

Catholic anthropology and Cognitive disability: Rational capacities as the definition of what it means to be human in the image of God

Therese Ignacio Bjoernaas

Affiliation: Assistant professor in Religion and Ethics at Queen Maud University College, Trondheim, Norway

Abstract: Christianity has based its anthropology on the Bible's assertion that God created human beings "in his own image." Theologians have made key assumptions regarding "image of God." One central assumption is that we possess capacities that are uniquely representative of God's image, and chief among them is the capacity to reason and act as moral agents. St. Thomas Aquinas, the most central theologian in the Catholic Church, gives a privileged position to the mind and the intellect in his exegesis of the *imago Dei*. Theologians have placed some of the blame for the discrimination faced by people with cognitive disabilities on the discourse of catholic theological anthropology itself. Disability scholars such as Molly Haslam, Peter Byrne, and Hans Reinders assumes that from Aquinas's perspective, people with profound intellectual disabilities must lack the *imago Dei* because they lack the faculties of reason and will, which are its essential components. This paper presents a brief refutation of their argument.

Bio:

I am at the moment an assistant professor at Queen Maud University College in Norway, focusing on multiculturalism, islamophobia and racism in Early Childhood Education. I am also a Phd candidate in Berkeley, California writing on disability theology, in particular what it means to be made in the image of God in the Catholic Church, which understands the image in term of reasoning capacities. I received by BA at the Norwegian University of Technology and Science in Religious Studies and after that decided to pursue a Masters degree in theology at Barry University in Miami, Florida, focusing on homosexuality in the Catholic Church. The marginalization of certain groups of people based on their God-given embodiment at the hands of the church left me concerned about what it means to be disabled, colored, and homosexual in the image of God.