

Speaking With Us, Not For Us: Neurodiversity, Theology and Justice

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Abstract

To belong in the Christian tradition, we must be able to contribute to it. Yet neurodivergent Christians have rarely been enabled to tell our own stories about ourselves as a vital part of God's (neuro)diverse creation. In common with other autism research, academic theology is framed by pathologizing clinical paradigms of autism; neurodivergent people's situated knowledge about ourselves has not always been valued in the field. In this aut-ethnography, I use reflections from a decade of engaging with autism theology – often a painful experience of Othering – to frame a response informed by critical autism and neurodiversity studies. Drawing on lived theology from autistic research participants, I consider what our neurodiversity theologies have to offer to academic theology. Finally, I ask how theologians can do justly by speaking with, not for, neurodivergent people.

Keywords: neurodiversity, autism theology, disability theology, epistemic injustice, autoethnography, critical autism studies

Friday, 3 PM.

I'm in the library, surrounded by books of theology about autism, and I'm shaking.

Many of these books share narratives of autistic people, whom the writers clearly love – telling their stories for them. Other authors are just speaking for us. (For me.)

Assuming the voice of God, some theologians say I am the result of a Fallen world. That people like me didn't exist in Eden. They tell me to celebrate, because I will be cured in Heaven!

(What do you want me to do for you? they forget to ask. If they were listening, the answer would not be, "Make me neurotypical.")

I'm told that to call myself disabled and autistic is to be misrecognized. That these are not my true names.

(I remember that powerful moment, when neurodivergent speaker Jemma said “Disability is part of our identity in Christ, and that’s something to be celebrated.”)¹

Some books debate whether I am a person. For hundreds of pages.

(In my fragile bones, I feel the weight of history, of all the times people like me didn’t count as human, from mass institutionalisation to eugenics.)

Over and over, medical and psychological research is used to explain away my reality.

(The writers don’t talk about the harm clinical research has done to autistic people. They don’t share our own, very different stories about ourselves.)

All the books, even the most well-meaning ones, discuss me as a problem to be solved. They toss me back and forth like a theological football, till I’m battered and bruised and exhausted. They write for neurotypical people, not for me.

But I have to keep pushing myself through this pile of unsafe books, for fear of being accused of not engaging with the literature.

Stories have power.

This is not my story.²

1: Speaker/s and know/ers

I am an “unreliable narrator” (Yergeau, 2013). Defined by others, disbelieved when I tell my story, excluded from the conversation about me. Being autistic “signifies fundamental nonexistence” in our ableist, neuronormative culture (Yergeau, 2013).³ This is a belief with deep cultural roots, and it permeates the stories told about neurodivergent people.⁴

About people like me.

¹ Jemma Brown (Richardson et al., 2022).

² Adapted from my blog post *Safety In Numbers: Autism, Theology and Me* (Jacobs, 2022).

³ Neuronormativity is “the performance of the local dominant culture’s current prevailing images of how a so-called ‘normal’ person with a so-called ‘normal’ mind thinks and looks and behaves” (Walker, 2021, p. 53).

⁴ The neurodiversity movement grew out of the autism self-advocacy movement, but the concept of neurodivergence is used today by people with ADHD, by dyslexic, dyspraxic and dyscalculic people, by those with Tourette’s Syndrome, and increasingly by people with learning disabilities and/or mental and emotional distress (Graby, 2015). Responding to critiques that the neurodiversity paradigm is only relevant to those with low support needs, neurodivergent people have argued that this lacks a nuanced understanding of the neurodiversity movement’s values (M. Campbell, 2020; Milton, 2019).

I do not recognize myself in the stories most theologians tell about me. I spent seven years in the wilderness, afraid to cross the threshold of a church, and my alienation began amidst these stories. Theologies where I became “them” — where I was the object of study, as well as the subject (F. K. Campbell, 2009). Autism has been a concern of pastoral theology for a decade and a half (Swinton & Trevett, 2009), but neurodivergent people ourselves have rarely been enabled to tell our own stories of church, faith and our place in God’s (neuro)diverse creation.

“It is a fraught thing to hear yourself described and debated, especially by those who do not share your identity” (Boot, 2022).

This is epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007).⁵ And in this, the church is a mirror of society. Neurodivergent people have long been the objects of others’ knowledge (Botha & Cage, 2022; Milton, 2017, p. 124; Walker, 2021, p. 94). Our *knowing* about ourselves has not been valued (Chapman & Botha, 2023; Stone & Priestley, 1996). My credibility as an autistic person is doubted; my “account of everyday experiences and harms” is disbelieved (Chapman & Carel, 2022, p. 2). If I speak, I cannot *really* be autistic (Chapman & Carel, 2022). If I do not speak, my silence is a tragedy — not a repression of my voice — and someone else will tell my story for me (Davis, 1995; Jacobs, 2018; Michalko, 2002).

My autistic narrative is fragmented. I do not write in straight lines. Silenced by a world and a church that cannot hear my voice, I can easily forget that God speaks through this autistic, ADHDer, dyspraxic body-mind (Belser, 2019; Raffety, 2020).

“Participation in the great story of salvation that is enacted and spoken about in church and faith community is prevented. Silence is all that remains” (Williams, 2022, p. 195).⁶

Lucy: I’ve only told one person at church that I have Asperger's and she told me I was wrong. So I didn't tell anyone else.

Naomi: Wrong in what sense?

Lucy: She said, “No you don't. You can't have that.” So I didn't tell anyone again.

⁵ Miranda Fricker (2007) writes about two types of epistemic injustice – testimonial injustice, in which the stories told by members of a marginalised group are not believed, and hermeneutical injustice, in which we are not enabled to participate in the shaping of knowledge about us.

⁶ Williams writes here about her exclusion from charismatic ritual, as an autistic person, but her reflections on being unable to remake herself through narrative after trauma resonate with themes of speech and knowing.

- Extract from an interview with Lucy (Jacobs, 2018)

In writing an aut-ethnography about my experiences of reading theology as a neurodivergent person, I am speaking back to those who would speak about me without me (Denzin, 2014).

Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience to show how “the researcher and the social world impact on each other” (Pitard, 2017). In *aut-ethnography*, autistic people reclaim our fragmented, “rhizome-esque” stories (Milton, 2017, p. 105), resisting cultural narratives that can only imagine us as silent (Yergeau, 2013).

This is my story.

Two other neurodivergent people speak in this article: Lucy and Anthony, autistic participants in my research with disabled Christians (Jacobs, 2018).⁷ Lucy is also dyspraxic. Like me, they speak differently,⁸ and their stories have often been invalidated. These are neurodiversity theologians worth listening to.

I've not been going to [the house group] for that long there, so I've— I've not really spoken much yet. I, kind of, offer to read the passage and then I figure I've got some speaking in...

I've got a rubbish memory. I— it's terrible, so when I'm reading stuff, I don't remember, kind of, other stuff that I've read... I think it makes my faith really, kind of, surface. It doesn't go as deep as other people's seem to, if that makes sense, where they've got more understanding of things.

- Lucy

I know how the trauma of misfitting⁹ in a neuronormative world can leave you feeling like your faith is not good enough, Lucy. All because you cannot communicate and think in the 'right' ways. Later,

⁷ Lucy and Anthony are 2 of 14 neurodivergent participants in research for my PhD and a book (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022), from a total of 45 disabled Christians in the United Kingdom. Both were initially diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, a diagnosis which no longer exists. Their shifting terminology for themselves reflects similar shifts in the autistic community at the time they were interviewed, in 2015.

⁸ Diagnostic criteria might imagine some of Lucy and Anthony's interview contributions as a “failure of normal back-and-forth communication” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), but their speech is different from neuronormative standards, not deficient. Longer interviews, more time spent with the data, and participant reflection (Tracy, 2010) helped us to bridge communication gaps together.

⁹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory of misfitting (2011) describes how society is physically designed for non-disabled people and how disabled people misfit against its normative limits.

you will share your vision of a (neuro)diverse Heaven, and it won't matter if you don't remember all the right words. God speaks through your experience.

I do not aim to speak *for* anyone except myself, but I hope to speak *with* my neurodivergent community (Crowder, 2022). As I shift between “we,” “I” and “they” (Kafer, 2013), I aim to “point towards a new discursive space [for] autistic-led commentary that responds to and moves with... the diversifying autistic voices of our times” (Crowder, 2022, p. 71). I write as an autistic, dyspraxic ADHDer and disabled person, as a precariously self-employed researcher in disability and religious studies, and as an edge-walker on the margins of the institutional church (Waldock, 2021). I model language, rather than debating it,¹⁰ citing neurodivergent writers on the terms that have emerged from our community, from *neurodiversity* (Singer, 2016) to *neurominority* (Walker, 2021, p. 21).¹¹ Language matters, but a shared language “means very little, if next you are denying autistic people complex emotions, identity, community, culture, and objectifying and othering them” (Botha & Cage, 2022).

Sometimes, when I have been silenced beyond what I can stand, God is in the silence.

2: Knowing neurodiversity

I speak, halting and clumsy, panic-scrambling to script a string of words, force them out in an order you will recognize. I lose words. I know the name of the theory but the wrong one is all that will come out of my mouth. This is an academic presentation, and I am being judged on whether I can speak convincingly enough to fit in a neurotypical academy.

“You talk about ‘disability’ and ‘neurodiversity’—” I can hear the quotation marks “—but aren't we all the same in the sight of God? Aren't we all a little bit autistic?”

It is not God's eyes that freeze me now. I fight down my body's need to rock and shake. Bite the skin around my fingers so hard they bleed.

¹⁰ I echo Krysia Waldock in this approach (2021), who writes, “I won't be listing what Autism is or what the statistics are. Being Autistic and having faith are acutely personal parts of my life; placing them into a rubric of a typical Autism essay would be highly insensitive. I am an Autistic, it is part of my identity in the same manner as being a Christian.”

¹¹ Citational practices are political (Ahmed, 2017); I primarily cite neurodivergent writers in this article.

“You say you speak as an autistic person—”

Fragile neural circuits shatter under pressure.

“—but you can speak.”

And I am silence/d.

I live in a society which imagines people like me as a public health crisis (Bumiller, 2008). Academic research into autism and other neurodivergences is dominated by a dehumanizing pathology paradigm, which imagines neurodivergent people as ‘disordered’ and seeks to ‘cure’ our differences (Botha & Cage, 2022; O’Dell et al., 2016).¹² Research marginalizes our knowledge of ourselves, rather than imagining we might have insights into the lived experience of neurodivergence (Botha & Cage, 2022; Luterman, 2019; Milton, 2017; Walker, 2021). Most autism research still defines me by the absent self theory (Bustion, 2017; Frith, 2008), which says I have no ability to empathize with others, no ‘theory of mind’ (Baron-Cohen, 1997).

“How can one defend her own humanity if she does not recognize the humanity of others?” (Yergeau, 2013).

The pathology paradigm is rooted in a destructive fiction of what it means to be human (Deligny, 2015; Milton, 2017, p. 104) – a norm against which neurominorities fall short (Bowman, 2021; Walker, 2021). Divergent neurotypes, such as autism, are “widely taken to be at odds... with living a good human life” (Chapman & Carel, 2022, p. 3).

Naomi: Have you felt that you're accepted as you are [at your church]?

Lucy: It's been, kind of, mixed. I think in some ways I have been. And in others I get this, you know, this expectation that everyone should be really involved and should be going to, you know, so many things and should have a good circle of friends, and some things that I don't have and others I don't want.

¹² In the US and UK, the vast majority of autism research funding goes to genetic and scientific research into causes and cure (Singh et al., 2009), a bias about which autistic people have expressed concerns (Pellicano et al., 2014).

And because our own voices are not heard in most research, research rarely asks how we can be given the opportunity to live up to our potential *as neurodivergent people* (Chapman & Carel, 2022:2).

Epistemic injustice stifles our flourishing, as the people God created us to be.

Engaging with research that has literally denied I am a person can be very painful (Luterman, 2019). But neurodivergent people are speaking back against epistemic injustice.

Critical autism studies and neurodiversity studies are challenging the power of research to construct us without us (Botha & Cage, 2022; Huijg, 2020; Mueller, 2020; O'Dell et al., 2016). Neurodivergent researchers are highlighting the abusive 'interventions' that result when research represents neurodivergence as abnormal and less than human (O'Dell et al., 2016; Walker, 2021). They are challenging misrepresentations of autistic people's existence (e.g. Murray et al., 2005), countering the harmful idea that we lack 'theory of mind' with the 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2017).¹³ In the face of invalidating questions asking us for whom we speak (Milton, 2019), the neurodiversity movement continues to make a stand against research and theory that has the power to cause suffering and inequality (Silberman, 2015; Yergeau, 2013). Our critiques are about justice.

Our own research is rooted in the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2021) – a philosophy that celebrates our different ways of being and thinking. Neurodiversity is natural, valuable, and essential to human flourishing (Milton, 2020). At the same time, the neurodiversity paradigm acknowledges that we are marginalized neurominorities (Walker, 2021, p. 43), in a society designed to sustain neurotypical people's needs (Milton, 2020; Silberman, 2015). The concept of neurodiversity gives us tools to challenge our marginalisation.

3: Neurodiversity and theology

*I was so excited to find a theology article on whether Peter might have had ADHD. It's something that I and other neurodivergent people have pondered, imagining Peter as one of our tribe.*¹⁴ Peter is

¹³ As Milton explains it, "when autistic people and those not on the autism spectrum attempt to interact, it is both that have a problem in terms of empathising with each other: a 'double empathy problem'" (2017, p. 13); this becomes a serious problem when neurotypical framework is imposed onto an autistic person's interactions.

¹⁴ (Allison, 2019; Jacobs & Waddock, 2020). To be clear, I am not trying to diagnose a biblical character with any 'condition' here. I am retelling the story of one who sparks recognition in me; a resistant reading (Exum,

my relatably distractible, gloriously impulsive, saying-what-no-one-else-dares-to, deeply-feeling, holy-loving, prophetic ADHDer hero, and his neurodivergence just might be critical in the history of the church. So maybe my neurodivergence matters to God too.

But, among some nice conclusions about including easily-distracted people in church, I read that “Peter’s story may in fact cause us to ask if the whole body of Christ has ADHD in a metaphorical sense.”¹⁵ (I am not your metaphor.) Peter’s difference is erased. His neurodivergence doesn’t matter. By the end of the article, ADHDer Peter has become just another a lesson in patience and grace for neurotypical people. And I’ve lost the neurodivergent saint I needed.

Theology need not be rooted in pathology paradigms. We have been blessed with very different ways of thinking about diversity, from critical disability theologians (Betcher, 2007; Bowman, 2021; Eiesland, 1994; Hardwick, 2021)¹⁶ who see disabled and neurodivergent people as part of “the beautiful biodiversity that God has woven throughout the tapestry of creation” (Kenny, 2022, p. 155). Inspired by them, I embrace the neurodiversity paradigm as a theological vision – of the glorious neurological diversity of God’s human creation, and the uniqueness of the *imago Dei* in each of us. “This is who I am and how God created me” (Hardwick, 2021, p. 11). What a liberating image of the divine, when all I have ever heard are stories of a neurotypical God. A God who can create such diversity might be an autistic ADHDer like me. The idea makes me rock happily in my library seat, and for once, I don’t care who sees. Maybe I won’t be eradicated in Heaven. Maybe I’ll meet a neurodivergent God there, and we’ll recognize each other (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022).

Yet, as autistic pastor Lamar Hardwick warns us, “The Christian understanding of faith, sin, salvation, and all that we believe begins with a simple story about the dangers of desperately wanting to rid ourselves of our humanity” (2021, p. 9). So much pastoral theology is rooted in pathologizing clinical theories of autism (Bustion, 2017), dominated by outdated representations of me as an absent

1993), in defiance of a neuronormative theological “hegemony of the average” (Hull, 2003, p. 22) which represents biblical characters solely as neurotypical.

¹⁵ (Barclay, 2008, p. 342).

¹⁶ Elsewhere I have compared the approaches of critical disability theory and pastoral disability theology. The former is influenced by disability theory and disabled people’s perspectives (Jacobs, 2018).

self (e.g. Brock, 2019; Cox, 2017; Dearey, 2009; Deeley, 2009; Dubin & Graetz, 2009; Evers, 2017; Hauerwas, 2013; A. Lewis, 2009; Swinton, 2012). Scientific abstractions distance philosophical concepts from people (O'Dell et al., 2016; Yergeau, 2013); I read far more debate about *autism* and what it means for neurotypical people than I hear *autistic people's* perspectives (e.g. Brock, 2019; Cox, 2017; Gillibrand, 2014; Harshaw, 2012; Leidenhag, 2022). The question of whether I am human is kept alive by well-meaning but abstracted debate about selfhood, personhood and the *imago Dei* (Cox, 2017; Gillibrand, 2014; Gordon, 2009; Hills et al., 2019; Leidenhag, 2021). Euphemisms deny I am part of God's (neuro)diverse creation (Walker, 2021); phrases such as "a person who lives with the experience of autism" (Tam, 2022, p. 25) represent my different ways of being as a terrible cross to bear.¹⁷ I am told my neurodivergent experience and identity are little more than a label (Brock, 2019; Edmonds, 2011), by those who have not heard my story of how my life and faith were transformed when I first named myself an *autistic person*, created by God, just as I am.

"When I receive messages from church members implying that I should avoid labeling myself as autistic, it both breaks my heart and opens my eyes to the reality that the church has so much to learn" (Hardwick, 2021, p. 8).

This is a field dominated by "the perspectives of nonautistic parents and church communities to the exclusion of the perspectives of autistic persons themselves" (Bustion, 2017, pp. 661-2). Theology is overwhelmingly concerned with non-speaking autistic people, often conflated with those with learning disabilities (e.g. Brock, 2019; Gillibrand, 2014; Hills et al., 2019; A. Lewis, 2009; Tam, 2021, 2022).¹⁸ But speaking and non-speaking are complex and shifting for us; speech has little to do with intelligence or support needs, and autistic people communicate in diverse ways (Botha et al., 2023).¹⁹ Theologians expressing solidarity with autistic people who do not use speech can easily fall

¹⁷ Although neurodivergent people choose different ways to describe ourselves, identity-first language – "autistic people" – is the preferred term of a majority of autistic people (Botha et al., 2023).

¹⁸ So Hills et al. write that up to half of autistic people have "severe autism" and will never develop "functional speech" (2019, p. 2-3). But this link is not clear. Low IQ has been over-estimated in autistic people (Dawson et al., 2007); one recent study found 18% of autistic children had additional learning disabilities (Memmott, 2019 [2022]; Roman-Urrestarazu et al., 2021). Dividing autistic people by functioning labels – a poor predictor of support needs (Alvares et al., 2020) – risks obscuring our commonalities (Bowman, 2021) and the social barriers we all face, from unmet health needs and higher mortality rates to high suicidality (Pellicano et al., 2014).

¹⁹ "[S]peaking and non-speaking is not dichotomous because autistic people can move between speaking in some environments or spaces and not in others" (Botha et al., 2023, p. 870).

into the trap of filling the ‘gaps’ of their silence to legitimate theologies (Jacobs, 2018; Raffety, 2021). This may make it easier to dismiss those who communicate through speech or writing, and our critiques (e.g. Evers, 2017; Harshaw, 2012; Hills et al., 2019; A. Lewis, 2009). At the same time, I see the vitally important concept of lived experience appropriated or denied in theology, so that neurotypical professionals may continue to speak for us (e.g. Brock, 2019; Harshaw, 2012).

Amidst the theological interest in remembering that we are all one in Christ, my difference and identity are downplayed or erased (e.g. Barclay, 2008; Brock, 2019; Macaskill, 2019; Swinton, 2011). I become a metaphor for Christianity to think with (Betcher, 2007, p. 59; e.g. Brock, 2019; Dearey, 2009; Gillibrand, 2014; Gordon, 2009; Leidenhag, 2022). I still see more than a hint of the instrumental use (Hull, 2014) of autistic people in theology, as though we are here to bring the rest of the church closer to God (e.g. Barclay, 2008; Brock, 2009; Hills et al., 2019; Shrier, 2018; Swinton, 2012; Tam, 2022).²⁰ I read that I may need to repent of using my autistic identity as an excuse for my different ways of being (Macaskill, 2019, p. 436) – reminding me of years of judgement from fellow Christians, whose comfort has been disrupted by my difference (Spies, 2021) – but rarely do I read theology calling for neurotypical Christians to repent of the systemic exclusion of neurodivergent people from their churches.²¹

At the other end of this Othering, I come to “signify what it means to be inhuman” (Yergeau, 2013).

Like other autism research (Botha & Cage, 2022; Luteran, 2019), theology of autism is beginning to respond to autistic people’s critiques. Academic theologians are beginning to ask autistic people about their own experiences of church, faith and spirituality (Burnett, 2021; Rapley, 2021; Tam, 2021; van Ommen & Endress, 2002).²² A few theologians are challenging theology’s own history of dehumanising us (Leidenhag, 2021, 2022), questioning deficit-based paradigms of autism

²⁰ So, for example, Leidenhag writes that “attention to those we label ‘disordered’ forces us to interrogate our own presumptions of order” (2022); Macaskill writes “to think properly about autism brings with it a body of further blessings for the church” (2022, p. 435). Autistic people point back to a neurotypical-led church here.

²¹ One exception is Macaskill, who acknowledges that autistic people have been hurt by the church: “The church is not a safe place just because it is the church” (2019, p. 96). Pastoral theology has more often discussed exclusion in *society*, following Thomas Reynolds’ disability studies-based theology (2008). Even so, some theologians express unease with concepts from disability theory, such as ableism (Brock, 2022; Swinton, 2011).

²² This is in the context of an “empirical turn” towards theological ethnography (Kaufman, 2015; Marti, 2016).

(Macaskill, 2019) and responding to autistic people who have been harmed or marginalized by churches, challenging the church to do better (Macaskill, 2019; van Ommen & Endress, 2002).

Yet theology still overwhelmingly speaks about us, without us.²³

This is part of a broader trend in pastoral theology of disability, which has often talked about disabled people without centring our perspectives (Betcher, 2007; Jacobs, 2018; H. Lewis, 2007). Pastoral theology focuses on the care of autistic people (Brock, 2019; Burnett, 2021; Tam, 2021), but has less to say about barriers to belonging in churches (Waldock, 2023). When theology distances autism from disability (Leidenhag, 2021; van Ommen & Endress, 2002),²⁴ and rejects disability theory as irrelevant to churches (Brock, 2019; Edmonds, 2011; Evers, 2017; Swinton, 2011), it becomes harder for neurodivergent people to represent ourselves differently.²⁵ Second-hand stories about relationships with autistic people are common in theology (e.g. Brock, 2019; Gillibrand, 2014; Harshaw, 2012; Tam, 2021),²⁶ but neurotypical theologians have not often been reflexive about their power in this conversation (F. K. Campbell, 2009; Jacobs & Richardson, 2022), even as a few autistic theologians begin to identify themselves (Macaskill, 2019; Rapley, 2021; Williams, 2022). And on all neurotypes other than autism – ADHD, dyspraxia, Tourette’s Syndrome – academic theology is largely silent.²⁷

Instead, theology imagines churches as ideal Christian communities where neurodivergent people will find welcome and friendship (Brock, 2019; Burnett, 2021; Swinton, 2012; Tam, 2022). Yet I read few stories of neurodivergent people like me, who have been traumatized and alienated by

²³ “Nothing about us, without us” is a maxim of the disability and neurodiversity movements (Silberman, 2015).

²⁴ Not all neurodivergent people consider themselves disabled. However, the neurodiversity paradigm is a social model, showing how we are disabled by barriers in a neuronormative society (Walker, 2021).

²⁵ The same pastoral model of disability frames theological approaches to neurodivergent people and disabled people more generally (Jacobs, 2018).

²⁶ These are not uncontested stories. Brock writes, “The practice of telling stories to establish the moral authority of the speaker... needlessly narrows the discussion and excludes important voices” (2019, p. 242). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) would agree that stories told by non-disabled people to legitimate their right to speak about disabled people are problematic. However, obscuring the difference in positionality between stories *about us* and disabled and neurodivergent people’s *own* untold stories of our marginalisation can reinscribe the silencing of disabled and neurodivergent voices in theology (Jacobs, 2018).

²⁷ There is very little theology engaging with ADHD (Barclay, 2008) and almost nothing on Tourette’s Syndrome – one exception is Beers (2020).

church communities. Nor do I often hear about those of us who are differently social,²⁸ and might prefer to seek God alone, in the quiet places to which Jesus also withdrew.

Naomi: You just don't want to take part?

Anthony: Exactly, yes. Which is why the most comfortable way I find to take my faith is all in there, you know, in my head, because at any time, you know, in prayer I can ask for God's help, I can ask for forgiveness, whatever it might be.

In a neurotypical vision of friendship in theology of autism, I read that I must assimilate into neuronormative social Christian communities. This is a model of inclusion, not justice (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022; Raffety, 2022), where neurotypical churches set the terms for my hospitality (Jacobs, 2018). And I wonder when I will hear not charitable calls to be 'friends' with me, but outrage at the injustices that keep me from belonging in churches at all.

My neurodivergent participants had a different way of *knowing* about social churches.

Naomi: Can you imagine an environment where you would be more comfortable in a church — if not completely comfortable, then more than you have been?

Anthony: ...When I say I don't have to go to a church to [have faith], that should not be interpreted as saying, "I don't think the church has any purpose at all," because I certainly think it does. But a lot of the church's work is invariably and quite understandably pretty social... Which in many ways is an absolutely wonderful thing, because it sort of, brings a lot of pleasure to a lot of people that way, gives them a sense of wellbeing and happiness, which has to be a good thing. Except of course everyone is different, and I'm in the minority on the other end of the scale who is much more of a loner, and quite enjoys solitude... But at the same time I can completely understand if other people had to live in that manner like I do, they'd go completely out of their minds, in the same way I would if I was having to do, you know, social things like that all the time, which I'd find extremely exhausting.

²⁸ In their research on autistic sociality, Rosqvist et al. argue that "we need to explore alternative possibilities for understanding friendships, ones that do not necessarily include the dominant NT ideals of researchers" (2015).

Imagine if neurotypical-led church communities could empathize with neurodivergent people as strongly as Anthony empathized with his neurotypical fellow Christians.²⁹ Anthony's vision of justice meant justice for all God's people – even if that meant there was no place for him in church communities. But he did not give up on the idea of a church that could honor and enable the flourishing of autistic Christians too.

Just because we've always done something this way, doesn't mean that we always have to, if there's a better way, and I think there is.

- Anthony

Anthony's failure to belong made space for new narratives (May, 2011) about more just ways of doing church. "Perhaps this is something like what the apostle Paul means at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, when he writes, 'I will show you the most excellent way'" (Bowman, 2021, p. 130).

I long for churches where Lucy and Anthony's different, neurodivergent ways of being and *knowing* are valued, not as objects of charitable outreach, but as transformative witness to the (neuro)diversity of God's Kingdom.

4: Doing justly

"I think it's very worrying, the approach you're taking in this research," the senior professor says.

I think she's angry about my argument that disabled people should be able to speak for ourselves, but it's hard to be sure. There is a chasm between her and me, too deep to be ever bridged by words.

And God hovered over the waters of the deep.

"My sister is a cripple," the senior professor says. "Her affliction is very hard for me."

I drop my water bottle. It goes rolling, spinning away, under the wheels of my wheelchair. My support worker reaches down to pick it up. Later, she will write a witness statement, and she will be believed, because she's neurotypical and non-disabled.

²⁹ Anthony did significant emotion work here to compensate for the double empathy problem. Neurodivergent people are often known – and sometimes pathologized – for our strong sense of justice, in defiance of the idea that we lack theory of mind (Russell et al., 2019; Schäfer & Kraneburg, 2015).

But I cannot speak.

To belong in the Christian tradition, we must be able to contribute to it.³⁰

It matters whose stories are told, and who tells them.³¹ The idea of lived experience is contested in theology, even co-opted to speak for marginalized groups (Radford, 2022). But our embodied experience, as marginalized people, is a vital way of *knowing* about God, the Bible and church (Chopp, 1987; Cone, 1975; Radford, 2022). “Autistic writers write autism differently because our brains work differently” (Bowman, 2021, p. 220). Theology that does not centre neurodivergent people’s lived experience cannot hear the very different questions we are asking – about access, participation and (in)justice in churches (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022, p. 124).³²

The small group now, we just, kind of, read [the Bible passage] and people answer the question. And if I don't understand it, then, well, I just never understand it... I think that people would, kind of, be open to [other ways of responding to the passage] being suggested, but... the majority of people would never suggest that, because they can understand it... The couple of people that might find it useful either have never thought of that or wouldn't dare suggest it.

- Lucy

“If I don’t understand it, then, well, I just never understand it.” Lucy’s words convict me, as someone with educational privilege, who understands a hostile world by studying it. I wonder how many other neurodivergent people don’t “dare” ask for a different way of understanding the Christian tradition. Neurodivergent Christians cannot join the conversation about us until it is accessible to us.

I think my concept of normal is, it doesn’t actually exist anyway. And it’s all the people who make the rules, who perhaps, I don’t know, define normal as what they are, and form their rules based on the opinions accordingly. Without often consulting anyone else who is not, in inverted commas, ‘normal.’

³⁰ We all need “the right to participate in the ‘living tradition’ or the reflexive arguments” of a society or institution (May, 2011, p. 368; Shotter, 1993).

³¹ However, testimony is “mere ‘story-telling’” (Stone & Priestley, 1996, p. 20) without theory about the social conditions and inequalities that produce the situated knowledges of marginalized groups (Radford, 2022).

³² Participants in my research critiqued theologies that fail to speak out against harmful approaches to disability, neurodiversity and distress, offering only “lightweight” responses (Jacobs, 2018, p. 215).

- Anthony

Reflecting on the power of neurotypical people and perspectives in churches, Anthony added, “It’s sort of a question again of them having to learn about us, and us having to learn about them.” As he reminds us that we all need to work to overcome the double empathy problem, Anthony begins to guide us towards ways that theologians can *do justly* in research with neurodivergent people.

Theologians can do justly by recentering neurodivergent voices in the theological conversation. We can offer a Christian challenge to the academic ableism and barriers (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Martin, 2020) that keep neurodivergent people from contributing to theology.³³ We can undertake participatory research that builds interactional expertise with autistic and other neurodivergent people (Milton, 2017), “not merely as sources of empirical material, but as active participants in the production of knowledge on autism” (Milton & Bracher, 2013, p. 61). And we can teach a diverse curriculum that includes neurodiversity and critical disability perspectives, welcoming critique from the grassroots (Ahmed, 2000, 2017). As we share our power, theologians may be inspired to examine our imposed theology (Marti, 2016) and our paradigms of neurodiversity, and to be led by neurodivergent people’s embodied understandings of God.

Theologians can also amplify an emerging neurodiversity theology, bursting into being outside the inaccessible towers of academia (Allison, 2019, 2021; Hartley, 2019; Memmott, 2019; Memmott & Noël, 2020; Noël & MacMillan, 2022).³⁴ They can support a small but growing number of neurodivergent scholars shaping neurodiversity theology (Bowman, 2021; Morgan, 2022; Waldock, 2021; Williams, 2022), and the critical autism scholars offering theologians new ways to think with, not about, autistic people (Bustion, 2017; Waldock & Forrester-Jones, 2020). These are our “threshold theologies” (Jacobs, 2018; Muers & Grant, 2017), our holy disruption on the margins of the church (Spies, 2021). Inspired by the neurodiversity paradigm, we are telling each other new stories about God’s (neuro)diverse creation, about a God like us (Jacobs & Richardson, 2022).

³³ “Grudgingly opening the door a little bit is not enough,” writes Nicola Martin (2020), identifying neurotypical privilege in an academy that needs to “accommodate a widening range of approaches and thinking styles.”

³⁴ For example, in 2019, the annual ‘Living Edge’ conference on disability and church was themed ‘Thinking Differently About God.’ Neurodivergent people reflected theologically from lived experience of autism, dyslexia, psychosis, learning disability and more, on church, the Bible and faith (Allison, 2019; Hartley, 2019).

These are stories I recognize myself in.

Only when neurodivergent are imagined as theologians, as storytellers, as *knowers*, will we discover what our neurodiversity perspectives have to offer theology.

I have thought about [healing and disability in heaven] actually. I didn't work out what the answer was. But I think I came to a middle where I thought that there'd either be healing or it wouldn't be a problem. So, you know, other people's attitudes or whatever it is that gets in the way... I don't think all disabilities are necessarily a problem. So if they're not a problem, why would they be fixed? Because a lot of things... it's just a word to describe something that's a bit more than your character, but it's related to that... It's more other people that— If other people's imperfections get in the way then it might be those that are changed.

- Lucy

In spite of all the barriers they faced to belonging in churches, Lucy and Anthony were clear that *they* are not problems that need solving, fixing or curing. It is a neuronormative society and church that needs to change. Their neurodiversity theology and eschatology did not re-rehearse the question of whether neurodivergent people are human, whether we are created in the image of God. They centred neurodivergent flourishing. Speaking from embodied lived experience, Lucy and Anthony asserted that they are a vital part of God's (neuro)diverse creation.

When I listen to Anthony and Lucy, I remember that I am created by God as I am, and that my God-given identity as an autistic ADHDer *matters*. With my neurodivergent community, “I learn to love my neighbor because I keep learning to love myself” (Bowman, 2021, p. 242).

The wilderness makes space for new stories. Through our embodied neurodiversity theology, we are calling theologians to think differently about us... and about God.

To speak with us, not for us.

Library. Friday, 5 PM.

*There's a book in my bag that I have higher hopes for. I bought it because one contributor is autistic. Claire Williams has written a powerful autoethnography here – a narrative about neuronormative churches and how they traumatize her.*³⁵

Her story resonates into my shaken, fragile bones, through a body and mind that carry trauma like hers. She is speaking with me.

When I read neurodivergent and disabled theologians, I'm more likely to trust that I'm safe among their words. Naive? Maybe. Hearing "I am like you" doesn't guarantee that their writing won't traumatize me. But this is a numbers game. And so far, my lived experience has been reflected most often in the theologies of other Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people. That's no surprise, when they share so much of my story – the ableism we meet with in churches; the trauma waiting for us inside the gates; the exclusion, when churches close those heavy gates to us.

This personal and communal history of trauma – this longing for safety in numbers – is one reason why some of us ask if a Christian event on disability or neurodiversity is disabled-led. It's not an accusation. I think we just want to know if we'll be safe. Please, give us grace, and tell us you will listen to our story.

One day, I want to wake up in a world where there are more people like me at the table. More Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent theologians (and poets and memoirists and social researchers and artists and TikTokers). Non-disabled and neurotypical allies, too, listening and amplifying our voices. Until there are so many of us that everyone else has to sit up and take notice, when we ask, Where are our stories?

A more just world, yes.

*But also a safer world.*³⁶

6,543 words

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³⁵ (Williams, 2022).

³⁶ Adapted from *Safety In Numbers: Autism, Theology and Me* (Jacobs, 2022).

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