

REVIEW

SWINTON, John, and Brian Brock, eds. 2007. *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church*. London: T&T Clark. 251 pp. Hbk. ISBN: 0-567-04543-9. £65; Pbk. ISBN: 0-567-04558-7. £19.99.

The incredibly multidisciplinary collection of chapters compiled herein is the result of an international multidisciplinary symposium held at the University of Aberdeen in May 2005. Considering ethics, philosophy, social sciences, politics, science and genetics, all in relationship with theology and disability, this work is an excellent demonstration of academic theology discussing genetic science on its own terms. While not being forced into a debate hemmed by the parameters of a bioethics or moral philosophy perspective, it still provides a very significant critique of the present practices of prenatal testing and selective abortion, and society's understanding of disability.

The thorough and helpful introduction by John Swinton communicates that this work does not intend to provide the "right answers." It rather aims to "open up new areas of dialogue and development around issues relating to genetics and human disability"—to ask the "right questions." These questions include: "What does genetic technology look like if we begin with the assumption that God is real and active in the world and that disability does not have to be understood primarily in terms of suffering or tragedy?" and "What moral shape does genetic technology take on when the discussion begins with the assumption that people with even the most profound forms of disability live lives that are worth living...?"

The book is divided into four sections with chapters by different authors. Beginning with personal experiences of disability, Brian and Stephanie Brock reflect on their struggle through the medical quagmire of prenatal testing surrounding the birth of their son. Christopher Newell considers the "moral encoding found in the everyday" and accounts of personhood in his chapter, "What's Wrong with You?" Martina Holder-Franz broadens the dialogue with her personal pastoral experiences of disability, including the important note that she has "ministered to a number of families who, after much thought and consideration, have decided to continue with their pregnancies [although tests indicated disability] only to discover that their child was born without any form of disability." Tom Shakespeare's written dialogue demonstrates the difficulty of delineating positions and boundaries with regard to prenatal testing.

Although several authors have extensive experience *with* persons with disabilities, it is significant (perhaps even disappointing) that the book only has one chapter written from the perspective of a person with a disability. This lends weight to the common critique that persons with disabilities are being talked "about" instead of "to." Considering the centrality of the disability experience to the discussion, it could be seen as an oversight on the part of the editors. It might, on the other hand, be viewed as a witness to the fact that the many voices of persons with disabilities have been silenced for centuries, that others must speak for them, or that, with development in genetic technologies, one can only expect the absence of the perspectives of persons with disabilities to increase.

Opening Part 2, "Eugenics and the New Genetics," Amy Laura Hall observes the links between mainline Protestantism and American eugenics, resulting in "responsible" citizens seeking "fewer and better babies." She examines the relationship between these agendas and voluntary eugenic decisions today. Mary Mahowald dis-

cusses the famous statement by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." She considers the similarity of attitudes from the previous century to current practices of prenatal testing and selective termination.

In Part 3, "The Promise of the New Genetics," Walter Doerfler contributes a geneticist's perspective on the human condition. Doerfler asserts that "Science cannot and will not realistically aspire to change the constraints of nature." His perspective provides an interesting contradiction to other common interpretations of the aims of genetic science, such as Bacon's oft-quoted aim, "to relieve man's estate." Blair Smith discusses the implications of genetics research on Public Health and Primary Care Medicine. Genetics, Conversation and Conversion, the combined effort of Brock, Doerfler and Hans Ulrich, brings together human genetic science and analyses its theological implications.

Part 4 covers "Theological Reflections on the New Genetics." Hans Reinders' contribution includes the significant challenge that "the most important task of ethics with regard to intellectual disability is to reflect upon what it is to appreciate life as it turns out to be." Reinders questions the sceptical attitude that indicates that "good" is dependent upon "choice." Bernd Wannewetsch suggests that "person" is best understood with the disabled as key to recognizing personhood. He explains why recognizing personhood is "a spiritual, rather than empirical matter." For some readers his reflection on the "angelic mission" of persons with disabilities may seem to be a romanticization of disability. However, those who've experienced a "transformation" while personally caring for or befriending a disabled person are more likely to agree with this assessment. Brent Waters contrasts receiving children as "gifts" with scrutinizing their existence in rigorous quality control. Finally, Jeffrey Bishop considers the objectification of the body necessary to achieve the goals of modern medicine.

Robert Song's conclusion effectively weaves together the 13 chapters of *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics*. He suggests a way forward which includes the possibility that there is a different story to be told with regard to disability. Although readers are likely to find some parts of the book more helpful than others, as a whole it presents food-for-thought for students and seasoned academics alike. It questions the core of society's understanding of "disability" and clearly points out the contradiction in a society increasing research in pursuit of a greater ability to diagnose "genetic defect" prenatally, while simultaneously working to affirm the full personhood, humanity and legal rights of persons with disabilities. Combining the expertise and experience of several key Theology and Disability "thinkers" and "practitioners," this work has pressed into fields of inquiry in these combined subjects not previously considered. It emerges as a must-read for anyone asking what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.

Caroline Collie  
PhD Candidate  
University of Edinburgh