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Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity

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Amos Yong. *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity.*

Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007

Reviewed by Rosalynde Welch

Amos Yong's *Theology and Down Syndrome* represents an ambitious attempt by an Evangelical theologian to come to grips with the conditions and conundrums of disability in a contemporary Christian context. The book's nine chapters and formidable bibliography inquire into cognitive disability of all kinds, not, despite its title, narrowly into Down syndrome alone. Yong writes in the dense idiom of critical academic theology and disability studies that may put off some readers, but the text is leavened with epigraphs, personal asides, and case studies that will appeal to most readers.

Yong sets himself three aims in this volume: to edify the reader, to contribute a new perspective to the field of systematic theology, and to transform the church into a more hospitable hearth for disabled people (xi). Implied in these three aims—the existential, the theological, and the pastoral—are the rather different audiences to whom the book is addressed: Christian believers with a personal interest in Down syndrome in particular or disability in general; theologians interested in the implications of disability; and church leaders and members facing the challenges of ministering to disabled congregants. Not coincidentally, Yong himself fits all three profiles. His youngest brother, Mark, was diagnosed shortly after birth with Trisomy 21, or Down syndrome. Therefore, short personal vignettes are dispersed throughout the text in italicized asides. As a working academic theologian, Yong brings his family's acquaintance with disability to bear on his professional interest in theology. And Yong's personal background in the evangelical missionary effort overseas has honed his sensitivity to the practical challenges faced by disabled believers in the context of a faith community.

Yong chooses to write within the subgenre of systematic theology, a discipline of general theology that seeks to give a rational, methodical account of Christian beliefs and to pursue the implications of those beliefs

over a wide range of topics. If the book is governed by a single controlling idea, it is Yong's notion of the "pneumatological imagination" (11). Building on the account in Acts 2 of remarkable Pentecostal outflow of diverse languages imparted by the Holy Spirit (*pneuma*), Yong develops a "pneumatological" epistemology:

[The pneumatological imagination] provides a theological rationale for preserving the integrity of difference and otherness, but not at the expense of engagement and understanding. Finally, it alerts and invites us to listen to the plurality of discourses and languages in the hope that even through "strange tongues," the voice of the Holy Spirit may still speak and communicate. (11–12)

The pneumatological imagination thus emphasizes the marginalized other—in particular, of course, the disabled community—and privileges diversity within unity. In this concept, Yong discovers a helpful biblical warrant for the theologically liberal vocabulary of social justice, inflected by the academic counterdiscourses of late modernity with which Yong undertakes an extensive engagement.

From this pneumatological perspective, Yong launches an ambitious project of survey and summary. He begins by examining the Bible's treatment of people with disabilities, particularly the blind, the deaf, and the lame. Working within a Protestant framework of *sola scriptura*, Yong must reconcile any contemporary theology of disability with the relevant scriptural accounts, but this is no easy interpretive task. Yong finds that Old Testament writers understand disability within a dualistic ritual framework of purity and defilement, whereas New Testament writers emphasize the Christological narratives in which the healing of a disability symbolizes Christian redemption. Given the vast differences that science and rationality have generated in the ways modern people understand the causes and treatments of disabilities, contemporary readers may find the biblical sources irrelevant or even unsatisfying. In response, Yong suggests three simple enduring biblical themes, corresponding to the three aims of his project: the existential truth that the disabled are to "endure patiently the outworkings of God's inscrutable plan, given the hope that God's ultimate intentions include their well-being and vindication"; the theological insight that under God's sovereignty all "disabilities are part of God's plan"; and the pastoral injunction to the church to meet the needs of people with disabilities (39–40). In addition, Yong suggests that if we are to move forward in a biblical epistemological framework we must reread the canon "beneath and between its lines," seeking a saving interpretation of scripture for modernity rather than a rigid literalism (42).

Yong then turns his attention to a lengthy history of Down syndrome and disability in the modern world, with an eye to exposing its legacy of discrimination. He traces the eventful emergence of the biomedical model of disability, in which Down syndrome, for instance, is ultimately understood in reductive genetic terms and subject to both a science-driven course of rehabilitative therapy but also a science-enabled regime of prenatal testing and abortion. Yong next tackles the peregrinations of disability in the postmodern world—that is, within the academic discourses of disability studies. The master insight of disability studies is the so-called “social model” of disability, which holds that what we call disability is primarily an ideological construct composed of (largely unjust) representations of disability and the disabled. Yong shows that although it is suffused with a civil rights vocabulary of justice and liberation, the social model can be as confining as the biomedical model, for the social construction of disability is simultaneously a deconstruction of individual agency: the disabled “subject position,” to use the academic idiom, can be just as reductive as the biomedical focus on biology.

Yong proposes instead a perhaps too easy “both/and” approach to the conflict: disability is *both* a positive biomedical condition *and* a constructed social condition. He suggests, optimistically, that our late modern context combines both promising scientific resources and a culture in which “differences are valued and embraced” (110). While there may be weaknesses to this undertheorized reconciliatory posture, it puts Yong in position for the culminating effort of the book, namely the encounter of disability studies with a theology of disability.

Yong’s method in the final chapters of the book turns away from survey and toward analysis: he first outlines the traditional Christian position on a variety of topics and then subjects each to critical cross-examination in light of contemporary disability studies. Yong selects seven of the traditional theological *topoi* for special inquiry: creation; providence, including the problem of theodicy; the Fall; the *imago dei* (or what Latter-day Saints would call the question of divine nature in humanity); ecclesiology, including sacraments and ministry; soteriology and salvation; and eschatology. In each case, Yong reconsiders traditional Christian notions—occasionally, as in the case of the Fall, dismantling them all together—in favor of a pneumatological revision that privileges the democratic, the pluralistic, and the antihierarchical. As he does so, he develops three key concepts for a theology of disability: emergence, relationality, and transcendence (201).

The concept of emergence is developed in the context of “theological anthropology,” the study of what defines human nature. Yong argues that the soul as consciousness emerges from, but is never fully reducible to, the

body and its processes. Emergence offers two advantages for a theology of disability: first, it is able to accommodate a modern scientific understanding of disability—that is, that disability is in part a biomedical condition of the body—while retaining a theory of soul; and second, in contrast to a Cartesian model that privileges the (rational) soul over the (material) body, an emergentist model of human nature values embodiment, prior to consciousness, as the criterion for personhood, and thus unambiguously extends the protection of personhood to even the most cognitively impaired humans.

If emergence offers an account of human nature, relationality offers an account of human salvation. Any theology of disability must answer the vexing question: how can a person who lacks the capacity to learn and take moral account of his or her actions be saved, whether by faith or by works? In response to this problem, Yong proffers the notion of relationality, by which he means a person's embeddedness in relationships with God and within a human community: "Each person with intellectual disability stands in a unique relationship of moral and spiritual responsibility before God, one dependent on the degree to which the various intellectual, moral or social dimensions of life are emergent in that life" (237). If the conceptual uncertainty of this solution frustrates some readers, its pragmatic flexibility in the practical questions of fellowship and ministry cannot be denied. And in the end, Yong's optimistic vision of pneumatological transcendence centers constructively on inclusion and community rather than on doctrinal exactness:

The Christian heavenly hope is possibly the most extensive vision of inclusion in our theological repertoire. The question is whether we will truly open up the doors to God's embracing and empowering difference, rather than attempt to retain control over who is in or out according to our conventions regarding the present scheme of things. (291)

For Latter-day Saint readers, part of this book's interest will lie in tracking the points of convergence or divergence of Yong's ideas with LDS teachings. At times, Yong's theology resonates strongly with LDS doctrines. His emphasis on relationality, for example, chimes very nicely with the emphasis of Latter-day Saints on family and friendship, together with their corporate and covenantal dimensions of salvation. And while he explicitly rejects the possibility of postmortem evangelism, Yong finally arrives at something that resembles the LDS idea of eternal progression. In order to explain how profoundly disabled people can be resurrected to glory while retaining a continuous identity, Yong endorses Gregory of Nyssa's (about AD 335–394) vision of a dynamic eschatology: "For this is truly perfection:

never to stop growing towards what is better and never placing any limit on perfection” (275).

On the other hand, the LDS doctrine of a premortal existence during which the unembodied spirit already exercised individual agency seems to contradict or transcend Yong’s notion of emergence, according to which the body and its processes must exist prior to any individual consciousness and on which much of his theology of disability rests. Even Yong’s basic method may stand at odds with any potential LDS theology of disability: to what extent, the LDS reader may wonder, is it possible in an LDS context to subject doctrinal assumptions to critical interrogation from secular perspectives? Will vocabulary drawn from liberal, social justice activism be congenial to LDS theological discourse, or will a native LDS vocabulary need to be developed in order to articulate and integrate unique LDS concepts into a suitable treatment of LDS perspectives on disability?

These questions, and many others evoked by this erudite theological journey, should help Latter-day Saints in conversing with other Christians about ministering to those with disabilities and should stimulate readers to further fruitful reflection on all of these important themes.

Rosalynde Welch (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) graduated in English from Brigham Young University with interests focusing on Renaissance English literature, contemporary critical theory, and creative writing. Welch received her PhD in early modern literature from the University of California at San Diego State. She is also a contributor to *Times and Seasons*, one of the largest LDS blog websites.