

Review essay

Autism Theology: Discussions from an emerging field

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Reviewed works:

Claire Williams, *Peculiar Discipleship: An Autistic Liberation Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2023), pp. 272, ISBN 978-0334063063. £19.99

Ruth M. Dunster, *The Autism of Gxd: An Atheological Love Story* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), pp. xix + 420, ISBN 978-1725268357. £47.00

Stewart Rapley, *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2021), pp. xiv + 178, ISBN 978-0334060871. £19.99

Cynthia Tam, *Kinship in the Household of God: Towards a Practical Theology of Belonging and Spiritual Care of People with Profound Autism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021), pp. x + 191, ISBN 978-1725274419. £26.00



Introduction

Recent years have seen increasing theological attention given to autism, to the extent that we may think of Autism Theology as an emerging subdiscipline of theology. This themed issue of *Theology in Scotland* further testifies to the increasing interest in this field. In this article we review four recent books that are important contributions to the emerging theological conversations about autism. As we will discuss in the last section of this article, authorship is an important point of reflection.

Therefore, it is relevant to note here that three of the four books that we review are written by authors who identify as autistic. These are: *Peculiar Discipleship* by Claire Williams, *The Autism of Gxd* by Ruth Dunster, and *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church* by Stewart Rapley. We will review the books in this order, followed by a review of *Kinship in the Household of God* by Cynthia Tam. These reviews, written by Ian Lasch, Bryan Fowler, Henna Cundill, and Christopher Barber respectively, will be followed by a discussion (written by Léon van Ommen) that highlights some of the themes that emerge from these four publications and the wider discourse on autism theology. Note that we have not edited the individual reviews to fit one particular style, in order to respect each reviewer's contribution.



Peculiar Discipleship: An Autistic Liberation Theology

With autism and theology such a relatively young discipline, there remain a number of avenues yet to be explored. Thankfully, Claire Williams explores one of these in her upcoming *Peculiar Discipleship: An Autistic Liberation Theology*. While many works to this point have asked questions about how to incorporate autistic people into the life of the Church, or how to value the humanity of autistic people, Williams instead dares to dream a bit bigger, by asking how theology might be employed to liberate autistics from the confines placed on them by society and the Church.

To do so, Williams starts by telling the story of her own diagnosis and experience, as well as the experience of other autistic individuals. She treads some familiar (but foundational) ground, such as debates around language like person- vs. identity-first language or functioning labels. She acknowledges the difficulty in the debate about whose voices are listened to and valued, but does not limit her discussion to only autistic voices, but also engages with researchers about autism and family members of autistic individuals, such as her discussion of Eilidh Campbell's *Motherhood and Autism* (pp. 44–46).¹ This is in part because Williams herself dwells in both worlds, as an autistic person and a mother of an autistic child, who sometimes has to act as an interpreter of her child to the world. It seems clear that Williams is seeking to bridge a divide that exists in discussions

¹ Eilidh Campbell, *Motherhood and Autism: An Embodied Theology of Motherhood and Disability* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

of autism, and though she never lays out a system for how to decide which voices should take precedence when the two camps find themselves in conflict, she does discuss what one mother does that makes her voice one worth listening to, when she points out that she ‘is not [...] portraying herself as a hero, she is not the redeemer and her daughter the grateful recipient [...] she didn’t always get it right [...]’ (pp. 124–25).

In thinking about how theology can be liberative, Williams invokes the idea of ‘alongsiding’. She cites Ruth as a scriptural example of this ‘alongsiding’, in the way that she pledges to stay with Naomi. Most helpfully, *Peculiar Discipleship* offers a few different ways in which theology can help both Church and society to go about this work of ‘alongsiding’ to be truly liberative toward autistic people. These seem to involve primarily examining our conceptions of time and of creatureliness.

Time, Williams says, is fundamental to our oppressive thinking about disability. Our thinking about autism is influenced by what Alison Kafer called ‘crip time’: the disruption of future expectations that disability presents (pp. 55–56). On the other hand, ‘autistic time is necessarily flexible’, Williams argues (p. 69). Neurotypical assumptions about time are not synonymous with God’s time, and practices like ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) are frequently a result of trying to normalize the future of autistic people through manipulation (p. 57). Sabbath presents a radical repudiation of normative assumptions of productivity and progress as a lens for understanding God’s time as distinct from neurotypically normative expectations about time, which can transform our understanding of autism.

Creatureliness, too, appears as a fundamental category for autistic liberation theology, in that recognition of autistics as icons through whom we can see the face of Christ is a necessary step. Williams invokes Rowan Williams to say that the inability to value our fellow humans is in fact a failure of imagination – an inability to see others as they are seen by God (p. 140).

Staying true to her Pentecostal and charismatic roots, she argues that the Pentecost event is an important hermeneutical key, in that it is an event where ‘God does not universalise but particularises’ (p. 171). Our theology must be imaginative enough to make room for autistic people to be icons of Christ, so that we might even, for example, allow for stereotypically autistic actions, such as stimming, to be intentional and directed toward God, and therefore sanctifying (p. 209). Cultivating such imagination in

order to be in solidarity with the oppressed and offer hospitality toward the other, Williams argues, can allow the Church and society to create spaces where autistic Christians are truly free to be themselves.

In *Peculiar Discipleship*, Williams offers an ambitious exercise in going beyond theologies of mere acceptance or welcoming in order to craft a theology which truly liberates autistic people. This is a necessary work, and one can only hope it paves the way for further theological development of these and other liberating themes in autistic theology.



The Autism of Gxd: An Atheological Love Story

Ruth Dunster's recent work encapsulates an autistic theology as opposed to many standard works in this field which present a theology of autism. From its title to its very structure to the way she incorporates her story and autism into the very fabric of the book, Dunster formulates her theology through a specifically autistic lens. This book is well worth the read for anyone who wants to understand how autism can influence and shape theology.

Towards the beginning of the book, Dunster raises two profound questions that set the stage for her argument throughout, pondering, 'Is it blasphemous to describe Gxd as autistic? Is it blasphemous, alternatively, to trace the *imago Dei* (image of Gxd) only in the abled-bodied (or "able-minded")?' (p. 45). While others, even in the field of autism and theology, have stumbled over these issues, Dunster addresses them head on. She maps the seemingly negative (clinical) attributes of autism onto a positive view of God, by way of an 'autistic trinity' whose attributes are 'mindblindness', 'literal-mindblindness', and 'autistic fascination' (pp. 28–44). It is somewhat troubling that Dunster uses designations such as mindblindness to make her positive case for autism and the trinity since they are wrought with a negative history and have been dispensed with in more recent literature. However, something Dunster attempts in her book is to reimagine previously negative concepts of autism in a positive light. While it is debatable if this works, for Dunster these attributes (above) are at their core autistic empathy, which she concludes is the very heart of God or (in her words) 'Gxd' (pp. 73–77).²

² At the outset of her study Dunster addresses the curious reader: 'Why do I not write "God" but "Gxd?" This is the question of Gxd's "x". Really, I would

It is important for Dunster to conceive of knowing God in this way because throughout the book she relies on apophatic theology. Instead of approaching God through kataphatic theology, Dunster uses voices like Dionysius, Teresa of Àvila, John of the Cross, and Thomas Altizer to illustrate that God speaks in silence and is present in his absence (pp. 149–86; 250–67). While kataphatic theology as a positive and more customary theology defines God by his relationship to other things (e.g. God is good), apophatic theology defines God by what he is not (pp. 19–20; 144–49). Dunster employs apophatic theology through her concept of ‘mindfulness of separation’ (p. 94), where, by definition, ‘the absence of Gxd is, paradoxically, the only way to inhabit the presence of Gxd’ (p. 378). This notion is bolstered by Dunster’s concept of ‘literal metaphor’. Metaphor is understanding a thing by relating it to something else. For example, the phrase ‘the road of life’ brings the ‘image’ of road back into the concept of life (pp. 98–99). This is the uniting power of metaphor. Literal metaphor bridges the gap that exists between ‘the human and the divine’ (p. 103). If faith is found ‘in what is not seen’, then ‘the eye of an ultimate, Absolute autistic faith can attain this’ (p. 106), since ‘Absolute autism speaks the pure speech of Gxd for us’ (p. 254). What Dunster is saying through her employment of apophatic theology and use of literal metaphor is that we come to understand God in his death, through his absence, and in his silence. God is someone we must search out. As the Eastern theologians she cites articulated, we know God through his ‘hiddenness’ (pp. 144–208).

The final chapters deploy this logic, as Dunster concludes that in searching for God what we really find is our ‘authentic’ self (pp. 350–59). But the journey is vital in this process of self-actualization. Dunster expresses that we can only *really* read through our own lens. As she puts it, ‘my Middlemarch is my Middlemarch and yours is yours’, proposing that understanding the uniqueness of our lens is the path towards embracing the ‘innerness and solitude’ of life (p. 303). It is this inner, authentic life that Dunster has been urging us to seek throughout her book, as she states in her conclusion, ‘So I have written my way into this search for the painful autistic integrity of self-knowledge and acceptance’ (p.

prefer that you think this through as a polysemic riddle; in other words, there are a number of ways to interpret this word, and it is for you to ponder which one, or ones, might be valid’ (p. 1).

357). Dunster has written this book out of her own struggles to find God in the dark, and she submits that through pursuing God in the darkness, we discover what is truly within us.

However, it is here that I level my critique of her thesis. Even though there is a well-trodden path from Augustine to Calvin to Barth affirming this duality of knowledge, of God and self, this knowledge rests on the nature of the transcendent. Dunster in relying on Altizer and his atheological approach seems to separate the transcendent God from the Christian tradition. Admittedly this is part of her aim which is to understand God uniquely. However, one wonders if separating God from the Christian tradition does not isolate her intended audience and frustrate her overall goal, which is to know God, since many have come to know him through this tradition. Still, there is much to ponder in Dunster's way of reasoning and admittedly as a neurotypical reader, there may be another frame, possibly a literal metaphor, that I am missing. In conclusion, I am incredibly grateful for this book, because it offers both the autistic and neurotypical reader joy in their pursuit of God.



Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church

Stewart Rapley's book, *Autistic Thinking in the Life of the Church*, reflects in detail on the way that autistic people engage cognitively with Church teaching and practice, drawing on the theory that many autistic people have a strongly systematising or pattern-seeking manner of thought (pp. 13–44). His book is aimed primarily at pastors and Church leadership, but would be of interest to Christians generally, especially those who feel that they have a 'pattern-seeking mind', whether or not they are autistic.

The premise for the book is that for autistic people, disengagement or even distress can be caused by 'cognitive dissonance' – i.e., discomfort triggered by a perceived inconsistency between what the Church teaches and how faith is practised, either by the Church community or by the autistic person themselves. In a small qualitative study, Rapley investigated how and where cognitive dissonance might occur in relation to four areas: God, the Bible, prayer and supporting texts such as liturgical resources and songs. He proposes that by strengthening understanding and mutual engagement between autistic people and their churches, pattern-seeking styles of thought can add a distinctive contribution to the life of the Church (pp. 3–4).

Analysing the results of his study, Rapley proposes that in broad terms ‘pattern-seeking’ minds will tend towards a less anthropomorphic concept of God, as compared to that which is common in Christian discourse. This, in turn, leads to a less relational experience of prayer. With regards to the Bible, Rapley suggests that the majority of his participants preferred to interpret the Bible in relation to its historical context, and they seemed to be less comfortable with other types of hermeneutic approach. Similarly, when engaging with supporting texts such as liturgies and worship songs, participants tended to give more weight to the meaning of the texts over the ‘community reinforcement’ effect that comes from practice of saying or singing supporting texts with others.

By sharing the results of his study in this way, Rapley makes an important contribution to the emerging discussion around autistic experiences of church, as he rightly notes that (with some exceptions) most existing resources focus on the sensory and social aspects of church life (p. 19). As an autistic writer, Rapley gives valuable insight into his own cognitive experience of church, supported by his insider perspective on his research data.

As is common to qualitative studies, the sample size was small (n=9), and the data was analysed only by one person (himself), therefore it is limited as a basis from which to make sweeping generalisations about all autistic Christians. Much of the analysis is based on Simon Baron-Cohen’s theory of autistic people having ‘pattern-seeking minds’, but this theory is not without controversy as it builds on some of Baron-Cohen’s highly contested proposals that autistic people have an ‘extreme male brain’ (even if they are women) and a reduced ability to empathise. Thus, there may be more subtle ways to analyse the data, which account both for different presentations of autism in men and women, and for Damien Milton’s widely accepted theory of the ‘Double Empathy Problem’, which contests the notion that autistic people have reduced ability to empathise.³ In addition, Rapley himself observes some vulnerabilities in his analysis, for example that some apparent differences in autistic thinking may be more readily explained by habits of language use and ways of describing things (e.g., the use of anthropomorphic metaphors for God) than by genuine cognitive difference (p. 56). He also notes that, even in his very small

³ Damian E. M. Milton, “On the Ontological Status of Autism: The ‘Double Empathy Problem’”, *Disability & Society* 27, no. 6 (2012): 883–87.

sample size, there were always ‘outliers’ to every pattern or trend that he himself tried to identify in the data (p. 46).

Despite these limitations, which are mostly of the type common to any qualitative study, the book has the potential to become a valuable springboard for future research, and a starting point for churches and church leaders who share Rapley’s objective to improve belonging for autistic worshippers (p. 34). To that end, Part Two of the book is devoted to setting out a potential ‘engagement model’ – a set of principles and ‘mindsets’ that create the right space for engagement and dialogue around the topics that have the potential to cause ‘cognitive dissonance’ for pattern-seeking minds.



Kinship in the Household of God: Towards a Practical Theology of Belonging and Spiritual Care of People with Profound Autism

As I write this, Eastertide has begun and Christ is risen. Yet only a few days before, during the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, the action of the woman wiping the sweat and blood off the face of Jesus as He carries the Cross to Calvary (6th Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus) struck me as never before. For whom do I perform this role and do I perform it with care and love? Again, during the Holy Thursday liturgy the thought occurred to me: Whose feet do I wash? These questions are not merely rhetorical or unrelated to Tam’s exploration of acceptance and belonging as experienced by two people with profound autism within two different evangelical churches in Canada. I engaged with this book as an autistic Roman Catholic and Tam’s exploration of Church acceptance and belonging in relation to autism resonates deeply within me.

In his foreword, the theologian and former mental health nurse John Swinton poses the question: What does it mean to be a church for everyone? The very fact that the question needs to be asked, and the context in which it is being asked, implies that in some, and perhaps in many, ways the Church is not open for everyone and excludes some on the basis of their disability. Tam is a Canadian Evangelical Church pastor and national director of disability ministries within her church, although she is not herself autistic and, therefore, writes from the outside looking in. Whether the book would be different if Tam was autistic is open to debate. Again, the book appears to be based on Tam’s PhD research into the inclusion and belonging of those who are profoundly autistic within

specific Christian communities, which may have some impact upon how the work is viewed and interpreted.

Tam examines the definition and meaning of autism in terms of disorder and social construction in Chapter 1, finding such definitions wanting, and proposing instead that autism is much more about human difference rather than disorder. We are also introduced to the two main protagonists, Dylan and Ellen, both of whom are profoundly autistic and have communication differences. Dylan's and Ellen's experiences of acceptance, inclusion and belonging within two specific evangelical faith communities are explored in depth in Chapters 2 and 3. I was engulfed by a sense of sadness followed by anger at the attitudes and behaviour expressed by members of these communities towards Dylan and Ellen and by extension to all those who are different, myself included. One of the faith communities, Red Hill, strived to be an 'all-inclusive' church, but Tam presents this as being very shallow and superficial. In both churches, Dylan and Ellen were largely strangers and at times ignored or mocked by church members. Only very gradually were Dylan and Ellen accepted by members of their faith communities and it is debatable whether this, too, was only skin deep. This journey from being unwelcomed strangers to a sense of belonging through forgiveness and healing forms the focus of Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 focuses on God's inclusive love for all of creation and explores the theology of inclusive communities as presented by Bonhoeffer. Tam uses and explores the term 'human person', a term that I have always struggled and had problems with. The 'human person', to me, is either tautological or suggests the existence of the 'non-human person' or the 'non-person human'. What then is 'human-hood' or 'person-hood' and does this lead to discrimination and rejection of those deemed 'non-human' or 'non-person' such as those with profound disabilities? Chapter 6 revisits the two faith communities highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3 in terms of what it means to be a Christian community, through the lens of St Paul's vision of 'covenant community' as expressed in his letters to the Galatians and Romans (which can be summed up as: 'Love one another as I have loved you'). Chapter 7 develops this theme of 'covenant community' in terms of admittance and membership through baptism and explores whether those with profound autism or learning/intellectual disabilities have the cognitive ability to understand and proclaim God's Word. The ability to quote (often at random and out of context) and

proclaim the Word of God on the part of the baptised appears to be a prerequisite for baptism within one of the faith communities highlighted in the book. Tam states clearly that membership of a Christian community is God's gift and not amenable to intellectual prowess. Chapter 8 explores the gifts that those with profound disabilities bring to the Church, namely that of freeing the giftedness and ability in others to care for, accept, welcome and love those who are perceived as 'weak', broken or disabled. The final short chapter concludes this book with a very brief summary and drawing together of the main points and threads made throughout the book.

Tam's tendency in various chapters to say that specific issues will be 'picked up and dealt with later in the book' can become slightly annoying. However, this is a very well-written book and the one 'take away' for me is to question whether my local Catholic parishes are welcoming of people who are in any way 'different'; and whether people who are profoundly autistic, have a profound learning disability, or have serious mental health issues, feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging in my parish. If not, why not, and what can I do to help? Whilst it could be argued that Tam has answered these questions, she is writing from an evangelical perspective and her observations may not be directly applicable to a Roman Catholic perspective, whereas me reflecting on whether I can apply her observations may be.



Salient points for an emerging discipline

The four books reviewed above present – implicitly or explicitly – a number of salient points or questions that Autism Theology as an emerging subdiscipline might need to reflect on. The first theme to single out is the aim of Autism Theology. Williams is clear about this: Autism Theology should be about liberating autistic people from the oppression they have historically faced and continue to face to this day, both in society and Church. Rapley does not state the aim of his book in terms of liberation theology, but he also has in mind the flourishing of autistic people's lives in the context of the Church. Tam likewise urges churches to become places where autistic people are valued, their gifts appreciated, and where they truly belong. These aims may not sound surprising, but they are worth highlighting because not all disciplines or researchers do necessarily have these aims in mind. Autism Theology can make a difference in the wider

autism discourse by emphasising these aims and joining researchers in other disciplines who work with these aims in mind.

A second point follows: whose voices are listened to in Autism Theology? Each of the four books reviewed here, and other publications in the field, intend to raise awareness in faith communities and the academy about the lived experience of autism. The background for this is that autistic people often feel they do not belong, that their gifts are not valued and that their needs are not taken into account in the way (Church) life is organised. For faith communities to recognise their autistic members' place in the body of Christ it is necessary to raise awareness of the lived experience of autistic people. The people best placed to tell the communities are, of course, autistic people themselves. Rapley's book is a good example of a particular way in which autistic people may experience prayer, sermons, Scripture reading, etc., pointing to the cognitive dissonance that often occurs for autistic people when these activities are set within a non-autistic context. This point is related to the authorship of the publications, which we referred to in the introduction to this review article. Autism Theology needs to listen to autistic people by reading their publications, whether they are academic books and articles, blog posts, or other ways in which autistic people express themselves. The fact that three of the four books in this review article have been written by autistic authors is encouraging.

However, the question of whose voices are listened to is more problematic in the wider autism discourse than one might think. Williams includes a discussion about the tension that exists in some quarters of discourse between autistic people who view the voices of parents of autistic children with suspicion (see especially chapter 4). This discussion could include medical professionals, including social support workers, who are sometimes viewed with equal suspicion. The reason is understandable: for a long time, autism has been seen as a medical problem (pathology) to be solved. Those who claim autism to be at the core of their identity, and therefore as an inherently ontological part of their being, naturally object to the erasure of autism, whether it is through the search for an autism 'cure' or therapies like Applied Behaviour Analysis. Williams, and others, take a more reconciliatory view, recognising that in order to be a faith community together, where everyone has a place, requires a dialogue between the various 'stakeholders'. Nevertheless, a reconciliatory view also requires that mistaken views of the past and

present are confessed and repented from. The harm and pain that many autistic people (have) experience(d) needs to be acknowledged. Here is an opportunity for faith communities and theology as a discipline to embody a community where such acknowledgement, repentance, and living and working together is possible.

The question of whose voices are listened to can also be addressed from another problem that autism studies in general have hardly begun to address, which is the absence of the voices of autistic people who do not speak or speak only minimally.⁴ It is estimated that 25%–35% of autistic people are within that group, yet only an estimated 2% of participants in autism research is non- or minimally verbal.⁵ There are at least two problems with this. First, the perspectives of those who do not use speech as their primary way of communicating are hardly included in research. Second, generalisations made on the basis of research with certain groups of autistic people (in this case, those who can express themselves by using speech) are not necessarily applicable to other groups of autistic people. As a new discipline, Autism Theology can and must do better than the prevalent trend. Cynthia Tam’s contribution is worth highlighting in this regard.

These first two points set the context for the third point to highlight, which is the particular contribution autistic people can make to theology and Church. The clearest example in the four books reviewed above is that of Ruth Dunster. She has written a theology that is explicitly an autistic theology. Indeed, she uses certain theories of autism as a basis to construct her specific autistic theology. As a project in autistic theology⁶ Dunster’s

⁴ We use non- or minimally speaking rather than non- or minimally verbal, as seems to be the preference of autistic people: see Alyssa Hillary Zisk and Lily Konyon, “How to Talk About AAC and AAC Users (According to Them)”, 13 October 2022, <https://www.assistiveware.com/blog/how-to-talk-about-aac>.

⁵ Fritjof Norrelgen et al., “Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders Who Do Not Develop Phrase Speech in the Preschool Years”, *Autism* 19, no. 8 (November 2015): 934–43; Ginny Russell et al., “Selection Bias on Intellectual Ability in Autism Research: A Cross-Sectional Review and Meta-Analysis”, *Molecular Autism* 10:9 (December 2019), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s13229-019-0260-x>.

⁶ We use ‘autistic theology’ for theology written by autistic authors, in distinction to the more encompassing term Autism Theology, that can be written by autistic or non-autistic authors. We spell the latter with capitals to indicate that it is a subdiscipline in its own right.

book is fascinating and perhaps the most substantial effort at writing an autistic theology to date. It is likely that Dunster will receive pushback from both autistic readers and theologians: from the first because she uses some theories of autism that are highly contested (e.g., Theory of Mind); from the second because she writes an ‘atheology’ and thereby deviates significantly from mainstream theology, as Bryan Fowler indicated in his review of Dunster’s book above. As a model for doing autistic theology the book is illuminating nonetheless. In ways that are likely to be less contested, Rapley and Williams also write from their particular perspective as autistic theologians and members of the Church. It is because autistic authors write from their particular autistic perspective that they make original contributions to theology and potentially reframe theological notions that have long been taken for granted (for example, Williams’ discussion of time and creatureliness). That is not to say that one has to identify as autistic in order to make contributions from an autism angle, as many allies show, including Cynthia Tam.



Conclusion

The four publications in this article represent some of the debates in the area of Autism Theology as it emerges as a subdiscipline of theology in its own right. These publications are important as the field develops, but they are not the only ones.⁷ Furthermore, to get a good grasp of the discipline, it is important to read journal articles, which reflect a much wider authorship in the field as well as some of the most recent research on autism and theology. However, these four books do include some of the salient issues for the field. We have reflected on three of these issues here (the aim of Autism Theology, the question of whose voices are listened to, and the unique contribution autistic people can make to the Church and theology), to indicate the direction in which the field might develop in the foreseeable future.

⁷ Especially noteworthy is Grant Macaskill’s book *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), which was only omitted from this article because it has been reviewed elsewhere in this themed issue.

Review essay: Autism Theology: Discussions from an emerging field

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Chris Barber is a registered learning disability nurse from Birmingham (UK) who is currently working on a PhD, at the Centre for Autism and Theology, that focuses on the experiences of inclusion and discrimination among Church of England and Catholic clergy who have non-visible disabilities.