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Some Difficulties for Amos Yong's Disability Theology of the Resurrection

Abstract

Amos Yong claims that persons with disabilities like Down Syndrome will retain their disability at the resurrection. In section I, I will make some preliminary remarks in order to properly frame the discussion. In section II, I will lay out Yong's account of the resurrection and offer some difficulties along the way. Section III will examine what appears to be the main source of justification for Yong's claim. It is what I shall call Stanley Hauerwas' dictum which states that to 'eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject.' In this section, I shall draw out three sets of bizarre entailments and difficulties that arise from Hauerwas' dictum. Section IV will offer some concluding remarks and suggestions for further development on the doctrine of the resurrection from a disability perspective.

1 Preliminary remarks

Amos Yong's *Theology and Down Syndrome* attempts to offer a fresh look at Christian doctrine in light of the disability perspective. His paper 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion' is a call to philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians to consider the disability perspective in three key areas: the problem of evil, religious epistemology, and life after death. Yong's work offers many useful insights that Christian theologians and philosophers should consider.

Yong and I have a bit in common. Yong's younger brother Mark and my younger sister Kelli both have trisomy-21, or Down Syndrome. Yong and I both wish to do theology in a way that brings glory to God and justice to the weak. One of Yong's desires is to change the way the Church and society as a whole treat persons with disabilities. Part of his project is to get the Western world to move away from a medical model of disability that ultimately dehumanizes disabled persons. Another aspect of his project is to motivate the Church to be more inclusive so as to help the disabled find their place within the communion

of saints. Part of what this means is that the Church should not merely minister to disabled persons because disabled persons can be ministers as well. What Christians need to realize is that the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh, whether abled or disabled. I concur with Yong on all these things, and I dare say hallelujah, perhaps even amen. Further, I agree with Yong that various Christian doctrines need to be reformulated in order to get this change within the Church moving. Where we disagree is over the doctrine of the general resurrection of the dead. Yong claims that persons with disabilities will be resurrected with their disabilities intact. In order to justify this he makes several metaphysical claims that I find worrisome. Throughout this paper I shall address these issues.

2 Amos Yong's disability theology of the resurrection

Disability theology is a project in postmodernism¹ in that a key component is the notion that all voices have an equal say on all matters. Part of the project entails pointing out the past atrocities perpetrated on a particular group and then using the oppressed perspective to criticize and correct the views of reality that led to the atrocities. The project for disability theology, then, is to lay out the history of disability, offer a critique of the doctrinal articulations in Christianity that may have led to oppression, and rearticulate Christian doctrine from the perspective of the disability experience. The history of the treatment of persons with disabilities contains far too many tragedies, so it would seem that disability theologians like Amos Yong have their work cut out for them.

There are several doctrinal concepts in Christian theology that Yong sees as problematic and in need of being rearticulated from a disability perspective. The doctrine that I wish to focus on here is the general resurrection of the dead. As Yong points out, our eschatology is intertwined with our Christian practices. The way we think about the final eschatological state will deeply influence the way the Church behaves.² One problem, as Yong sees it, is that our image of our future resurrected bodies is based on 'some able-bodied ideal of perfection.'³

If we think that the afterlife is a 'magical' fix for all the challenges posed by disability, then we may be more inclined to simply encourage people with disabilities (as has long been done) to bear up under their lot in life and await God's eschatological healing for their lives. Yet this assumes that the task of responding to the issues of disability belongs to God, and it also assumes that disability is primarily (perhaps only) an individual affair.⁴

The corrective for this problem is to posit that persons with disabilities will retain their disabilities at the resurrection. People with Down Syndrome, for instance, will still have trisomy 21. Redemption for people with Down Syndrome will 'not consist in some magical fix of the twenty-first chromosome but in the

¹ Amos Yong, 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion,' *Ars Disputandi* 9 (2009), 62.

² Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco 2007), 291.

³ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 282.

⁴ Yong, 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom,' 70.

recognition of their central roles both in the communion of saints and in the divine scheme of things.⁵ Yong further speculates that the same will be true

for all persons—from the young to the elderly—along with their differing bodily afflictions and conditions, whether that be the wide range of intellectual or developmental disabilities, Alzheimer's, chronic illness, polio, multiple sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, congenital amputees, and so on. Precisely because the meanings of our lives are constituted by but irreducible to our bodies, so also will the resurrected body be the site through which the meaning of our narratives are transformed (and that, eternally).⁶

At this point one might ask how Yong could maintain this account of the resurrection given the emphasis on healing in scripture in the ministry of Christ and the eschaton. Yong offers a hermeneutical solution as a way forward. It starts by distinguishing between illness and disability. Illnesses can be improved while disabilities cannot. When it comes to interpreting scripture we should distinguish between healing and curing. Illnesses can be healed, but disabilities cannot be cured. Thus, one should read the ministry of Jesus as healing illnesses but not curing disabilities.⁷

This might strike one as a rather arbitrary distinction and thus call into question Yong's proposed hermeneutical principle. What could justify such a distinction between illness and disability, and healing and curing? Why can illnesses be healed, but disabilities not be cured? One source of justification seems to come from Stanley Hauerwas' dictum: 'To eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject.'⁸ The claim is that God cannot cure 'individuals of their genetic variation, as it is difficult to imagine how someone with trisomy-21 (for example) can be the same person without that chromosomal configuration. In these cases, for God not to allow the trisomic mutation may be for God not to allow the appearance of precisely that person. There may be no way, in this case, to eradicate the disability without eliminating the person.'⁹

What must be understood at this point is how strong Hauerwas' dictum is. It takes the form of a necessary truth claim. Necessary truth claims admit of no exceptions, so only one counterexample will show it to be false. What this does is it makes a person's disability an essential property of her individual essence such

⁵ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 282. On 269 he states, 'To say that people with disabilities (such as Eiesland or Wendell) will no longer be disabled in heaven threatens the continuity between their present identities and that of their resurrected bodies.' Nancy Eiesland has degenerative bone disease, and Susan Wendell has myalgic encephalomyelitis. This is an odd claim since Yong, on occasion, speaks as if physical disabilities can be cured while intellectual disabilities cannot, 334.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 283

⁷ *Ibid.*, 245-6.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, 'Marginalizing the "Retarded",' in Flavian Dougherty (ed.), *The Deprived, the Disabled, and the Fullness of Life* (Wilmington 1984). Yong approvingly quotes this dictum in *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 270, and 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom,' 61. Interestingly Hauerwas simply asserts this, without justification, as a passing comment. It plays no role in the argument of his paper.

⁹ Yong, 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom,' 61. Despite the strong statements from Yong that I have already quoted, there is a severe ambiguity in his *Theology and Down Syndrome*. Sometimes he talks as if God cannot eliminate/cure disabilities, then other times he says God can and on occasion does, and other times he says God could cure but will not because disabilities do not need to be cured. See *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 243, 245-8, 269-74, 282-4. If God can cure disabilities—whether He chooses to or not—it follows that Hauerwas' dictum is false.

that she cannot exist without her disability. If she were to lose her disability she would cease to exist.

Why think a thing like that? Yong claims that some disabilities are identity conferring.¹⁰ Our sense of self is deeply shaped by our past experiences, and disabilities play a major role in the shaping of our personalities and character.¹¹ '[L]iving with disabilities shapes our lives, relationships, and identities in substantive rather than incidental ways...To say that people with disabilities [like degenerative bone disease and myalgic encephalomyelitis] will no longer be disabled in heaven threatens the continuity between their present identities and that of their resurrected bodies.'¹² This leads Yong to ask, 'if people with Down Syndrome are resurrected without it, in what sense can we say that it is they who are resurrected and embraced by their loved ones?' Or to put it another way, 'Could someone imagine their daughter with Down's syndrome as being her true self in the new heaven and new earth without some manifestation of her condition?'¹³

My answer to such questions is that I can imagine, perhaps as through a mirror dimly, my sister Kelli without Down Syndrome. This is because she is not identical to her disability. She has various character traits that are shaped by her Down Syndrome, but they are not causally determined by her Down Syndrome. For instance, she often fails to answer questions directly and has the skills of subterfuge that would make a politician jealous. These qualities are not the direct causal result of her disability as far as I can tell for my wife is often irritated at my inability to answer questions directly, and subterfuge runs in the family. It is true, though, that her disability has shaped her personality, but why think that she would need to be continually disabled in order to retain that personality? It is not obvious that eliminating a person's disability will eliminate the character and sense of self that she has developed over time because of her disability. In fact, it is conceivable that a person could retain her cultivated character whilst leaving behind her disability.

It seems to me that Yong has a case of mistaken identity. By this I mean that he has confused metaphysical identity with a sense of self. Further, he has confused the 'is' of predication with the 'is' of identity. Necessarily a person is identical to herself. Necessarily a disability is something a person has and not something a person is. A disability is an accidental, and not a necessary, property. A disability is not a necessary property of an individual essence precisely because it is a part of a contingent state of affairs that need not obtain, and on occasion ceases to obtain whilst the person continues on. As such, Hauerwas' dictum is false, and Yong's hermeneutical principle lacks justification. Since Yong's hermeneutical principle lacks justification, his rearticulation of the resurrection from a disability perspective is unmotivated.

¹⁰ Yong asked that I include the word 'some' in this sentence. It is hard to figure out which disabilities are identity conferring and which are not from Yong's writings. Again, there is a great deal of ambiguity.

¹¹ Yong, 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom,' 69.

¹² Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 269. Also, see note 5 above.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 270.

3 Taking Hauerwas' dictum seriously

I have my suspicions that disability theologians will not find metaphysical arguments convincing and will continue to hold Hauerwas' dictum. As such, I wish to bring out three sets of difficulties that arise from Hauerwas' dictum if it is taken seriously. The following difficulties are *entailed* by Hauerwas' dictum. If a disability theologian like Yong wishes to avoid these entailments he will need to abandon the dictum and replace it with something clear and coherent.

3.1 First difficulty: medical ethics and the ministry of Jesus

Yong holds that a disability is 'any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.'¹⁴ If Hauerwas' dictum that to 'eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject' is taken seriously it will have a profound impact on how we practice medicine. Surgeons ought not to do cochlear implants anymore for in the process they are eliminating the disability of deafness and as such eliminating a person. Every cochlear implant is a murder.¹⁵ Also, various fields of medical research ought not to be pursued for fear of eliminating even more people. For instance, we should stop trying to find cures for Alzheimer's, Autism, and MS. We should also stop working on limb transplants and cures for blindness. Recent questions have arisen about the possibility of drugs that increase mental IQ. It would seem that we ought not to give such drugs to persons with mental impairments for we would be eliminating those individuals in the process. Nor should we continue to work on drugs that reduce the affects of Alzheimer's, or drug treatments for ADHD.

Related to this, we will need to rethink our views of Jesus. Jesus developed a reputation as a healer. Typically one might look at the gospels and say along with J.B. Green that '[h]ealing is a sign of the in breaking kingdom of God, reminding the reader that behind the healing ministry of Jesus and others stands Yahweh the healer.'¹⁶ Not so if we take Hauerwas' dictum seriously. The gospels portray Jesus as healing illnesses *and* curing disabilities. People born blind are made to see and the lame are made to walk (cf. John 9, Mark 2). The deaf are made to hear (Mark 7). People who have been disabled for large portions of their lives are cured (Luke 13). Jesus is eliminating people left and right in the gospels. If we take Hauerwas' dictum seriously it would seem to call into question the moral character of Jesus and make one skeptical if Yahweh is in fact standing behind Jesus.

There is a possible rejoinder to this set of difficulties. One could say that physical disabilities can be cured but mental disabilities cannot.¹⁷ The problem

¹⁴ Yong, 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom,' 56. Here Yong is following the definition offered by the World Health Organization.

¹⁵ One could accuse me of an uncharitable reading of Yong. I must confess that I do not know what else could be meant by Hauerwas' dictum. If it has some other meaning besides the elimination of the person, it is not obvious. If it has some other meaning, the dictum should be abandoned.

¹⁶ J.B. Green, 'Healing,' in T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (eds.) *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove 2000), 538.

¹⁷ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 334. Yong says that intellectual disabilities, unlike physical disabilities, serve as 'strong identity characteristic[s] that cannot be eliminated without eliminating the

with this rejoinder is that it lacks justification. One would need a sufficient reason for thinking that mental disabilities cannot be cured. To say that one's mental disability has deeply influenced one's sense of self is insufficient for the same applies to physical disabilities that are curable. The same also applies to cancer survivors who speak of the life changing experiences they have had as they overcame their disease.

Further, if this rejoinder is made it would demonstrate that Hauerwas' dictum is false. As mentioned earlier, Hauerwas' dictum is a necessary truth claim. Necessary truth claims admit of no exceptions, and one exception will show it to be false. If one were to allow that certain sets of disabilities can be cured and others cannot, she would be abandoning Hauerwas' dictum.

3.2 Second difficulty: the problem of heavenly pain

Consider the following. Let us say there is a disability attached to the 17th chromosome that causes continual pain. The disorder is the source of the pain, and the pain is terribly debilitating. In order to get rid of the pain one would have to remove the disorder that is attached to the 17th chromosome. If, by Hauerwas' dictum, God cannot get rid of the disorder without getting rid of the person, then God cannot get rid of the pain. If God cannot get rid of the disorder, the person is destined to an eternal life of pain. Granted it is a heavenly life of pain, but it is still a life of continual pain.¹⁸ Whence then is the hope of a world without suffering?

It would seem that God is impotent to deal with the problem of evil even after creation has been made new. The problem is further exacerbated by the disability theologian's claim that one's 'personal identity is understood not only in terms of cognitive self-consciousness, but...in terms of bodily structures'¹⁹ because a person's experience of a life-long debilitating pain as a result of her bodily structure will constitute part of her identity. If one has to seriously ask, 'Will people who have lived most of their lives with prostheses be resurrected with what has become, for all intents and purposes, an integral aspect of their identity?'²⁰ it would seem that we would have to seriously ask, 'Will someone with a life-long debilitating pain that has become an integral aspect of her identity be resurrected without this pain?' It seems that persons who suffer from MS, leg calf perthes, horrible back pain, fibromyalgia, and other such woes will have an eternity of pain to look forward to regardless of their eternal destination. It would also follow that persons who suffer psychological anguish from chronic depression, multiple personality disorders, and other such mental disabilities have a similar fate.²¹

person.' Of course, as mentioned in notes 5, 9, and 12, this creates a severe ambiguity in Yong's work for he sometimes speaks as if physical disabilities cannot be cured either.

¹⁸ Thanks to Keith Yandell for this argument.

¹⁹ Yong, 'Disability and the Love of Wisdom,' 69.

²⁰ Ibid., 68.

²¹ Thanks to Justin Knapp for bringing to my attention the issue of chronic depression and bipolar disorder.

3.3 Third difficulty: people disabled late in life

Much like the previous difficulty, a set of questions that arise from Hauerwas' dictum appear to have disheartening answers. Consider the case of a fully grown man who gets in a car accident. As a result of the accident he is left severely disabled both intellectually and physically. When Christ returns and ushers in the resurrection of the dead how will this man be resurrected?²² Will he be resurrected in his pre-accident state, or his post-accident state? It would seem that the answer is post-accident for God cannot eliminate the man's disabilities without eliminating the man himself. I doubt very much that the man's wife will appreciate this answer, nor would the man were he capable of grasping what was being said. Or consider a classic question posed during the early Church. If a man loses his arm in life will God give him a new one at the resurrection? An Augustinian would say yes, but it would seem that a disability theologian must say no for in 'the new created order, every life, "impaired" in its own way, will grow in goodness, knowledge, and love.'²³ To say that this diminishes an individual's hope for the afterlife would be an understatement. Further, it ignores all of the disabled voices that do look forward to God's future curing of their bodies.²⁴

4 Concluding remarks

Towards the end of Yong's book he makes it clear that there are many issues that need to be worked out from a disability perspective and he laments that he has had to be suggestive in his thoughts instead of dealing with the various issues involved in reformulating Christian doctrine. While Yong should be applauded for attempting to reformulate Christian thought and practice in a way that emphasizes the inherent value of persons with disabilities, I suggest that his reformulations need more work so that they can deal with the difficulties that I have raised. Despite this, I agree with Yong that Christian thought and practice need to be reformulated precisely because persons with disabilities do have inherent value, and the hope of Christ is for everyone whether they are abled or disabled. To conclude, then, I would like to offer a few possible suggestions for Yong, and other disability theologians working on the resurrection.

(A) I recommend that Yong get rid of Hauerwas' dictum. The dictum is too strong and has some rather unfortunate entailments. Further, since it is a necessary truth claim, it only needs one exception to demonstrate that it is false. I believe that the ministry of Jesus has demonstrated this dictum to be false. Further, cochlear implants, whether they work well or not, do give a person hearing, and thus show that the dictum is false. Many other examples could be given, but one counterexample is sufficient to show that a necessary truth claim is false.

²² Thanks to Ben Simpson for bringing this question to my attention.

²³ Yong, 'Theology and Down Syndrome,' 288.

²⁴ Yong notes that amongst persons with disabilities there are many divergent views on heavenly hope. After mentioning several disabled persons who look forward to God's healing power, Yong makes the most astounding remark. 'To be sure, disability advocates may say these are socially conditioned responses of the psychologically and religiously immature.' *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 244. Hopefully Yong does not agree with these advocates.

(B) If Yong, or any disability theologian, wishes to argue that disabilities must be retained in the resurrection in order to preserve identity and continuity, several things must be articulated. First, a clear anthropology is needed. Yong has not stated what anthropology he holds to, nor what the conditions are for identity through time and from death to resurrection. In order to offer an account of identity through time and from death to resurrection, Yong will need to lay out a clear anthropology. He claims to hold to an emergentist anthropology where persons are constituted by but not reducible to their bodies. Yet he has not clearly stated what this means. Is it an emergent dualism, non-reductive physicalism, material constitution, or dual-aspect monism?²⁵ Each view is interesting in its own right, but each has difficulties that must be dealt with. For instance, physicalism has a notoriously difficult time accounting for identity from death to resurrection.²⁶

Second, conditions for identity through time and from death to resurrection must be offered. Yong is attempting to offer a speculative account of the continuity and discontinuity between our present bodies and our resurrected bodies. This is a difficult task by itself. He will need a few different things to accomplish this task. He will need to postulate some thing that persists through time. It could be a soul, or perhaps a body. That will depend on which anthropology he adopts. Whichever anthropology he adopts will also have to avoid replica problems.²⁷ He will also need an account of psychological continuity. I believe that this is the level where most of Yong's speculations have been taking place. His claims would be strengthened if he were to offer an account of what it is that persists through time and from death to resurrection.

(C) There is a related difficulty to the above. I would suggest that an argument must be offered as to why a person must retain her disability at the resurrection in order to maintain psychological continuity. It seems to me that the memory of being disabled, the cultivated character traits, and so on would be sufficient for psychological continuity. It is not obvious to me that a person must be continually disabled in order for these things to obtain. I do not see this as a refutation of Yong's claim, but I do see it as a rival hypothesis. In order to prefer Yong's claim over this rival hypothesis Yong will need to offer some justification for his claim.

(D) Yong's work brings up several interesting questions that I would like to see discussed. One related issue has to do with the continuity of bodily structures from death to resurrection. How much structural continuity is needed between our current bodies and our resurrected bodies? Yong holds to a very strong account of continuity between current bodily structures and resurrected bodily structures. It is interesting to note what other contemporary theologians believe.

²⁵ Yong, 'Theology and Down Syndrome,' 322. He shows that he is aware of each of these views, but he never takes a stand on which one he holds.

²⁶ For a sample of such issues one can look at Kevin Corcoran (ed.), *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons* (Ithaca 2001). Also, Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (eds.) *Persons: Human and Divine* (New York 2007).

²⁷ The replica problem is a difficulty for physicalist anthropologies. The basic idea is if identity is grounded in physical bodies, it is logically possible for God to create several replicas of you at the resurrection all claiming to be you.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, for instance, argues that 'the transformation of the perishable into a spiritual body will be so radical that nothing will remain unchanged. There is no substantial or structural continuity from the old to the new existence.'²⁸ Pannenberg notes that 'after our death, our bodies will decay in the earth and the hope for our resurrection does not depend on the continuity of that bodily substance with the future spiritual body.'²⁹ Clearly we have two opposite views here between Yong and Pannenberg, and a whole host of other views could be thrown in the mix as well. Yong's case would be stronger if he could offer justification for his view over Pannenberg's. As I have already argued, Hauerwas' dictum does not provide the needed justification, so something else will be needed to fill its role.³⁰

²⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia 1985), 67.

²⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Resurrection: The Ultimate Hope,' in: Kenneth Tanner and Christopher Hall (eds.), *Ancient and Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century – Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden* (Downers Grove 2002), 261.

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