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2024

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Recommended Citation

Othman, Enaya, "Ignatian Values and International Conference on Disability" (2024). *Arabic Languages and Literatures*. 20.

<https://epublications.marquette.edu/arabic/20>

Ignatian Values and International Conference on Disability

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the values of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) concerning the issues related to disability and how the mission of the “Conference on Disability at the Intersection of History, Culture, Religion, Gender, and Health” hosted by Marquette University embodies those values. This conference, which was first held in 2022 and planned to take place in 2025 again, serves several goals shared by Jesuit education, Catholic values and Ignatius’ philosophy. It aspires to contribute to social justice, deep thinking and reflection, and meaningful change in society. Above all, the conference is motivated by ‘service’ to humanity and thus to the Divine. It is a value-based initiative that aims to eliminate the socially constructed and thus man-made divisions and hierarchies based on material and physical characteristics. After probing into how the Disability Conference represents Ignatian values and contributes to their actualization in the society, the paper provides some examples from the conference presentations.

In Catholicism, disability has been often attributed as holiness especially in the lives of saints who were exemplary for other people. Many saints suffered from physical impediments or performed miraculous healing; in either case, their relationship with disability signified their closeness to God.¹ In the 20th century, the Catholic church placed even more importance on the inclusion of people with disability. The Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities succinctly emphasizes that people with disabilities do not want pity but participation.² The US Conference of Catholic Bishops also called upon people to “reexamine their attitudes toward their disabled brothers and sisters and promote their well-being, acting with the sense of justice and the compassion that the Lord so clearly desires.”³ In the same vein, from Ignatius’ foundational values to the most recent General Congregation in 2008, “service of faith and the promotion of justice” has been the central to the mission of Jesuit tradition.⁴ In our highly globalized world, justice cannot be achieved without understanding the (so-called) other, the minority, and the marginalized. The experience of Ignatius himself that led to the foundation of the Jesuit tradition bespeaks the significance of reflecting on the multilayered and transformative power of impediments. In his journey to recover from bodily wounds, Ignatius found wisdom and comfort in spirituality and service. The special care of the early Jesuits for the disadvantaged, including the sick and the disabled, expresses the great concern of Jesuit tradition for equal opportunities and

inclusiveness. St. Ignatius, injured in battles and thus suffering from a physical impediment to walk as well as from financial restraints, was able to overcome restricted mobility and the boundaries it entailed.

The Disability Conference at Marquette follows the pattern provided by Jesuit education and St. Ignatius in eliminating the boundaries among the differences of ability. Historically and presently, people with differences of ability are often marginalized within the social constructions of normality and normativity. Political and legal regulations and discourses as well as social structures often act as vanguards of these constructed norms, or they latently perpetuate these structures. Furthermore, in cases of belonging to more than one disadvantaged social identity, individuals are double-marginalized. Accordingly, disability has been increasingly perceived as a social justice and minority issue beyond a medical diagnosis. This disability project addresses how culture manifests as a power structure in which those outside what is considered *normal* face oppression and injustice. Approaching disability as a social justice issue, it aims to contribute to Marquette’s mission to recognize diversity, dignity, and justice.

Marquette’s mission of service to others and its recognition of diversity through advancing and sharing our knowledge can be best accentuated by integrating research and community service to benefit our society.

Jesuit Education and the Mission of the Disability Conference

Ignatius's values are grounded in spirituality and service, transcending bodily and artificial constructions. At the center of these values lie respect, love, healing, and justice among others. Contemplation and inquiry are embedded in these values and are among the most important tools/steps in serving God. Ignatius integrates serving God with 'care for the person' and the common good. His tradition highlights attention on each person, their needs, struggles, and circumstances while seeking justice and peace in society. The care for the human according to Ignatian spirituality encompasses care for mind and soul as well as for the body. In this sense, Jesuit values that unite personal and common good with serving God construe the foundational basis of the Disability Conference. As the Jesuit investment in education suggests, Ignatian values are to be achieved through inquiry, understanding, research, and by instilling the sense of justice and service in individuals. Education therefore should be followed by action for the betterment of societies. As contemplation and reflection changed the life of Ignatius, the idea behind this conference is to achieve meaningful reflection on our lives, realities and experiences leading us to care for each other and transform our communities.

With this understanding and mission, and after years of scholarly inquiry into people with disability, I called for researchers, students, religious agents, and healthcare providers across the globe to discuss disability as a social justice issue as well as to delve into the meanings, challenges, and intersections in relation to disability.⁵ The first gathering, hosted at Marquette University in 2022, brought a number of young and established researchers to discuss a wide range of issues from accessibility to inclusion, spirituality to justice, education to legal aspects of disability. This international conference as an open dialogue is a major way to promote inclusion, connect to diverse communities, and improve equity and accessibility. Therefore, the Disability Conference is projected to be continued and made part of Marquette's traditions. Potentially, the second conference will be held in 2025. This conference endeavors to serve the Ignatian value of providing service for the underprivileged and marginalized. The conference, thus, is designed not only to bring people across cultures, faith,

occupation, and gender together but also to take initiative in promoting change towards inclusion and justice. As Fr. Kolvenbach, SJ, emphasized during his service as Superior General, the Jesuit decision making mechanism prioritizes the impacts of decisions on the marginalized.⁶ Having internalized this approach, the conference on disability invites the social, political, educational and religious agents to be aware of the challenges encountered by people with disability in their daily lives and in having access to resources, careers, education, health services including mental health, and in other spheres of life.

My own research on disability in Milwaukee has revealed that people with disability among Muslim communities are often double marginalized either due to their ethnic and religious background, or through sexual abuse and gender discrimination, or due to financial impediments. Especially, women with disability or female caretakers who are often the main caretaker in the family face heavier financial burden compared to men. Accordingly, this conference sheds light on how disability is reproduced by social conditions. It thus shows that multifaceted economic, political, and social structures that generate injustice should be challenged. Consequently, it aims to cultivate care for the person and social justice in various aspects. The organization of the conference itself fosters hope for youth and other audiences by conveying the perspectives, feelings, and voices of oppressed groups, encourages them to talk further, and express their needs and opinions. Many contributions in the first conference built on interviews and questionnaires with the young population such as university students or teachers with differences of ability. Thus, they reflect the voices of the people directly. The missions of the conference include: to encourage open discussion and deeper understanding of disability; to facilitate collaboration between the sciences and the humanities to enhance our understanding of disability in all of its complexities; to generate inclusive dialogues and interdisciplinary interactions between academia, community organizers, social and legal activists, health care providers, and religious leaders; to reflect on the intersections among religion, culture, gender, and minority experience; to breakdown stigma associated with disabilities; and to communicate the experiences of the

underprivileged and voiceless with their own voice.

The Disability Conference is an international and hybrid event that significantly utilizes advanced communication technologies. In doing this, the conference aims to achieve the highest level of dialogue among different cultures, religions, ethnicities and nationalities. The conference creates a balance between the local experiences and its universal dimensions. Dialogue is aimed not only among differences in culture and religion but also among people with disability, caretakers, scholars, policymakers, community and religious leaders. The promotion of dialogue through the goals and context of the conference relies on the Jesuit aspiration for peace, dialogue, and justice. The papers to be presented at the conference and keynote speeches are meticulously selected to reflect the diverse experiences with their unique aspects while at the same time tying those particularities to common and collective structures operating across countries. It is also notable that most of the presenters in the conference were among those who have had first-hand experience of disability either as people with differences of ability or caretakers and educators. This matters immensely in representing real world experience as it eliminates the disadvantages of research where the researcher-subject relationship constitutes hierarchies where the voice ultimately tends to represent the researcher. The conference, as much as possible, involves participants from diverse backgrounds and societies. This serves the Jesuit education purpose of *learned ministry* in that it aims to transcend the inequalities in reaching out to the space of knowledge production. Through online participation, broadcasts, and posts of videos, it aims to reach out to larger and more diverse audiences. The conference thus contributes to the gap between societies in access to information and undertakes this task as part of its mission towards promoting change and transformation for a just society.

Insights from Conference Presentations

As can be seen in the conference [proceedings](#), the gathering of the 2022 [Interdisciplinary Conference: Disability at the Intersection of History, Culture, Religion, Gender, and Health](#) consisted of two keynote speeches and fifty-one presentations. The conference took place on March 3-4 in a hybrid form welcoming in-person

and virtual participation across the world. The keynote address by the prominent disability scholar Dr. Lennard Davis offered significant insights into the complexities of disability and the development of disability studies including its interdisciplinary foundations. Brenda Wesley, a mental health advocate, delivered the second keynote speech in which she elaborated on the intersections among identity, disability, and policy.

The conference presentations covered a wide range of issues that provide insights into how disability should be understood and dealt with in a way that morally and intellectually contributes to being human. These issues include, among others, the representations of disability in literary works and historical approaches to disability in general, the links between gender and disability as forms of identity, and cultural, religious, and social constructions of disability.

By adapting an intersectional approach, the presentations uncovered the links among multiple forms of identity and engaged in an intense examination of the experience of disability. These studies reflect the lived experience of individuals, broaden the exploration of human life and God's creation, and foster solidarity and empathy among diverse groups, as well as address the challenges within various communities. For instance, a paper by Elizabeth Staszak discussed the experiences of disabled converts' in the church, reflecting also on the dichotomies of abled-disabled and honor-shame. Concluding that "Jesus' life on earth showed us how he found people on the margins and in the liminal spaces of society, saw their worth, and made a place for them in the kingdom of God," Staszak emphasizes the Church's inclusiveness as an original and major mission.⁷

Delving into the historical debates concerning the religious construction of disability, the papers by Andrew Walker-Cornetta and Rebecca Rose Farias, respectively, addressed American Catholics' vernacular and articulation of mental disability and Puritans' use of "a rhetoric of community reciprocity" based on Protestant virtue.⁸ Both papers confirmed that there were contradictory articulations of disability within the religious traditions in question; however, they offered meaningfulness, support for rehabilitation, and spiritual support.

Through an exploration of the disability identity among the Arab Muslim community, Majd Subih addressed the theological discussions of disability according to Islamic sources and the intersectional experiences of female Muslim Arabs. From an intersectional identity point of view, Subih argued that disability experience is strongly informed by the gender of disabled person as well as local cultures, Islamic teachings, and one's own context.⁹ This demonstrates the significance of recognizing multiple systems shaping the experience of disability.

Providing novel perspectives to differences of ability, such as the perception of deafness as a culture rather than a disability as presented by James I. Deutsch, many contributions to the conference aimed at debunking the stereotypes about disability experience.¹⁰ In the same vein, focusing on Paralympic Games, Evan Baughman explored how disability sports transforms the views with regards to the notions of normative bodies and (dis)ableist stigma. Questioning the differences in the recognition of abled and disabled athletes, it calls for improvements in the regulations of disability sports events for pro-rehabilitation.¹¹

A number of papers dealt with the challenges encountered by the disabled people at schools, workplaces, healthcare institutions, or in social life, and proposed practical solutions to the issues of accessibility. Maria Rovito, for example, showed how online communities on various social media platforms constitute space for healing. Particularly in cases when healthcare or disability activism fails to address certain types of disability, those platforms operate to create equality in healthcare.¹²

Stacie L. Warner drew our attention to the accessibility issues in higher education including how conceptions of productivity and performance ignore the differences of ability.¹³ In the same vein, Desire Chiwandire contented that the medical definitions of disability which situates it against the *normality* promotes a discourse of excellence. Despite the policies to welcome more disabled people to educational institutions, Chiwandire argues, the underlying discourses impede a just and inclusive higher education system.¹⁴

Ultimately, the presentations at the Disability Conference reveal the ways in which people with


disability are stigmatized, marginalized, and restricted by social constructions. They point out the various angles from which disability can be addressed in order to serve others. The papers concerned with disability and education stressed the importance of placing the individual at the center, prioritizing the individuals' needs and pace in setting educational goals. Papers addressing disability and religion confirmed the critical role of a spiritual vision of the world and human being compared to the material being of the body. A shared theme in all papers was the need to promote equity and inclusiveness. By bringing the multifaceted aspects of disability, the conference resonated the broader themes and missions of Jesuit education.

Conclusion

The Disability Conference, which is planned to be held every two to three years and made a Marquette tradition, serves the goal of fostering collaboration between various groups engaged in understanding and improving disability conditions. The Disability Conference pioneers a process which brings together scholarly research, professional insights, individual narratives, and religious perspectives with a mission to break down stigma associated with disability, with the ultimate aim of contributing to a just and equal society. The conference creates a space for mission-based research and an open platform in which faculty, students, and people with differences of ability cooperate to address the issues surrounding disability. In line with Ignatian values, the conference highlights the dignity of each individual, cultivates care, and fosters a diverse society. With its mission, scope, and framework, the disability conference also creates a model that can be replicated by faculty at Marquette or elsewhere.

Overall, this project contributes to advance the mission of Marquette by "putting together a symposium on 'research as mission at Marquette'" as suggested by Fr. James Voiss. Exploring disability through historical insights, cultural and religious meanings, representation and self-expression, legislation, and intersections with other identity and minority groups, the conference underscores the intersections that inform disability. Through this interdisciplinary approach, it looks into meanings and stereotypes associated with disability, their manifestations in law and politics, and the intersections of disability with gender, ethnic, and national

identities. By offering this inclusive and innovative conference, the academic, moral and service traditions of Marquette University may

be used as a platform by which such collaborations will be formed and maintained. 

Endnotes

¹ Christine James, "Catholicism and Disability: Sacred and Profane" in *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis*, ed. Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 168, 172.

² United States Catholic Conference, Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities (Washington, DC: USCC, 1998), 9, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/upload/Pastoral-Statement-of-U-S-Catholic-Bishops-on-Persons-with-Disabilities.pdf>.

³ United States Catholic Conference, 1.

⁴ Jesuitresources.org, "Introduction to Jesuit Core Values: Whole Persons of Solidarity for the Real World," Xavier University, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/understanding-our-heritage/jesuit-core-values/intro-to-core-values>.

⁵ I came up with the idea of organizing the Disability Conference as a result of a research project that I lead called "Gendered Disabilities and Milwaukee Muslim Immigrants: Empowering Muslim Women, Health Providers, and Researchers to Understand Stigmatizing Effects of Disabilities and Promote Positive Change," funded by The Explorer Challenge, Marquette University Strategic Innovation Fund 2018-2022, as well as two disability classes: one I taught with two other professors and another I have designed and received Course Development Grant from Marquette Center for Transnational Justice. I was the chair and the main organizer of the conference, and I brought together the conference committee. The conference was international and hybrid.

⁶ Jesuitresources.org, "Introduction to Jesuit Core Values."

⁷ Unless otherwise stated, the remaining endnotes refer to the *Interdisciplinary Conference: Disability at the Intersection of History, Culture, Religion, Gender, and Health Proceedings Book*,

ed. Enaya Hammad Othman, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University, 2022), <https://epublications.marquette.edu/icdi/2022/Postconference/1/>; additional notes refer to presentations given at the same conference; Elizabeth Staszak, "Disabled White Feminist Convert: Navigating the Liminal Space between East and West, Abled and Disabled, and Honor and Shame in the Coptic Orthodox Church," 21.

⁸ Andrew Walker-Cornetta, "Disability and the Trouble with Religion" (panel presentation, March 2022), <https://epublications.marquette.edu/icdi/2022/program/7/>; Rebecca Rose Farias, "Do as Thou Wouldst be Done By: Relief Responses to Mental Illness in Puritan New England," 58-66.

⁹ Majd Subih, "The Intersectionality of Disability, Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender: Muslim Arabs in the United States," 140-153.

¹⁰ James I. Deutsch, "Deaf Culture at the Intersection of History and Disability," 67-74.

¹¹ Evan Baughman, "Prescription Paralympics: Medical Influence Across Elite Disability Sport History," 101-108.

¹² Maria Rovito, "Experiencing Pain Together: Online Endometriosis Communities and the Gaslighting of Women's Chronic Pain" (presentation, March 2022), <https://epublications.marquette.edu/icdi/2022/program/15/>.

¹³ Stacie Warner, "Bringing Visibility to Invisibility: Examining the Complexities of 'Invisibility' amongst Students with Disabilities in Higher Education," 280-287.

¹⁴ Desire Chiwandire, "Constructions of Students with Disabilities as a Threat to Academic Excellence at Historically White South African Universities" (presentation, March 2022), <https://epublications.marquette.edu/icdi/2022/program/14/>.