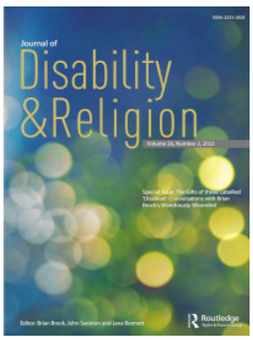

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Holding Close Both the Wonder and the Wounds

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ABSTRACT

Brian Brock's recent *Wondrously Wounded* is a welcome addition to the growing theology of disability literature. Despite its many virtues, I think *Wondrously Wounded* runs the risk of distorting the Church's identity with regard to how it has responded to disability. Drawing on Hilde Lindemann's work on 'holding' and 'letting go' of identities, I try to strengthen Brock's call for the Church. Our collective work toward the realization of the gospel requires that together we hold the Church's wounds, and not just its wonders, as part of the narrative we recount.

KEYWORDS

church history;
disability;
moral theology;
intellectual disability

As he describes it elsewhere, the central aim of Brian Brock's *Wondrously Wounded* is "to discover the gift that is the diversity of the human family through doxological perception" (Brock, 2020a).[1] And Brock's book is certainly a gift. There is much in the book that people should ponder and it deserves to help shape theology of disability discussions to come. Part II is especially important for rethinking how our culture treats testing and procedures in problematic ways. There needs to be widespread uptake and reflection on the important issues Brock raises here. It would have been helpful for me, for instance, to have read this section before being thrown myself into the sea of perinatal testing and genetic counseling, with all its ableist and eugenic undercurrents. Brock shows that our approach to disability is largely a function of the neoliberal market state where value is functionally set by market forces rather than being set by theological reflection, bringing political critiques that one usually finds elsewhere into the theology of disability literature. And he rightly notes the ways even well-meaning individuals and churches can operate from a position of implicit and unrecognized ableism that needs to change. That won't happen without those assumptions being brought to light. And Brock is doing his part to make that happen. *Wondrously Wounded* avoids framing issues of disability as grounds for the problem of evil, as too commonly happens.[2] Instead, it recognizes that disability is a day-to-day part of our

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communal lives together that calls into question much of how our culture, and the contemporary Western Church,[3] thinks about disability. While I think that Brock's book is valuable in this regard, I think that it runs a risk of distorting the Church's identity with regard to how it has responded to disability. Drawing on Hilde Lindemann's work on 'holding' and 'letting go' of identities (2014), I try to strengthen Brock's call for the Church.

I focus my comments on how narrative is part not just of Brock's project, but also a central element of how groups, including the Church, think about topics such as disability. Brock's personal narrative with his son Adam frames his methodological starting point, and the book's contents are intricately connected with the telling of the story. But, especially in theological contexts, there's no such thing as *just* telling a story. The personal is political. It's also philosophical (Kittay, 2010). And it's theological (Ahlvik-Harju, 2020). Given the interweaving of stories about Adam with the philosophical and theological (and thus also political) themes, it's difficult, if not impossible, to fully separate the personal stories from the use that Brock puts them to. There's a danger, then, that arguing with the theological or philosophical aspect of the book will look like an attack on Brock's love for and devotion to Adam, or, even worse, on Adam himself. Some stories are communal in the telling, as Brock thinks of his story with Adam. (Frances Young, another disabled parent, agrees: "In the end, I guess, Brock and I have reached the same position: that the story is 'ours' rather than 'his'…" (Young, 2020) Brock makes clear that his story and Adam's intersect rather than being identical; he wants it to be clear, rightly, that not all the difficulties in his life involve Adam:

> Adam's life is not the locus of my own heaviest crosses. His life places constrictions on mine, but not ones that obscure the gifts that continually flow through him (Brock, 2020a).[4]

Brock, also to his credit, is worried that the story of his relationship with Adam could become a 'prop', particularly given Adam's cognitive disability:

> If Adam is going to appear before you in his own right, there are limits to what I can and should tell about him. Only one of us has the power to define both of our lives by telling our story, and this imbalance comes with real dangers. The first is to tell his story as a way of proving my own credentials to speak on this topic, a gesture that has become so familiar in disability theology circles (Brock, 2019, p. xiii).[5]

Recognizing these dangers, Brock allows for others to push back against his narrative (Brock, 2020b). This willingness is just one of the many

examples of the epistemic responsibility that Brock takes in how he approaches the issues (see Ahlvik-Harju, 2020; Kittay, 2010).

That said, I do want to push back a little, not necessarily because I think he's wrong, but because sometimes it's too easy to fail to notice issues that we care about (Timpe, 2014).[6] The title of my essay is a nod not only to Brock's book, but also to Hilde Lindemann's *Holding and Letting God: The Social Practice of Personal Identities* (2014). According to Lindemann, "we are initiated into personhood [through] interactions with other persons, and we simultaneously develop and maintain personal identities through interactions with others who hold us in our identities. This holding can be done well or badly" (Lindemann, 2014, p. x).[7] For Lindemann, our social interactions create a person's identity, beginning before they are born and ending only after they die. Personhood isn't a quality of individual subjects, but a communal practice.

In Lindemann's terminology, a person's identity is narratively constituted; that is, we are characterized by

> tissues of stories and fragments of stories generated from both first- and third-person perspectives, that cluster around what we take to be our own or others' most important acts, experiences, characteristics, roles, relationships, and commitments…. They are, that is to say, narrative understandings formed out of the interaction between one's self-concept and others' sense of us (Lindemann, 2014, p. 4).

For those who are not able to contribute to their own narrative identity, or can't do so in a way that others recognize,[8] their personal identity in the relevant sense is a function of those stories told solely by others. They govern not only what we expect from others, the lens through which we interpret others' actions, but they also make intelligible "how *we* are supposed to act with respect to them" (Lindemann, 2014, p. 6). All children, especially initially, have their identities formed by their families as they are folded "into the ongoing narrative of the live they live in common" (Lindemann, 2014, p. 7) with their family members.

Given that I've not interacted with him and only know him through Brock's writings, I don't want to claim that Adam doesn't have the relevant first-person capacities to help construct his narrative identity. From Brock's discussion of Adam's condition, it seems as if he's not able to communicate in a way that contributes directly to forming the public narratives about him. In this way, he may be similar to Lindemann's sister Carla, who had severe hydrocephaly and died at 18 months of age. Speaking of Carla, Lindemann writes:

> It's doubtful that she was capable of forming a self-conception, and even if she did have some sense of who she was, she certainly lacked the ability to express it. The narrative tissue that constituted her personal identity therefore contained no stories from her own, first-person perspective. It was constructed entirely from the

> third-person point of view. We who were her family, along with friends, neighbors, and the many health care professionals she encountered in her short life, gave her all the identity she had (Lindemann, 2014, p. 8).

Carla was 'held in her personhood' by the identity-constituting stories and experiences her family wove around her and her identity, as least as she was known by others, was constructed from these stories and experiences.[9]

Identities, as Lindemann points out, can be contested. The various tissues that they're built up of can conflict. The stories and experiences can also underdetermine parts of our identities. They are always incomplete glimpses of the fullness that lies behind the narrative. If we fail to recognize this fact, we can hold their identities wrong. Sometimes that bad understanding of their identity can be contested, but not always. Contesting an identity takes a certain status with regard to social location, opportunity, and receptivity that not all are granted.

Lindeman talks not just about creating identities, but of holding people in those identities, and releasing them from aspects that perhaps no longer continue to shape their identities:

> Just as families are primarily responsible for initially constructing the child's identity, so, too, are they primarily responsible for *holding* the child in it. They do this by treating him in accordance with their narrative sense of him, and in so doing, they reinforce those stories. But identity maintenance also involves *letting go*: weeding out the stories that no longer fit and constructing new ones that do (Lindemann, 2014, p. 85).

Constructing and holding identities can be done well, and they can be done poorly. We can create identities that we shouldn't, and we can hold people in inappropriate identities. When we construct or hold an identity poorly, what we need is a "counterstory—an identity-constituting story that resets the narrative of the real self and … mends the damage to her own identity as well" (Lindemann, 2014, p. 134). For this counterstory to count as the genuine identity, "the stories it comprises must be accurate portrayals of the person's actions and attitudes" (Lindemann, 2014, p. 136). But such revisions are not always easy to accomplish, particularly in the face of power differentials: "Oppressive master narratives that enter into social group identities commonly make it impossible for the people bearing those identities to express themselves adequately, and then, of course, what they say and do won't get the right kind of response" (Lindemann, 2014, p. 115). The history of how contemporary Western culture has tended to treat disabled individuals is an obvious and appalling instance of power differentials preventing a marginalized group from defining themselves (Shapiro, 1993; Sinclair, 1993). People can be oppressed when they're held

wrong. In many ways, Brock's book is an attempt to help us learn how to hold individuals like Adam better in our theological imagination.

There's a danger, when we construct identities for others, of constructing them wrong in ways that it can then be hard to correct. Brock is aware of this possibility when it comes to his son, Adam, and expends significant effort to avoid falling into this danger. And let me be clear: my concern here is *not* with how Brock constructs Adam's identity.[10]

What concerns me more is how Brock constructs the identity for the larger cultural institutions he addresses, including the Church. (While Lindeman's book focuses primarily on individuals, much of her view also applies to larger social groups such as institutions or traditions.) More specifically, I'm concerned that there's a temptation, which I worry sometimes Brock falls into, of telling the identity-conferring story of the Church wrong, and in a way that can contribute to its identity being held wrong. As Lindeman writes, "Our identities serve as guides for what we are supposed to do" (2014, p. 49). The 'supposed to' here has a normative force. If an institution's identity is constructed inaccurately, then that can contribute to that institution's failing to address an issue that it needs to.[11]

In the opening page of the introduction to *Wondrously Wounded*, for instance, Brock writes that "at least the peoples of the developed West can be proud of having accomplished the task of including people with disabilities in the collective life" (Brock, 2019, p. 1). While Brock is aware that "there is more to be done" (2019, p. 1), I worry that he's overly optimistic about the degree to which disabled individuals are included in public life.[12] According to information about federal district courts in the US, for instance, there were over 39,000 civil rights cases filed in district court during 2017, with over 27% of those being related to ADA compliance. While the total number of civil rights cases not involving the ADA decreased by 12% from 2005–2017, ADA-related civil rights cases rose by almost 400% during that same period.[13] Cases rose again in both 2018 and 2019.[14] Over 5,000 written state complaints are filed under IDEA, and more than three times as many due process complaints.[15] While not every filed case indicates a failure for disabled individuals to have the legal protections afforded to them by the ADA and IDEA, even a quick look at the numbers indicate that neither the ADA nor IDEA, the two major laws regarding disability here in the United States, each of which is over 30 years old, has achieved its goal of providing the kinds of inclusion aimed at. Claiming that "the desire to build societies that are progressively more humane for disabled people is one of modern Westerners' most closely held moral aspirations" (Brock, 2019, p. 141) simply strikes me as false for much of the modern Western world, both individually and structurally.

Brock is aware that "all the ramps and lifts in the world are a poor substitute for open hearts, as hearts hardened to otherness radiate rejection and resistance in physically accessible public places" (2019, p. 2). Achieving social justice requires not only better laws and enforcement; it also requires changing attitudes (Haslanger, 2017). As Judy Heumann makes clear in the documentary *Crip Camp*, laws, even with enforcement, are not sufficient to mean that disabled individuals are sufficiently valued and welcomed into their communities. As others have shown, it's not the case that church congregations are experienced as radiating rejection and resistance less than does general culture.[16]

This optimism is more problematic, in my view, when Brock specifically turns to the Church. "Where citizens of the ancient world saw an anomalous birth as a threatening sign, Christians saw a much more positive divine creative work" (Brock, 2019, p. 9). Perhaps, but certainly not uniformly. Using Augustine as an example will help here.

Augustine's view of disability isn't all bad; like others in the medieval tradition, he "unambiguously refused its [that is, Neoplatonism's] presumption that all disability is a result of humanity's fallen condition" (Brock, 2019, p. 30; see also the discussion in Frost, 2020). While it is true, as Brock argues here and elsewhere, that aspects of Augustine's corpus urge a radical hospitality and communal value that would have been surprising to many in the ancient Roman world, I think it's inaccurate to say that it's always part of "Augustine's wider aim … to normalize human diversity as a natural part of God's story within creation" (Brock, 2019, p. 17). After all, in the very passage that the previous quotation from Brock is engaging with, Augustine says that if certain 'monsters' were indeed born of human parents they lack humanity: "Either the written accounts which we have of some of these races are completely worthless; or, if such creatures exist, they are not men; or, if they are men, they are descended from Adam" (*City of God* 16.8; quoted in Brock, 2019, p. 17) .[17]

While the Christian tradition in general has been a tradition of liberation from bondage (see Brock, 2019, p. 19 and especially Cone, 2010), or at least aimed to be so, it has also historically spread colonialism, constructed apartheid, propagated slavery, perpetuated lynchings, sheltered serial sexual abusers, and tolerated hate crimes against queer folks. While Jesus's ministry may have been to overturn "the dominant ideals of the socially and politically powerful" (Brock, 2019, p. 22) too often the Church has served the worldly powerful rather than its Head. Christianity has all too often failed to hold "every human life to have achieved infinite worth in being the object of Christ's love" (Brock, 2019, p. 25).

The concern then is that Brock's treatment too often paints an overly glossy and idealistic view of the Church. That is, his treatment suggests

an overly optimistic identity which warps the narrative.[18] Given his overly optimistic evaluation, Brock helps hold the Church in a problematic identity that we need to revise for the sake of being who the Church is called to be. While rightly noting that some Patristic thought was the locus of revolution against oppressive social and economic orders (e.g., his discussion of Gregory of Nazianzus's sermon in chapter 1 is excellent), Brock sometimes oversimplifies in a pollyannish way, as in treating this sermon to encapsulate "*the* patristic view of disability" (Brock, 2019, p. 31 emphasis added). If it is true of the patristic period as a whole had a "*grounding in the rule of absolute human solidarity and embodiment in explicit rejections of all sorts of exclusionary practices and attitudes common at that time*" (Brock, 2019, p. 46 emphasis original) the Church since then has far too often not lived into that same ethos. Similarly, in discussing Luther Brock writes that the reformer "has provided the key to moving beyond charity models of disability. *Every human being has a place in God's story*" (Brock, 2019, p. 48 emphasis original). But, as Brock is well aware, it looks as if Luther didn't consistently live out that commitment.[19] If we're going to "[trace] the red thread of the wonder tradition" (Brock, 2019, p. 53) that he emphasizes in part 1, we must also acknowledge that there are other facets of its identity, other threads to trace as well that are equally woven into the fabric of the Christian tradition. We can't just hold the wonder and let go of the continued wounds.

A central theme of James Cone's work in black theology builds on the assumption that "Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation" (2010, p. ix). Theology is always contextual. In order to be specifically *Christian* theology, Cone thinks theology must identify with the goals of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. "There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abuse…. [It is] not only appropriate but necessary to define the Christian community as the community of the oppressed which joins Jesus Christ in is fight for the liberation of humankind" (Cone, 2010, pp. 1, 3). And so Cone thinks that, given how anti-black oppression has and continues to function in our culture, in order to be specifically *Christian* theology, theology must seek to "[speak] of God as related to black liberation" (Cone, 2010, p. 10). If this is right, then so too in order to be specifically *Christian*, our theology must address the oppression, marginalization, and devaluation of disabled individuals.[20] But here we must confront the internal conflicts that are woven throughout Church history and theology. Our tradition is not unified and the dross must be burned away.

In this context, I appreciate that Brock's book aims at "real political insurrection" (2019, p. 11), even within the Christian community. Consider

this my official admission of a willingness to participate. As said earlier, the theological is political. A significant part of the Church's identity *is* political. But political insurrection requires an accurate accounting of failures; that is, it requires theological repentance so that the identity we're drawing on is accurate in the way that Lindemann argues is normative. It requires that we rightly show how the dominant cultural narratives regarding disability as negative have not only been tolerated but supported by the Church through much of its history. In her discussion of Brock's book, Carolin Ahlvik-Harju notes the absence of anger from Brock's text:

> The movement slogans [such as the personal is political and nothing about us without us] also came to mind at times because I sometimes missed the fury with which so many women or people with disabilities and their advocates throughout history have had to claim their place in public space (Ahlvik-Harju, 2020).[21]

I think we sometimes need more anger, even at the Church. Its identity sometimes requires it. When we don't feel it, it's harder to work toward the reforms that are needed. Docility helps hold the Church in an identity that falls short of its calling. It will be easier for us to let go of those aspects of our theology, attitudes, and practices that exclude disabled individuals when we publicly proclaim an accurate account of the Church's identity, both past and present, rather than act as if we've already achieved that identity to which we are called. I agree with Brock that the "politics of hope" (2019, p. 235) to which we're called by the Gospel begins in the present life. But that hope isn't yet fully realized. Our collective work toward its realization requires that together we hold the Church's wounds, and not just its wonders, as part of the narrative we recount. This strikes me as a way in which Brock's book could serve the Church better, even though I think it is already a significant service as is.[22]

Notes

1. In addition to Brock's book, I also engage with the Syndicate symposium dedicated to it, as I think the exchanges there are very helpful is thinking about his project in *Wondrously Wounded*.
2. For a treatment of how disability *is* and *ought to be* related to discussions of suffering and evil in contemporary philosophy of religion, see Kevin Timpe and Hilary Yancey (forthcoming).
3. Much of Brock's book is clearly located within a Western approach to disability in a way that might be worth thinking about; but so too is my own work, as will be my comments here.
4. Brock recognizes, as proponents of social models of disability have long emphasized, that at least many of the difficulties involved are socially imposed on those who have a disability rather than inherent to the disability itself; see his reply to McFarland's contribution to the Syndicate discussion.
5. Miguel Romero refers to this as a 'double bind' in his Syndicate contribution. Here is one way he puts it: "*Would the argument in parts 4 and 5 be undermined if it*

could be demonstrated that there are problems with the historical and interpretive work performed in part 1?" Romero thinks that answer is 'no', but there's a danger. As he puts it later: "The scholarly theological goal to wrestle with what it could possibly mean to 'get Augustine right' or to 'get Aquinas right' simply does not matter for the kind of argument Brock makes in *Wondrously Wounded*. Understanding *Wondrously Wounded* in this way helps us recognize and appreciate *what it is* and understand *what it is not*. It is not everything and it cannot be everything (Brock, 2020a).

6. See the discussion in Timpe (2014). I'm not saying that those with a vested intertest ought not contribute to the scholarship on the issue. In fact, as Elizabeth Barnes has pointed out, we all have a vested interest when it comes to disability: "I used to think I couldn't philosophize about disability precisely because the topic is so personal. But on reflection, that's absurd. Disability is a topic that's personal for everyone. The last time I checked, most non-disabled people are pretty personally invested in being non-disabled. The fact that this sort of personal investment is so easy to ignore is one of the more pernicious aspects of philosophy's obsession with objective neutrality. It's easy to confuse the view from normal with the view from nowhere. And then it's uniquely the minority voices which we single out as biased or lacking neutrality. When it comes to disability, I'm not objective. And neither are you. And that's true wither you're disabled or (temporarily) non-disabled" (Barnes, 2016, ix). See also the excellent discussion in Panchuk (2020).
7. In general, I think that the practice of 'holding someone in personhood' is neither necessary nor sufficient for personhood. (I say 'in general' because it may be that God's holding someone in personhood is in fact both necessary and sufficient for their personhood, given what divine volitions entail.) However, given that here I'm more interested in ethics-y and social/political issues than metaphysics, I'm fine with that (even if Lindemann's book doesn't have as stark of a division between these issues: "human beings can be brought into or held in being [i.e., personhood] by how they are treated" (Lindemann, 2014, p. 3; see also 10–19). But at other times, she writes that the process of narrative construction isn't all there is to personal identity, given that we can misidentify another's personhood (Lindemann, 2014, 8f). She states (21) that her account isn't "intended to supply sufficient conditions for personhood." She admits she might be erring on the side of too social an approach on page 210.) For some related concerns about her approach, see Verkerk 2015.
8. I put it this way because of the history of testimonial injustice against people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual or developmental disabilities; see the discussion in Reynolds and Timpe (forthcoming).
9. For details of her view that that need not concern us here, see her discussion of the necessary conditions in Lindemann (2014), p. 53.
10. Miguel Romero raises a good point about the difference between siblings and parents: "There is a difference between Brock's personal history and the history that frames my own concern with "disability," analogous to the differences Brock acknowledges between his experience of Adam and the way Brock's two youngest children (Caleb and Agnes) experience their older brother Adam (xiii). Here is one way to account for that difference, by way of something I share in common with Caleb and Agnus: long before we three had the concept "disability" and long before the moral and cultural significance of that concept had any articulated meaning, we had the knowledges and family rhythms of our respective lives with Adam and Vicente. For me, decades before I began any formal study of theology, philosophy, and ethics, I had the intellectual and moral formation that came from being raised to presume that our intimate family life with Vicente was normal.…The animating principle that gets the ball rolling on the question of "disability" would be a strange way of

thinking and the challenge it brings to settled Christian presumptions, descriptions, judgments, and practices concerning a loved person. In other words, on Brock's terms, we can imagine someone like Caleb or Agnes setting himself or herself to the work of dogmatic theology or systematic theology or historical theology on questions and puzzles generated by that strange 21st century way of thinking called "disability" (Romero, 2020). As much as I would love Romero's position to be the general default starting point, I don't think we can begin there as a culture for contingent historical reasons.

11. One example that has been getting scholarly attention is the Church's failure to address systemic racism, and specifically anti-blackness, in both itself and the larger culture, a failure that has kept the Church from full repentance. See Thurman (1976), Cone (2004), and Walker Grimes (2017).
12. Consider, for instance, Brock's claim that "universities generally pride themselves in being the most accessible and equitable of public spaces" (2019, p. 230) in light of Dolmage (2017) and McMaster and Whitburn (2019).
13. "Just the Facts: Americans with Disabilities Act."
14. "2019 Was Another Record-Breaking Year for Federal ADA Title III Lawsuits."
15. "IDEA Data Brief: Written State Complaints."
16. See, for instance, the excellent work by Eric Carter, Shane Clifton, Benjamin Connor, and Summer Kinard, among others. As I've discussed elsewhere, "People with disabilities are less likely to attend church regularly than are members of the nondisabled public. According to one survey, adults with disabilities in the US were almost 40% more likely never to attend a church, synagogue, or other place of worship" (Timpe 2018, 91).
17. In Brock 2012, he is less positive about Augustine's evaluation of disability, there noting that Augustine "stands in a long tradition of conceiving of those with physical and mental challenges as residing within a hierarchy of wholeness, at a greater or lesser distance from what we take to be human perfection" (2012, p. 66) as well as Augustine's rationalism that would seem to value cognitive disabled lives. See also the discussion in Timpe (2020). Relatedly, in responding to Ahlvik-Harju's criticisms that his approach is insufficiently explicitly feminist, Brock admits that patristic authors, including Augustine, "are often not good on women" (Brock, 2020c). Brock mentions the need to "relieve the guilt of nun raped during the sack of Rome in the first book of the *City of God*" (Brock, 2020c). Calling Augustine's treatment of the nun's treatment as simply "not good" strikes me as a problematic understatement.
18. McFarland has raised what I think is a related concern about Brock's book: "It's not clear that 'wonders' are always good, in the way that Brock seems to suggest. … '[the] suffering of Christ in the world into which Christians are inevitably drawn in this life. It was precisely this linkage of pain and unexpected divine drawing near that the two words of my title, wondrous *and* wounded[,] highlight'…. 'Wonder' is a word with a range of connotations, and my worry is that Brian's use of it seems at times to tend toward stressing its positive connotations in ways that goes [sic] beyond what is theologically prudent" (McFarland, 2020). Even if, as Brock suggests, wonder is something that must be lived into and not just thought about, McFarland argues that something's being a wonder may be neither intrinsically good nor bad, but simply strange.
19. I discuss the conflicting strands of Luther's thought on disability in Timpe (2020), section 1.2.
20. For a related argument engaging the work of N.T. Wright on these issues, see Timpe forthcoming.

21. Brock does talk about frustration, but I think this is distinct from anger. The latter, I claim, is both sometimes morally permissible and required to address social injustice and oppression.
22. Thanks to Medi Ann Volpe and Jana Bennett for helpful comments on an earlier version of this contribution.

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