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ARTICLES

A Disabling Medieval Religious Discourse: The Paradox of The Suffering Christ

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The image of the suffering Christ raises many intriguing questions about humanity, the human body, and what it means to be "made" in *imago Dei*, the image of God. It also broaches the subjects of bodily difference and impairment. High and late medieval devotion was rooted in the image of the bleeding Christ in bodily pain. Yet while pious Christians glorified and imitated Christ's human suffering, individuals with impairments who may have experienced their own bodily pain remained passive "objects" of miraculous cure, charity, or fear rather than active spiritual "subjects" in eleventh- to fourteenth-century Latin Christian European religious discourse. This essay explores this paradox, proposing five religio-cultural obstacles that the Church would have faced in transforming its discourse on impairment.

Incarnation doctrine is central to Christian belief. Since the Council of Nicaea, Latin Christian theology has affirmed the hypostatic union, or the human-divine nature of Christ. The image of the suffering Christ raises many intriguing questions about humanity, the human body, and what it means to be "made" in *imago Dei*, the image of God. It also broaches the subject of bodily difference. How are persons with impairments viewed within religious discourse? Are they disabled? This essay provides a brief account of the high and late medieval (i.e. eleventh to fourteenth centuries) Latin Christian European religious discourse on physical impairment. This religious discourse, which shaped and reinforced extant stigmas, will be nuanced by related institutional practices and contextualized by the concurrent devotional environment. While I do not wish to reinforce a merely Eurocentric vision of the Middle Ages, I have limited the geographic scope given my previous research on medieval European popular religious practices and theological developments. It is unfeasible to provide a global yet nuanced account of disability within this essay's page constraints, as cultural views and experiences of disability varied greatly among societies in the Middle Ages.[1]

High and late medieval devotion was rooted in the image of the bleeding Christ in bodily pain. Yet while pious Christians glorified and imitated Christ's human suffering, individuals with impairments who may have experienced their own bodily pain remained passive "objects" of miraculous cure, charity, fear, or sin rather than active spiritual "subjects" in religious discourse. This

1 Scholars such as Kristina Richardson have produced excellent research on societal perceptions and experiences of disability in the medieval Islamic world. See Kristina L. Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

essay explores this paradox, proposing five religio-cultural obstacles that the Church would have faced in transforming its discourse on impairment. These factors include: 1) the Christian tradition's intermittent association of impairment with sin; 2) hagiographical objectification of persons with impairments; 3) almsgiving practices that earned benefactors their salvation through people with impairments; 4) European judicial practices of corporal punishment; and 5) medieval systems of aesthetics and theologies of bodily glorification. Scholarship to date has not investigated the glaringly-apparent gap between the high and late medieval imagery of Christ and the religious discourse on impairment.

Methodology: Models of Disability

The medieval lexicon lacked a clear term for disability as it is understood today. Brandon Parlopiano convincingly argues that while medieval canon law evidenced an implicit *conceptual* distinction between disability and impairment, medieval discourse did not have a universal system of *linguistic* differentiation.[2] "Disability" as a modern umbrella term denoting the stigmatization of impairments did not enter the English language until the sixteenth century. Medieval religious discourse instead often described impairments through highly-individualized terminology. Theologians specified individual physical or sensory impairments, using terms to refer to persons with mobility impairments, (*contracti*, or "crippled"), persons who were blind (*caeci*), and people with epilepsy (*epileptici*).[3] The absence of a universal medieval term for disability requires scholars to impose modern theoretical frameworks on medieval religious discourse while contextualizing contemporary understandings of impairment.

Modern critical understandings of disability are broadly categorized into four models: social, medical, cultural, and religious. Disability studies first emerged in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s amid the British political disability movement.[4] The social model was proposed soon after, evolving from social psychologist Erving Goffman's work on stigma, visibility, identity, and deviance just a decade earlier.[5] The social model, which envisions disability as socially constructed, is commonly accepted by scholars today. While the medical model conflates impairment and disability, rendering bodily difference solely as an anatomical problem to be cured, the social model distinguishes between the two. Within the social model, impairment is a medically-defined

2 Brandon Parlopiano, "*Propter Deformitatem*: Towards a Concept of Disability in Medieval Canon Law," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 4, no. 3 (October 2015): 72–102, https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v4i3.232.

3 Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4

4 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-140*, 20.

5 Ibid, 22.

difference or condition separate from disability, which is the stigmatization of and discrimination against persons with impairments. Impairments are not inherently disabilities. As Joshua Eyler aptly explains, the social model highlights how societies "disable" those with impairments "by imposing definitions of normativity and ability onto the social world."[6]

The cultural model fuses the medical and social models to some extent, investigating how medical knowledge, social norms, and other factors affect the lived experiences of disability in specific cultures. Definitions of "health" or "normal" physiology, as well as the degree to which societies accept bodily difference, vary temporally from culture to culture.[7] Unlike the medical and social models, adherents to the cultural model contend that "disability" encompasses *both* the societal stigmatization of impairments and what Carol Thomas dubs "impairment effects," or the potential pain and physical restrictions that "arise directly from their impairments."[8] As both a lived experience and a mirror of societal ideology, the disabled body can also aid scholars in understanding cultures. According to Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper, cultures "use physical and cognitive differences to narrate, organize, and interpret their world."[9] Disability itself has discursive power. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder also highlight how literature has historically utilized disability as a literary device through a process of "narrative prosthesis."[10]

The religious model, popularly applied in medieval disability studies, explicates the institutional Church's role in shaping conceptions of disability. Edward Wheatley argues that with medieval medical knowledge confined to monasteries and universities, Church dogma and praxis were most influential in the construction of disability accepted by the wider public.[11] Through this conceptual model, scholarship may discern how the Church produced a "disabling" discourse by stigmatizing bodily differences in written treatises, spoken sermons, and papal documents.

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6 Joshua R. Eyler, *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 4.

7 Irina Metzler notes how impairment is also dynamic, as the medical field has defined impairments differently throughout history (and amongst different societies). See Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400*, 21-36.

8 Carol Thomas, "Rescuing a Social Relational Understanding of Disability," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 6, no. 1 (2004): 22–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410409512637.

9 Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper, eds., *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 4.

10 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

11 Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

This essay adopts a combination of the cultural and religious models of disability, thus defining "impairment" as a physiological difference, permanent injury, or biological condition. "Disability," as defined in this essay, will refer to both the societal stigmatization and the potential physical restrictions of lived impairments. Specifically analyzing medieval religious discourse on impairment inherently aligns with the religious model. Yet while the Latin Christian Church shaped European cultures, contemporary societies also influenced the Church. Utilizing the cultural model allows for analysis of a range of interrelated factors which shaped medieval understandings of disability, and subsequently, the lives of individuals with impairments. It provides a scheme for analyzing the role of disability in medieval religious discourse and why impairment was portrayed as such.

Religious Discourse on Impairment and the Paradox of the Suffering Christ

High and late medieval religious discourse positioned persons with physical impairments as "objects" of sin, fear, or disgust. Drawing from New Testament passages, religious discourse sometimes associated visible impairment with individual sin. Disabling theology simultaneously rendered individuals with impairments as "incomplete" manifestations of *imago Dei* requiring miraculous cure. Medieval hagiographies appropriated this biblical theme, exploiting persons with impairments to emphasize the spiritual sanctity of the saint with supernatural healing powers. Papal decrees on almsgiving also disabled individuals with impairments by positioning them solely as objects of charity who existed for the salvation of philanthropists. Each of these elements will be explored in detail as part of this essay's central analysis.

There is a blatant disconnect, however, between the Church's disabling discourse just cited and the simultaneous devotional environment. High and late medieval piety obsessively fixated on the suffering of Christ and the wounds of his mutilation. Theological developments from the twelfth century onwards oriented religious fervor toward glorifying the humanity of Christ. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153 CE), Clare of Assisi (d. 1253 CE), and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 CE) explored incarnation doctrine, diverting from the former atonement and divine justice theories of Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109 CE) and Peter Abelard (d. 1142 CE).[12] As Aquinas debated how Christ partook in the universal postlapsarian "defects" or impairments of humanity, other twelfth-century theologians stressed the physical, bodily suffering of Christ. They portrayed his bleeding body as a model of "perfect obedience" and as a potential site of divine union via *imitatio Christi*, or imitating Christ's suffering. Thirteenth-century Christianity idealized affective, or bodily and sensuous, piety and the "productivity of pain and even of social ostracism,

12 David H. Jensen, "Medieval Christologies," in *Christian Understandings of Christ: The Historical Trajectory*, ed. Denis R. Janz (1517 Media: Fortress Press, 2019), 93–150.

as conducive of *imitatio Christi*."[13] However, the spiritual merit of physical pain was reserved for mystics, ascetic monks, and martyrs while excluding individuals with impairments.

Material culture reflected devotional practices and teemed with images of the impaired Christ. The Cult of the Wound of Christ developed in eleventh- and twelfth-century monasteries and spread to the Christian laity. Mystics such as Thomas à Kempis (d. 1471 CE) urged Christians to "rest in Christ's Passion, and live willingly in His holy wounds," describing his side wound as a special access point for the soul's divine union.[14] As curative "wound amulets" circulated, Books of Hours depicted Christ's wounds with corresponding prayers showcasing his fleshly suffering.[15] Artwork portrayed the "broken," bleeding Christ and his bodily emaciation, unlike later Renaissance works which extolled his perfect form.[16]

Analysis: Obstacles to Discursive Transformation

Despite the newly-emphasized veneration of the suffering and impaired body of Christ, medieval Christianity did not transform its disabling religious discourse. Persons with impairments remained *objects* in religious discourse rather than *subjects* and active agents with spiritual merit. There is a stark contradiction within the tradition: the Church exalted the bodily suffering of Christ and the "holy pain" of martyrs, saints, and practitioners of *imitatio Christi*, but withheld conferring the same dignity upon individuals born with or later acquiring physical impairments. Analysis will now propose five factors which seek to explain this contradiction, and why the high and late medieval Church did not remedy this paradox by transforming its discourse on impairment.

Impairment and Sin in the Christian Tradition

New Testament theology informed the medieval Church's constructions of disability. Patristic and medieval theologians sometimes interpreted biblical excerpts as attributing impairment to divine retribution for an affected individual's sins. Modern scholars, such as Nancy Eiesland, often point to passages such as Luke 5:18-26 or Mark 9:43-48, which seemingly make this

13 Hannah Skoda, "Representations of Disability in the Thirteenth-Century Miracles de Saint Louis," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua R. Eyler (Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 54.

14 Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 303.

15 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 303.

16 See the *Holkham Bible Picture Book* (Add MS 47682, fol. 32v), c. 1327-1335, parchment, British Library, London, UK, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_47682. See also *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (MS M.917/945, fol. 66v), c. 1440s, Netherlands, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York, https://www.themorgan.org/collection/hours-of-catherine-of-cleves/84. These starkly contrast with later Renaissance depictions of the crucified Christ, like Angelo Nardi, Christ on the Cross, c.1635–1650, oil on canvas, The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, England, https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/christ-on-the-cross-44475.

connection.[17] Medieval society did not exclusively explain impairment as divine retribution, since natural causes were also recognized, but associations between sin and impairment nonetheless persisted in religious discourse. This correlation is found in texts written by ecclesiastics, such as *Topographia Hibernica* ("Topography of Ireland") by the historian and archdeacon of Brecknock, Gerald of Wales (d. 1223 CE). In this account, the archdeacon claimed that the bestiality and immoral practices of the inhabitants caused their impairments:

> I have never seen among any other people so many blind by birth, so many lame, so many maimed in body, and so many suffering from some natural defect . . . And it is *not surprising if nature sometimes produces such beings contrary to her ordinary laws when dealing with a people that is adulterous, incestuous, unlawfully conceived and born outside the law, and shamefully abusing nature herself in spiteful and horrible practices.* It seems *a just punishment from God* that those who do not look on him with the interior light of the mind should often grieve in being deprived of the gift of the light that is bodily and external [emphasis added].[18]

The archdeacon explicitly "othered" the locals' bodily impairments, which were visually depicted in anthological versions of the manuscript, as contrary to nature's "ordinary laws."[19] Identifying sinful behavior as the cause of impairment, Gerald of Wales justified divine wrath for neglecting to know God through mystical meditation by "look[ing] on him with the interior light of the mind." Ecclesiastics drew upon biblical themes to brand impaired bodies as manifestations of sin. They exploited persons with impairments as visual warnings of the "consequences" of violating the Church's moral code. This convenient motif disincentivized the Church from transforming its discourse to accept persons with impairments as holy Christians.

Ecclesiastics not only characterized impairment as a marker of individual sin, but also claimed that impairment potentially tempted others to sin. Medieval canon law reinforced stigmas surrounding physical impairment by barring impaired men from the priesthood. Gratian's *Decretum* (c. 1140), the standard medieval text of canon law, drew authority from the Councils of Nicaea (325 CE) and Arles (524 CE), and from biblical exegesis on Lev. 21:18-21. The text prohibited men with bodily "deformities" that inhibited the proper

17 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 69-88.

18 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*, 20.

19 See a marginal manuscript illustration of a man with a mobility impairment in Gerald of Wales' *Topographia Hibernica* (Royal MS 13 B VIII, fol. 30v), c. 1196-1223, parchment codex, British Library, London, UK, https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8804&CollID=16&NStart=130208.

performance of the mass from entering the clergy.[20] As Brandon Parlopiano explains, these regulations and subsequent canonical interpretations stemmed from concerns that priests with visible impairments jeopardized the "validity" of the sacraments, causing potential scandal for the Church.[21] As transubstantiation doctrine developed and affirmed the "real presence" of Christ in the eucharist, ecclesiastical regulations of its administration tightened. Canonists feared bodily differences might distract the laity during the elevation of the host or lead parishioners to question the Church's efficacy, causing them to sin by embracing anti-clerical or heretical ideas. Persons with impairments emerged as objects of fear in religious discourse and practice, as potential threats to the Church — and to the very presence of Christ in the sacrament.

The theme of divine retribution was also fused with the concept of what Nancy Eiesland calls "virtuous suffering," by which impairment was designated as a form of temporal suffering which could lead to eternal salvation.[22] While virtuous suffering might initially appear to present individuals with impairments as active "subjects" with spiritual agency, the concept actually justified the persecution of persons with impairments. Michel Foucault notes a medieval episode in a church in Vienne where a priest expelled a person with leprosy from the grounds, stating that "it has pleased God to afflict you with this disease, and the Lord is gracious for bringing punishment upon you for the evil that you have done in this world."[23] Foucault aptly conveys the harrowing reality of this scene:

> Hieratic witnesses of evil, their [the person with leprosy] salvation is assured by their exclusion: in a strange reversal quite opposed to merit and prayers, they are saved by the hand that is not offered. The sinner who abandons the leper to his fate thereby opens the door to his salvation...Abandonment is his salvation, and exclusion offers an unusual form of communion.[24]

In this excerpt, Foucault expresses how biblical associations of impairment with sin supported a disabling theological system which defined social isolation and discrimination as forms of virtuous suffering. This framework portrayed persons with impairments as objects of sin which became "worthy" of salvation by the very social structure which alienated them. Local ecclesiastical practices, such as the one just described, encouraged the individual to willingly accept persecution as a mode of attaining redemption. Ecclesiastics rationalized their

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20 Parlopiano, *"Propter Deformitatem:* Towards a Concept of Disability in Medieval Canon Law," 84-95.

21 Ibid, 92-95.

22 Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 72-75.

23 Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 6.

24 Foucault, *History of Madness*, 6.

marginalization of persons with impairments as beneficial for their salvation. By doing so, the Church excused itself from transforming its discourse. Medieval religious discourse and subsequent practices portrayed impairment as a sign of individual sin, as a form of virtuous suffering, and as a combination of both. Each form relegated the individual as a subordinate object "deserving" of persecution.

Medieval Hagiographies and Miraculous Healing

Other biblical motifs, namely that of miraculous healing, were prominent in medieval hagiographies, or accounts of saints' lives. Gospel passages often focused on Jesus's supernatural powers which, as Edward Wheatley notes, painted him as a "miraculous healer" and spiritual "physician."[25] Many of the Desert Fathers and early saints such as Antony of Egypt (d. 356 CE), Martin of Tours (d. 397 CE), and Benedict of Nursia (d. 547 CE) were venerated for possessing similar healing powers. Their *vitas*, or life accounts, adhered to hagiographical tropes which described how the saints cured sick individuals and exorcized demons. The miraculous healing theme had enormous potency in the medieval period, when pilgrims traveled near and far to visit saints' shrines in the hope of miraculous cure. Miraculous healing accounts also took center stage in medieval English religious dramas of the York, Chester, and N-Town cycles.[26]

Popular high and late medieval hagiographies reinforced notions of persons with impairments as necessary objects of miraculous healing. According to Andre Vauchez, impairments appear more often in thirteenth-century hagiographies than later ones, evidencing how the medieval Church emphasized "'saints' connections to disability theologically."[27] While hagiographies recounted miracles performed during the saint's lifetime, they also spoke of those performed at saints' shrines or through saints' relics. Healing episodes were also visually-instilled in the medieval psyche through monastic manuscript illustrations and stained glass windows accessible to the Christian laity in their local churches. The Cathedral and Metropolitical Church of Saint Peter in York (commonly known as York Minster), for example, houses one such panel of St. William of York (d. 1154 CE) healing a blind woman.[28]

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25 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*, 10.

26 Wheatley, Edward. "Monsters, Saints, and Sinners: Disability in Medieval Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, eds. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 23, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316104316.003.

27 Wheatley, "Monsters, Saints, and Sinners: Disability in Medieval Literature," 22.

28 See the St. William Window (panel 15b), c. 1414, stained glass, York Minster, UK, http://www.cvma.ac.uk/jsp/record.do?mode=ADV_SEARCH&photodataKey=10604&sortField=WINDOW_NO&sortDirection=ASC&rowsPerPage=20&selectedPage=1&recPagePos=2.

Hagiographical texts upheld disabling biases through narratives of miraculous cure. Some individuals' physical impairments undeniably caused pain or limited their lifestyles, and many embarked on pilgrimages sincerely desiring miraculous cure. However, hagiographies and other forms of religious discourse only spoke of those with impairments in the context of healing. Solely portraying persons with impairments as necessary recipients of miraculous cure implicitly upheld the notion that these individuals were somehow lacking and in need of divine repair. It represented persons with impairments as passive objects to be healed by "superior" saintly Christians. Not only did medieval hagiographies position persons with impairments as canvasses for supernatural healing, but also occasionally rationalized impairment as divine punishment for offending saints or failing to accurately venerate them.[29] In this context, religious discourse conveyed a message that individuals' impairments might signify failed spirituality or devotion.

Persons impaired by leprosy were especially objectified through the hagiographical trope of the "leprous kiss." This *topos*, first appearing in Sulpicius Severus' late fourth-century *vita* of Martin of Tours, later popularly appeared in the life accounts of Marie of Oignies (d. 1213 CE), Angela of Foligno (d. 1309 CE), Margery Kempe (d. 1438 CE), and others.[30] Interpersonal contact with people affected by leprosy, who embodied "disfigurement" and "illness" in the medieval imagination, was believed to spiritually transform the religious person. Julie Orlemanski explains this two-step *topos*, as the subject first expresses extreme disgust before kissing the afflicted and experiencing spiritual transformation. In Bonaventure's famed *vita* of Francis of Assisi, the saint is described as experiencing "an overpowering horror" of people with leprosy.[31] Yet one day while passing an affected individual, Francis, "remembering his need to 'overcome himself' in order to be a knight of Christ," kisses the man and gives him alms.[32]

Model Christians were glorified by kissing persons with impairments. In this *topos*, hagiographies "othered" the individual with leprosy as a feared figure whose "deformity" was positioned as an object to "overcome." As Julie Orlemanski explains, overcoming "disgust" by kissing the individual with leprosy became "its own kind of suffering, a suffering that awaits transformation in the alchemy of penance and *imitatio Christi*."[33] Margery Kempe's account reinforced the medieval belief that "overcoming" disgust to kiss those with impairments spiritually benefitted the holy person by allowing

29 Wheatley, "Monsters, Saints, and Sinners: Disability in Medieval Literature," 25.

30 Julie Orlemanski, "How to Kiss a Leper," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 3 (2012): 42–157, 143, https://doi.org/doi:10.1057/pmed.2012.11.

31 Orlemanski, "How to Kiss a Leper," 150.

32 Ibid, 151.

33 Ibid, 150.

them to identify with Christ's own suffering; as her *Booke* states, "thorw the beheldyng of the seke man hir mende was al takyn into owr Lord Jhesu Crist."[34] Sometimes, as in Martin of Tours's *vita*, the kiss even healed the person with leprosy. Persons with impairments appeared as objects of cure in hagiographies and life accounts, included merely to reinforce the healer's sanctity or credibility. Rather than depicting the potential suffering of the person with an impairment as a mirror of Christ's own afflictions, medieval hagiographies instead highlighted the saint's "suffering" — achieved through the impaired body of the "other" — as a form of *imitatio Christi*.

Hagiographies were often written for canonization purposes and were thus biased to focus on saints' miracles. However, the Church benefitted from this system which exalted saintly healers by degrading those they cured. Saints served important functions as models of perfect obedience and Christian virtue in the Church. With a monopoly over saints' shrines, the Church also benefitted economically from saints' cults as eager pilgrims traversed the globe collecting powerful relics. Miraculous healing cohered with the concepts of divine retribution and virtuous suffering which consistently reinforced the Church's disabling rhetoric. The medieval Church prioritized saints' adoration, which harmonized with its extant theology and interests, rather than discursive transformation, which would have required a theological reorientation.

Almsgiving and Objectification

While the medieval Church used impaired bodies to validate saints' sanctity in hagiographies, almsgiving similarly objectified persons with impairments as passive recipients. Ecclesiastical sermons and letters prescribed almsgiving to care for impoverished people and persons with impairments. Charity took the form of institutional foundations, lump sums, food donations, or monthly rent payments. Alms were given to individuals or to institutions, such as almshouses and *hôpitals* (hospices), which were attached to monasteries or run by bishoprics or lords.[35] People with impairments were often subsumed into the larger marginalized sector of society, despite the fact that not all individuals with impairments were beggars. Some *hôpitals* and almshouses cared for people who were poor, elderly, and impaired alike. Others, like the Hospital of Quinze-Vingts in Paris, focused exclusively on individuals with permanent impairments.[36] Although almsgiving ostensibly benefited persons with impairments, religious discourse portrayed these individuals as objects of charity who enabled almsgivers' redemption.

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34 Ibid, 152.

35 Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, trans. William Sayers (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 78-79.

36 Irina Metzler, "Disability in the Middle Ages: Impairment at the Intersection of Historical Inquiry and Disability Studies," *History Compass* 9 (2011): 45–60, https://doi-org.proxygw.wrlc.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2010.00746.x.

The Church began to emphasize the seven corporal works of mercy around the twelfth century.[37] In the medieval "economy of salvation," almsgiving performed as penance was labelled as one such work of mercy which reduced the benefactor's future Purgatory sentence.[38] The existence of impoverished people and persons with impairments was deemed necessary for the salvation of the wealthy. Pope Innocent III (d. 1216 CE) explicitly communicated this perspective to his lay audience in *Libellus de Eleemosyna*:

> Consider, that the Lord does not so much make the rich because of paupers, then paupers because of the rich; because *the pauper profits the rich man more than the rich man profits the pauper*. For a rich man gives to a pauper temporal alms, however the pauper returns to the rich man eternal recompense [...] In that one whom is given to, it extinguishes thirst, expels famine, and clothes nakedness. But *in the other who gives, guilt is extinguished, culpability is expelled, and sin is atoned for* [emphasis added].[39]

This excerpt reveals how the Church framed almsgiving in a way that objectified impoverished people and individuals with impairments who received alms; they were rendered mere conduits for philanthropists' salvation. Biblical imperatives to serve the marginalized were perverted for the advantage of the wealthy. Just as medieval hagiographies exploited persons with impairments to exalt miraculous saints, systems of almsgiving conveyed beliefs that persons with impairments were only noteworthy in the degree to which they served non-impaired Christians. These attitudes prevented the Church from addressing its theological paradox which glorified the impaired Christ and his bodily suffering yet simultaneously disabled people with impairments.

Almsgiving foundations soon transformed into institutions of isolation, especially for individuals impaired by leprosy. Visibly-impaired leprous bodies fueled medieval fears of contagion, prompting the foundation of specialized leprosariums around 1050 CE to control and isolate the affected.[40] Individuals with leprosy became objects of seclusion and were further stigmatized by Church practices. The Third Lateran Council (1179 CE) called for the institution of separate churches and cemeteries for individuals with leprosy, essentially segregating them from the "mainstream" Christian community. Some churches subsequently instituted ceremonies of expulsion which

37 Adam J. Davis, *The Medieval Economy of Salvation: Charity, Commerce, and the Rise of the Hospital* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019).

38 Hope of salvation remained the predominant motivation for almsgiving despite thirteenth-century mendicants' efforts to stress the motivations behind almsgiving as (dis)qualification for benefactors' spiritual gain.

39 Thomas J. Maurer, "*Triplex Enim Eleemosyna Est, Cordis, Oris, Et Operis*: Pope Innocent III's Spiritual and Rhetorical Approach to Almsgiving" (Master's thesis, Western Michigan University, 2017), 39-41.

40 Susan Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imaginary," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 559–87. https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-2008-007.

required persons with leprosy to stand in open graves and wear black veils in churches, rendering "the leper dead to the world, a solitary outcast" who was forced to live on the periphery of villages.[41] The Church positioned affected individuals as outsiders. Without institutional recognition as members of the Christian community, persons with impairments were not prioritized in religious discourse as active spiritual subjects.

While leprosariums segregated those afflicted by leprosy, monastic-run *hôpitals* and almshouses specialized by the fourteenth century, similarly isolating their constituents. Marginalized groups, including persons with impairments, became scapegoats amid widespread plague and increased criminality rates. Security concerns fueled later structural efforts to criminalize "antisocial behavior," segregate people with leprosy and with mental illnesses, and enforce labor upon the marginalized.[42] By the sixteenth century, the charitable institutions first erected by the Church led to what Foucault called the "Great Confinement" of the early modern period.[43] While papal treatises on almsgiving objectified individuals with impairments by touting the salvific opportunities they afforded the wealthy, Church-founded institutions secluded and "othered" persons with impairments. Both schemes reinforced disabling portrayals of individuals with impairment, ultimately hindering any prospects of discursive transformation.

Ecclesiastics and European Judicial Practices

Secular European judicial practices of corporal punishment also inhibited religious discursive transformation. Some early medieval societies exercised corporal punishment for crimes "including theft, the sexual violation of women, female adultery, defamation, and assault."[44] Forms of mutilation like blinding, branding, disfiguration of the nose, or cutting off ears were sometimes used as "lenient alternatives" to the death penalty.[45] Wheatley has noted how these practices of physical mutilation contributed to the stigmatization of impairment, as people profiled individuals with impairments as potential criminals.[46] This was especially true for people with facial impairments, who emerged as objects of fear in medieval society.

The face was granted especial importance in medieval societies, adopting the philosophy of earlier figures, such as the historian and archbishop Isidore of Seville (d. 636 CE). As the archbishop explained, "the face [*facies*] is named

41 Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imaginary," 560.

42 Stiker, *A History of Disability*, 84-86.

43 Foucault, *History of Madness*.

44 Patricia Skinner, "Mutilation and the Law in Early Medieval Europe and India: A Comparative Study," in *Legal Encounters on the Medieval Globe*, ed. Elizabeth Lambourn (Arc Humanities Press, 2016), 115.

45 Skinner, "Mutilation and the Law in Early Medieval Europe and India: A Comparative Study," 115.

46 Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*, 20.

from 'likeness' [*effigie*], since it reflects the entire form of a man [*tota figura hominis*] and the mind [*cognitio*] of each person."[47] If read in the Aristotelian sense of "form," whereby form unifies matter and defines the essence of a being, the face represented the entire (dis)harmony of the body and the very meaning of what it is to "be" human. Isidore of Seville stated that facial physiognomy even reflects the "mind," which was often conflated with the soul in medieval theological treatises. Interpreted as such, the face revealed individuals' inner spirituality. Facial mutilation consequently effected great shame as others judged the virtue of people with facial impairments based on their outward appearances.

At times, ecclesiastics actively reinforced corporal punishment and shaped legal guidelines to advance moral reform. Archbishop Wulfstan of York (d. 1023 CE), for example, helped draft laws for King Cnut of England (d. 1035 CE) which explicitly prescribed nose-cutting as a punishment for female adulteresses.[48] The relevant directive read:

> A woman who commits adultery with another man whilst her husband is still alive, and is found out, shall suffer public disgrace, and her husband will have all her property, and she will lose her nose and ears. *If she denies it and fails to purge herself, let a bishop take control and punish her severely* [emphasis added].[49]

This quote reveals that in the medieval period, the clergy sometimes had direct power to inflict physical impairment upon sinners who failed to adhere to the Church's moral code. While gender likely affected ecclesiastics' authority to physically discipline transgressors, their role in supporting and even participating in corporal punishment reinforced misleading stereotypes which correlated impairment and bodily difference with criminality. Fourth Lateran Council reforms, impelled by critics such as Peter the Chanter (d. 1197 CE), prohibited clerical involvement in corporal punishment and in the infamous practice of "trial by ordeal" in 1215 CE.[50] Criminality and physical impairment nonetheless remained conflated in medieval minds. This presented yet another obstacle for the medieval Church to overcome disabling stereotypes. Rather than using its discourse to present persons with impairments as meritorious Christians, the Church supported images of impaired individuals as objects of fear to enforce its moral code.

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47 Orlemanski, "How to Kiss a Leper," 146.

48 The nose-slitting of adulteresses had biblical precedent and was prescribed in Byzantine laws of the eighth century, in Cnut's eleventh-century English laws, and in the twelfth-century legal code of southern Italy. See Skinner, "Mutilation and the Law in Early Medieval Europe and India: A Comparative Study," 130.

49 Patricia Skinner, *Living with Disfigurement in Early Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 72.

50 Elizabeth Papp Kamali, *Felony and the Guilty Mind in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Medieval Aesthetics and Theologies of Bodily Glorification

Medieval systems of aesthetics also reinforced the Church's disabling religious discourse which objectified individuals with impairments. These systems of aesthetics inherited Platonic ideals of beauty and degraded impairment as a "deformity" or "disharmony" in the body.[51] Medieval aesthetics were also rooted in the dichotomy-riddled "discursive practices" of ancient medicine. The Hippocratic corpus portrayed sickness as an abnormality and disturbance of the soul. It identified individual foolishness as the cause of illness, reasoning that the "wise man" knows how to identify and thus prevent illness.[52] This pejorative system created the binaries of sickness/health, normal/abnormal, and wise/unwise that fundamentally shaped medieval understandings of normative physiognomy and states of health.[53]

Within the medieval framework of aesthetics, impairments became metrics of comparison which gave meaning to the ideal. Impaired bodies were denied merit in their own rights. Early theologians such as Augustine shaped medieval adaptations of the inherited ancient systems of aesthetics. In *De Natura Boni*, Augustine explains the opposition of beauty and ugliness. Augustine describes deformity and "ugliness" as privations (*privatio bono*) "from divine goodness and beauty"; he asserts that ugliness, defined as "pain and sickness, deformation of limbs and loss of colour," exists to teach us to recognize goodness, immutability, and beauty.[54] Labelling impairments or aberrations from normative physiology as "ugliness" which gives meaning to beauty clearly degraded and objectified individuals with impairments.

Later medieval theologians built upon this foundation, incorporating concepts such as integrity, harmony and proportion. Scholastics such as William of Auvergne (d. 1249 CE) connected the beauty/ugliness dichotomy to proportion while Bonaventure (d. 1274 CE) located proportion's centrality to beauty and pleasure.[55] Aquinas, adhering to Platonic views of bodily shape and structure, defined beauty as accordance with nature and harmony among all parts. He argued that beauty requires integrity, and that incomplete figures are "deformed."[56] Henri-Jacques Stiker argues that Augustine's portrayal of deformity as an intentional aspect of divine creation integrates abnormality

51 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400*, 49-51

52 Meghan Henning, "In Sickness and in Health: Ancient 'Rituals of Truth' in the Greco-Roman World and 1 Peter," in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, eds. Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 185–204.

53 Henning, "In Sickness and in Health: Ancient 'Rituals of Truth' in the Greco-Roman World and 1 Peter," 185–204.

54 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400*, 49.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid, 50-51.

"into the *order* of things," normalizing difference.[57] However, theologians also mused about bodily glorification at the Last Judgement in ways that contest such an assessment.

Augustine, Aquinas, and Anselm agreed that impaired bodies would be perfected following the Last Judgment, and only martyrs would retain their impairments as they showed "no deformity, but only dignity."[58] This variance implied that bodies with impairments currently held an "imperfect" status. It upheld the aforementioned notion that persons with impairments require miraculous cure, whether on earth or in heaven, to become "whole." While martyrs' residual bodily traces of "holy pain" were marks of glory, bodies with impairments remained objects awaiting divine remedy. Christina Van Dyke notes the seeming logical paradox that

> If Christ's hands and feet are permanently mangled by the nails pounded through them and the subsequent weight of his body bearing down on them on the cross, and if St. Lucia's eyes remain permanently removed from their sockets, then those parts of their glorified bodies are not able to perform their 'natural' functions. And yet, they count as the paradigm of perfect bodies in the afterlife![59]

The question scholars should ask, however, is why were only Christ's and martyrs' impairments dignified as "perfect bodies" in medieval religious discourse? How do we account for the sustained wounds of martyrs' glorified bodies and the paradoxical necessity for individuals' naturally-impaired bodies to undergo beautification at the end of time? This essay has responded to these questions with five proposed factors which reinforced this paradox, preventing a discursive transformation within the Church on the questions of impairment and suffering.

While medieval biblical exegesis intermittently identified divine retribution as a cause of visible impairment, medieval hagiographies also depicted the inverse, miraculous cure, which objectified impaired individuals to validate the sanctity of the saintly healer. Religious discourse also expounded a concept of virtuous suffering, which justified the persecution of individuals with impairments as beneficial for their salvation. Popes promoted almsgiving as the solution for benefactors' salvation while European ecclesiastics participated in corporal punishment, strengthening connections between impairment and immorality and fueling stereotypes that people with impairments were criminals. Finally,

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57 Stiker, *A History of Disability*, 76.

58 Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400*, 56.

59 Christina Van Dyke, "Taking the 'Dis' Out of Disability: Martyrs, Mothers, and Mystics in the Middle Ages," in *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Scott M. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2020), 215.

medieval systems of aesthetics and theologians' interpretations of bodily glorification upheld contradictory notions which glorified the "holy pain" of saints, mystics, and martyrs who were impaired at death, and yet disabled individuals' natural or acquired impairments as "deformities" that lacked "dignity."

Medieval disability studies unmasks the discursive power institutions wield. It reveals the power of words in shaping societal notions of normativity, leading to exclusionary practices that marginalize the "out group." Yet impairment exists beyond the margins of the page. Although few first-hand medieval accounts by persons with impairments survive, scholars should not forget that constructions of disability do not encapsulate the lived experiences of those with impairments. As Miri Rubin explains, "Bodies, their pleasure and their pain, their daily routines and their heroic and traumatic moments, are constructed *but also lived* [emphasis added]."[60] Medieval scholars must conduct their research with the lived realities of impairment in mind.

Disability studies' activist roots also challenge scholarship to consider the subject's relevance in the present. The Catholic Church has revised its discourse on impairment in recent years. Acknowledging "pastoral inconsistencies" from diocese to diocese, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued recommendations in 2017 to improve universal sacramental accessibility and "foster attitudes and a parish culture" of inclusivity.[61] The Vatican recently released its own catechesis guidelines in 2020, inviting individuals with impairments to share in the "fullness of sacramental life."[62] The guidelines underscored persons with impairments "not only [as] the recipients of catechesis, but [also as] protagonists of evangelization."[63]

Yet many churches unfortunately remain inaccessible, unwilling to integrate people with impairments in parishes. Accessibility is often understood literally as physical access to spaces. Yet accessibility to communities, to understanding, and to acceptance are equally — if not more — essential for parochial inclusivity. The Vatican should engage with disability studies scholarship, adopting its terminology and conceptual frameworks to deepen critical understandings of disability and to serve as an educational resource. Accessibility solutions, such as appointing disabilities advocates in parishes, should also be directly derived from persons with impairments and those

60 Miri Rubin, "The Person in the Form: Medieval Challenges to Bodily 'Order,'" in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 100.

61 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities (Revised Edition)* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2017), 4.

62 Elise Ann Allen, "Vatican Says Don't Deny Disabled People the Sacraments," *Crux*, June 25, 2020, https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2020/06/vatican-says-dont-deny-disabled-people-the-sacraments/.

63 Allen, "Vatican Says Don't Deny Disabled People the Sacraments."

intimately familiar with them.[64] Medieval religious discourse provides the modern Church an opportunity to reflect upon its rhetoric and its past disabling practices as it works to fully welcome persons with bodily impairments into the "Body of Christ."

64 For example, Karen Jackson, a mother of a child with severe autism and the director of the Faith Inclusion Network at her parish, provides five best practices for parochial inclusivity efforts based on her experiences. See Karen Jackson, "No Barriers," *U.S. Catholic* 85, no. 8 (August 2020): 32–34.