this point, but it never affected our relationship and he even wrote a blurb for my dust cover – saying this, I have now changed the title for the book's second edition.

John also took his ethic of challenging opinions through a strong moral compass into the greater world. Any slight to or mistreatment of a disabled person was deeply offensive to his sense of right and wrong. He was a Protestant liberation theologian, and saw challenging society as an active part of being a Christian. This is something that many disability theorists have too often

missed in their critique of disability and religion: the place of Christianity in helping to right the wrongs of its own religion. This could in part be due to the formulation of the social model of disability through what is presumed to be a deeply secular discourse. Such discourse, in Britain at least, has a positivist Marxist/Kantian foundation (Oliver, 1996). Thus, religion is associated inaccurately with conservatism.

Last meetings

Fast forward over twenty years from our first meeting, and my last visit to John was on Friday 16th January of this year at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education. It had also been ten years since John had shepherded me through the final stages of my Ph.D. at Birmingham University. In the finest tradition of supervision we were still very much in touch after my Ph.D. He was also a source of many of my job references, frequent correspondence, and he had opened a few doors in my research. An example of the latter happened when I conducted a study in the US in 2003, and John wrote a letter of introduction to the author and neurologist Oliver Sacks for me. This letter allowed me to spend a pleasant morning drinking Indian coffee in Oliver Sacks' flat in New York. We also later involved Oliver Sacks in our emails on blindness and consciousness, and one of these dialogues – perhaps fittingly – ended up as an extended footnote in *The Mind's Eye* (Sacks, 2010). I would imagine few other Ph.D. supervisors in the world could have done this.

Shortly before travelling to Birmingham for this last visit an “idiot” from Fox news in the US – not my words, the words of British Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron – had declared that the city was now wholly Islamic. According to the “idiot”, the people of the city were now living under what was described as a caliphate, and it had thus become a no-go area for Christians. This Fox news story was obviously one of the topics of conversation that afternoon. Birmingham is full of churches of all shapes, sizes and denominations, as befits this vast multicultural city. This kind of negative misinformation was a real pity, as John's work had covered the education of Islam and its relationship to Christianity for a number of years. He was a true renaissance academic. He had also conducted a significant amount of teaching and research in order to provide knowledge on the connections and respect between all religions. It is important that this should not unravel.

Also discussed that afternoon were our latest pieces on Christianity and disability. Importantly, I was asking his advice on this special issue. John was originally going to submit a paper to the issue, arguing that the only instances of Jesus' anger were at injustices towards people with disabilities. Unfortunately, age, writing obligations and teaching commitments meant that he was not confident of giving this piece the time it needed and he had written to let me know before our meeting – my only hope is that one day someone can take up the mantle of this research. John had also not long published his controversial new book on the prophetic church (Hull, 2014a), and his much needed theology of disability (Hull, 2014a). The former of these books, he told me, had become required reading at Britain's only private Islamic teaching college. The lecturer at the college was one of John's students. This is a beautiful legacy.

Reflecting now on the conversations of that day, for me one of John's greatest gifts to life was his academic legacy in the field of disability and Christianity. In scholarly literature, at last this awareness is becoming a topic of discussion – this special issue being one such contribution. A number of authors have raised theological questions about received wisdoms on disability, and formed a religious model of disability and a specific Christian model of disability. John has been a significant figure in this process and his work, particularly his theology of disability, will continue to be present in the evolution of these models.

Of course, a number of traditional social theorists still try to claim that the study of disability is a purely secular exercise, and see the presence of religion in this study as wholly detrimental. One example comes from Michael Oliver & Colin Barnes (2012), who claim that the "Judeo-Christian" tradition and culture discriminates against people with disabilities. This argument is based on religious symbolism in the Bible and artworks of the renaissance. Their work, however, ignores the criticisms of these issues by theologians such as John, and academics from a number of other faiths for many years now. It also shows ignorance of Semitic religions – they interestingly never mention Islam in this family of monotheistic faiths – and the fierce, critical debates within the broader theology of disability. I find that John's symbolism of disability from a liberating Christian stance, such as the broken body of Jesus on the cross, is a more powerful image of the imperfection of humanity (Hull, 2003a).

A summary of the special issue

I believe that the articles in this journal are a fitting tribute to the direction of John's thinking, and provide a range of scholarship on Christianity and disability in education. They are also truly international, originating as they do from Germany, the UK and the US. The articles range from theological conceptions of aesthetics, the teaching of ethics on disability, and perhaps most importantly the issue of being a disabled Christian in education. Sometimes, all of these issues appear in the same article.

The first article in this issue is on aesthetics and a Christian notion of social justice. In *Beauty & Disability*, David Anderson discusses the inner character of disabled people as being beyond what many people appear to feel is an unappealing outward appearance. Its argument challenges normative frameworks and our inabilities to judge people by their spiritual physiognomies, forged in God's image. This he argues often stifles the emotional well-being of people with what are felt to be socially unacceptable disabilities.

Articles two and three in this issue examine the much needed development of pedagogy on Christianity and disability. However, unlike standard texts on special needs teaching the two authors address the teaching of non-disabled professionals about issues related to disability, ethics and Christianity. The second article, *Preparing for Disability Awareness Sunday* by Leslie Francis and Susan Jones, is a pedagogical evaluation of Bible passages and the delivery of their contents during this event. It employs a quantitative methodology, and examines teachers' understanding of two passages in particular, Mark 2: 1-12 and Mark 10: 46-52. It observes that group discussions and the sharing of information about these passages provide a deeper understanding by the clergy involved in the exercise.

The third article is *Teaching Attentiveness in the Classroom and Learning to Attend to Persons with Disabilities* by Jason Whitt. The article looks at the teaching of understanding attentiveness in ethical philosophies in his course *Disability, Personhood, and Society*. This course was delivered to senior level college medical humanities students, the career trajectory of whom was that of medical professions. In his qualitative analysis, Whitt observes that his teaching of

attentiveness deepened students' understanding of the problems faced by people with disabilities in medical settings.

Articles four and five address the all-important treatment of people with disabilities by greater society, and the effects of Christian ethics on this treatment. The fourth article is Inclusive Education – A Christian Perspective to an 'Overlapping Consensus' by Manfred Pirner. Manfred uses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to espouse a Christian approach to pluralism within education. He finds that an anthropological analysis employing a number of standard Christian ethics provide a strong starting point for raising awareness and designing pedagogy. These can be applied to the core values of mainstream education in order to put the education of students with disabilities at the very heart of teaching activities.

Our fifth article is From Bullied to Acceptance: A Student with Asperger's Relationship with Christ by Denise Reid. Marrying anthropology and phenomenology in her approach, Denise tells the story of a student in her college, and his experiences as a student on the Asperger's' spectrum. His journey was not easy, and the article reports that he found a great deal of difficulty gaining acceptance – he was the victim of violent and verbal bullying throughout his education. However, discovering a new understanding of his faith enabled him to gain acceptance within the college, and communicate his frustrations. This was also a journey for Denise, who discovered new elements of her own faith through this process.

Finally, and by complete coincidence, this issue reviews John Hull's *The Tactile Heart*, a collection of his essays on disability and Christianity, and also *Towards a Prophetic Church*. I think it is a fitting way to end this collection, and a life well lived.

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