Multiculturalism, Religion, and Disability: Implications for Special Education Practitioners

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Abstract: Religious beliefs permeate many aspects of culture. Often, however, educators are reluctant to discuss religious beliefs when working with children with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families. Ignoring the salience of religious teachings about the nature and meaning of disabilities as they relate to both individuals and society, however, limits the opportunity to fully understand the experience of living with disability. Discussion of religious beliefs, traditions, and practices should be incorporated into teacher education, and should be part of the zeitgeist of working with children and families. This article examines images of and teachings about disabilities in three major world religions widely practiced in the United States: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Spirituality and religion are important to millions of individuals across all cultures. Until recently, however, the spirituality of people with disabilities has been largely ignored by both communities of faith and secular social service and educational systems. (Avery-Wall, 2006; Rogers-Dulan, 1998; Stolberg, 2008) Neglecting the importance of religious belief and experience in the lives of many individuals with disabilities and their families, may imply a view of their innate humanity that is incomplete or less complex than other people (Swinton, 1997). Spiritual beliefs may greatly influence perceptions of people with disabilities, of themselves, others, and the world (Dellassoudas, 2000). Multicultural education and programs designed to build cultural competence must necessarily include instruction in religious practices and spiritual beliefs (Richards, Browne, & Forde, 2007). There is a growing body of literature in the helping professions around training practitioners to consider and understand the influence of religion on people with disabilities and their families as part of a system of care (Benjamins, 2005; Forster, McColl, & Fardella, 2007; Hurst, 2007; Selway & Ashman, 1998). Unfortunately, special education has thus far largely neglected considering religion as part of an evolving commitment to multicultural practice, and building cultural competence among students in teacher education programs.

Religion in the Modern World

Only recently has science advanced to the point where humans have a reasonably broad ability to mediate and manage the impact of the natural world in ways that are predictable and stable. People in the so-called developed world tend to believe that they have a fairly high degree of control over their health, lives, and destiny. We now know that vitamin A deficiency can cause blindness and that diet can prevent it. We know that the cognitive impact of phenylketonuria can be avoided through dietary manipulation and control. Technologies now allow 50 year old women to give birth to healthy babies and people without legs can be competitive runners (Robinson, 2008). Prior to the time when the degree of control that we can now exert over the natural and physical world was possible, people largely understood the world only as controlled by unseen, supernatural forces. Religion served to explain many of the mysteries of the natural world. The power to explain the unknown is also the power to control behav-
ior. Religious teaching often defines what people should believe to be true about the world around them, and it prescribes how people should act in accordance with these beliefs (Goldberg, 2006). Religious beliefs have been the foundations of civilizations. Public and private behaviors were usually governed by the codes of conduct described in religious law. It is relatively impossible to parse religious and civil leadership in ancient (and not so ancient) cultures. Even today despite public discourse around the need to maintain a secular, civil society in this country and elsewhere in the world, it is naïve to underestimate the extent to which religious thought influences thinking on a wide variety of issues, including disability. To deny or ignore religious influences on conceptualizations of disability is to overlook a profound aspect of the human experience and our understanding of what it means to have and live with a disability. As special educators and researchers we are just beginning to explore the relationships between the influence of religion on cultural and personal understandings of disability.

Religion in America

Americans often point to the separation of church and state mandated by the First Amendment as proof that we live in a secular society. However, momentary consideration of the following examples indicates that religious thought clearly pervades our thinking. An obvious example is the continued legal debate over the teaching of intelligent design (Slack, 2007). Religious beliefs have always pervaded attitudes and policies on a variety of controversial issues. The deliverance narratives of the Hebrew and Christian traditions certainly influenced the debates around Civil Rights and desegregation (Cone, 1975; King, 1968). Another example is the interaction between religion and culture that is evident in public school vacation calendars. Without fail, extended periods of vacation coincide with major Christian holidays. For an example from public policy, objections to gay marriage are fundamentally religious objections. Religion matters in modern America and yet we rarely explore how it relates to beliefs about students with disabilities. Understanding what religions say about disability can deepen the ability to understand how to improve the services provided to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families.

Religion and Disability

With these issues and ideas in mind, we can begin to explore images of disability in three major world religions. The intent here is simply to argue that multicultural teacher preparation for special educators is incomplete unless it includes an examination of religion. It is in the best interests of our students and their families that we train and expect special educators to reflect on the ways religious ideas influence practice. We make no claims that our research on religious images of disability is comprehensive. Choices about what information to include and exclude in this discussion were made largely on the basis of the big ideas available in a survey of the literature. What we have tried to do is gather sufficient information to open the conversation. With this goal in mind, this article only provides an introduction to important scholarly work in disability studies and religious studies. Our hope is that this introduction will inspire our colleagues in special education to further explore the scholarly work represented here and continue to reflect on issues around religion, disability, and special education.

Religion in this discussion is limited to the three Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The simple criteria for this project were (a) religions with which the authors have sufficient familiarity to comprehend the scholarly work available, and (b) religions that are prevalent enough in the United States that most teachers will have at least heard of them and have an elemental sense of their belief systems.

Abrahamic Traditions

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam fall under the umbrella of the Abrahamic traditions because all three recognize the historical figure Abraham and his descendants as central and original figures in the culture of the faith. There is significant overlap in the sacred texts of each faith and in their treatment of people with disabilities. Similarly, each faith is inconsistent and seemingly contradictory in the images of
disability that are conveyed through sacred text and teachings. When viewed as literary works and policy documents it is evident that they have evolved and changed over time as a function of social need and cultural change. It is easy to see that contradictions in teachings are the result of changes to documents that prescribed behavior and functioned as civil law for many centuries. However, the lingering consequences of these inconsistencies are ambivalence and confusion among teachings about the meaning and origin of disabilities as well as the ways in which people with disabilities should be treated. On one hand there are historical narratives connecting disability to evil. However, people with disabilities are also held up as objects of pity and function as opportunities for the faithful to demonstrate their own goodness through acts of charity (Rose 1997). Recently, however, religious institutions and spiritual communities have begun to understand that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have spiritual lives and religious needs that are fully their own, and quite similar to the needs of individuals without disabilities (Collins, Epstein, Rice, & Lowe, 2003; Swinton, 1997; Yong, 2007).

Judaism

The Hebrew bible’s central character, Yahweh, a single deity, is responsible for conditions of disability and this is a major shift from previous polytheistic traditions in ancient Mesopotamia (Hentrich, 2007; Walls, 2007). In the Yahweh stories, disabilities are generally negative degradations of the perfect body God bestowed upon Adam in the creation story. As such, disabilities are perceived as divine punishments. People with disabilities are considered impure and they carry the danger of bringing pollution to their surroundings and other people (Hentrich). The emphases on perfection surrounding the ritual acts involved in making sacrifices as offerings to God as prescribed in Hebrew scripture conflate the ideas of pollution and disability (Melcher, 2007). Jewish law describes in detail the need for perfection in both the sacrificial object and the preparer of the sacrifice (Miles, 2002a). Although there are legal prohibitions about who can perform certain kinds of ritualistic tasks, such as an insistence that the priest who examines an animal before sacrifice have clear vision, there is no scriptural precedent for excluding a man with blindness from memorizing and speaking the sacred texts (Miles, 2002b; Wertlieb, 1988). The David stories, however, communicate more negative images of disability and the roles for people with disabilities in society. David is understood to stand for an idealized man in ancient Israelite culture (Hentrich). As David moves to depose Saul in order to establish the dynastic house of David, Saul’s son Ishboshet is killed, yet his other son, Meribaal, is spared. Apparently, Meribaal is no threat to David because Meribaal has a physical disability that legally excludes him from assuming the throne (Hentrich; Schipper, 2006). Although the historical record is unclear as to the exact nature of Meribaal’s disability, he is described as “lame” or “crippled”. (Hentrich). The legal basis of Meribaal’s inability to rule is unclear. It is possible that either purity laws associated with religious practice or civil laws about physical disabilities were responsible for his disqualification. What is important in the story is the fact that David did not kill Meribaal because he was perceived as no threat because of his disability. The Meribaal story communicates a status of reduced manhood and otherness resulting from physical disabilities.

The exclusion of persons with disabilities from the temple also appears to originate in the David stories. As David moves to conquer Jerusalem, the defending army surrounds the city with soldiers who have disabilities—either congenital or resulting from injuries or illness. The tactical reasons for this action are unclear but some scholars suggest that cultural taboos in ancient Jerusalem would have caused David to hesitate to engage with such a force for fear of pollution (Heller, in Hentrich, 2007). A more positive interpretation offered by Brunet (in Hentrich) is that the city was surrounding itself with a “moral wall” which David would not dare to attack in fear of divine vengeance that would convey disabilities upon David’s soldiers. David, however, continued undeterred and after assuming power in Jerusalem banned people with disabilities from the temple (Hentrich). It is unclear whether David was exacting revenge on those who opposed him or if he was concerned
about issues of purity and pollution (Henrich). In practical terms, the David narratives of exclusion have continued to influence religious practice. However, as Judaism evolved over time and expanded geographically, the emphasis on physical perfection became secondary to an emphasis on intellectualism (Abrams, 1998). The shift mediated negative attitudes toward people with disability. Jewish philosophers came to believe that physical perfection (as they defined it) was not required to have a relationship with God (Abrams). Consequently, people with certain disabilities, particularly blindness, were gradually brought back into the temple and began to assume important roles. Modern Jewish scholars and theologians continue to revisit and reinterpret sacred texts as they work to become more inclusive and welcoming to Jews with diverse physical and cognitive abilities (Artson, 2006). The Jewish community is re-examining ideas about what constitutes wholeness and what ways of being are considered defects. Artson raises important questions about who among us is truly free of human shortcomings. Arbitrary decisions about what is and is not acceptable to God it is argued, distract Jews from a primary responsibility to “glorify the Torah and to testify to God’s sovereignty as we might” (Artson). In the modern era, the words “as we might” recognize the diversity of human experience and promote inclusion of all Jews, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Christianity

As the second of the Abrahamic religions, Christianity builds from the history of the Hebrew bible as the Old Testament and becomes a separate tradition with the birth of Jesus. The New Testament contains stories of what happened during and after his birth. It is important to recognize that ancient Christianity inherited the historical perspectives of its Jewish roots and built upon these themes to serve social and political ends (Miles, 2001). Disability serves a markedly different literary function in the New Testament than in the Hebrew bible. Rather than simply functioning as punishment and a visible reminder of God’s wrath, people with disabilities become the media through which God communicates messages of mercy and power.

A story in the book of John has Jesus clarify the meaning of disability. Jesus explains that people are not born with disabilities because of sin but instead they are born with disabilities in order to provide opportunities for God to demonstrate his power (Miles, 2002b). This is a very different message then the one conveyed in Exodus which teaches that children may bear the weight of their parents’ sins which are manifested as disabilities (Miles, 2001).

The Jesus stories are narratives of social reform (Wills, 2006) and not exclusively focused on improving the lives of people with disabilities. Hebrew rules around issues of impurity and pollution (originating in God’s mandates about the priesthood to Aaron and his descendants and furthered through the David narratives) expanded to marginalize people with disabilities in multiple aspects of social life (Bishop, 1995). Stories of Jesus healing people with disabilities in public are also stories of crossing social boundaries and building community (Senior, 1995).

Christian narratives have often served as the basis of civil law and social norms in Western culture since Roman occupiers began to convert around 200 A.D. The New Testament has been interpreted and reinterpreted on a regular basis for centuries and the treatment of people with disabilities has varied with these changes. Since 400 A.D. various Christian theologians have offered interpretations of intellectual disabilities as evidence that immorality is inheritable (Miles, 2001). Fifteen centuries later similar arguments were used to support the eugenics movement in the United States and elsewhere, including Nazi Germany. Sixteenth century reformer, Martin Luther made remarks about drowning children with disabilities based on his belief that these were not actually human children but rather incarnations of the devil (Miles). Not all theological interpretations of disability in Christianity are so negative. Indeed many people with disabilities were treated far more kindly by social service institutions run by the church than they would have been in state operated prisons or asylums. The overwhelming message of the Jesus narratives, however, serves to set people with disabilities apart from
the rest of society until acted upon by God. Implicit in the message is the idea that those who are not healed or do not live well with a disability are in some way removed from God and therefore from the community.

Islam

Of the Abrahamic traditions, Islam is the most recent and in many ways the most inclusive of people with disabilities. The word Islam means “submission to the will of Allah”. Muslims believe that we are each born in the body that Allah intends us to have. Allah is perfect as is his work. Therefore, to dishonor or exclude people with disabilities from civil society or religious life is to disrespect and disregard the will of Allah (Miles, 2002b). Health is benevolence from Allah, however, disease and disability are not expressions of divine punishment or wrath. Rather, disability tests individuals and in the process allows opportunities for atonement (Rispler-Chaim, 2007). Disabilities are considered normal aspects of the human experience by the Qu’ran and Islamic law as evidenced by the prescriptions for how and to what extent individuals with disabilities can and should participate in religious and secular life (Miles, 2001; Rispler-Chaim). The Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament describe the ways and extents to which participation in religious and social life should be limited or restricted for people with disabilities. Islamic law and the Qu’ran call explicitly for the inclusion of people with disabilities in social life through emphatic denials of ideas about contagion or pollution associated with disability (Rispler-Chaim). Participation in religious life and activities are required of all Muslims, with or without disabilities. Accommodations are offered to people with disabilities to make their participation in religious life possible to the greatest extent. They are also excused without consequence from religious requirements that are simply beyond an individual’s ability. The individual is clearly not defined socially or religiously by his disability (Miles). In marked contrast to its Abrahamic predecessors, Islam treats people with disabilities as fully participating members of the social and spiritual community (Miles).

Perhaps more so than the other two Abrahamic traditions, the Qu’ran and its teachings also function as the basis for modern civil law in Islamic societies. As far back as the seventh century Muslim courts were debating whether or not men with intellectual disabilities should be allowed to own property. Arguments around the issue would be considered progressive today. A man who may not manage property because of an intellectual disability should still be allowed to try to do so. On the other hand is it the responsibility of the community to prevent potential harm from coming to this man by protecting him from the risk of losing property as a result of his inability to manage it? The debate tends to give more weight to the idea that to deny a man the right to own property is a greater harm than would come to him were he to lose his property (Miles). Additionally, part of honoring the will of Allah, according to the Qu’ran, is the idea that people in a community are responsible for each other because each person is created by Allah and should be honored as such. A practical consequence of this teaching is an enhanced sense of community responsibility for providing people with disabilities with what they are unable to provide for themselves (Miles). Contradictions exist however, between Qu’ranic teachings that Allah is perfect and therefore people are created as Allah intends them to be, and teachings that “for each illness, Allah has provided a remedy” (Miles). In practical terms, modern Muslims may find themselves confused as to the appropriateness of interventions that can alter a state of disability. Such acts might be interpreted as an act of rebellion or an avoidance of a trial Allah has intended for the person.

Overall, the Qu’ran and Islamic law are most remarkable in the relative little they say about people with disabilities compared to the other Abrahamic traditions. As previously discussed, images of disability are used repeatedly in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles as representations of God’s wrath, punishment for sins, metaphors for turning away from God, or to provide opportunities for demonstrations of divine benevolence and greatness through miraculous healing. These narratives are conspicuously absent from Islamic writings (Miles, 2001; Rispler-Chaim, 2007). Beyond efforts to clearly articulate ideas of inclusion and civil protection, relatively little else is said about people with disabilities. A possible rea-
son for this absence is an effort to normalize disability and to think of abilities and disabilities as one aspect of human condition within the range of possible characteristics bestowed by Allah. As such, people with disabilities are full members of the community who may have specific needs that must be met in order to fulfill Allah’s will but whose needs do not marginalize them or limit their access to the full experience of living in community with other Muslims (Miles).

**Personal Religious and Spiritual Experiences**

As interesting as the history of religion and the images of disability presented therein are, none of it matters if disconnected from the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities and their families. As has been examined, there is a long tradition of ambiguity about the meaning of disability and the place individuals with disabilities have in a culture based on religious history. On one hand rarely have individuals with disabilities been allowed to articulate their own needs and faith experiences as fully functioning members of spiritual communities. Recently, however, religious institutions have begun to understand that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have spiritual lives and religious needs that are fully their own and quite similar to the needs of individuals without disabilities (Collins et al., 2003; Swinton, 1997; Yong, 2007).

Religious beliefs, spirituality, and faith traditions provide structure that individuals with disabilities (and others) use to create meaning in their lives. The religious experiences of individuals with disabilities and the religious experiences of their families or other caregivers are often overlooked in the multicultural pedagogy of special education and in the practices of otherwise culturally competent special educators. There is a growing body of literature, however, that indicates that religion is personally relevant and meaningful to individuals with disabilities in their daily lives.

**Spirituality and Individuals with Disability**

Children with and without disabilities think quite a lot about God, in whatever form dictated by the iconography of their culture (Torstenson-Ed, 2006). The diversity of religious beliefs among children in classrooms should automatically dictate the inclusion of religion in a multicultural pedagogy. As seen in the exploration of the Abrahamic traditions, however, religious teachings about disability add a layer of complexity to children’s religious thinking. Webb-Mitchell (2008) writes about his experiences working with children with emotional disabilities and intellectual disabilities in an institutional setting. He found that spirituality was the common ground on which he could meet and talk with these children. Although the framework is in the Christian tradition, the belief system or the doctrine is not the point of the stories he shares. Rather, children who had great difficulty understanding the external reality of the world around them and the internal workings of themselves because of emotional or intellectual disabilities, expressed deep and prolonged interest in both the practical and metaphysical aspects of their religious experiences. The examples Webb-Mitchell (2008) provides describe products of childhood religious imagination that are not noticeably different from the religious interests of other children.

Nearly 50 years ago Margaret Mead shared her observations of the power religious instruction has to promote wholeness among people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Smith & Johnson, 1997). She described the implicit recognition of a person’s humanity when she is fully included in the ritual and doctrine of a spiritual community. Israeli parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities describe the normative function of the bar and bat mitzvah rituals (Vogel & Reiter, 2004). Temples, churches, and mosques across the country are developing programs and practices to become more inclusive and recognizing the important contributions that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities make to spiritual communities (Harris, 2006; Vogel, Poloway, & Smith, 2006).

Families and caregivers of individuals with developmental disabilities often report that their faith informs their attitudes and decisions around issues concerning children and other family members who have disabilities. Some interpret their experiences of caring for a child with intellectual or developmental dis-
abilities as an opportunity for spiritual growth. Other families interpret the experience as a test of faith (Marshall, Olsen, Mandelco, Dyches, Allred, & Sansom, 2003). Parents may also interpret children’s disabilities as punishment for their own misdeeds (Glover & Blankenship, 2007) and therefore they feel significant shame or guilt. Religious beliefs inform parents’ attitudes about what interventions can or should be implemented for their children. Similarly, families who are adherent to deterministic religious beliefs may not want services they believe will interfere with whatever plan or reason God had by creating their child’s disability (Cho, Singer, & Brenner, 2000). Internalized blame and shame about disabilities can contribute to a parent’s lack of participation in decision processes. Special educators must be sufficiently aware of these issues to be able to include religion in discussions with families when designing individualized education plans and services for children. Parents who believe that God will heal their child through prayer may not be interested in elaborate or involved interventions that schools are eager to try. On the other hand, however, schools should also be aware that participation in religious rituals like Bar and Bat Mitzvahs can be very important to families. Part of culturally responsive teaching is to provide services that allow children increased access to activities that are developmentally, age, and culturally appropriate (Rogers-Dulan, 1998). Special educators need to be aware of religious activities, traditions, and cultural milestones that may be important to students and their families so that they can work together to support children’s full participation in these cornerstones of childhood experiences (Vogel & Reiter, 2004). Reaching beyond the school walls and lending expertise to religious organizations as they work to become more inclusive and accessible to people with developmental and intellectual disabilities and their families is important (Summers & Jones, 2007). Special educators in our global community have an obligation to inquire and understand the spiritual needs of individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities in order to plan instruction that increases access to the normal functions of daily life to which all people are entitled.

Discussion

Given the extent to which religious and political thought are historically intertwined, it is reasonable to question the extent to which various interpretations of scripture have been influenced and changed over time. We cannot ignore the fact that religious thinking informs conceptions of disability. As special educators we must also understand that the efficacy of our work may depend on the ability to work with individuals and families who are influenced by religious or spiritual conceptions of disability that may or may not agree with our own. The brief and incomplete survey of Abrahamic texts presented here should make clear the extent to which religious teachings are ambivalent and often contradictory in the messages they present about both the nature of and responses to disability. Religion and spirituality are meaningful experiences for people with and people without developmental disabilities (Matthewes-Green, 2005). Furthermore, people with disabilities can enrich the spiritual life of a religious community (Vogel et al., 2006). Special educators have a responsibility to inquire about and consider the ways in which faith traditions influence the beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities so that we can work with them to promote access to the full experiences of life with the greatest autonomy and self determination possible (Dellassoudas, 2000).

Conclusion

Future research should include an exploration of religion and disability that is wider and deeper than the current introductory survey presented here. Other belief systems may interpret disability in ways that are substantially different than the Abrahamic traditions. For example, disability is an important role in the central tenets of Buddhism and can be seen as a desirable quality when one is seeking to distance oneself from society (Miles, 2002a). How do ideas like these influence students with disabilities, families, and teachers? There is far more to explore in the Hebrew and Christian bibles and the Qu’ran both in the images of disability presented and the act of religious literary criticism itself.
Qualitative research should explore what teachers think about religion, disability, and the intersection of the two in their practice. Students, parents, and special educators need opportunities in which to reflect on their beliefs about their spiritual and religious beliefs about developmental and intellectual disabilities in order to understand how, when, and why these beliefs influence needs, service delivery and instructional practices.

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