

Review

John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness and Gentle Discipleship*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016, 225 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-1-48130-409-2, \$29.95.

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Professor John Swinton is a practical theologian, a registered mental nurse, and a registered nurse for people with learning disabilities. He has also been a healthcare chaplain. In this role he spent many hours alongside people whose memory and/or cognition were not central to the way they encountered the world. “I began to realise that who we are is not the sum of our neurological configurations... this book is working out formally ideas that I already knew intuitively” (p. 12).

Swinton considers three groups of people with disability: those with profound and complex intellectual difficulties; those with advanced dementia; and those with acquired brain injury. The lens through which he considers the humanity of these people is a Christian theology of time.

The culturally dominant narrative concerning time is “the time of the clock” (dubbed by Benjamin Whorf, Standard Average European Time). Here, time is assumed to be linear, dynamic, forward-facing, measurable and controllable. Swinton argues that our perception of what constitutes “normal” or “abnormal” is essentially related to our perception of time. Taking issue with Mary Warnock, he writes, “The suggestion that we are a burden on others because we cannot contribute is simply another way of saying that the way in which people with profound disabilities use their time is incompatible with current temporal assumptions and expectations” (p. 52).

Swinton characterizes time as an aspect of creation, a creature that is both a gift of God’s love and also fallen and so in need of redemption. Swinton contrasts the time of the clock – linear, unrelenting, progressive, potentially abusive – with God’s time, which is holistic, all embracing and mysteriously simultaneous.

Swinton’s thesis is that we need to learn to live in God’s time and that people with disabilities can contribute to our learning. A key feature of

God's time is that it is slow. Jesus walked at the average speed of a human being, which suggests that, metaphorically, God operates at 3mph. Love is slow. This should lead us to redefine our stance to slow. Slowness, which characterizes much of the interactions of people with disabilities, is actually a gift. When we slow down, we are potentially more present, we encounter one another with gentleness, and we take rest seriously.

Swinton works this out in the context of each of the groups of people mentioned above. People with profound intellectual disabilities risk being downgraded in a hyperactive and hypercognitive society. Yet they mirror central aspects of what it means to reside in God's time: slowness, gentleness, vulnerability, non-competitiveness, trustfulness, restfulness. Writing from a specific Christian standpoint, Swinton acknowledges that many Christian communities achieve inclusion, but claims this is still too often about tolerating someone with a disability. He challenges what might the Church look like if such people were conceived as *disciples* with a distinct *vocation*?

Swinton moves on to examine our stance to people with dementia, and suggests that this too can often be reframed from within God's time. He contests as reductionist the taken-for-granted consensus that memory is purely a neurological process. Physiologically, our bodies as well as our minds remember. Theologically, memory is a spiritually-oriented process that finds its home in the human heart. (He contrasts the Latin root of "remember" which means "re-minding" with the Spanish "recordar", which means "re-hearting").

Swinton also takes issue with the Lockean view on personhood as constituting our ability to tell a story as a linear narrative. Someone with dementia has not "lost" their memory – only their sense of linear time; of time with past, present and future tenses; of time-of-the-clock. For someone with dementia, past, present and future tense cease to have relevance, paralleling the simultaneity of God's time.

In the final section of the book, Swinton explores the practical and theological difference made by awareness that we live within God's time for those who live with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) and its accompanying personality changes. Much of the distress of ABI lies in the horror of the disconnect between life 'before' and 'after' injury. Yet God's time is different to sequential, linear time.

Using Colossians chapter 3 from the Christian New Testament, Swinton focuses on the Pauline phrase, "Who we are is hidden in Christ". The temporal dynamic of "in Christ" is non-linear. This changes the hermeneutic we use to read our existence and interpret our experience, for who we are lies outside the boundaries of our fragile bodies. Moreover, this is as true for non-disabled people as it is for those with a disability: "the process of

discovering who we are is *always* emergent, confusing and deceptive, even if we never encounter brain damage” (p. 178).

I find three main strengths in this book: first, the insistence that we examine more critically our dominant sociocultural narrative which makes the brain everything. Such “neuromania” equates damage to the brain with damage to our “humanness”, with resultant devaluing of the personhood of many people with disabilities. Secondly, a reminder that there is an alternative perspective to linear time-of-the-clock. God’s time is slow, gentle, timefull, simultaneous, and ultimately more life-affirming. Thirdly, Swinton makes an eloquent case for relating to people with disability, not as objects of charity, but as fully integrated members of the (Christian) community, with gifts and a calling to offer the rest of the social (faith) body. Referencing Frances Young’s son Arthur, Swinton states he has “a role as teacher as well as student, giver as well as recipient, guest as well as host” (p. 123, although surely those last two terms should be inverted). This is something that chaplains in all settings will recognize: our patients are our teachers. As a chaplain of an acute hospital, I found myself challenged again to adopt a stance of being the patient’s *guest*, affirming *their* control, *their* gifting, *their* offering to me.

My unease with the book stems from the difference between Swinton’s theological orientation and my own. As early as p. 4, Swinton characterizes his own key constructs in terms of the limits of human reason, the centrality of divine revelation and the giftedness of human knowing. Later, he aligns himself with Karl Barth via the celebrated Barthian anecdote, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so”, and through invoking Barth’s concept of “soteriological objectivism”, where God’s work of salvation continues irrespective of human response.

All of this has the feel of a top-down theology. For this reviewer, insufficient weight is given to the kind of bottom-up Christian approach, where incarnation and the “crucified God” minister to human experience. To be fair, in chapter 11, Swinton acknowledges a critical tension between theological formulation and lived experience. He suggests that ritual, with its movement from liminality into new possibilities, can provide a bridge. Nevertheless, the theological foundations stand over against human experience, and the implied sense of direction is that experience must align itself to theology. As a hospital chaplain, for both pastoral and theological reasons, I am seeking a theology that emerges *from* suffering and offers a more organic fit with the challenging experiences of individuals. Hope and redemption arise in and through connection with an incarnate God who is alongside us in every moment of time.