

God beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities. By Jill Harshaw. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016. 208 pages. \$85.00.

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Jill Harshaw provides a critical perspective on people with profound intellectual disabilities and their experience of the spiritual life. Harshaw challenges the perceptions of many that people like her daughter Rebecca, who cannot confirm their experiences in words, can experience and likely do experience God, who, as God, can communicate in ways beyond our knowing. As she advocates the methodology of practical theology, Harshaw unpacks the particularities of experience that can be identified along a spectrum from full engagement on the part of an individual to passive reception depending upon a number of circumstances, among them age, past experience, understanding, sensation, and ability to report. This methodology is promising for her study even as she cautions over-reliance on empiricism. She offers caveats to research conducted with persons with profound intellectual and developmental disabilities (PWPIDD, my acronym) concerning the role of language, consent to the research, obstacles to understanding, care with an interpreter's/spokesperson's response for PWPIDD, explorations of alternative methods of communication, and the potential of knowledge gained from this research to change practice.

Harshaw presents her argument for God's communication to PWPIDD over the course of six chapters. For those unfamiliar with the now fundamental literature in disability studies she provides a critical survey of the field. She next presents the work of scholars in practical theology with a fine consideration of qualitative studies using this methodology in reference to PWPIDD conducted by Jon Swinton, Harriet Mowatt, Amos Yong, Thomas Reynolds, and Molly Haslam. She explores the standard vocabulary of theology to great effect, noting in the third chapter "that God is not incapacitated by reason of their [PWPIDD] cognitive deficits from communicating and disclosing himself to and through them" (85). This chapter offers the most sophisticated of her arguments for this communication with a brilliant consideration of theological language surrounding accommodation that includes references to Scripture, its authors, and its interpretations. While she does not play on legal language I was drawn to the parallels regarding accommodations for people with disabilities in the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), the UK Disability Discrimination Act (1995), now replaced by the Equality Act (2010), and the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006). She concludes this part of the text convincingly, underscoring "that God acts to facilitate encounters" (115), arguably, with PWPIDD and with the nondisabled.

The remaining chapters offer appropriate explorations of objections to her argument and forgone conclusions that either PWPIDD could not experience relationship with God or God could not breach the human constructions of disability and thereby establish such a relationship with Harshaw's Rebecca, for example, and other PWPIDD. In the penultimate chapter she returns to Scripture with an investigation of Peter's table fellowship with the Gentile Cornelius and his and his household members' baptism, recounted in Acts 10, from which she mines Peter's conclusion that God shows no partiality in extending relationship beyond the people of the covenant. "Similarly ... there is space in this new inclusive community for [PWPIDD], albeit that others might be unable to identify their access route" (138).

Any claims about what the spiritual experiences of PWPIDD may be by their family members, friends, caregivers, community members, and researchers can be made only through a glass darkly. Nevertheless, and as Scripture and tradition testify, such incapacity on the part of the nondisabled does not forgo the assurance that God discloses to PWPIDD and the nondisabled alike a desire for relationship in the mystical experience of divine encounter. Rather than focus on what PWPIDD may or may not reveal to the nondisabled about their experiences, Harshaw turns her and the readers' attention to what is known about the *kenotic* accommodations of the Christian God.

Harshaw considers honestly the questions that many ask about the value and the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities. This text could serve as a springboard for serious discussion of how God reveals Godself regardless of disability as well as a corrective to presumptions about our own and others' experiences of the divine. *God beyond Words* is recommended for family members of and caregivers for PWPIDD, and for people in ministry, theology, and the helping professions, to approach these concerns with a new appreciation of the possibilities yet to be known. Unfortunately, beyond Harshaw's control, the price of the text will be prohibitive.

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Let me state upfront and clearly: this book has been for me both rewarding and frustrating—rewarding in what it has to say and frustrating in the way it says it. Unfortunately, the frustrations keep getting in the way of the rewards.