

Including the Mentally Handicapped in Religious Ceremony: Michael Polanyi's Tacit Dimension and Pierre Bourdieu's *Habitus*

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Should the mentally handicapped be welcomed into religious ceremony? Traditionally, the mentally handicapped have been marginalized in the religious meeting, because of both their perceived lack of cognitive ability and the fear that they may disrupt the ceremony. Regarding the former, it's generally accepted that because the mentally handicapped cannot articulate their faith or understanding of dogma, they cannot have faith. Therefore, not much concern has been shown about the matter of religion and the mentally handicapped.¹

However, some recent studies by Jean Vanier, Stanley Hauerwas, Brett Webb-Mitchell, and John Swinton show that mentally handicapped people have religious potential and the potential for religious development with the help of the faith community.² In addition, some protestant denominations in the USA, such as PCUSA, CRC, and RCA, have strived to include mentally handicapped church members in the public worship and sacrament.³ However, it is necessary to consider the mentally handicapped with respect to practical theology, because practical theology shows the importance of participation in the process of faith formation and growth of understanding by repetition. This has not been considered an important factor in studying the matter of religion among the mentally handicapped up to this point.

In this paper, I will argue for the full inclusion of the mentally handicapped in religious ceremony, using the methods of practical theology, especially social studies and participatory theory. In multicultural and multi-religious societies, these approaches do not analyze the phenomenon of society with specific lenses; rather, they look at common ceremony and action from a neutral position, and therefore can help human beings regardless of religious or cultural differences.⁴

In fact, the matter of religion for the mentally handicapped is not restricted to a specific religion. Although the mentally handicapped have not been given much consideration historically and have often been discriminated against, they should not be marginalized.

¹ The only reformed confession which mentions the participation of the mentally handicapped is Micron's Shorter Catechism (1552). See Willem van't Spijker, *The Church's Book of Comfort* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 142.

² Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anasi Press, 2008); Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures: Learning to Be Members of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); John Swinton, *Critical Reflections Of Stanley Hauerwas' Theology Of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures: Learning to Be Members of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

³ Regarding RCA(Reformed Church in America)'s case, see. <https://www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=7239>; <https://www.rca.org/page.aspx?pid=4994>. Regarding to CRC (Christian Reformed Church), see "Persons with Disabilities and Profession of Faith," in *Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith in Christian Reformed Church, Agenda for Synod 2011* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publication, 2011), 561; Regarding to PCUSA(Presbyterian Church in the USA), see Minutes of the 200th General Assembly, 1988. Published by the Office of the General Assembly, Louisville, KY. Part 1, 444.

⁴ Regarding method, see Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

In general, some religious stances that emphasize cognitive ability arise from an emphasis on religious dogma: if people cannot articulate dogmatic knowledge or show enough understanding, they cannot gain full membership or full participation. However, practical theology, which honors participation and praxis, reveals that the human being is not just a being of cognition, but a whole person who has affection. Therefore, the possibility of knowing by practice and participation, and of growth of understanding by repetition, is a worthwhile subject of study for the whole of religion.

In this paper, the most important questions are as follows:

If a person cannot articulate an idea, does it signify a lack of cognitive ability or understanding? Is there any possibility of some sort of knowing through participating in a meeting?

My starting point is Michael Polanyi's idea of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge can be defined as follows: "We always know more than we can say or prove." Tacit knowledge is a sort of epistemology without insight.⁵ That is to say, even if a person does not articulate logically about something, it does not signify an absence of knowledge of that thing. Because of this, bodily participation is an important means to gaining knowledge. By indwelling in reality, the process of immersing oneself in the particulars of subsidiary awareness by means of embodied activity while synthesizing and internalizing, people come to know.⁶

If we were to permit the possibility of tacit knowing, how could it be reinforced? Note Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. According to him, "social agents are endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences. These systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable them to perform acts of practical knowledge, based on the identification and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react."⁷ By rites and action, social injunction and social order are inscribed in the body.

So, even though the instruction and memorization of dogma is important in religious education, instruction is limited in that dogmatic knowledge can easily appear hostile rather than inclusive, becoming a kind of religious elitism which emphasizes the accumulation of knowledge. Therefore, we must not underestimate the formative function of participation and repetition in helping build religious understanding. For example, a little droplet of water by itself does not have much transformational power, but the repetition of droplets over a long time can create a beautiful lime cave; likewise, weekly religious participation and communion with other people can create beautiful religious imagery and tacit knowledge in the minds of mentally handicapped participants. At this point, I insist that practical theology is more important than any other theological method. The power of religion does not come from the accumulation of knowledge, but from experience and reflection. That experience is not a mere human experience, but an encounter between God and human—an experience from which no human being should be systematically excluded.

Eventually, I insist that the mentally handicapped have the potential to gain tacit knowledge while participating in the religious ceremony, and that repetitive participation can enhance their understanding: therefore, they should be welcomed in the religious ceremony.

⁵ See Thomas F. Torrance, ed. *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1980), 145.

⁶ Regarding the meaning of indwelling, see *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Mediations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 138.