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Title: Christianity and its link to Western notions of ability, disability and moral treatment through education

This special issue has been too long coming. For a mainstream journal on Christianity and education to give itself over to what has long been considered to be an important yet peripheral topic is a strong message. There are three significant reasons for such a contention. The first reason is simply mathematical. It has long been acknowledged that Christianity was fundamental to the development of Western culture and civilization through education (Boyd & King, 1964). The first Western educational institutions as we now recognize them were monasteries. Furthermore, the text and curriculum, particularly what we call the hidden curriculum, is synonymous with the Gospels (**REFERENCE HERE**). Christ himself was called Rabbi – teacher – by Judas. What has been less discussed in such histories of education has been the effect of Christian notions of ability, on the development of philosophies that have derived from education. For example, with education came academic assessment, and from this form of assessment came an intellectual notion of intelligence, such as IQ testing (**REFERENCE HERE**). This assessment was related largely to reading aloud and the written word. Therefore, ability became strongly linked with speech and writing, and the ability to write and speak in a standardized pattern. For Christians, behavior, or more particularly positive, good, moral behavior was also seen as an ability. To be badly behaved was, and arguably is, an irreligious act. Thus we find that our modern behavioural difficulties are often classified by educators as special needs and disabilities. **YOU ARE HERE!**

Disability and the experience of impairment is a significant theme in the Bible. Jesus' healing of people with disabilities is seen as a miraculous act, many figures in the Bible had disabilities, and sometimes impairment is used as a punishment for immoral acts. In addition, disabilities such as blindness, deafness, mental illness and impaired limbs are seen as an important moral and practical issue by many Christians today and a number of churches see the curing of people who are ill or experience disability as part of their worship life. Therefore, it could be argued that the study of disability is a fundamental component of Christian ethics.

Furthermore, given Christianity's status as a world religion, Christians are born with disabilities, raised and experience disabilities later in life in a number of different cultural and educational settings. In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Disabled Person, people with disabilities have as much right to educational and cultural inclusion as their able-bodied peers. This can present a number of challenges to the pedagogy of teachers of students with identified disabilities, and the support and educational experiences of Christian students and teachers with disabilities.

In scholarly literature, the perception of disability in Christianity is also a significant topic of discussion, and a number of authors have raised theological questions about the received wisdom on disability. For example, a number of traditional disability theorists, such as Colin Barnes and Geoff Mercer, have claimed that the Bible discriminates against disability and people with disabilities, and argued that Christianity represents impairment, difference and diversity negatively. Authors such as the theologian and religious educator John Hull, who is

blind, have also argued that from the point of view of a person who is visually impaired the Bible can seem prejudicial towards people who are blind and treat blindness negatively. Yet images of disability such as the broken body of Jesus on the cross have also helped people to understand the imperfections of humanity from a positive Christian standpoint. Historically, Simon Hayhoe observes that Christians founded the modern separate education of children who are blind and deaf, and provided moral management of adults with mental illness, in a belief that teaching could provide a spiritual treatment for their impairments. Furthermore, he observes that experimentations with blindness and mental illness were used to empirically test passages in the Bible in the 17th and 18th centuries, and were subsequently crucial to the philosophies of the enlightenment.

Boyd, W., & King, E. J. (1964). *The history of western education*. London: A. & C. Black.