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Dis/abling Religion

Introducing Dis/ability as a Social-Analytical Concept for the Study of Religions

Abstract: How do religions and social order interact with each other? Scholars of religions have repeatedly explored this question from numerous perspectives. However, they have yet to utilise the approach of disability studies, which focuses on disability as a social ordering process, to address this question. As such, not only have the manifold empirical relationships between religions and disability often been disregarded, but a great theoretical potential also remains untapped. In this paper, I demonstrate what the study of religions can gain from analysing processes of disablement. In doing so, I introduce the concept of *dis/abling religion*, which integrates the study of religions and disability studies, making it possible to systematically grasp the entanglements between religions, disability, and social order.

Keywords: theory of religion, social order, disability studies, inclusion, social cohesion

Zusammenfassung: Welche Wechselwirkungen bestehen zwischen Religionen und gesellschaftlicher Ordnung? Dieser Frage wird in der Religionswissenschaft immer wieder aus unterschiedlichen Perspektiven nachgegangen. Der Ansatz der Disability Studies, denen es um Behinderung als Prozess sozialer Ordnung geht, wurde jedoch noch nicht verfolgt, um diese Frage zu erörtern. Damit bleiben nicht nur die vielfältigen empirischen Zusammenhänge von Religionen und Behinderung oft unbeachtet, sondern auch ein großes theoretisches Potenzial unausgeschöpft. In diesem Beitrag zeige ich auf, was die Religionswissenschaft aus der Analyse von Behinderungsprozessen gewinnen kann, und stelle das Konzept der *Dis/abling Religion* vor, das Religionswissenschaft und Disability Studies miteinander verbindet und ermöglicht, die Verflechtungen zwischen Religionen, Behinderung und sozialer Ordnung systematisch zu erfassen.

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1 Introduction: Relating Religion and Disability

Exploring disability is an expedient path to examining religions and their interactions with social order. Such an exploration can thus provide deep insights into a central issue in the study of religions. Yet, disability studies have been broadly overlooked within the study of religions as an approach to investigating this long-standing and highly topical subject. With this paper, I hope to signpost this path.

Throughout history, religious communities all over the world have recognised people with disabilities as authorities. Religious beliefs deal with disabilities in their explaining and managing human diversity, numerous religious artworks depict disabled bodies, and some religious practices either cause disabilities or promise healing from them. People with disabilities have variously been exegetes, ritual performers, and critics of religion. Equally, they have been disenfranchised, segregated in special institutions, or even eliminated, in actions legitimised by religions. Excellent case studies provide examples, differentiation and contextualisation for these possible relationships between religions and disabilities (Belser 2018; Garland-Thomson 2020; Ghaly 2011; Johnson, Nelson, and Laud 2017; Rispler-Chaim 2007; Schumm and Stoltzfus 2011a, 2011b, 2016; Staley 2014; Triplett 2019; Wheatley 2010), shedding light on issues which, though deserving of attention,[1] are often overlooked by scholars of religions. However, by exploring these relationships we[2] can accomplish much more: Subjecting them to a more general social-theoretical analysis would illuminate fundamental and far-reaching interactions between religion and social order that, due to their subtlety, are usually opaque to us. For this to be achieved, there are two preconditions. First, the understanding of disability as a biological fact must be left behind: Disability is not a fixed group of certain physical characteristics (*impairments*), such as being unable to walk or having three copies of chromosome 21. According to disability studies, *disability* results from social processes. As social processes and

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1 These issues deserve attention not least because they involve the lives of the world's largest minority, representing 15 % of the world's population (World Health Organization 2011), and often involve questions of human rights.
2 By "we", I mean researchers both with and without experiences of disabilities, whether direct or indirect. I do not mean exclusively non-disabled researchers enriching their knowledge through research on disabled people.

conditions are both context-specific and variable, so is disability as a social con-
struct. Second, disability is not to be deemed a special case: Interactions between
religions and disabilities are not individual cases occurring in isolation from
other, more general processes. Rather, in line with disability studies and social
science approaches such as the post-structuralist sociology of knowledge and
power, we can assume that disability and non-disability – or deviance and nor-
mality – constitute each other. They are two sides of the same coin. The interde-
pendent process that produces both, and thus orders society, however, is more
clearly visible on the disability side, because here the conditions of normality
appear as contested barriers.[3] On the side of 'normal' ability, these barriers
are disguised and so subtle that we can hardly grasp them. Therefore, as Fou-
cault (1982, 211) noted, normality is best understood through the lens of that
which is labelled its opposite. As such, by analysing the relationships between
religions and disabilities, we explore the socially enabling and disabling effects
of religions, which make up social ordering processes. Thus, we will discover the
dis/abling religion beyond the religious treatment of impaired people.

Introducing the concept of *dis/abling religion* to the study of religions, I will
first explain the term *dis/ability*, referring to the academic field of disability stu-
dies. Based on my research on *Religion and Disability* (Jelinek-Menke 2021), I will
then present the various dimensions of *dis/abling religion*, bringing together the
study of religions and disability studies, to analyse the interactions between reli-
gions and social ordering processes. Finally, focusing on examples from Anthro-
posophy, Catholicism, and Protestantism, I will demonstrate how *dis/abling reli-
gions* empirically look, and how they concretely shape the structure of society. I
will end this paper with conclusions on what the study of religions gains when it
takes *dis/ability* into account.

2 Conceptualising Dis/ability

Dis/ability was originally conceptualised within disability studies. This academic
field and its theoretical concepts can best be understood by considering the con-
text of their emergence, and their evolution over time. In the following, therefore,
I will give a cursory outline of the historical and theoretical background of the
dis/ability concept.

Disability studies are rooted in the disability rights movement. In the 1970s,
analogous to, and in cross-fertilisation with the civil rights and women's rights

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3 I would like to thank my colleague Brian McGowan for our discussions on this issue.

movements, disabled activists in the United States called for stereotypes to be overturned, as well as for self-advocacy and equality of disabled people (Heumann and Joiner 2020). Disabled people rebelled not only against being repressed and oppressed, but also against very often being only passive objects of insufficient and patronising care, examinations, and experiments. They fought for accessibility and participation, and for disability research to be primarily carried out by or with disabled people. Such research, they argued, should consider and include the perspectives of disabled people, and reflect the situations of disabled people sociologically. Since the 1980s, such research has been termed disability studies (Waldschmidt 2007a, 162).

The central theoretical basis of disability studies for reflecting on the situation of disabled people is the distinction between *impairment* and *disability*. Here, *impairment* refers to *individual physical* or *mental characteristics* that are defined as aberrant, and limiting, whilst *disability* refers to *social disadvantage* due to impairment (Goodley 2017, 9). Since the forms of disadvantage can vary, and impairments do not always lead to disadvantage, disability is revealed as a non-necessary reaction to impairment, and thus as a social construct. The subject of disability studies is disability rather than impairment, meaning that it studies societal processes of disadvantage, to reconstruct the causes of the disadvantages faced by impaired people. Instead of casting a *medical gaze* (Foucault) over individual impairments, it is the *medical gaze* itself which is studied (Waldschmidt 2007b, 161).

Another core element of disability studies is to categorise understandings of disability into different *models of disability*. Three basic *models of disability* are the *individual model*, the *social model*, and the *cultural model* (Goodley 2017, 11–20; Waldschmidt 2007a, 163–167). They differ in the relationships they assume between impairment and disability.

Disability understandings that disability scholars assign to the *individual model* hardly or do not distinguish between impairment and disability. Classically, these understandings are found in medicine and other applied sciences, as well as in religions. They focus on impaired individuals, and view the limitations that occur in connection with impairments as inherent properties of those impairments. Consequently, social disadvantages are held to be quasi-natural consequences of physical limitations. As a result, there is an emphasis on solutions at the individual level. Research is directed at medical therapies and cures, special education, and assistive technology.

The *social model* comprises understandings of disability that are based on a strong distinction between impairment as physical limitation, and disability as social disadvantage due to an impairment. It is 'the model of the disability rights movement', formulated to challenge the individual model (Goodley 2017, 9). How-

ever, the social model is now widespread, including among religious actors. Social model research approaches focus on disabling by society, pointing out that the disabling of impaired individuals is not natural or inevitable.

The *cultural model* can be called the 'most academic' model. Like the social model, it refers to approaches that distinguish between impairment and disability. Unlike the social model, however, cultural model approaches understand impairment, too, as a social construction, and thus reject the dichotomous notion of impairment as nature and disability as culture. They stress that a physical characteristic is not in itself aberrant, or limiting, but that these are valuations based on social definition processes. Moreover, cultural model approaches do not necessarily understand disadvantage/disability as a reaction to impairment, but reverse their relationship by stating that a physical characteristic becomes an impairment through being used to justify a social disadvantage (Tremain 2001, 631–633). Consequently, certain physical characteristics can no longer be determined as impairments, but emerge as impairments when used in a specific historical-social context to justify disadvantage/disability. This means that, in certain contexts, we can detect impairments that we would not perceive as such in our everyday understanding (which can be particularly relevant regarding religious contexts), without judging this categorisation as right or wrong, accommodating Weber's (2012) premise of restraining from passing value judgements (*Werturteilsfreiheit*), which is highly respected in the study of religions. Furthermore, cultural model approaches highlight the interdependence of impairment as an aberration and non-impairment as normality. To make this interdependence clear, some proponents of the cultural model speak of *dis/ability* (Waldschmidt 2017, 25). They promote consideration of both what is labelled abnormal and what is labelled normal, when aiming to understand social processes and structure. The cultural model "questions the other side of the coin, the commonly unchallenged 'normality', and investigates how practices of (de-)normalization result in the social category we have come to call 'disability'" (Waldschmidt 2017, 24).

Building on a cultural model perspective, I understand *dis/ability* as a context-specific social process, in which people are interdependently divided into incapable and capable, determining their positions in the social structure. Particular physical or intellectual characteristics are used to justify this division and determination. The two basic assumptions of this definition are that (1) in interactions, the actions of one individual do not meet the expectations of another (such as silence during a public worship service),[4] and that (2) it is necessary for such conflicts between action and expectation to be resolved in order for interactions

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4 I refer here to an example described in detail by Staley (2014, 429–432).

(such as the worship ritual) to take place. However, it is the individual deemed impaired, and their physical or intellectual constitution, that are held responsible for such conflicts, rather than the discrepancy between actions and expectations, or the expectations themselves. The impaired individuals are deemed incapable of meeting expectations, and are consequently either: (a) excluded from the context in which the unmet expectations exist, and instead included in an alternative context (such as a special worship service for people with impairments); or (b) accepted and included in the original context, but in an entirely different way than would be considered normal (for example, as an impaired person exempted from the expectation not to talk during the worship service). Both strategies resolve action-expectation conflicts, but have far-reaching disadvantageous (i.e., disabling) effects for the individual being excluded or included in a particular way. In the context of his *anti-essentialist theory of disability*, Weisser (2007, 240–241) therefore speaks of disability as a *conflict resolution strategy*. Through their use in justifying the exclusion or special inclusion of the individual, particular characteristics (such as trisomy 21) are thus made responsible for the action-expectation conflict, and therefore made into or confirmed as impairments.[5] In the same process, certain actions and physical characteristics are re-constructed as normality or normal ability (such as not talking during a worship service, or having two 21 chromosomes).

Conceptualising dis/ability in this way suggests that constructions of incapacity and capacity interact with inclusions and exclusions, and are thus reflected in them. On the methodological level, we can therefore conclude that, by analysing processes of inclusion and exclusion, one can trace the social construction of incapacity and capacity, countering the common assumption that they are naturally given. However, this conception shows that it should not be assumed that impaired people are always excluded everywhere, nor that only exclusions lead to disadvantages, or that all inclusions expand scopes of action. Rather, the mode, conditions, locations and consequences of both inclusion and exclusion determine an individual's scope of action in a specific context. Inclusion and exclusion mean positioning each individual, both impaired and non-impaired, in the social structure, and equipping them with a certain scope for action. Therefore, on the theoretical level, the formulation of dis/ability leads us to recognise the societal division into non-able and able as one of society's most fundamental organising principles, used to legitimise these social ordering processes. Consequently, when examining the interactions between religious contexts and constructions of

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5 By using trisomy 21 as an example here, I do not want to reproduce stereotypes about people with trisomy in claiming that none of them would be able to meet worship requirements.

inability and ability, we uncover the interactions between religions and social order.

3 Theorising Dis/abling Religion

As the division into non-able and able is a fundamental social ordering principle, it is also an ordering principle of and within religions – yet its status as such is often overlooked. In particular, there is a failure to account for its contingent nature. Presuppositions of normality become evident when they impede us personally, or when we engage seriously with the perspectives of those who experience them as barriers. Consequently, normality can be uncovered as a contingent construction, dependent on someone or something being excluded or at least marked as abnormal. In this regard, it is merely one side of the coin, which constitutes its reverse side. Taking my research on *Religion and Disability* (Jelinek-Menke 2021) as a starting point, I introduce the concept of *dis/abling religion* here in order to investigate both sides simultaneously, and to discover their interdependence in the context of religions.

The concept of *dis/abling religion* examines the division of society into able and non-able as a fundamental social ordering principle, and considers how this process interacts with religions. Integrating perspectives from both the study of religions and disability studies, it explores how religious contexts may, on the one hand, constitute barriers, exclude people, or hinder them from overcoming barriers, or, on the other hand, how they may enable people to overcome barriers, and contribute to their inclusion. Hence, the concept of *dis/abling religion* opens up a pathway to discovering the mechanism by which religions fundamentally shape and are shaped by social order, and is thus a useful social-analytical tool for the study of religions.

The individual processes within this mechanism are complex and intimately entangled. To reconstruct *dis/abling religion*, I will begin by systematically unpacking it. In this regard, I identify different *effects* of religious issues and contexts, and the various *levels* at which these *effects* come into play. In the following sections, I define these *effect* and *level categories*, using concepts from Luhmann's systems theory.[6]

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6 For a detailed description, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 124–140.

3.1 Effect Categories

In the context of *dis/abling religion*, I identify three *effect categories*: *enabling religion*, *disabling religion*, and *releasing religion*. What is meant by each of these *effects* of religion?

Enabling Religion

Under the category of *enabling religion,* I subsume those religious ideas, practices, organisations, and things related to a distinction of reality into transcendence and immanence (Luhmann 2015, 77, 2016, 26 and 24–26) that make someone or something either able to include or eligible to be included. In other words: *enabling religion* ensures a congruence of capabilities and expectations in a religious or in another, non-religious context, either by creating capabilities or adjusting expectations. This applies not only to disabled people, but to everyone. Being able or eligible is equally a condition for – and reflected in – inclusion, a term which is used here to mean "the way [...] in which people [are] considered relevant"[7] to a particular context (Luhmann 2005, 229). It is important to determine *how* someone is included in a particular context, for example whether the inclusion leads to further inclusion in a broader context or not. Since systems theory understands society as the entirety of the communicative processes of social systems, human beings are not part of society in a physical way, but are communicatively involved in it in various ways (Luhmann 1997, 78–80 and 618–620, 1987, 286). Consequently, inclusion is not solely or primarily about physical presence, but about whether and how a person is communicatively addressed.

Disabling Religion

The category of *disabling religion* encompasses religious issues or contexts that ignore, disadvantage, or devalue people, or prevent their inclusion by presenting insurmountable barriers of expectation, or by hindering (or failing to promote) the development of the capabilities necessary to meet existing expectations. In this sense, religions can prevent inclusion in their own religious context, or in other, non-religious contexts. Through the reference to individual physical, intellectual or behavioural characteristics to legitimise such exclusion, disadvantage,

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7 Translated by the author.

or devaluation, those characteristics are transformed into impairments. These can include not only characteristics understood as impairments or disabilities in contemporary everyday life in the anglophone sphere, but any characteristic, such as sex, sexual orientation, skin colour, or race. It can even include characteristics usually regarded as the opposite of impairment, such as high intelligence, as I will show below. Disabling effects result not only from exclusion (both unconscious or deliberate), but also from inclusion. Inclusion that leads not to further inclusion but to exclusion is called *hyper-inclusion* (Göbel and Schmidt 1998, 111f.). In line with systems theory terminology, it is therefore also termed inclusion when, for example, disabled people are segregated in special institutions. The idea of this as a form of inclusion is rejected from a human rights perspective, however, as inclusion in special institutions is a form of hyper-inclusion, which demonstrably makes further inclusion less likely (Wansing 2007, 275–292; Helbig and Steinmetz 2021, 241–256). It can therefore be classified as a disabling context. This is what Wansing refers to when she states that disabled people face problems not only from exclusion, but also from too much inclusion (Wansing 2007, 288).

Releasing Religion

Releasing religion is a special category that is clearly different from the other two. The term describes religious contexts in which the individual characteristics that are considered impairments disappear, such that an impaired person would become a non-impaired one. This includes assumptions that impairing characteristics dissolve when dying or in the afterlife. The experience or description of dissolving impairments 'in this world' can result from an unusual or unexpected congruence between expectations and capabilities, so that it is no longer necessary to use characteristics to justify exclusion, disadvantage, or devaluation. Therefore, the characteristics that are otherwise used for this purpose become irrelevant, or are no longer defined as a limitation. In particular, the structure of rituals as *communication avoidance communication* (*Kommunikationsvermeidungskommunikation*, Luhmann 1997, 235) can, as I will show, foster the experience of impairment relief.

3.2 Level Categories

To understand the processes of *dis/abling religion* in detail, it is also helpful to distinguish between different societal *levels*, and to assign the various effects of

religious issues and contexts to them. Here, I distinguish between *social environment*, *religious community*, and *transcendence-related conceptions*.

Social Environment

From a systems theory perspective, religion is considered part of society, namely that part of society which divides reality into the transcendent and the immanent. In the following, by the level of *social environment* I mean every part of society that is not religious. Although constituted according to their own respective logics, these non-religious parts can be shaped by religion and can, in turn, observe religion as their own environment (Luhmann 1987, 35–37, 1997, 62–66 and 92–101, 2015, 137). *Socially enabling religion* thus has an effect beyond its own religious context, leading to a broader inclusion, while *socially disabling religion* does not lead to inclusion in non-religious contexts.

Religious Community

Religious community is not to be understood here as a physical group of people of the same belief or practice, or wearing the same symbols. *Community* here denotes communicative acts that have systemically unambiguous and semantically uniform connotations. A religious community is therefore communication with a certain religious semantics, in which people are included and excluded under various ways of addressing and unity or togetherness is asserted internally in distinction to external others (Lüddeckens and Walthert 2018, 469). In this sense, *communally enabling religion* refers to beliefs, practices, organisations, or things that address or make it possible to include people within their specific religious semantics. Its opposite is *communally disabling religion*.

Transcendence-related Conceptions

With *transcendence-related conceptions*, a particular category of religious beliefs is singled out: those concerning, for example, entities (such as gods and goddesses), powers, or mechanisms (such as karma) that represent the transcendent, or events after death or in another life. Since they concern dissolving the contingency of existence in the world, they turn any issues and contexts into religious ones. These conceptions, like all others, may be either inclusive (*transcendence-related enabling religion*) or exclusive (*transcendence-related disabling religion*).

4 Applying Dis/abling Religion

In this section, I present several examples of interactions between religion and dis/ability, in the context of Anthroposophical, Protestant, and Catholic welfare organisations for people with so-called intellectual disability in contemporary Germany. In doing so, I demonstrate how *dis/abling religion* can look and how it can reflect, as well as shape, social order in everyday life. The analysis of these examples in my research on *Religion and Disability* (Jelinek-Menke 2021) led me to develop the concept of *dis/abling religion*.[8] The examples refer to (1) theological-anthropological conceptions, (2) religious welfare institutions, and (3) interactive-ritual practices.

4.1 Dis/abling Religious Conceptions

According to the anthroposophical conception, disability is the result of a disturbed connection between the different components of the human being (etheric body, astral body, and the ego). This is believed to occur during the incarnation process in the spirit world, between dying and rebirth, under the influence of individual deeds (karma). From this perspective, it is not the ego, the spirit or the mind of a person that is impaired, but the ability of the ego to express itself through the physical body. Anthroposophical proponents therefore reject common terms such as *intellectual disability*. Since, according to Anthroposophy, the soul mediates between the various components of the human being, it is the soul that must be nurtured to promote a better interlocking of the individual components of the human being, and thus their general ability. Consequently, Anthroposophical proponents speak of a need for *soul care* (*Seelenpflege-Bedürftigkeit*). Furthermore, both disabled and non-disabled interviewees see incapacity existing to promote a deeper development of the ego of the person concerned. In dying, my interlocutors described, limitations dissolve and the ego, now further developed, can enter new and more beneficial connections as a non-disabled person in the next life (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 28–29, 55–56, 174–179 and 303–307).

The specific Anthroposophical *transcendence-related releasing religious conception* leads to *soul care*, which is presented as a *religious enabling practice*, as it helps people to achieve what is considered normal ability. This is illustrated by a quote from my research on religious welfare institutions:

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[8] For a detailed description of the research context and process, as well as methodological reflections, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 83–128.

> Mrs T.: "I don't know what I am then [after rebirth] (but I'll) not be disabled any more (but) help people who (have a) disability to help other people who are in need"[9]

In contrast to Anthroposophical proponents, non-disabled Protestants and Catholics I interviewed portrayed disability as the targeted creation of a personal god. This creation is seen to be either following a divine plan largely unknown to human beings, or because this god favours diversity or wants to give the non-disabled a sign. From a Protestant and Catholic non-disabled perspective, then, disability is first and foremost instructive and enriching for people without disabilities, as they experience the creative power of their god when they encounter disabled people (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 179–185). Within the Anthroposophical conception, as pointed out above, a disability primarily serves the development of the impaired person. However, some non-disabled interviewees also proposed the idea that non-disabled people are enabled to experience the transcendence through the encounter with disabled people. They stated that non-disabled people are usually not able to immediately experience transcendence, as they are too intelligent. For example, Mr. A. portrayed adults who "are getting too smart" and "thinking too much" as *spiritually disabled*,[10] thus turning intelligence into an impairment, while intellectually impaired people are seen as *religious virtuosos* (Weber 2005, 95).

Conceptualising and including disabled people as religious virtuosos may represent an appreciation of disabled people against the background of their everyday defamation. However, religious virtuosity is inevitably bound to a double outsider position: The social and communal outsider positions are prerequisites for creating or maintaining the characteristics and behaviours believed to mark the proximity to the transcendent. Additionally, characteristics and behaviours can only be considered to be marks of proximity to the transcendent if they are usually despised. Otherwise, they would correspond to this world, and not point to the existence of one beyond (Kleine 2015, 9–11). Therefore, intellectually impaired people cannot exchange their religious recognition as virtuosos for social, non-religious benefit, nor can they use it for their personal advancement in the hierarchy of community positions. The *enabling* potential of this religious conception is thus relatively low, making this conception a perfect example of *hyper-inclusivity* (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 249–251).

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9 Translated by the author. For the original quote and a detailed discussion of it, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 303–304).

10 Translated by the author. For the original quote and a detailed discussion of it, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 278).

The examples sketched here show that the social structures of segregation and othering are a breeding ground from which the experiences of transcendence by the privileged can emerge. In other words, if some people were not constructed as abnormal and repressed from the public sphere, encountering them would not trigger feelings strong enough to be associated with transcendence. Equally, it is evident that religious conceptions of disability as the result of karma or divine creation conclusively explain the existence of precisely those human characteristics that are considered impairments in everyday life. Although some religious actors reject common everyday terms and classifications around disability because they consider them defamatory and disadvantageous, Anthroposophical, Catholic and Protestant conceptions deny the contingency of this very social order, and reify the constructions of impairments and their counterpart normality.

4.2 Dis/abling Religious Welfare Institutions

Regarding disability, it becomes clear that the influence of religions on social order goes far beyond providing conclusive explanations and reifying contingent social constructions. This influence is especially mediated by the important role religious welfare institutions play in contemporary society. The task of welfare institutions is, generally, to include excluded people and to ensure their (re-)inclusion in various social systems (Wansing 2005, 105–107). Accordingly, they are supposed to be *socially enabling institutions*. In Germany, welfare institutions that address people with intellectual disabilities are mostly run by Protestant, Catholic and Anthroposophical social organisations. Religious welfare institutions should therefore not be underestimated in terms of positioning people with intellectual impairments in the social structure, and consequently shaping social order today.

The carers I interviewed from religious welfare institutions emphasised the enabling effects of their institutions. They attributed these effects to the fact that their given denominations shape the premises and the employees of their institutions, as well as the daily routines within them. For example, they described educational measures enabling the residents to participate in various social processes. In other words, the residents are to be made 'socially includable'. According to the interviewees, religious teachings, such as those contained in biblical stories, and practices such as religious rituals play a central role in these educational measures. This social enabling through religion is logically preceded by religiously communal inclusion, since it is only possible to participate in religious instruction and rituals when one is willing, able and eligible to do so, from the community's point of view. In addition, some employees of religious welfare institutions aim to influence social processes outside of the institutions, to make

them more inclusive (*socially enabling* or *releasing religion*). In particular, those holding leading positions in Catholic and Protestant institutions pointed to this socio-political commitment. Hence, employees of religious welfare institutions clearly presented 'their religion' as an *enabling religion* (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 142–165, 186–203 and 284–286). Many of my interlocutors with an intellectual impairment living and working in religious welfare institutions took a similar view. In addition, some of them saw transcendence-representing beings, such as a god or angels, acting as 'educators' (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 165–172).

> Mrs M: "I noticed when a fortnight ago I was in a foul mood and I ran away again and God said no you're going back to work you have to stay there you have to work there otherwise you'll get a clip round the ear and then I went back there"[11]

In such narratives, divine beings encourage people to act in socially acceptable ways. As such, religious conceptions reinforce common norms of action and simultaneously can have a *socially enabling effect*.

Although the socially enabling effects of religions are often emphasised, nevertheless religions also appear as disabling structures. Both numerous studies and the reports of my interlocutors demonstrate that special institutions for people with disabilities, in particular, promote exclusion. It can be assumed that this applies equally to religious and non-religious institutions. Even if this exclusion is often not directly associated with religion, religions, by running such institutions, are mediators of the exclusionary effects associated with them (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 231–279).

Furthermore, some people assume that the inclusion of intellectually impaired people is generally not feasible outside of institutions. In these cases, inclusion in the institution was either portrayed as an appropriate alternative inclusion, which recalls the *separate but equal* principle (Heumann and Joiner 2020, 123–124), or even as the realisation of a better model for society. Mrs. B., a housemother in an Anthroposophical village community, referred to a metaphor introduced by Anthroposophical physician Ita Wegman, in calling the community an "island" where people who "cannot go out in public" are cared for.[12]

However, it is with precisely this approach that these actors entrench the contours of the social normality that they criticise, as the realm of normality is shaped by the extent of exclusion/inclusion in the special institutions. With their welfare institutions, religions relieve the normal sphere of society from having to take

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11 Translated by the author. For the original quote and a detailed discussion of it, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 170–171).
12 Translated by the author. For the original quote and a detailed discussion of it, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 188–189.

certain people into account, and enable it to exclude these people physically. Furthermore, religious welfare institutions contribute to the segregation and othering that, as I have shown above, enable privileged people to experience transcendence.

4.3 Dis/abling Religious Practices

Rituals are a form of *communication avoidance communication*. Following Luhmann, this means that while in everyday life there is always the possibility of interpreting actions in different ways, in rituals the meaning of an action is fixed to fulfil one single expectation. This also determines which action should follow a previous one. Virtually independent of an action's appearance, it is almost inevitably confirmed as correct by the fact that it is followed by an expected subsequent action.

In religious welfare institutions, denominational rituals in which bodies are physically involved play a crucial role. Firstly, these rituals serve to make the denominational affiliation of the institutions visible. Secondly, such rituals are deemed to be beneficial. This makes sense when we understand disability as resulting from a conflict between actions or characteristics and expectations, and when we assume that conflict is stressful and therefore needs to be resolved. Since rituals as *communication avoidance communication* ensure and synchronise the flow of bodily interactions, they resolve the stressful conflict at least temporarily. Thirdly, rituals are explicitly used for community building, which, as mentioned above, is considered a prerequisite for establishing individual social ability or 'includability' (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 203–211).

Ritual theories, such as those of Turner, identify the experience of equality (*communitas*) in rituals as central to community-building (Turner 1969, 95–97). According to my analysis, ritual participants conclude from the synchronisation of their actions that there is equality between them. This can have consequences in everyday life outside the ritual, where people may otherwise have an unequal relationship with each other (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 208–210). But what measures are necessary to achieve synchronisation in rituals? And what ritual elements, apart from synchronisation, determine the social positions – people's relationships with each other – especially when synchronisation fails? Often, we can hardly grasp these processes, as they are usually very subtle or not visible in the ritual itself. Considering disability, however, they become evident.

Through the lens of disability, it can be seen that ritual participants easily experience a sense of equality because they *are* very similar to each other, especially in terms of their ability to meet the ritual requirements. Those who are not,

are often excluded from the outset. Thus, some experience equality and community at the expense, namely the physical exclusion, of others. The interviews show that this exclusion happens partly unconsciously, due to the anticipation of specific physical and behavioural requirements of a denominational ritual. The narrations of my interlocutors from all investigated denominations, however, make clear that exclusion from rituals is also carried out consciously and strictly, indicating the importance attributed to the experience of equality (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 264–272).

Despite preventative exclusion, participants can act unexpectedly and thus jeopardise the synchronisation required for the experience of equality. When bodily synchronisation fails, there are two possible strategies for protecting the experience of equality: (1) Unexpected actions can be tolerated if the perpetrator is classified as an impaired individual. In this case, disabling or disability occurs as a *conflict resolution strategy*, to include all present people and ensure the experience of equality for at least some. However, the status of *the disabled*, which is associated with far-reaching disadvantageous consequences outside the ritual, is thereby also solidified. *The disabled* may then be a specific position within the religious community, but they are not an equal or normal member. Thus, this religious inclusion has *communally* and *socially disabling effects* (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 255 –259). (2) Another, related measure to protect the experience of equality for the majority is that unexpected actions in rituals can also be interpreted as an expression of proximity to the divine or spirit world. These *religious virtuosos* are religiously included but remain outsiders, as outlined above. Ideationally conceptualising impaired people as religious virtuosos with its *hyper-inclusive* or *disabling effects* occurs here in the bodily-practical context of ritual.

In many cases, preventative exclusion is already sufficient to prevent dissimilarity from manifesting itself in unexpected actions. Moreover, the structure of rituals as *communication avoidance communication* contributes to the fact that special conflict resolution strategies, such as *disability* or *religious virtuosity*, are not necessary to ensure the successful continuation of rituals. Logically, this also leads those who struggle with being classified as incapable and disadvantaged in everyday life to sense themselves as able in rituals, and to be recognised as being so. Some people, such as Mr. G., a resident of a Protestant institution who is classified as intellectually disabled, described hope that this recognition taking place within the ritual will also cross over into everyday life. Other interviews suggested that this is taking place. In light of this, we can identify religious ritual ability as a prerequisite for social inclusion in the context of disability, which we would not expect in a functionally differentiated society (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 244–245 and 296–302).

Against the background that, outside of rituals, action-expectation conflicts are widespread, experiencing ability and equality leaves a deep impression. This

can result in an experience that interlocutors described as a transformation of impaired people into non-impaired, or their being released from disability during rituals *(releasing religion)*.

> Mrs T.: ((she sighs)) "[...] (and then) you receive this and that like that yes well I always find that I can say ((with a slight tremor in her voice))/I may receive Christ's spirit that's a bit of a a redemption/"[13]

> Mrs B.: "when I stand there and and I know the person otherwise [...] ((breathy, whispering))/then it's something completely different/so then a completely different person ((breathy))/is looking at me/"[14]

However, according to further descriptions, this *releasing religion* only lasts for a brief moment (Jelinek-Menke 2021, 294–295 and 298). Like all experiences in physical ritual interactions, however, it can have consequences for beliefs, actions, and relationships in everyday life, both for those who are present and those who are not. The consequences, however, are not uniform, but reflect the way in which a person is communicatively addressed by the ritual.

Hence, specific ritual requirements of certain religions determine who participates physically in a ritual and who does not. Since these requirements are considered normal, when someone cannot or may not participate physically, it is usually not the requirements of the ritual but the characteristics of the non-participant that are problematised. These individual characteristics are thus turned into impairments. Furthermore, rituals include and exclude various people in different ways, embodying this inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, the physical presence and absence in rituals evoke specific ways of addressing. The community and inclusivity generated by rituals is therefore not characterised by equality of its members, but by a denominationally specific (i.e., semantically unified but distinct) network of relationships between diverse, present and absent, belonging and non-belonging, non-disabled and disabled people.

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13 Translated by the author. For the original quote and a detailed discussion of it, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 296–297.
14 Translated by the author. For the original quote and a detailed discussion of it, see Jelinek-Menke 2021, 299–300.

5 Conclusion: Learning about Religion from Disability

What can we, as scholars of religions, learn about social order and the role religions play in it, when we engage with disability and apply the concept of *dis/abling religion*? And what do we learn about how *lived religion* reflects social order?

I have demonstrated that consideration of disabled people and their multifaceted relationships with religions can make us aware of many aspects of religions that are highly relevant but often overlooked. Approaching these with the help of concepts like dis/ability from disability studies, we reconstruct the division into non-able and able as a fundamental social ordering principle. Further, we uncover general ordering processes that usually remain obscured, reflected in and affected by the interactions between religions and disability. Or, in other words: By analysing the interactions between religions and impairments through the lens of disability studies, we discover the empirical phenomenon of *dis/abling religion*. As a theoretical concept useful in the analysis of various empirical situations, *dis/abling religion* points to the necessity of considering both what is labelled abnormal and what is labelled normal when we aim to understand social and religious structures. This labelling occurs in an interdependent, contingent process of social construction. Moreover, the concept of *dis/abling religion* draws our attention to the various effects religions have, or, more precisely, to the effects they have on the social positions of people when religions include and exclude them. I have termed these effects of religious inclusion and exclusion *enabling religion*, *disabling religion*, and *releasing religion*.

Based on empirical research applying the concept of *dis/abling religion*, I illustrated the interactions between religion and dis/ability as a social ordering principle. Focusing on examples from Anthroposophy, Catholicism, and Protestantism in contemporary Germany, I showed that, firstly, religious conceptions of disability reify impairments and normality as it is constructed in everyday life, by explaining them as creations of a god or results of karma, thus denying the contingency of a social construction. Secondly, by segregating disabled people in their special welfare institutions, religions solidify the common concept of normality as one that excludes impairments. Religious welfare institutions also maintain the othering of people with impairments, which makes encountering them so exceptional that it offers 'normal' people the possibility of a religious experience. This, in turn, fosters the idea that impaired people are religious virtuosos who have special spiritual abilities. However, instead of this conception leading to social advantage for impaired people, it reinforces the location of impaired people

in the realm of the anomalous, characterised by disadvantage. Looking at religious rituals through the lens of disability, it becomes clear, thirdly, that rituals, as a specific kind of physical interaction, create a network of relations between diverse people, through inclusion in and exclusion from rituals. This means that rituals shape social order by relating present and absent people to each other according to their in-/abilities to meet the specific conceptional and physical requirements of a certain ritual and religion. Finally, regarding the particular example of religious conceptions, institutions and rituals, we can understand how disabling and enabling work as interdependent principles of social order, and that religions can play a significant role here. Religions can provide social cohesion, which, while advantageous for some, proves disadvantageous for others. Being disadvantaged does not mean being completely excluded from society, but having a fixed and adverse position in religion and society. The concept of *dis/abling religion* helps us to recognise this fact.

The field of religions is a wide and complex one that, of course, cannot be tackled in its entirety in one paper. Here, I have explored a small part of the field, through the lens of disability studies. It now falls upon scholars of religions to develop this outlook, applying the *dis/abling religion* concept in other areas, thereby testing the validity of the concept. Doing so would mean examining dis/abling religion in, for example, other historical, regional, or community-semantic contexts than those I have considered in this paper. Having focused here on conceptions, institutions, and rituals, we could ask how religious written and oral sources, or material things such as artworks, interact with dis/ability. What physical or intellectual characteristics are considered abilities in these religious contexts, whilst being defined as inabilities in their social environment, and vice versa? Furthermore, clarification is needed as to what extent the religious division into non-able and able intersects with other fundamental organising principles of social order, such as sex/gender, class, and race. There may be merit to discussing whether sex/gender, class, and race can also be understood as forms of impairment, when used to legitimise religious inclusion and exclusion, privilege and disadvantage, or in short: dis/ability.

To conclude, we can affirm that we gain a deep insight into various religions and their interactions with social order when following the path of disability studies. I am convinced that Waldschmidt is correct in her statement that disability studies need encounters with disciplines such as the study of religions to fully explore the dis/abling processes of society (Waldschmidt 2017, 20). Let's set out on that path together.

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