Dancing between Text and Tradition: Religion and the Individual with Disabilities

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Abstract

Nineteen leaders within the Muslim, Catholic Christian, Protestant Christian, and Judaist faith provided a critical insight on varied levels of disability construct that still exist within their religious communities. Perspectives were influence by generation and knowledge of religious history. These leaders provided an insight which spoke to a dance between text and tradition. The study concluded that even though the stigma associated with individuals with disabilities (IDW) strings across religion, acceptance, and stigmatization is present in all religions. Religion encourages tolerance and care of others but at the same time places emphasis on the different status of persons.

Key Words: disability constructs religion, disabilities, and religious leaders.

1. Introduction

The inclusion of people with disabilities is a pervasive social concern. Nineteen percent of the American population has a disability (United States Census Bureau). The magnitude of these statistics indicates that the population of individuals with disabilities (IWD) within religious communities in America is significant. According to the revised Americans with Disabilities Act (2008): Physical or mental disabilities in no way diminish a person's right to fully participate in all aspects of society, yet people with physical or mental disabilities have been precluded from doing so because of discrimination.(Title 42, Chapter 126, Sec 12101, a1).This study began with a pilot study entitled *The Voice of Jesuit Experiences on the Significance of Disabilities* (Author,2008) which was published in Jesuit Resource.Org.

The original pilot looked at Christian literature and interviewed five Jesuit leaders regarding the perception of the position of the church on individuals with disabilities. The pilot study drew the interest of two other researchers and expanded to include other sects of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Our nation is becoming more and more multicultural. The authors of this study, as teachers, meet and work with children who come from different cultures and practice different religions. In our profession we have been exposed to a variety of religious cultures and their history. Does the stigma associated with individuals with disabilities still string across religions and cultures? (Goffman,1963). Has the perception of inclusion in the religious community changed over time within the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish religion and how are we informed by the history of the religion.

2. *Literature Review*

2.1 Christianity

The Holy Bible (1982) is the fundamental source of Christian beliefs and practices. Within the Old and New Testaments, there are multiple sections of the Holy Bible that refer to people with disabilities. This study presents the literal context of the Holy Bible in historical order as written not interpreted. There is not a plethora of examples in the Holy Bible about the treatment of IWD but then ones that are available are cryptic.For example, within the Old Testament of the Holy Bible, in Exodus 4:10, Moses spoke to God:

O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue. The Lord replied to Moses: Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf and mute? Who gives sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?

In Leviticus 20:16 Moses is directed by God to inform Aaron:

For the generations to come none of your descendants who have a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect is to come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed. No man with a crippled foot or hand. Or who is hunchbacked or dwarf or who has any defect or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles …because of his defect he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar.

Rose (1997) in "Who Causes the Blind Man to See" noted that "disability is a challenge of divine perfection" known in theological circles as the theodicy issue. Rose conjectures that for people without the disability, disability is seen as a sign of punishment often linked with the fury of God. Disability as a punishment for sinis evident in the New Testament of the Holy Bible (1982) where in John 5, Jesus interacting with the invalids at the Bethesda pool asks:

Do you want to get well? Sir, the invalid replied, I have no one to help me into the pool…Then Jesus said to him-Get up-pick up your mat and walk. At once, the man was cured… Later, Jesus found him at the temple and said to him: See you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you. Henderson and Bryan (1984) as cited by Rose (1997) state "that the biblical precepts continually make the connection between disability and evil and physical ability with virtue and cleanliness." (p.397).

Rose clarifies this point, "Historically, this attitude has left persons with disabilities vulnerable to societal practices of isolation, sterilization, and euthanization in the name of religious purity" (p.397).During World War II, the Nazi regime practiced the concept of forced sterilization. Any person with a history of disability in the family was sterilized as a way to protect the Aryan race. "Only the Roman Catholic Church, for doctrinal reasons, opposed the sterilization program consistently; most German Protestant Churches accepted and often cooperated with the policy." (United States Holocaust Museum). The later 20th century position of the United States Catholic church on people with disabilities can be summed up by a statement made by the Catholic Bishops who determined that the church must actively affirm the rights of IDW, "The Church must become an advocate for and with them. It must work to increase public sensitivity towards the needs of people with disabilities and support their rightful demand for justice."(National Catholic Partnership of Disability, 1978)

Carter (2007) stated that in the 21st century there are reasons why individuals with disabilities are not always fully included in the church/congregation, There may be physical barriers to inclusion such as lack of ability to navigate space or to access worship area and attitudinal barriers that exist that prohibit individuals with disabilities from fully participating in worship and religious practices. "People with disabilities and their families sometimes encounter words and actions—most likely well intended—that they perceive to be demeaning, condescending, or paternalistic" (Carter, 2007, p11). This is a cause for concern when considering that there are approximately 20% of people in any given parish who have a disabling condition. The NCPD states that in "a parish with 1000 members (there is) need to give consideration to the special needs of approximately 200 parishioners." (Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 2005)

2.2 Judaism

Within the Jewish faith, the Jewish Holy Scriptures known as the Tanakh,tells of King David who said, "Those who attack the Jebusites shall reach the water channel and (strike down) the lame and the blind, who are hateful to David. That is why they say, 'No one who is a blind or lame may enter the House.'"(TanakhII Samuel, 5-7, 525, p.477).

According to Marx (2002), "The paradigmatic perception of mortality reinforces the view of disability as divine punishment for sin"(p. 49). Furthermore, "The Talmud realistically acknowledges that disability is undesirable" (Marx, 2002, p.56).

According to the Jewish Encyclopedia (1906) section entitled "Blind in the Law and Literature," Tanakh, the state of blindness, is presented as the most severe "degradation". In situations where enemies were to be debased, their eyes were gouged out. Recall that Samson's eyes were removed by the Philistines. During the time of David the blind were forced to live outside the city limits (2 Samuel, 5-6) and were not permitted to participate in Kiddush but as with all individuals with disabilities were able to participate in Passover (Marx, 2002).Rose (1997) claims that disability in the early Jewish community was seen as incompetence and IWDwere exempt from religious practices.

For example, in the Talmud individuals with developmental delays, referred to in ancient Hebrew as Shoteh or those with hearing difficulties known as Heresh, were not permitted to be involved in legal transactions of ownership. In the community, a rabbi was ultimately responsible for determining a person's right to participate in religious community events such as Bat or Bar Mitzvah, and/or marriage (Rose, 1997). Today, the general rule when deciding if an IWD can participate in religious services and holidays is:

Inclusion or exclusion of the disabled is considered only when technical aspects of the relevant precepts raise questions as to the plausibility of participation by the disabled. This is true in regards to both synagogue liturgical activity and activities carried out in the home (Marx, 2002, p.187). While most members of the Jewish religious community support the inclusion of IWD there remains a faction that cling to the negative attitudes of the past. "Previous research indicated that traits like alienation, authoritarianism, aggression, hostility, rigidity, and defensiveness are associated with dogmatism…and that individuals with such traits tend to express negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities" (Weisel & Zaidman, 2003, 311).

2.3 Islam

In a study conducted by Diken (2006), Turkish mothers, who identified themselves as Muslim, stated various religious reasons for their children's disabilities. Some women blamed exposure to medical procedures like X-rays and vaccinations during pregnancy for the disability of their child (Diken, 2006) and some blamed religion or God. According to Diken, half of the mothers surveyed stated that it was God's decision that they had a child with a disability.

It is God's decision, and we have nothing to do with it…We have recognized my child's developmental delays before he was one-year old. We believed it was our Fate; it was God's choice for us. Therefore, we didn't take our child to the doctor (Diken, 2006, p.12).

Some parents believed that a spell brought on by an evil spirit had cursed the family and that since the curse had not worked on the parents it was transferred to the child where it resulted in the child's disability. Others blamedan alcoholic father or a depressed mother for the cause of the child's disability (Diken, 2006).

In the Islamic community in Pakistan, alternative methods based on religious precepts are used to treat IDW. For instance, Farooqi(2006) stated that religiously based alternative methods are preferred to traditional medical methods. There are a variety of reasons that Islamic religious beliefs are misunderstood such as attitudes resulting from a poor formal education, and/or the blaming of supernatural forces for misfortune. The acceptance of inclusion in Islamic congregations coincides and often depends upon the concept of inclusion in schools. A study by Leyser and Romi (2008) reported that "religion is a contributing factor in impacting beliefs in regards to inclusion of individuals with special needs" (p. 713). The attitudes and perceptions of religious leaders within the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religions may help us understand how history has influenced the acceptance or rejection of IWD. From this vantage, our study asks the question: Can leaders of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religions provide a critical insight into the purpose, meaning, and significance of disability as it influences the modern day acceptance of the IDW as a full member of their religious communities?

3. *Methodology*

Data analysis using qualitative methodology specifically compares points of interest (Glaser, 1992). Within their life-worlds, we asked our participants, religious leaders, to reflect on attitudes toward and meaning of disability within their religious circles.

3.1 Participants

Participants, recruited from the Midwest, were selected specifically because they were leaders within their religious communities. These information-rich participants included religious leaders from three faiths: Christian, Islam, and Judaism.

The three religious perspectives and the variety of religious sects within the Christian religion created a specific triangulation of the topic; a crisscross of information and conclusions (Creswell, 2002; Johnson, 1997). This purposeful sampling method allowed for insight into the experiences and perspectives of the participants and provided a common ground of historical norms and experiences of religious attitudes towards IWD.

Of the selected group of religious leaders, fourteen were of Christian faith, two were of Islamic faith, and two were of Jewish faith. Seven of the leaders were women and twelve of the leaders were men. Ages of our participants created a natural boundary for analysis using the generational divisions (see Table 1 below):

3.2 Procedure

This qualitative research study presented in narrative form asks about the attitudes and perception of religious leaders concerning what their religion states about people with disabilities and their current practices of inclusion within the religious community. Data derived from these semi-structured interviews examined the perceptions of the participants on the current and historical precedents that influence the treatment of individual with disabilities within their religious communities. The interviews "provide useful information when you cannot directly observe participants and they permit participants to provide detailed personal information" (Creswell, 2002, p.218). The participants were guarantee confidentiality of identity of their names and that of their specific religious organization. We chose to use semi-structured interviews where participants engaged in a 20-30 minute interview with pre-determined questions. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Quotations given in analysis were transcribed verbatim without corrections to conform to typical grammatical conventions.

Each participant engaged in a discussion focused around the question which originated and was tested in the pilot study of this paper (Author, 2008):

- Question One: What is your understanding of the purpose/meaning/significance of disability according to the teaching of your religious community?

- Question Two: How do you see your members interpreting the position of the community on the birth of a child with a disability?

- Question Three: How are children with disabilities welcomed into your religious community

The results from the semi-structured interviews provided the substance for analysis of the data which began with interview text consisting of phrases and sentences relating to "identifying some categories, their properties and dimensional locations" (Strauss &Corbin, 1990, p.97).Interviews of several of the Catholic participants were brought forward and cited from the pilot study because of the rich dialogue and invaluable context.

3.3 Analysis

Standard methods of qualitative ethnographic analysis procedures were employed because the research intended to describe, analyze, and interpret patterns within a culture that shared some facet of common behavior and beliefs (Creswell, 2002).

The interviews were first sorted into age range categories. The information then was divided using a constant comparison analysis method, and the categories that were created were used to develop common themes from the interviews. The data was reexamined through axial coding for connections between themes and subtheme (Strauss &Corbin, 1990).The validity of the analysis was both descriptive and internal. "Descriptive validity refers to the factual accuracy of the results recorded by the researcher" (Johnson, 1997, p.282). This form of internal validity guaranteed that the transcriptions reflected the actual words of the participants (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

After multiple readings, the major themes of the three age groups (30-40; 41-61; 62-80) were determined as follows:

Ages 30-40: Text versus Tradition
Ages 41-61: Secular Intervention
Ages 62 -80: Legal Acceptance verses Spiritual Determination.

We have chosen to ground the narratives with a general historical overview in order to provide the reader with the background most likely to have influenced our participants.

4. *Narrative Analysis and Discussion*

As we address the influence of religion on the acceptance of IWD, the participants within different religious communities have spoken to the "dance between text and tradition." The literature review focused on the "text", religious doctrine and fundamental literature that provided the historical background and doctrine familiar to our participants. The narrative analysis and discussion focuses on the interpretation of religious doctrine and traditions concerning the position and acceptance of IWDwithin religious communities.

4.1 30-40: Overall theme: Text versus Tradition

Our analysis begins with the group born between 1973 and 1983. This generation grew up in an age where the treatment and placement of IWD was questioned and revamped. This age group inherited The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975(PL 94-142) which established the rights to an equitable education for IWD and the 1973 passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (U.S. Department of Education) that outlawed discrimination on the basis of disability for organizations that receive federal funds. Congress in the 1970-80 era recognized that the segregation of IWD was discriminatory and not the inevitable consequence of their limitations.

Participants, within the age range of 30-40 years, spoke on Question One - their understanding of the purpose/meaning/significance of disability according to the teaching of their religious community. As a group, they were present in the conflict between text and tradition and aware that everyone has challenges, no human is perfect. For example, as stated by a Catholic campus minister (Author, 2008), "The church would say that no matter what our challenge in life is- challenge- cross-complaint- we can reflect on the suffering of Christ's life and draw strength from that- just as Christ struggled with his cross we are called to challenge our cross." (para 17). A female Islamic youth leader stated, "When you see these kids it's a reminder you're not perfect." A male Anglican, priest addressing the significance of disability provided his faith based rationale as to why not all humans are perfect. In Christianity, we believe that God made the world good and the God made all things well. But that, the result of human sinfulness, direct human rebellion against God that all creation is now broken...So, therefore, all forms of physical corruption, all things that are not good are evidence of the fall. We do not, however, this is important; we do not believe that disabilities are the result of the individual person's own sin. In other words, person is not born with, for instance, a Down syndrome because they are sinners or because their parents were sinners, but because all humanity is in a fallen state."

These 30-40 year old participants then responded to Question Two: How do you see your members interpreting the position of the community on the birth of a child with a disability? We summarized their interpretation as "the dance between text and tradition". This summation was reflected in statement of the Jewish rabbi who spoke to the fundamental conflict within and between religious communities concerning the origin of disability when she stated, "I don't know if you're finding this, but my sense would be that within religious individuals that it's the dance between the text and tradition or the individual (circumstances)." A female Islamic leader talking about the origin of disability stated, "God is the one that gives everything and he is the one who gives you things the way they are. It's really just, it's fate everything's fate. It's written down, everything's foreseen, you can't really control anything."

In contrast, according to an Islamic director of special needs, disability speaks to stigma, to isolation:

It's more of a cultural thing there's a stigma attached with having a child with special needs. So it's a very private thing so most people do not bring their children who have special needs. … People think … that if you have a child with special needs…you must have done something wrong. Like God is punishing you through this. So it's not embarrassment, but you're putting out your sins.

Question Three asked the participants to reflect upon how are children with disabilities are welcomed into their religious community? The predominant perspective was that in the event that IWD are not disruptive the community should make the religious experience accessible so that they might participate to the fullest of their ability.

Specifically, an Islamic participant commented, "The thing is for people that are disabled, they don't have to come to the message …you can't kill any living thing or anyone until god takes their soul away. It's the same thing with disabilities, it's the same thing with anything, like people who are amputated or this or that, you have to care for them."

When a Catholic participant (Author, 2008) spoke of the inclusion of IDW it was**:**

Fully and completely - there are programs for them to teach them the faith on their level and to give them mutual experiences on their level…There is this dramatic accommodation - for a full active participation in the liturgy. (para.30)

This need for accessibility to community was also expressed by a Jewish rabbi who stated, "It's a an understanding that Judaism and Jewish worship, Jewish community should be accessible to any Jew that wants to participate and it's up to the congregation to make sure that that's done."

In the synagogue, IWD were invited to participate to the "fullest of their ability", A Jewish youth leaders remarked, "They participate in parts of the service … you'll have them come up for a prayer or maybe not for the large chunk of the service but what they can do and it's nice for the congregation to see as well as them to participate."

4.2 41-61: Overall Theme: Secular Intervention

This generation was born between 1952 and 1972. In the United States, they witnessed the challenges of school desegregation that resulted from the legal precedent established by the1954 Brown v the Board of Education. Within the field of public education, separate educational facilities no longer constituted an equal education. The law was not intended to address the inclusion of IWD whose education, for the most part, was in separate facilities or at home. This era ended with the presidency of John Kennedy whose family influenced the start of Special Olympics.

The participants in the 41-61 year age range addressed Question One. As a group they reflected upon the mystery of pain and suffering surrounding the condition of the IDW. A Catholic theologian and priest stated:

It is the theodicy issue- how does He have innocent people suffer- when we see someone with disability- speaking of severe disability- this is a birth accident-genetic disorder of some kind- the response to that is part of a larger providential care of God for all creation- part of that is the mystery of pain and suffering – it is a wound on the being of that person.

In contrast a Protestant male Episcopal Priest stated: "All things have been created by God and that as it says in the first chapter of Genesis, it's good what God creates."

When responding to Question Two - the overall theme was the welcoming of God's gift. An Episcopalian leader stated:

My perception of the members, and particularly this religious community, is that all people are to be welcomed as whom they are and some people require more in terms of our patience and our understanding, but that difficulties reflect our limitations rather than that person's limitations.

Another Episcopal leader voiced:

The average member would probably take the perspective that church is called to embrace all members, all people, all, no matter what their condition, and therefore someone with a disability is to be loved and supported and to be reached out to and we should do whatever we can to fully include them…I think there might be an overlay of that it would certainly be better if that person were otherwise and oh that's too bad, unfortunate and again that the perspective being that there is this person somehow defective in a way that I am not.

Continuing on that idea and Anglican leader stated that:

The parent might say, well this is a terrible thing and there is nothing good about it but that's not true either because in Christianity like I said earlier every event no matter how painful it is, is pregnant with the voice of God. And I think that having a child with disability gives you an opportunity to know God in a way that you wouldn't know him otherwise and so a parent with a child with disability or grandparent has an opportunity to know God in different way.

In contrast to the subtheme of welcoming, a Catholic theologian emphasizes that it is:

The theodicy issue again– the justice of God and suffering-they would see in the broader context that suffering is part of the human condition there is not a cause to give it to or assign it to people- but none the less-you should respond with caring and compassion – spirituality- theological position is that this is God's will and God has a plan and they would interpret it somewhere in that kind of thinking.

Responding to Question Three, the Participant 41-61 group overall found an initial open minded acceptance of the IDW fostered by parents and community desire for this acceptance .One Catholic leader (Author, 2008) stated that the initiative for intervention was parent driven. **"**The parents pushed us forward- involve people with disabilities- physically adapt the buildings, find ways to include people in parish community- the more people are included the more it breaks down the stereotypes and fears" (para. 29).

According to an Anglican pastor IDW are welcomed to the communion table and are given opportunity to receive catechism. "We do our very best to incorporate children into worship of the body from an early stage….. so we do provide special opportunities for children to be educated especially in the Holy Scriptures."

A leader in the Presbyterian Church pointed out that, "As much as possible- treated no different- sometimes we bend over backwards to show how open minded- this singles them out." This concept of singling out is also voiced by a Catholic participant who stated, "People would look at a person with a disability and they would automatically discount their quality of life." This participant was particularly concerned about the medical ethics:

Funny enough if you sit and talk with these individuals with disability they are as happy as anything- they would say why don't you ask me if I'm happy – why don't you ask me about my quality of life-not surprisingly when you start to have legalization of physician assisted suicide the most vocal group who opposes is the disabled community * they are no fools because they see the handwriting on the wall- they see this in the cross hairs they know that they have come to a whole culture that has a skewed viewpoint on the quality of life.

(*civil rights groups for IWD such as PRIDE and ADAPT)

A Protestant pastor noted that:

The reception of a disabled child would be initially warm and embracing and initially seen as something people would be supportive of the direction would depend on – if people would embrace child and family and then seek the training and education that it takes to work with them in a long term and sustained environment.. If not then the interest would wane and people would not be as helpful and receptive.

4.3 62 -80 Overall Themes: Legal Acceptance verses Spiritual Determination

This generation was born between 1931 and 1951. They have lived through World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Desert Storm. During their lifetime, services offered were predominantly centered on veterans with special needs. Tests of intelligence were initially developed to screen individuals for military service. This generation also experienced the Brown v Board of Education and the Civil Rights Movement. They grew up in a time period where most children with severe disabilities were institutionalized. Schools for individuals with special needs were segregated. If the students with special needs were included it was in separate rooms, separate buildings from the general population. The overall theme for this group was the reality of legal acceptance as compared to the understanding of the nature of disability as spiritually determined.

Religious leaders between the ages of 62 to 80 addressed Question One. A Jesuit Catholic priest (Author, 2008) thinking about the meaning of disability stated:

God did not curse them; it was not from their parent's sin. We do not understand the mystery. Suffering assuredly to the church is a good thing – no pain, no gain, some are strong, some commit suicide – I learned patience from this – patience to suffer (para 13).

In the Episcopalian, church the leader determined, "We can work with what the children's gifts are, and that is congruent with our faith. I know there are those who feel like disabilities can be God's judgment but they are very few and if they stick around long enough we will change their minds." Another Episcopalian concurred that. "I do not believe that the church as a whole or officially would say that there was a judgment against the parents or they have done something wrong."

When addressing Question Two on the position of the community on the birth of child with a disability, the participants were in agreement with the position taken bya Catholic Jesuit Priest (Author, 2008) that , " My parents would have thought it was somebody's fault – a punishment- or they were a victim- more a victim" (para

18).The Episcopalian deacon stated the opposite, "I do not believe that the church as a whole or officially would say there was a judgment against the parents or they have done something wrong ."

Answering Question Three on types of support, a Catholic theologian (Author, 2008) comments that , "This is religion's inability to cope with disability…you don't see a lot of disabled people around here... people are not comfortable with them – shy, embarrassed especially if they have deformities…we hide them in institutions" (para 25).In the Episcopal church participants in this study have a different perspective, "We have youth do the readings, lead psalms, do the Old Testament or New Testament lesson whatever. We have a couple of people both of them have significant disabilities, both of them get up to read initially with a parent behind." Further comments from the Episcopal Church leaders speak to a determination to include:

Well, in this particular parish I think, families feel that children with disabilities are welcomed. And I think in some ways, people cannot stay here because of that. We do have children who are disruptive at times and we've had that from the beginning. Even in the early days of the church, there were a few children who were disruptive. So it's been a part of the history of this parish. Again, I would say that everybody welcomes that. There are I think a handful who get a little annoyed with disruptions but they pretty much keep their mouth shut.

5. Analysis Summation by Age groups

Overall 30- 40 year old religious leaders, seems conflicted between the interpretation of their religious texts and the acceptance of the visible practices that are forming new traditions, traditions which challenge the literal interpretation of documents considered sacred. The participants' voices that speak to the conflict between text and tradition affirm the tone of the literature review where modern blanket statements of support and acceptance of IDW are in some cases in direct conflict with religious documents. In the era of the 41-61 year old religious leaders, there was an acknowledgement of the importance of secular intervention with IDW reflecting some positive some negative attitudes. Disability was seen as a mystery of pain and suffering which called to mind the theodicy issue regarding the conflict between God's goodness and omnipotence and the existence of evil and discord considered to be manifested in disability. Yet there was in some communities a receptive embracing of IDW as God's gift to be welcomed and to be accepted. There was a concern that IDW would become marginalized within religious communities. Initial open minded acceptance of the IDW would need to be part of an ongoing community interaction and educational initiative in order to maintain continuous support and contribute to the value and quality of life of individuals considered to be different.

The 62 to 81 year olds focused on the acceptance of the legal responsibility towards IDW. Inclusion in the community was the exception and remained in their perspective a matter of physical American Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodations during services. There was a concern that individuals regarded as "deformed" or "disruptive" might create discomfort in the community. The responsibility for assimilation was considered to be the purview of the parent rather than the religious community as a whole. There was an overall sentiment that there is "grace in knowing what you can and can't do."When considering the dialogue of our religious experts of varying ages their voice created a picture of generational influence. There was a distinct difference in the religious interpretation of each age group towards the meaning and significance of disability. Attitudes and perceptions of religious leaders within the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religions reflected the best and worst case scenario of the overall social construction of disability for the 21st century. The older generation seemed to have stagnated in a culture of segregation where disability was a problem outside the purview of the religious community. The younger the participant the more likely they were to embrace inclusion and to be and active partner to parents of children with IDW. Participants with the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religions provided a critical insight into the interpretation of the purpose, meaning, and significance of disability within their respective religious communities. This insight was based on their knowledge of historical principles of their religion and their candid professional opinion of experiences concerning the acceptance or rejection of IWD.

6. Summation

The leaders of Muslim, Catholic Christian, Protestant Christian, and Judaist faith provided a critical insight on varied levels of disability construct that still exist within their religious communities, and insight which speaks to " a dance between text and tradition". The study concluded that even though the stigma associated with persons with persons with disabilities strings across religion, acceptance, and stigmatization was present in all religions. Religion encourages tolerance and care of others but at the same time places emphasis on the different status of persons.

7. Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to this study based predominantly on the qualitative nature of the methodology. Data collection by interview leaves interpretation of interviews to the researcher even with a triangulation of analysis. The participants were volunteers and constituted a convenient sample. It was not possible to account for the other factors influencing the perspective of the religious leaders. Lastly, participant size and demographics limited generalization of results. Future research would benefit from a large sample size. Our study indicated that the acceptance of IDW in a religious community was not guaranteed. This concern should be addressed by returning to the field to obtain a larger sample size which incorporates religious extremes.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Distribution

AgeRange	Religion	Gender	Position
30-40	Islamic	Female	Visitor Relations Director
30-40	Catholic	Male	Campus Ministry Leader
30-40	Jewish	Female	Rabbi
30-40	Jewish	Female	Director of Student/Children Services
30-40	Islamic	Female	Director of Special Needs
30-40	Anglican	Male	Priest
41-61	Catholic	Male	Deacon
41-61	Catholic	Male	Theologian Jesuit Brother
41-61	Catholic	Male	Deacon
41-61	Catholic	Male	Theologian and Professor of Theology
41-61	Episcopalian	Female	Priest
41-61	Episcopalian	Male	Priest
41-61	Presbyterian	Male	Deacon
41-61	Catholic	Male	Priest and Seminarian
62-80	Catholic	Male	Jesuit Priest
62-80	Catholic	Male	Professor of Theology and Author
62-80	Episcopalian	Female	Deacon
62-80	Episcopalian	Female	Deacon
62-80	Catholic	Male	Priest

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