From the holdings of the Department of Special Collections , Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ

These documents are either in the public domain, or can only be used for educational and research purposes (Fair use) as per U.S. Copyright law (text below). By accessing this file, all users agree that their use falls in the public domain or within fair use as defined by the copyrightlaw. We do not charge any permission or usage fees for the publication of images of material inour collections, including those provided by Princeton University Library, via our website, catalog, or directly from staff.For more information regarding copyright, credit, and citation please review the information onthe Copyright, Credit and Citation Guidelines page of our website.
https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/policies/copyright-credit-and-citation-guidelines. If you have any questions, including how to order higher-quality images from the collection, contact Special Collections Public Services via our Ask Us! Form. https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/ask-us

---

Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026 Religion

2020

Spiritual Rehabilitation: Religion and Cognitive Disability in Postwar America

Walker-Cornetta, Andrew

Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

---

http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp011n79h736g

U.S. Copyright law: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, §108, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve a violation of copyright law. https://www.copyright.gov/title17/title17.pdf

SPIRITUAL REHABILITATION: RELIGION AND COGNITIVE DISABILITY IN POSTWAR AMERICA

Andrew Walker-Cornetta

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY

OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE BY

THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

Adviser: Judith Weisenfeld

September 2020

© Copyright by Andrew Walker-Cornetta, 2020. All rights reserved.

Abstract

This project offers an account of a particularly transformative moment in the history of disability in the United States. It examines changing cultural attitudes and social activism surrounding what was described in the middle of the twentieth century as "mental retardation." Looking across both previously explored and heretofore unexamined archives, it demonstrates that religious grammars, conventions, and communities—as well as talk about religion—saturated discourses surrounding cognitive disability in the postwar era. It makes the case that much of what animated public investment in these forms of difference at mid-century were the ways in which many Americans found them generative for thinking about the conditions of modern life and what might transcend them.

This proves especially clear in what one might think of as explicitly religious contexts, for example, in the memoirs of parents of children with cognitive disabilities published by evangelical presses or in the work of Catholic schools dedicated to this population. Half of this dissertation focuses upon such sites and texts, exploring their place within the broader landscapes of mid-century engagements with cognitive disability and the claims mobilized within them. However, just as important to this project is the task of examining similar phenomena in contexts less explicitly religious. By also attending to the work of nonsectarian advocacy organizations and the prescriptions of so-called "mental deficiency" professionals, this dissertation illustrates that constructions of cognitive disability were often inextricable from broader moral and theological questions about the meanings of kinship, human difference, and social reproduction in postwar America.

Table of Contents

Abstract……...iii

Acknowledgements……..v

Introduction: Meanings and Lessons……...1

Chapter One: *Angel Unaware*, Cognitive Disability, and the Politics of Positive Thinking……..…29

Chapter Two: "Out of the Shadows": Religion, Narrative, and the Early History of the Parent-Advocacy Movement…….68

Chapter Three: Imagining Exceptional Selves: Cognitive Disability and American Catholic Identity…….92

Chapter Four: Bad Devotion: Mothers, Mental Deficiency Professionals, and the Profligacy of Care……120

Conclusion……...158

Bibliography……161

Acknowledgments

People have been patient with me—a requirement of child rearing, friendship, pedagogy, and much else. I'm grateful to have this occasion to bring this fact and many individuals to mind.

I was extraordinarily fortunate to have landed in the Religious Studies Department at Indiana University Bloomington as an undergraduate. I was, in many ways, unready for college, but found among the department's faculty and graduate students a number of excellent teachers (Sylvester Johnson, Kevin Jaques, Aaron Stalnaker, and Ellen Muehlberger) who made my world stranger, more worrisome, and more alive. It would be difficult to overstate how life altering it was to have wandered into Constance Furey's Introduction to Christianity class as a freshman. Her talents as a teacher and friend have made many things in my life possible and better.

My time working at St. Vincent New Hope in Indianapolis, Indiana after college again made my world stranger, more worrisome, and more alive. I am grateful to everyone with whom I worked, especially to Kathy Ballard and Adriana Powell for their trust in me. I think about those two short years almost everyday.

My choice to begin a master's program in religious studies at New York University sometime later was both relatively uninformed and—it turns out—excellent. I found there wonderful teachers and mentors. Adam Becker, Ann Pellegrini, Geoffrey Pollick, and Angela Zito exposed me to the best possible versions of what the study of religion might be. Faye Ginsburg was also a wonderful guide into the study of disability.

I was in Princeton University's Department of Religion before I was in Princeton University's Department of Religion. Prior to enrolling at NYU and while waiting tables

in town, I started occasionally sitting in on the Religion in the Americas workshop and, eventually, a graduate seminar taught by Kathryn Gin Lum. I wouldn't have mustered the courage to ask for permission to do these things without Annie Blazer's encouragement and I am so grateful to Kathryn and others for welcoming me into rooms and conversations simply because I wanted to learn.

This was a promising prelude to my time as a student in the Religion in the Americas subfield. My initial impressions of the faculty and graduate students—that they combined erudition and kindness in rare and delightful ways—were only reinforced with time. Wallace Best may be the most disarming teacher I know. His students are well acquainted with his ability to somehow ask questions that require you to encounter your assumptions from a new angle. And, by some magic, he always manages to do this without the prickliness common to academic discourse, communicating confidence in you as a student and person. Jessica Delgado famously doles out sterling advice and I am so grateful to her for consistently drawing my attention to what is most important—whether that is in a text, in an exam, or in life. I am so lucky that Seth Perry joined the department at the same time I did and that he was so generous my first two years in the program as I trailed him in almost all of his courses, graduate and undergraduate, and elsewhere. As a reader, Seth always sees a version of myself as a writer that I haven't yet become but want to be. Judith Weisenfeld's dedication to her students is unmatched. Whatever I do in the time ahead of me, I hope to do it with a fraction of the integrity, curiosity, and care that Judith applies to research, teaching, and the labor required to make those things possible.

My partner has teased me before that I just went to graduate school to make friends. This might be the most honest thing to say. My colleagues have been wonderful companions. I can't believe the crowd I wandered into. These are some of my favorite people: Beth Stroud, Vaughn Booker, Leslie Ribovich, Kijan Bloomfield, Alda Balthrop-Lewis, Kelsey Moss, and Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada have been wonderful friends to me. The same is true of those who wandered into the crowd with me: Eden Consenstein, Madeline Gambino, Kris Wright, Ahmad Green-Hayes, Michael Baysa, Caroline Matas, William Stell, Mélena Laudig, Raissa von Doetinchem de Rande, Daniel May, Toni Alimi, Nyle Fort, Nareman Amin, and Judah Isseroff have all helped to see me through.

Beyond my subfield, I must thank Leora Batnitzky, Eddie Glaude, Jeff Stout, Liane Carlson, and Buzzy Teiser for their dedication to the department and to me as a student at various junctures. Patty Bogdziewicz, Kerry Smith, Mary Kay Bodnar, and Lorraine Fuhrmann were and are essential to making 1879 Hall a wonderful place. Beyond it, I was so fortunate that my time at Princeton has overlapped with Reg Kunzel's, whose presence on campus made me feel much better about the place and the possibilities of academic life. Relatedly, the Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies provided a wonderful home away from home on campus, not least of all for its sponsorship of the Disability Studies Working Group. Many, many thanks to the group's members over the years and to Kristen Starkowski and Jiya Pandya for their work, friendship, and wisdom.

Folks beyond the university who extended advice, kindness, opportunities, and respect to me at crucial moments include Anthony Petro, Sarah Imhoff, Dana Logan, Erin Raffety, Heath Carter, Jodi Eichler-Levine, Jim Fisher, Courtney Bender, and Gale

Kenny. It's so invaluable as a graduate student to feel invited into a field by people beyond your institution.

I also thank the Columbia University Religion in America Seminar for allowing me to present a very early version of some of this work. I am grateful to Princeton's Center for the Study of Religion (special thanks to Bob Wuthnow and Jenny Wiley Legath) and the University Center for Human Values (special thanks to Liz Harman) for many forms of support and to the Louisville Institute for an honorary fellowship this past year.

This project has entailed lots of rummaging and casting about for sources. I am grateful for the responsiveness and assistance of those who have helped me arrive at my (growing) archive. Many thanks to Sr. Ceil Struck, Sr. Elaine Sanchez, Darcy Rosenbaum, Mario Dealca, Laurie Maranian, and Sr. Coletta Dunn for responding to random emails and for their help.

And thanks to all the people who loved me, in part, by not (or only sometimes) asking what I was working on over the past several years. Hugs to Aubrey, Luke, Krzysztof, Ahmed, Amos, Trovato, Ashlee, Kira, Alanna, Abbey, Kellyn, Sam, Davey, Jim, Aneudy, Monica, Katrina, Sharanya, Alex, Liz, Andrew, Tyler, Dustin, and Nick. Laura and Don provided the literal and figurative space for me to get to this point. Of course, I can only partially know the ways in which my parents, Ken Cornetta and Mary Ciccarelli, have loved me, but I am especially grateful for their gentle trust and steady presence now. I can only cry trying to write sentences about my siblings, Theo, Jacqui, and Cooter. They fill my life. The same is true for Emilee, Mona, and Reggie; loving with you is the best education.

Introduction: Meanings and Lessons

In the spring of 1955, one Paul Thuring of Jersey City, New Jersey wrote a letter to his local paper's editor. In his short note, Thuring invited fellow *Jersey Journal* readers to join him in admiring a speech given by Archbishop of Boston Richard Cushing a few years prior at the dedication of the chapel at the St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children in Jefferson, Wisconsin. In the Archbishop's address, from which Thuring's letter quoted, Cushing noted his appreciation for the increasingly common practice—evinced in St. Coletta's own name—of referring to persons more commonly known as "mentally deficient" or "backward" as "*exceptional*" individuals. "It is evidence of the work of God among us," the Archbishop declared, "that such children should be given the place of privilege in our affections and should be treated as 'exceptional' objects of human deference, reverence, and benevolence."[1]

In drawing the attention of his neighbors to Cushing's remarks (which Thuring presumably found in the form of a pamphlet published by the St. Coletta school with the title "The Exceptional Child"), Thuring angled to both underscore and to participate in the kind of holy work that the Archbishop named.[2] His letter celebrated this religious leader's perspective, the changes in speech norms that he underlined, and the work of institutions like St. Coletta's all as indices of broad social changes regarding so-called "exceptional" persons. A distinctive, opportunity-filled moment was unfolding, Thuring thought, and he admonished his peers to wade into the sea change with him. "True, we may always have the mentally retarded among us," his letter concluded, now in his own

[1] Paul Thuring, Letter to the Editor, *Jersey Journal*, April 4, 1955, 26.
[2] Richard Cushing, "The Exceptional Child," pamphlet (c. 1954), St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children Cardinal Cushing Center Archive, unprocessed.

voice, "but when we begin to appreciate the meaning and lesson of their humility and innocence[,] we become aware of their mission here on earth."[3]

As many of Thuring's contemporaries and subsequent scholars have noted, the decade and a half that followed the Second World War featured an efflorescence of popular discourse in the United States pertaining to what was known at the time as "mental retardation" and its cognates.[4] Thuring's letter to the *Journal*'s editor represented one among countless efforts on the part of many Americans to discern and to affirm the "meaning[s] and lesson[s]" pertaining to the forms of difference that these labels marked. This outpouring of talk of cognitive differences surfaced as a set of both acknowledged and unacknowledged responses to the eugenic fervor of the previous half century, which had rendered such forms of difference primarily, and emphatically, as menacing threats to the social body. According to these earlier rubrics, the only meaning "mental defectiveness" and the persons thus identified held were decidedly negative: errors to be corrected in the populace.[5]

---

[3] Paul Thuring, Letter to the Editor, 26.

[4] James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Alison Carey, "The Rise of the Parents' Movement and the Special Child," in *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 105-133; Janice Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2001); Ann Hamill, "Two Moral Universes: The Social Problem of Idiots from 1845 to 1855 and Mentally Retarded Sons and Daughters from 1945 to 1955," (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008); Janice Fine, "Catalysts for Change: Parents of the Handicapped, 1930-1960," (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 1989); Katherine Castles, "Little 'Tardies': Mental Retardation, Race, and Class in American Society, 1945-1965," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006).

[5] On the history of eugenics, see Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York: Penguin, 2016); N. Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

By the early 1950s, however, in arenas of cultural production, including film, literature, and journalism, parents, celebrities, and experts of various sorts had begun insisting that they had come to apprehend the *real* significance of the kinds of human differences that their forbears (at least as they imagined them) had abhorred and feared. To borrow Cushing's phrase, this group of social actors declared the relocation of this population to a "place of privilege" in their affections. Changes in language were intended to mark changes in heart, both of which carried significant implications for social life. Proposed social transformations took diverse shapes, but, in all instances, advocates demanded that the so-called "challenge of the mentally retarded" be met with greater verve.[6] Schools should be built. Poorly run institutions ought to be shuttered and replaced by better ones. Government monies needed to be allocated. Research had to be taken up. And above all, children and adults with cognitive impairments were to be recognized and appreciated in communities, families, neighborhoods, and the nation as never before.

In documenting these changes in cultural attitudes and practices concerning what would later be called "intellectual" or "developmental" disabilities, subsequent scholars have paid scant attention to a crucial feature of many mid-century Americans' approach to this increasingly public issue, one that is readily apparent in Thuring's letter to the *Jersey Journal*. That feature is many Americans' regard for these cultural shifts as matters of religious significance. Although historians have occasionally noted that some figures within this broader social drama identified themselves as religious, religious

[6] See, for example, Sr. Mary Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child* (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1963).

idioms, institutions, and practices remain largely at the edges of most accounts of cognitive disability in the postwar United States.[7]

This project demonstrates that religious grammars, conventions, and communities—as well as talk *about* religion—saturated discussions of cognitive disability throughout the postwar era. Some parents speculated about and insisted upon the supernatural powers of their "exceptional" children. Non-sectarian advocacy organizations penned and recited "prayers for the retarded." Politicians and others posited that the treatment of this population was a crucial index of the nation's righteousness. And doctors, clergy and parents of children with disabilities ambled into public debates about theodicy and the meanings of human difference.

In observing this, however, it is not my aim simply to ensure that what is readily recognized as the religious gets its proverbial due. Rather, I use what I have described as this saturation to advance a broader claim. That is, I contend that much of what explains the changes in cultural attitudes surrounding cognitive disability in the postwar era was the utility of these forms of difference for carrying out a basic kind of symbolic, world-ordering work, whereby mid-century actors ritually maintained and negotiated distinctions between the mundane and what was imagined to transcend it.[8]

Identifying "mental retardation" and its analogs entailed at least a minimal amount of theory about social life. One of the most common formulations used to

---

[7] For a brief discussion of parents' interpretations of their children's disabilities as "religious," see Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," 109-114.

[8] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also Joel Robbins, "Afterword: On Limits, Ruptures, Meaning, and Meaninglessness," in *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*, eds. Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson (London: Berghahn Books, 2006), 215.

describe and diagnose cognitive disability in this period was "social incompetence."[9] This indicates that, while professionals gathered a multiplying number of conditions, traits, and behaviors under the canopy of "mental retardation," one of the baselines for this ascription was the apparent failure to conform to social expectations and norms. These expectations and norms most often pertained to the individual's development into an economically independent actor and, often less explicitly, into a participant in the reproduction of the heteronormative family form.[10]

To name and to consider the possible value of persons deemed "incompetent" therefore occasioned questions about social life and its obligations. To what extent did social competence define what it meant to be a person? What forces governed processes of social reproduction and what, if anything, was beyond them? What other rubrics—beyond social competence—potentially determined the worth of an individual?

For self-identified religious actors and groups in the postwar era, engagements with cognitive disability could help to affirm one's understanding of the differences between the constraints, pressures, and ills of everyday life and the powers and authorities that exceeded them. As a figure understood to be in asynchronous relation to the social, the so-called "exceptional" individual could be called upon as an index of and way of pointing toward alternative rhythms. One sees this in the following question asked by the celebrity and author Dale Evans before a group of parents of children with cognitive disabilities in 1953: "Have you ever considered the possibility that the retarded

---

[9] The psychologist Edgar Doll developed and made popular this formulation in the 1930s. For more, see Edgar Doll, *The Measurement of Social Competence: A Manual for the Vineland Social Maturity Scale* (Minneapolis: Educational Publishers, 1953).

[10] For a useful discussion of these expectations and social competence, see Brockley, "Rearing The Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," 11-12.

child has a very prominent place in God's plan for slowing the rest of us down?"[11] Evans went on to lament the pace and feel of contemporary life. She noted, "the world is tense" and everyone is "rushing, rushing."[12] The individual with a cognitive disability, she suggested, emerged against this backdrop as a sign of other ways of being and as a possible agent of divine presence.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I discuss Evans' particular Protestant interpretation of cognitive impairment, but crucial to my argument is that one finds similar invocations and uses of individuals with cognitive disabilities among individuals and in contexts less explicitly religious. In what follows, one finds politicians, activists, psychologists, and physicians engaging questions about and positing distinctions between the material and immaterial in efforts to assess the significance of these forms of difference in postwar American society.

In this respect, I propose that discourses surrounding cognitive disability offer a distinctive vantage onto some of the anxieties, ambitions, and longings voiced in mid-century public culture. These discussions and representations appear as sites for evoking and navigating questions about the purposes and priorities of contemporary life.[13] Engaging these forms of difference staged what Kathryn Lofton has referred to as a "metadiscourse of value," a way for many postwar Americans to think about and to grapple with who they were, who they wished to be, and what organized their lives.[14]

---

[11] Elsie Miller Davis, *The Answer is God: The Inspiring Personal Story of Dale Evans and Roy Rogers* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1955), 175.
[12] Ibid.
[13] I've borrowed the formulation "sites for evo[king]" from Chloe Silverman, *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 21.
[14] Kathryn Lofton, "Religion and the Authority in American Parenting," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84.3 (September 2016): 806-841, 810.

Spiritual Rehabilitation

I mean for the title of this dissertation to function in multiple registers. In one sense, the application of the adjective "spiritual" marks the understanding of many of my subjects that the task of finding a new place for persons with cognitive disabilities in postwar society—i.e., rehabilitating them—was to be based upon their association with realms and goods that they distinguished from the material.

In another sense, this title names what were often posited as the supernatural stakes of the treatment of this population, as in Cushing's reference to such persons' correspondence with the "work of God among us."

Yet, in another sense, I employ this frame to insist upon how many mid-century Americans enlisted cognitive disability to reinforce broader ambitions and imperatives toward personal capacitation and enhancement—to, as the scholar of US American literature Stephen Knadler puts it, "channel individuals into post-war narratives of optimistic progress, normative families, and economic advancement."[15] I draw attention to how many of my subjects called upon this population—often as a means to advancing their social inclusion—in order to reinforce and inspirit regnant visions of the possibilities for and forms of what was often referred to as "self-actualization." I add to Knadler's observations about the political-economic utility of these forms of difference

[15] Stephen Knadler, "Exceptional Minds, Unstated Exceptions: Intellectual Disability and Post-War Racial Liberalism in African American 'White Life' Novels," *Studies in American Fiction* 43.2 (Fall 2016): 231-257.

an account of how they resonated with what other scholars have described as the almost mandatory buoyancy associated with much popular religion in this moment.[16]

For most scholars situated within the field known as disability studies, the second half of this project's title rings with decidedly ominous tones. As in parallel conversations about political questions of access, discussions of disability often raise queries about exactly what is subject to change within proudly announced projects of inclusion.[17] Is it an institution that is constituting itself in accord with the desires and needs of persons it has formerly excluded? Or, is it marginalized populations that are being asked or compelled to comport with—and thereby to fortify—the norms and values of an existing structure with the hopes of gaining some sort of recognition within it?[18]

Rehabilitation, as a way of naming a range of projects of educating, training, and curing, has been subject to significant critique within overlapping academic and activist conversations in recent decades. Critics have argued that, as a paradigm for engaging with bodily diversity, it prioritizes the erasure or minimization of difference, thereby preserving the moral status and valorization of cultural definitions of what it is to be "normal" in body and mind. Under the banners of critical disability studies and crip theory, scholars and activists have done much to add to these critiques by underscoring

---

[16] I engage with this literature explicitly in Chapter 1. For an early, and quintessential example, see Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth, and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).

[17] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[18] For robust engagements with these questions, see Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, Shelley Tremain (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Periperhal Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

the parallels between rehabilitation—as an expression of what Robert McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness"—and other assertions of normativity pertaining to gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship. To be rehabilitated, many have argued, is often to be made to submit to a host of intersecting hegemonies.[19]

I draw from this literature in what follows in order to explore related questions and dynamics that surfaced in the mid-twentieth century "remaking" of cognitive disability.[20] For example, I note that among the most commonly voiced arguments for the social acceptance and accommodation of individuals with cognitive impairments was that they were, in fact, *more capable*—that is to say, more *normal*—than people presumed. Such insistence often entailed the privileging and foregrounding of the most capable "exceptional" individuals, obscuring persons who did not fit this promise as readily. Moreover, these arguments also focused material investment squarely on capacitating individuals (as well as on cure) rather than on transforming social arrangements to better accommodate persons labeled accordingly.

I also track how claims related to the embrace of the "exceptional" depended upon and reinforced particular behavioral norms and social arrangements. For example, I note how the advocated-for acceptance of persons with cognitive disabilities was often presented, tacitly or not, as contingent upon the occlusion and repression of such persons' sexuality. Most mid-century commentators presumed that individuals with cognitive impairments were ineligible for participation in heteronormative coupling and family making. And, given this presumed exclusion from what were culturally acceptable modes

[19] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
[20] Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, 216-258.

of sexual identification and expression, those advocating for this population worked to elide their sexual desires and behaviors altogether, a maneuver in part accomplished via the ubiquitous glossing of individuals with cognitive impairments, regardless of age, as children.[21]

Relatedly, I am careful to emphasize how discourse surrounding those often referred to as "eternal children" resonated with and helped to intensify what Lee Edelman has referred to as "the sacralization of the Child"—the "Möbius strip ideology" that subjects all of politics to the priority of a future defined in terms of the replication of the family.[22] I underscore how arguments about the "angelic" nature of children with cognitive disabilities and their "holy innocence" could serve to bolster notions of "the family's" innocence, its supposed separation from the marketplace and politics and the need to protect it as such from variously imagined threats. This is to say, to make the case that such children had the right to be included in their families was, almost always, to promote a particular vision of what families ought to be and of the social order they were to mainstay.

Sacralizing constructions of this sort often take form in inextricable relation to notions of race and practices of racialization. In the case of mid-twentieth century discourses surrounding so-called "eternal children," a similar inextricability materialized in what was one of the most common refrains among advocates for this population,

---

[21] Of course these descriptions had to do with more than just sexuality. As Janice Brockley notes, it seems that the imputation of an "eternal childhood" to persons with cognitive disabilities "fit...the American need to distinguish between self-sufficient, competent adulthood and incompetence," while also allowing "parents a way to understand their responsibilities to their intellectually disabled children." Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," 11.

[22] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 28; 2.

namely, that these forms of difference might appear in *any family*. While this claim ostensibly operated to disentangle diagnoses of cognitive disability from supposed connections with particular social groups, it seems that much of the impetus behind the claim had to do with the preservation of the identities of white middle and upper class Americans. When advocates insisted, as did one parent in the Methodist magazine *Together*, that "Mental retardation…is found in all social strata," the immediate upshot was that white parents like this writer and their children should not suffer from association with communities whose presumed intellectual or hereditary inferiority might remain unquestioned.[23] Which is to say, one of the things that was rehabilitated in mid-century advocacy for persons with cognitive disabilities was the whiteness of families that might have been otherwise troubled through eugenic readings of cognitive impairment.[24]

I hope to demonstrate in what follows when public assertions about the social value of persons with cognitive disabilities challenged or brought into question regnant assumptions and social arrangements—in addition to when they did not. While, as I have suggested, my subjects' efforts often left unchallenged constructions of white supremacy and class difference, they did, in many cases, prompt interrogations of the family form, ideas of personhood, and structures of social obligation. In some instances, such queries manifested as attempts to re-envision how difference and vulnerability might be socially

[23] Jesse Roberts, "There Can Be Strength in Tragedy," *Together*, April 1960, 21.
[24] As other scholars have shown, conceptions of cognitive disability help to bring into relief the instability and contested boundaries of whiteness in US history. For an almost unbelievable account of the interplay of disability, class, and religion in and as processes of racialization, see Nathaniel Deutsch, *Inventing America's Worst Family: Eugenics, Islam and the Fall and Rise of the Tribe of Ishmael* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

accommodated, elaborating what the anthropologists Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp refer to as "new kinship imaginaries."[25]

Religious grammars often catalyzed such imaginative work. I show in what follows how some theological readings of cognitive disability structured ways of thinking about subjectivity and obligation that went beyond what are often glossed as liberal models of the self that conflate autonomy with flourishing.[26] Such hermeneutics occasionally provided distinct ways of theorizing dependency and interpersonal agency, often related to practices of prayer and the relational traffic between human and more than human beings. I also highlight how some religious communities, along related lines, elaborated social roles for persons with cognitive impairments wherein vulnerability and social detachment could be regarded as distinct kinds of capital. Such roles were occasionally experiments in forms of kinship outside of the nuclear family and much of the mechanics of social reproduction. It is not my intention to exaggerate or valorize the transgressiveness of such hermeneutics and practices, but it is to highlight how engagements with cognitive disability *spurred the moral imagination*, to borrow language from the medical historian Julie Livingston, in ways that could both bolster dominant ways of organizing society as well as invite experimentation with them.[27]

---

[25] Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, "Reverberations: Disability and the New Kinship Imaginary," *Anthropological Quarterly* 84.2 (2011): 379-410.
[26] See, for example, Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 66-67.
[27] Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). See also, Cheryl Mattingly, *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril, and the Struggle for a Good Life* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

Recommending the study of religion to disability studies

One of the reasons why such spurring is noteworthy is because of its inconsistency with the ways in which religion has appeared—or not—within the broader field of disability studies. While I noted above what have been perhaps tacit assumptions about the irrelevance of religion vis-à-vis cognitive disability in the postwar era, the absence of discussions of religion in this historiography likely extends from much broader narratives and assumptions about the relationship between disability as a way of organizing human difference and the religious.

In two of disability studies' most influential works, religion appears largely as a synecdoche for how people related to human corporeal diversity *prior* to modernity. In both Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* and Lennard Davis' *Enforcing Normalcy*, the concept of disability surfaces in the late nineteenth century though the collusion of industrial capitalism's advance and the emergence of new technologies of human measurement and management. Thomson and Davis argue that the forces of capitalism, the state, scientific medicine, and its accessories helped to produce the idealized notion of the "normal" or "normate" body/mind, against which all human forms would henceforth be defined.[28] Disability as a discursive construction intensely circumscribed the possible meanings of human variation; the concept itself became a means of, as Davis' title has it, "enforcing normalcy" in populations in order to regulate bodies in the service of particular forms of political and economic power.

[28] Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995); Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). See also, Kim Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

Especially for Thomson, pre-modern religious interpretations of "extraordinary bodies" might be called upon to help bring disability's historical invention into starker relief. According to Thomson, in pre-modern worlds, the forms of embodiment that come to be known as disabilities were often apprehended as dense with meaning and purpose, often linked to divine forces, and met with religiously-shaded emotions such as fear, awe, and wonder. Though Thomson is careful to note that interpretations of this sort were by no means always beneficial for those taken to be "extraordinary," they have represented for some scholars of disability provocative examples of ways of relating to difference that do not reduce impairments and their meanings to biologically defined lacks or losses.[29]

While I owe much to these accounts, like many tales of modern rupture, they lean too readily on taken for granted narratives of secularization.[30] Their implied suggestion that religion receded with the birth of the clinic or invention of statistics obscures the multitude of ways in which religious interpretations of human difference have continued

[29] Although Davis' and Thomson's studies appeared to have left little room for religion in the modern making of disability, other scholars have acknowledged the modern persistence of the religious vis-à-vis disability. However, these accounts often represent religion as something like a trammeling holdover from eras past. More specifically, I'm thinking of critiques of the so-called "charity model of disability." In works like Paul Longmore's study of twentieth-century telethons and Susan Schweik's account of what came to be known as the early-twentieth century's "ugly laws," one finds how apparently religiously-motivated performances of generosity functioned to preserve persons with disabilities in positions of social abjection, affirming their performers' sense of superiority over those whom they purported to assist. Like other critiques of American benevolence, these accounts have emphasized how often explicitly Christian practices of care have helped to maintain uneven relations of power. With respect to disability in particular, such practices often appear as handmaidens to normalcy, reinforcing and mystifying the structural divides between the normal and disabled. Paul Longmore, *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[30] Examples of more recent work within disability studies that has considered religion in modern contexts include Karen Nakamura, *A Disability of the Soul: An Ethnography of Schizophrenia and Mental Illness in Contemporary Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Michelle Friedner, *Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); and Tyler Zoanni, "Appearances of Disability and Christianity in Uganda," *Cultural Anthropology* 34.3 (2019), 444-470.

alongside and often in collaboration with archetypically modern formations such as biomedicine and psychology. (Indeed, there is a growing body of scholarship dedicated to describing these intersections.)[31]

This project responds to this literature by asking what attention to religion and talk of religion reveals about disability as a modern phenomenon. I hope to persuade other scholars of the important ways in which religious ideas, institutions, and idioms have—and continue to—inform normalcy's maintenance. I invite further inquiry into the ideological resources and structures of feeling that do so while blurring the bounds between the putatively religious and secular. At the same time, it is my wager that scholars of disability will likely find resources for their own efforts to theorize the "extraordinary" among religious subjects and not just those located in pre-modern pasts. As I've begun to suggest, I support this wager with discussions of how some mid-century Americans deployed religious resources to engage what the late disability theorist Tobin Siebers refers to as "complex embodiment." I show how these individuals and communities elaborated visions of subjectivity and sociality that resonate with some efforts within disability studies to rethink imperatives to independence and the alternative temporalities and spaces that might emerge from "living with a difference," to borrow another one of Rapp and Ginsburg's phrases.[32]

---

[31] See, for example, Pamela Klassen, *Spirits of Protestantism: Medicine, Healing, and Liberal Chrisitanity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Andrew Heinz, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Timothy Gloege, "Faith Healing, Medical Regulation, and Public Religion in Progressive Era Chicago," *Religion and American Culture* 23.2 (2013), 185-231.

[32] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), passim; Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, "Family," *Keywords for Disability Studies*, eds. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

While I hope these arguments might be applied to the study of disability broadly, I suggest they have specific utility for scholars exploring experiences of impairment that are mostly commonly assigned labels like "profound" and "severe." Often building upon the work of feminist philosopher Eva Kittay, several scholars have recently endeavored to describe some exclusionary tendencies within disability studies itself, namely, its preference for a particular kind of disabled subject, those who, as Don Kulick and Jens Rydström put it, "[are] politically aware, combative, independent, and articulate."[33] Often implicit in arguments against ableism is the suggestion that, were social and cultural barriers removed, persons with disabilities would be liberated to behave as autonomous, self-realizing actors like everyone else. Scholars like Licia Carlson, Alison Carey, and James Berger have questioned the anthropology underlying such claims, both because of the ways in which it seems to misrepresent non-disabled individuals' dependency as well as because of the significant number of persons for whom this paradigm does not work—those Berger refers to as the "disarticulate."[34] Paying attention to those Kulick and Rydström cautiously refer to as "the most significantly disabled" challenges the liberal assumptions underwriting much discussion of disability within the academy and beyond, calling attention to more complex questions about agency, surrogacy, and ethics.

It is not my suggestion that attending to religion will resolve these tensions within the field nor will it provide straightforward answers to complex questions of this sort. However, I do mean to underscore that various religious actors and traditions often

---

[33] Don Kulick and Jens Rydström, *Loneliness and its Opposite: Sex, Disability, and the Ethics of Engagements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 15. Eva Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[34] James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and Narratives of Modernity* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); and Alison Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship*.

surface what we might think of as other-than-liberal anthropologies. Their efforts to theorize the personhood of individuals with cognitive impairments and their location within broader webs of relationships, with beings both human and more than human, may help disability studies to think more expansively with and about those who have not otherwise fit easily within its projects.[35]

Recommending the study of disability to scholars of religion in the US

Scholars of disability are, perhaps, even more evangelical than their religious studies counterparts in their insistence upon the relevance of their object or mode of inquiry for other fields of study. The historian Douglas Baynton has offered one of the most memorable articulations of this animating conviction. "Disability matters everywhere in history," he writes, reprising an argument from an earlier article, "there are no histories in which a disability analysis would be out of place and many that are diminished by its absence."[36] Such an assertion stems from two related insights: first, that notions or metaphors of bodily impairment often structure hierarchies of human difference (e.g., conceptions of cognitive or physical deficiency underwriting particular logics of racialization or gender) and, secondly, that human communities consistently organize themselves in relation to what they identify as deviant bodies.

Scholars of religion in the United States are well positioned to prove the cogency of Baynton's claims. Indeed, some have begun to do so, albeit often without talking about

[35] For a good example of inquiry of this sort, see Zoanni "Appearances of Disability and Christianity in Uganda."
[36] Douglas Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2, emphasis added.

disability as such.[37] A small number of others have turned their attention directly to the entanglements between religious formations, ableism, and challenges to both in different settings.[38] While the opportunities for thinking about disability and religion together in the United States are great and diverse, in this project, I hope to recommend such work along a few related vectors by way of particular cases in the mid-twentieth century.

First, I make the case that attention to disability helps to bring into clearer relief the politics and moral stakes of health's definition. I demonstrate several ways in which attempts to define and treat what was known as "mental retardation" in the postwar era involved so-called "mental deficiency" professionals, parents, and others in debates about theodicy, social obligation, and human nature that might be articulated in idioms explicitly scientific, spiritual, or both. Through my engagement with these debates, I invite scholars to continue to expand our field's remit by venturing into contexts like social work, medicine, and disability professions as largely unexplored sites of what David Chidester calls "religious work," wherein people "negotiat[e] what it is to be human," to the benefit some and detriment of others.[39] In many ways, this is to extend defining insights within the study of religion about the relations and translations between

[37] To provide just one classic example, Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) provides ample material for thinking about how notions of impairment and diminished capacity undergird discourses about religious practice and difference.
[38] Erinn Stanley, "Sensing Exclusions: Disability and the Protestant Worship Environment," *Sensational Religion*, ed. Sally Promey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Sarah Imhoff, "Why Disability Studies Needs to Take Religion Seriously," *Religions* 8 (2017), 186; Anthony Petro, "Bob Flanagan's Crip Catholicism: Transgression and Form in Lived Religion," *American Religion* 1.2 (2020), 1-26.
[39] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 18. For a model of work along these lines, see Anthony Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

individuals' bodies, their comportment and differences, and the social bodies in which they are situated.[40]

Relatedly, this study foregrounds what anthropologists and historians of medicine refer to as "biosociality" as a potentially fruitful interpretive terrain for students of religion.[41] This term refers to forms of human community that shape around—sometimes in oppositional ways, sometimes not—medical diagnoses and that function often as some combination of advocacy organization, think tank, and support group. In what follows, I explore the emergence of a network, at once formal and informal, of the parents of children diagnosed with cognitive disabilities and their allies and how they elaborated a distinctive public in the postwar era. I focus here upon how that elaboration transpired through a particular kind of civil-religious imagination; however, I also stress how this kind of organizing around classifications of human difference and impairment engendered broader reflection on the meanings of personhood and the various forces that press upon and give shape to social life. I imagine that unique but equally rich material might surface in fora like autistic self-advocacy networks formed on the internet, chronic pain support groups, and "crip" mutual aid societies.[42]

Finally, I also want to recommend the study of disability as a productive avenue along which to continue explicating what scholars of religion have described as the secular and its formations. Some of the most influential efforts to describe what we might think of as the secular's substance have pointed toward questions of debility, disease, and

---

[40] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
[41] For one particularly influential articulation of this concept, see Paul Rabinow, *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
[42] Part of what I mean to stress here is that these forms of community reveal the organizing power of medical categories and discourse in a so-called secular age, but also highlight the creative and complicated ways in which people engage with and inhabit them.

suffering for the ways in which they help to bring into relief the particular kind of human the secular prefers and prescribes. Talal Asad describes this human accordingly: "the conscious agent-subject having both the capacity and the desire to move in a singular historical direction: that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain."[43] Scholars like Sherine Hamdy and Christopher Dole have elaborated on Asad's descriptions to show how the preference for such a subject—on the part of the state, professional authorities, or individuals—can come into conflict with ways of imagining the body and its implications that move in alternative directions.[44]

Mid-twentieth century engagements with cognitive disability in the United States featured conflicts not dissimilar to those described by Asad's interpreters. As parents of "exceptional" children and others worked to describe social space for this population they often found themselves caught between different claims about how to assign moral value to forms of difference scientifically defined as deficits. Was there a vocabulary within which impairment and incapacity might register as something other than ultimately lamentable? Or, in order for these forms of difference to be appreciated, was it necessary to locate them in relation to the organizing "historical direction" to which Asad gestures? Most answered the latter question affirmatively. For example, as authors and other commentators described what they understood to be the existential purpose of this population, they often referred to how their presence within families might inspire society to work harder toward the elimination of these forms of difference, continuing on a path

---

[43] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 79.
[44] Sherine Hamdy, *Our Bodies Belong to God: Organ Transplants, Islam, and the Struggle for Human Dignity in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Christopher Dole, *Healing Secular Life: Loss and Devotion in Modern Turkey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylania Press, 2012).

of medical and scientific progress. And yet, some of these same figures attempted to give accounts of the ways in which they found their children and their apparent inabilities enriching and powerful in ways that resisted imperatives to cure as well as the urge to translate said differences into something obviously "useful." Examining these tensions presses us further into the analytic space opened up by questions about "the secular body" and the assumptions and values undergirding which forms of life get recognized as worthy of accommodation and existence.[45]

Scope and Language

Before I turn to individual descriptions of the chapters that follow, a note of clarification is in order with respect to this project's scope and its limits. I have chosen to focus primarily on a group of social actors who arrogated to themselves the responsibility of "setting the terms" for cultural discourse concerning so-called exceptional persons.[46] These were, in the anthropologist Lawrence Cohen's phrase, efforts at hegemony.[47] This group was not a monolith. As I've already suggested, I attend to conflicts and tensions among various parties. However, the group I've identified was made up of primarily economically privileged people—doctors, parents, educators, psychologists, nurses, and others—identified as white and who often endeavored to speak for an imagined *everyone* in their attempts to define the meanings of "mental retardation" and to manage people

[45] See Charles Hirschkind, "Is There a Secular Body?," *Cultural Anthropology* 26.4 (2011), 633-647. Hirschkind is more focused upon questions related to the sensorial formation of the "secular body" that his title invokes, but my questions about interpretations of difference relate to his in so far as these interpretations are inextricable from desires and expectations about comportment, behavior, and how some people make others feel.
[46] For a similar formulation, see Kathryn Lofton, "Religion and the Authority in American Parenting," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84.3 (2016), 807.
[47] Lawrence Cohen, *No Aging in India: Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 37.

who lived under the description of that label.[48] My primary goal in this project is to track the presumptions of this group and to register the volume, in multiple senses, of their attempts to determine these forms of difference. Their power was formidable. But beyond this, when possible, I also hope to peer through the failures of these efforts: when a lack of consensus emerges; when one glimpses refusals; or catches sight, within the discourse itself, of those with whom this collective did not concern itself.

Sometimes, those people are the very individuals to whom these labels were affixed. Which is to say, this is not chiefly a study about persons with cognitive impairments. It is a story, rather, of what "swirl[ed] around" them and gave shape to their social lives.[49] The reasons for this have to do with both the limits of the archive and the specific aims of this project. With respect to method, my efforts are, in large part, circumscribed by how putatively non-exceptional people in the past constrained the ways in which persons with cognitive disabilities might be heard in the present in the texts they produced and the records they kept. In contrast to the now common disability rights slogan, "nothing about us without us," my subjects were voluble *about* the "exceptional" but appeared to think little of the possibility that persons labeled accordingly might represent their own experiences or reflect upon them.

It would be wrong, however, to explain such archival silence entirely in terms of constraints imposed by the "ableminded." It is also surely the case that the tools of the historian have been forged in ways best suited to attend to particular kinds of subjects with particular capacities, leaving others often far from reach. While I am attentive to the

---

[48] The phrase "under the description" is the anthropologist Emily Martin's. See *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
[49] Silverman, *Understanding Autism*, 11.

ways in which so-called "exceptional" individuals appear and act within my sources, I also do not want to presume the representativeness of these appearances and actions. Some things do not surface. These sorts of limitations, however, might also be analytically productive. Part of what my subjects grappled with—and with which disability studies has also grappled to some extent—are precisely the kinds of challenges related to representation and mediation that this project necessarily entails.[50] To what extent do we encounter a child with a cognitive disability through a mother's testimony? What might one learn from the limits of our analyses? From the spaces and ways of being to which we cannot get?

Returning to the matter of affixing labels, I've tried to be deliberate in what follows in distinguishing my voice from those of my sources when it comes to speaking of cognitive difference. I have chosen to retain the language my subjects used—both professional categories and popular sobriquets—in spite of what, in many cases, registers today as their strangeness or offensiveness. I've done so for multiple reasons. For one, like many other historians of medicine, psychology, and embodiment, I don't presume equivalence between forms of impairment, illness, or difference over time. Rather, I assume that the social categories and the practices sustaining them help to produce experiences and subjectivities. Like these other scholars, I hold that retrospective diagnosis often grants culture insufficient power over the making and shaping of disease and disability.[51]

---

[50] See, especially, Kulick and Rydström, *Loneliness and its Opposite*; Kittay, *Love's Labor*; and Berger, *The Disarticulate*.

[51] For an excellent discussion of the risks of retrospective labeling and a well-considered choice *to* read some historical sources with anachronistic categories, see Cornelia Dayton, "'The Oddest Man that I Ever Saw,': Assessing Cognitive Disability on Eighteenth-Century Cape Cod," *Journal of Social History* 49.1 (2015), 77-99. For a now classic discussion of these choices and

Another reason I reproduce this language as it appears in my sources is in order to highlight many of my subjects' confidence in language and, perhaps, anxiety about properly describing what they sought to name. This introduction began with a celebration of a supposedly more just (and more holy) designation for individuals with cognitive impairments. Archbishop Cushing and Thuring both took the adjective "exceptional" to measure the distance they and their peers had travelled from injurious attitudes. They were not alone in hoping that a new vocabulary would signal and constitute a new world for persons described accordingly.

This hope engendered a kind of compulsion to name, which resulted in an almost endless stream of designations that attempted to move toward some combination of diagnostic accuracy and greater acceptance of this population. *The unfinished. Inadequate children. The retardate. Sub-normal children. Eternal children. God's borrowed angels. The child nobody knows. The forgotten element in our population. Holy innocents. The least of these. The atypical. Underprivileged children. The mentally handicapped.* On one hand, these and other phrases emerged in this period to prove mid-century Americans' difference from those who had referred to people with cognitive impairments as "backward" or "feeble minded" in very recent history. Professional categories like "inadequate" or "retarded"—although they sound like insults today—indicated what was supposed to be a more enlightened and generous understanding of the nature of such forms of difference, as resulting not from hereditary deficiency but from any number of disturbances in cognitive development. The affectionate labels that parent organizations, educators, and others promoted either worked to implicate audiences in addressing an

---

challenges, see Charles Rosenberg, "Introduction: Framing Disease: Illness, Society, and History," in *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History*, eds. Charles Rosenberg and Janet Golden (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992): xiii-xxvi.

injustice ("the child nobody knows") or functioned to ascribe unique worth to such persons ("God's borrowed angels"). However, taken together, this proliferation of terms also seemed to indicate a kind of unsettledness, perhaps a lack of clarity about what was being named and an anxiety about whether or not one could speak of these forms of difference without being derogatory.

Readers are no doubt familiar with similar phenomena in contemporary contexts. When people speak of persons with cognitive disabilities, the pitch of their sentences or eyebrows often tilt toward question marks: "The differently abled?" "The mentally challenged?" "Special?" The lack of confidence that often accompanies speaking of these forms of difference both reveals a sense that the stakes of naming are high as well as a sense that acceptable terms are often in flux. My choice to cite and highlight my subjects' vocabulary helps to provide some background for this present-day diffidence. It also is intended to augment some of our discomfort, to push us to see the contingency of our own supposedly more appropriate and accurate terms and to question the relationship between their appropriateness and the ethics of current social arrangements.

That said, when speaking in my own voice I refer to persons my subjects regarded as "exceptional children" or "mentally retarded" as individuals or persons with cognitive disabilities or impairments. For the most part, I use present-day language heuristically, not to posit a more accurate diagnosis, but to identify the constructed nature of these forms of difference and to bring into clearer relief the vocabulary of my subjects.

Chapter outlines

The dissertation's first chapter focuses upon the publication and popularity of *Angel Unaware*, a 1953 memoir penned by the Hollywood celebrity Dale Evans Rogers that was one of the bestselling books in the United States throughout much of the 1950s. Historians of cognitive disability have recognized this text's influence as one that afforded "mental retardation" unprecedented public prominence. However, scholars of postwar religion have paid it little attention. I think across these two academic conversations to make several interrelated claims. First, I argue that the success of the book might best be understood in terms of its presentation of a person with a cognitive disability as an embodiment of mid-century positive thinking Christianity and a broader postwar insistence upon optimism. I suggest that the pointed critique *Angel Unaware* offers of prevailing attitudes toward cognitive disability (especially, those promoted by some medical professionals) invites scholarly reconsideration of the political potentials of what has often been glossed as a quietist religious grammar. By making these arguments about the book's success and uptake, I shed further light on many mid-century Americans' attraction to and investments in cognitive disability as material to "think with."[52]

The second chapter highlights how the popularity of *Angel Unaware* paralleled and supported the emergence of a large network of parent-activist organizations, most of which congregated under the banner of the National Association for Retarded Children, founded in 1950. I offer a novel reading of this movement by paying attention to how its members worked to narrate their own identities and those of the population they

[52] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). See also, Marjorie Garber, "Good to Think With," *Profession* (2008): 11-20.

represented by situating both themselves and persons with cognitive disabilities within broader frames of mid-century civil religion, tri-faith cooperation, and personal transformation. This reading helps to stress the means by which parents' claims and self-presentation found purchase in public life.

The third chapter focuses on American Roman Catholic engagements with cognitive disability. One of the reasons I've dedicated a specific chapter to this group is because of the outsized role Catholic institutions and individuals played in popular engagements with cognitive impairment in the 1950s—a fact that is missing from existing histories. Catholic clergy, parents of children with cognitive disabilities, and educators were all invested in demonstrating Catholic exemplarity in leading others toward the better treatment of the "exceptional." We see this clearly in the letter to the editor authored by Thuring, himself a Catholic.[53] This focus also allows me, however, to advance an argument about how the treatment and representation of persons with cognitive impairments enabled some Catholics to explore tensions between their ambition to "come of age" in American public life and to, at the same time, detach from the modern world. In this respect, the scope of this chapter enables me to offer a focused portrait of the kind of symbolic utility I described above.

In the dissertation's final chapter, I turn to a set of voices that sought to regulate the enthusiasm with which many of the people in the previous chapters embraced persons with cognitive impairments. Examining the writings of "mental deficiency professionals" (both addressed to fellow experts and to parents of children with disabilities), I highlight

[53] Thuring appeared to be an eager letter writer. In another missive penned years later, he reported on his delight in his "exceptional" son's participation in local Catholic education courses. Paul Thuring, Letter to the Editor, *The Advocate: Official Publication of the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J. and Diocese of Patterson N.J.*, December 10, 1959, 11.

warnings about the disordering potential of caring for this population overmuch. Professionals articulated these warnings chiefly with reference to mothers of children with cognitive disabilities who might allow their attachment to their offspring to pull them away from their other duties, thereby "handicapping" the family and, by extension, the social order that depended upon it. I organize my discussion around the fact that, almost invariably, commentators described the behavior of the mothers of which they warned in terms of religious extremity: the language of sacrifice, martyrdom, and devotion. I take these metaphors as a lens that enables us to better view what many took to be the conditions of the mid-century embrace of this population—what they could *not* disturb or interrupt.

Chapter 1 | *Angel Unaware*, Cognitive Disability, and the Politics of Positive Thinking

Introduction

This chapter focuses on what may very well be the most popular text about cognitive disability in American history. Released in 1953 by the evangelical publishing house Fleming Revell, *Angel Unaware* told the story of Hollywood stars Dale Evans' and Roy Rogers' experiences raising a young daughter who had been diagnosed at birth with what her mother referred to as an "appalling handicap."[1]

Several historians of cognitive disability have discussed this work as an early and especially popular example of a new genre of memoir that emerged in the 1950s: so-called "confessional" accounts penned by the parents of children labeled "mentally retarded."[2] While this small group of scholars has noted *Angel Unaware*'s cultural prominence and its role in shifting discourse surrounding cognitive impairment, this text has largely escaped the attention of scholars of religion. This should surprise given the nature of the book's organizing claim. As explained in what follows, Evans believed that *Angel Unaware* was authored by her child from beyond the grave, revealing her identity to her mother as an "angel" in the wake of her death. The fact that what was at one point the third best-selling book in the country claimed such otherworldly origins merits, one would think, at least some comment from the field of American religious history.[3]

---

[1] Dale Evans Rogers, *Angel Unaware* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1953), 7.
[2] On the parent confessional as genre, see James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 222-229.
[3] For select historians of cognitive disability's engagements with *Angel Unaware*, see Janice Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Ideologies of Parenting and Intellectual Disability in American History," in *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, eds.

This chapter builds upon the limited existing discussion of *Angel Unaware* to offer an argument about the book's purchase among mid-century readers. I argue below that *Angel Unaware*'s success—and thus, its role in reshaping cultural discourses surrounding cognitive impairment—had much to do with its congruity with what scholars of religion in the United States would recognize as positive thinking Christianity. I suggest that the book's representation of cognitive disability as both a challenge to families and as a distinctive kind of subjectivity encouraged readers to recognize such forms of difference as resources that could be embarked in their own pursuits of what scores of mid-century preachers and experts promoted as "happiness" and "peace of mind." It was this suggested utility, I argue, that drew many readers to the book and that also fortified its arguments concerning the social value of persons with cognitive disabilities in the face of widespread social stigma.

These claims about *Angel Unaware* and its uptake are significant because they help to explain *how* cultural attitudes changed in this moment. I show that it was this text's ability to coordinate cognitive disability with ambient feelings and associations about religion, the family, and the self that made both its popularity possible and its assertions about cognitive impairment plausible. While others have noted that,

---

James Trent and Steven Noll (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 149-150; Kathleen Jones, "Education for Children with Mental Retardation: Parent Activism, Public Policy, and Family Ideology in the 1950s," in *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, eds. James Trent and Steven Noll (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 325-326; Allison Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Katherine Castles, "Little 'Tardies': Mental Retardation, Race, and Class in American Society, 1945-1965," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006), 152-163. For what may be the lone reference to *Angel Unaware* in the field of US religious history, see Peter Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 167.

"Americans overwhelmingly responded [to the book and its revelations] with sympathy and devotion," I try to explain why this happened.[4]

In answering these questions, this chapter also calls for a reconsideration of positive thinking Christianity within the broader historiography of postwar religion. The absence of this text from existing accounts of postwar religious life—and accounts of positive thinking in particular—has enabled historians to represent religious trends in popular culture in this moment as largely quietist and pacifying: soul-soothing in the service of broader political and economic agendas. As described here, *Angel Unaware* emerges against these accounts as comparatively disruptive insofar as its claims about cognitive disability were leveraged as explicit attacks on professional authorities of various kinds and dominant social arrangements surrounding what was known at the time as "mental retardation." Although it has not registered as such among scholars of mid-century religion, this was a politically catalytic text, one that helped to provoke dramatic changes in the politics and social geography of disability in US history.

In the first three sections of what follows, I offer descriptions of the Rogers' fame and the experiences that led to *Angel Unaware*'s publication as they were relayed to mid-century audiences. In doing so, I underscore how the Rogers' story reflected the experiences of their contemporaries and attempted to provide a script for them. Next, I turn to better locate *Angel Unaware* in its religious context through a discussion of the book's representation of the Rogers as parents, followed by a discussion of their child's role in the text of *Angel Unaware* as both a representative of cognitive impairment and as an embodiment of the sensibilities of positive thinking Christianity. In the chapter's final section, I examine the reception of *Angel Unaware* among readers who were also the

[4] Carey, *On the Margins*, 112.

parents of children with cognitive disabilities in order to turn to the above-mentioned arguments about this text and postwar religion more broadly.

America's Family

To appreciate the significance of *Angel Unaware* as a document of US religious history and of the history of disability in the United States first requires recognition of Dale Evans' and Roy Rogers' almost unparalleled positions within the landscape of American popular culture in the middle of the twentieth century. Few celebrities could rival this pair in terms of their salience and ubiquity in entertainment media. They were a postwar power couple *avant le lettre*.[5]

Roy Rogers became the face and voice of America's childhood fascination with all things "Western" in the 1940s. Starring in over 70 feature length films, in possession of a score of hit records, a comic book series, and his own radio show, Rogers was christened "the King of the Cowboys" soon after World War II. Thanks to his inventive and entrepreneurial managers, Rogers pioneered practices of transforming one's stardom into a "brand" and what would later be called a "lifestyle." Products featuring Rogers' likeness ranged from binoculars, to "real tin" lanterns, to "teepees," to folding knives, to leather gloves, to harmonicas, to a "Roy and Trigger [his horse] Snap Shot Camera." The man was everywhere; it would be far from wild to speculate that Rogers' likenesses

[5] In this chapter, I refer to both Dale Evans and Roy Rogers as "the Rogers." Evans went by both Dale Evans and Dale Evans Rogers in different contexts. Here I will refer to her as "Evans" for the sake of clarity and her husband as "Rogers."

competed with portraits of Jesus for preponderance within the walls of postwar households.[6]

Toys and merchandise did not exhaust the extent of the Rogers' presence in mid-century homes and young people's lives. Beginning in the early 1950s, Rogers' managers formed "Roy Rogers Riding Clubs" in addition to an already robust network of fan clubs. Sponsored by the National Safety council, these clubs would meet in movie theaters for weekend matinees, before which children would view videos of Rogers discussing matters of personal responsibility and accident avoidance. Each meeting began with a recitation of a pledge and Rogers' "Cowboy Prayer"—artifacts of mid-century popular piety that blended the civic, celebrity, and consumption. These clubs alone claimed upwards of 2,000,000 young members.[7]

What was Rogers' already impressive fame in the early 1940s multiplied exponentially, making much of the above possible, when his brand incorporated a counterpart "Queen of the West." Dale Evans, already a film and music star in her own right, first joined Rogers on screen in a series of Western musicals in the mid-1940s and, in the wake of the pair's commercial success, they became a couple and married, making more grist for the Hollywood press's mills. Their off-screen and off-air partnership

---

[6] As one fan explained to Rogers and Evans, "I feel like I know both of you. There are pictures of you all over the house." Maxine Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings: The Inspiration of* Angel Unaware *and the Influence of the Roy Rogers Family in the American Home* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1956), 121. For broader accounts of the Rogers' careers, see Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, with Jane and Michael Stern, *Happy Trails: Our Life Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Raymond E. White, *King of the Cowboys, Queen of the West: Roy Rogers and Dale Evans* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2005); and Elsie Miller Davis, *The Answer is God: The Inspiring Personal Story of Dale Evans and Roy Rogers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955).

[7] Rogers' "Cowboy Prayer" read as follows, "Oh Lord, I reckon I'm not much just by myself. I fail to do a lot of things I ought to do. But Lord, when the trails are steep and passes high, help me ride it straight the whole way through. And when in the falling dusk I get the final call, I do not care how many flowers they send—Above all else the happiest trail would be for You to say to me, 'Let's ride, My friend.' Amen." See Davis, *The Answer is God*, 116.

helped to spur the success of their ventures into television programming as the 1940s turned to the 1950s. The fact of their partnership in life *and* in character represented an unmatched melding of the worlds of American popular fantasy and family life.

Perhaps it goes without saying, then, given the extent of this couple's fame, that Evans' announcement that she was expecting a child just a couple of years into her and Rogers' marriage generated considerable enthusiasm among those inclined to keep tabs on these Hollywood royals. Outlets like the *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s "Chit-Chat" column kept readers well informed about the family's plans during Evans' pregnancy.[8] And the Rogers' themselves were not shy about letting their fans in on their family life; during rodeo performances across the United States in early 1950, Rogers confided in audiences: "Folks, if you're wondering why Mama [Evans] is moving along a little ladylike tonight, it's because we're expecting a little buckaroo at our house come summer."[9]

An "appalling handicap"

The fact of the Rogers' willingness and even keenness to take on the roles that they fashioned with their fans as an ideal American family (look no further than Rogers' invitation for fans to recognize his partner as "Mama") surely added bulk to the emotional weight and strategic difficulties that waited for them in the near future. In August of the same year, Evans gave birth to a baby girl and underwent a series of experiences familiar to thousands, if not millions, of postwar parents, a fact which time would eventually disclose.

[8] For example, see "Chit-Chat," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 8, 1950, 11.
[9] Davis, *The Answer is God*, 120.

As Evans would later tell it, in the days after the Rogers' daughter, Robin, was born, her mother noted the infrequency with which the hospital's medical staff was allowing her to see her newborn.[10] When she inquired after her, most of the staff deflected or reassured, but her sense of unease soon proved justified. The Rogers' physicians had determined that Robin had what Evans later referred to as a "tragic handicap": "Mongolism," the set of traits that would soon be reclassified as Down's Syndrome.[11] The doctors initially tried to keep this news from Evans, informing Roy and the couple's managers first, but it was not long before she demanded explanation and she learned of her daughter's diagnosis.

In the days and months that followed, the Rogers were subject to the onslaught of reactions and guidance that usually accompanied such news in the mid-century United

[10] My narrative of the Rogers' experiences here is based upon several biographical and autobiographical sources, including Davis, *The Answer is God*; Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*; and Kirtley Baskette, "The Gift of Debbie," *Good Housekeeping* 160.3 (March 1965), 92-93; 190; 192; 194; 196. Throughout my description of these events, I highlight variations in the ways in which Evans recounted the story of her daughter's life. I do so in order to stress the fact that Evans' telling and retelling of these events were meant to achieve particular rhetorical ends with respect to the meanings of disability and Evans' authority as a writer, Christian, and mother. Also, the fact that she had the opportunity to tell and retell this story, with variations, in many venues, further attests to its cultural purchase.

[11] On changing mid-century etiology surrounding this category, see Clemens Benda, *Mongolism and Cretinism* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1949) and Benda, *Down's Syndrome: Mongolism and its Management* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1969). The category "mongolism" derived from racist nineteenth-century genetic theories that suggested that features ascribed to putatively inferior races might resurface within populations as "atavisms." The British physician John Langdon Down assigned this label to a condition he first described in the 1860s on account of what he saw as resemblance between the persons he studied and the so-called "Mongol race." In the mid-twentieth century, professionals and other public commentators generally lamented the use of this category. In Benda's *Mongolism and Cretinism,* he attempted to disprove Down's theory of "racial mutation" by offering comparisons of the eyes of persons with this condition and individuals labeled "Chinese." It must be noted that refutations like Benda's objected to the notion of racial recursion but not necessarily to the notion of race or racial hierarchy. On the history of these terms and Benda's role in their revision, see M. Luisa Rodríguez-Hernández and Eladio Montoya, "Fifty Years of Evolution of the term Down's Syndrome," *The Lancet* 378.9789 (2011), 402. For a reflection on the "notions" of race and disability and evidence of their co-constitution in this category, see Mel Chen, "'The Stuff of Slow Constitution': Reading Down Syndrome for Race, Disability and the Timing that Makes Them So," *Somatechnics* 6.2 (2016): 235-248.

States—reactions and guidance that countless families would recall in the ensuing decade in letters to editors, memoirs, newsletters, and the like.[12] Most common among these was the suggestion from physicians and others that the best thing to do for such a child was to "put them away."[13] Although the medical consensus around this recommendation was beginning to fray, if only slightly, the vast majority of medical professionals practicing in the postwar US believed that "defective" children like Robin were "hopeless cases," and that parents ought to surrender their offspring to the care of an institution and, as many would recall, move on with their lives. As one parent remembered having been advised: "Just pretend it was a bad dream."[14]

The Rogers' rejected this advice. It is unclear why they did so, but as Evans herself later acknowledged, their incredible wealth enabled them to provide things for their child that others obviously could not.[15] The couple built a separate cottage beside their Southern California ranch property for Robin and for a full time nurse who would see to her care.[16] Keeping Robin home was enabled by paying for what many institutions billed themselves as offering (and what they suggested conditions like Robin's required): distance from the "normal" home, protective confines, and round-the-clock professional

---

[12] On the history of these accounts, see Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew" and Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship*.

[13] See, for example, Lucille Stout, *I Reclaimed My Child: The Story of a Family into which a Retarded Child was Born* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1959). Stout recounts medical professionals pleading with her to institutionalize her child—pleading to which she initially submitted. She later came to regret her decision and described such advice as communicating the following: "We don't want your child in our society. We have no place for her here. We don't want to think of such people, or be reminded that they exist, so please keep her put away out of our sight." Stout, *I Reclaimed My Child*, 50.

[14] Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 137. For another example of parents receiving the same advice, see Willard Abraham, *Barbara: A Prologue* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1958), 55.

[15] For one parent's irritation with the inaccessibility of Evans' story on account of her wealth, see Stout, *I Reclaimed My Child*, 34, cited in Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," 94.

[16] Davis, *The Answer is God*, 136; 140-147.

care. What was important for the Rogers was that their ability to provide these things on their own made possible Robin's inclusion in their family life as a much doted-on member.

The question of Robin's inclusion in the public's image of the domus of the Queen of the West and the King of the Cowboys, however, was apparently a more complicated matter. Robin's parents opted to be less than forthcoming about their child's diagnosis. They informed several audiences in the early months of her life that their young daughter had a "congenital heart condition," but never mentioned or permitted those in their circle to reveal the precise—which is to say, developmental or cognitive—nature of her "handicap."[17]

It is worth noting here, the tenacity and intensity of stigma surrounding so-called "mentally deficient" children within this moment and context. In spite of the shifts in the etiology of cognitive disability that distinguished most of its forms from hereditary causes, it is safe to say that the vast majority of Americans were familiar with the suggestion that a child's cognitive impairment was reflective of at least some kind of deficiency in or on the part of her parents. Even if a previous generation's language of "inferior stock" no long held the purchase it once did, scores of parents of children with disabilities recounted accusations flung at the them in the postwar era suggesting that their loved one's conditions were evidence of their own defects—biological, moral, or, most likely, some combination of the two. It was this reason—perhaps as much as any suggestion about a child's "hopelessness" or inability to fit within a "normal" family—that must have encouraged many to put their child "away."[18]

---

[17] Ibid., 128.
[18] See, for example, parents' accounts reported in Eugene McDonald, *Understand Those*

Up until just two months before Robin's birth, it was accurate to say that no one of the Rogers' social stature had ever identified themselves as the parent or kin of a person with a cognitive disability. However, in the May issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* in the year of Robin's birth, the celebrated author Pearl S. Buck made known the fact that she had a—now adult—daughter who had spent the majority of her life as a resident at the Vineland Training School in Vineland, New Jersey. Buck's article, later expanded as the book *The Child Who Never Grew*, in many ways, initiated popular efforts to detach diagnoses of cognitive impairment from eugenic logics as they resonated in American culture.[19] That is to say, it worked to demonstrate, as advocates constantly stressed in this moment, that such forms of difference might appear in "*any* family." As such, Buck's revelation also reflected some of the difficulty in changing cultural attitudes. It ought to be noted that Buck published this article and book *after* enjoying a long career of success and after much had already been determined about her daughter's life. Upon learning of Robin's diagnosis, it is unlikely that the Rogers felt similarly secure in either their professional positions or their relationship to their daughter's future.

This situation, however, did not last long.

Shortly before her second birthday, Robin contracted the mumps. Her health worsened rapidly and, within days, she died as a result of complications. In late August of 1952, she was buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles, marking both the end and beginning of a story.

Feelings: A Guide for Parents of Handicapped Children and Everyone Who Counsels Them (Pittsburg: Stanwix House, 1962).

[19] Pearl Buck, *The Child Who Never Grew* (New York: J. Day Co., 1950).

A messenger, unmuted

What happened next became the center point of Dale Evans' efforts to represent herself to the public as not only a celebrity but as a mother and as a Christian. Evans narrated and re-narrated the events that followed Robin's death as decisive moments in her personal testimony and as decisive means by which to establish her eventual place as a successful author of Christian literature and as an advocate for so-called "exceptional" children.[20]

As she told it, two days after Robin's funeral, Evans sat beneath a large color etching of her daughter that an acquaintance had made, now placed at the center of the family altar among various photos and keepsakes. Thumbing through letters of sympathy from friends and loved ones, Evans was surprised to find the room becoming "heavy" with what she described as an "unseen Presence." Staring at the image of her child, she explained, "It suddenly dawned on me that [Robin's eyes] always seemed as if they were seeing further than we [sic]."[21]

How Evans described what happened in that room varied in different tellings, but, by some combination of events, including the "flash into [her] mind" of a verse from the New Testament's Book of Hebrews ("Be not forgetful of strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"), Evans became convinced that "Robin had been an angel" and that she was being called to participate in her heaven-directed "mission."[22]

---

[20] *Angel Unaware* was the first in a long list of books Evans published with evangelical presses. See, for example, Dale Evans Rogers, *My Spiritual Diary* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1955); *Christmas is Always* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1958); *Dearest Debbie* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1965); *Where He Leads* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1974); *The Home Stretch*, with Floyd Thatcher (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986).
[21] Davis, *The Answer is God*, 218.
[22] Ibid.

Following familiar scripts of inspiration and its burdens, Evans recalled that her initial efforts to respond to this revelation were stymied. She attempted to write down Robin's story—the truth that her daughter was and had been a "muted messenger of God"—but faltered in her attempts.[23] "Her mind was weak and dry," she recalled. She just wasn't a writer, she thought to herself. But a few days later, while recording lines for her and Rogers' radio show at a nearby studio, Evans found *herself* the one muted, like so many would-be divine mouthpieces. While unable to recite her lines, she later explained to others, a disembodied voice seemed to say to her: "Let Robin write it herself."[24]

So she did. In the weeks that followed, Evans wrote feverishly under what she understood to be a power other than her own. On "notepads, loose envelopes, the back of scripts," she committed to something like what scholars of religion might recognize as a practice of automatic writing. She assumed the position of her deceased daughter's amanuensis, recording Robin's life story, as she was understood to have relayed it to her "Heavenly Father" upon her arrival "Home."[25]

The history of religion in the United States is, of course, dense with communicative traffic between parents and their deceased children. From nineteenth-century séances to late-twentieth century bereavement narratives, the genre of the after-

---

[23] Unlike the accounts I am relying on most closely here, in others, Evans left out descriptions of her fumbling efforts to write. For example, in one instance, she described her discovery about Robin's identity and her writing of what came to be *Angel Unaware* as relatively simultaneous experiences. In both versions of the story, however, what is made clear is that Evans understood the text of *Angel Unaware* to come from beyond herself. As she told one journalist, "I know *I* didn't write it." Baskette, "The Gift of Debbie," 194. See also Dale Evans Rogers, "Foreword to the paperback edition," *Angel Unaware*, (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1963).
[24] Davis, *The Answer is God*, 219.
[25] Baskette, "The Gift of Debbie," 194; Davis, *The Answer is God*, 219; Garrison *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 37. On the "blurry" relationship between the spiritualist practice of automatic writing and later Protestant practices of inspired devotional writing, see Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016), 131.

death communiqué has proved an enduring medium for expressing and exploring the bonds of kinship and the social worlds that make those bonds both difficult and possible. While Evans' experience and narrative share much in common with analogous accounts of posthumous communications with children, Robin's message carried distinctive content pertaining to the meanings of her identity as a "handicapped" child.[26]

The sum of Evans' envelopes, backs of scripts, and notepads became *Angel Unaware*, a 63 page volume, published in March of 1953 by Fleming Revell and serialized in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States.[27] While the Rogers' fame certainly promised a wide audience for the book, neither Evans nor the press could have predicted the scope of its success. By year's end, Robin's story had become one of the best selling books in the United States, outstripped only by the recently released Revised Standard Bible and the celebrity preacher Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, to whom this chapter will turn in a moment. By March of 1954, Fleming Revell had sold almost half a million copies, with sales proceeding apace for almost a decade. If the Rogers were already a presence in countless American households at the outset of the 1950s, the publication of *Angel Unaware* added Robin to their ranks and with her "mental retardation" as both a topic of interest and significant site of moral investment.[28]

---

[26] See, for example, Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism and the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); John Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth Century Religious Experience* (Boston: Skinner House, 2004); Erik Seeman, *Speaking with Dead in Early America* (Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Susan Kwilecki, "Ghosts, Meaning, and Faith: After-Death Communications in Bereavement Narratives," *Death Studies* 35.3 (2011), 219-243. For a recent example that shares much in common with *Angel Unaware*, see Bryan Young, *Meant for Heaven: A Little Girl's Journey to Paradise* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort Publishing, 2017).
[27] On the book's serialization, see Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 78-82.
[28] For more information on the book's sales, see Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 82.

In Need of Confidence: Angel Unaware *and postwar popular religion*

In order to understand Evans' reception of her daughter's message and the spectacular popularity of *Angel Unaware*, it is necessary to situate both in relation to the religious styles and culture that helped shape Evans' experiences and that framed the book for American audiences. Doing helps to illuminate what it was that the readers of *Angel Unaware* may have found in Robin's story—what thirsts it satisfied and what longings it piqued—and how those discoveries shaped the meanings of cognitive disability in this moment. By Evans' own account, it was through an encounter with the writings of Norman Vincent Peale that she was prepared for the reception of her daughter's message.

Peale was another mid-century figure who could claim something bordering on a ubiquitous presence in American popular culture.[29] The pastor of Manhattan's Marble Collegiate Church, Peale had transformed this modest Reformed Church of America pulpit in the late 1940s into a platform for a distinctive version—at least distinctively successful—of mid-century popular religion. Blending the idioms of a generic Christian providentialism and an ascendant popular psychology, Peale worked to persuade Americans that their life's circumstances were merely the consequences of how they thought about them and that, by assuming the proper "thought-techniques," they might

[29] Of Peale's profile, the eminent historian of religion Sydney Ahlstrom once wrote, "[He] was as important for the religious revival of the fifties as George Whitefield had been for the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century." Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 956, qtd. in Carol George, *God's Salesman, Norman Vincent People and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156.

access "peace of mind, improved health, and a never-ceasing flow of energy."[30] "Altogether too many people are defeated by the everyday problems of life," Peale wrote at the outset of *The Power of Positive Thinking*. "It is a pity that people should let themselves be defeated by the problems, cares, and difficulties of human existence, and it is also quite unnecessary."[31] With unassuming authority, Peale offered audiences something that apparently many people wanted to hear, namely, that their lives were largely under their control.[32]

Peale relayed this message about the unnecessariness of adversity and the accessibility of health and happiness in just about every way he could, with the result being that few could escape his insistence. His words circulated in advice columns in popular newspapers and magazines, via his own radio—and, later, television—programs, in pamphlets, though his American Foundation for Faith and Psychiatry, and, most successfully, via his books. For sympathetic crowds, Peale's labors represented an attractive antidote to the "misery of a nation rich in things, but poor in spirit."[33] For the less receptive, they reflected a dubious attenuation of Christian commitment and a

---

[30] Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1952), vii.

[31] Ibid. On Peale's career, see George, *God's Salesman*; Christopher Lane, *Surge of Piety: Norman Vincent Peale and the Remaking of American Religious Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Timothy Sherwood, *The Rhetorical Leadership of Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent People, and Billy Graham in the Age of Extremes* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013).

[32] To be sure, Peale was not alone in preaching this gospel, or something like it. Peers with whom he shared common ground include the preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rabbi Joshua Liebman, and Robert Schuller, founder of California's Crystal Cathedral. For more on this broader milieu, see Andrew Heinz, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 195-216. See also Mark Mulder and Gerardo Martí, *The Glass Church: Robert H. Schuller, The Crystal Cathedral, and the Strain of Megachurch Ministry* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

[33] See Arthur Gordon, *One Man's Way: The Story and Message of Norman Vincent Peale, Minister to Millions* (Pawling, N.Y.: Foundation for Christian Living, 1972), qtd. in George, *God's Salesman*, 129.

dangerous escape from the world and its problems.[34] However, all comers were in agreement that millions of Americans were finding in Peale's promises a compelling means by which to handle the world around them.

Dale Evans' encounter with Peale transpired at a moment in which she felt especially in need of a good word. Beset by confusion and feelings of guilt and doubt in the wake of Robin's birth, Evans turned to Pearl Buck's above-mentioned account of her daughter's life while browsing magazines during one of her and her husband's national rodeo tours. The prospect of hearing from another mother, she later explained, struck her as "an astonishment…a thought of hope."[35] And yet, she soon found herself disappointed. "Down, down, went her heart," she noted. She later explained, "here was a stark story of how a mother, after years and endless miles of searching for help for her retarded child, had come to accept with finality the bitterness that there was no actual help, not now, for her child."[36] In Buck's account of choosing to institutionalize her daughter, Evans read a confirmation of many of the attitudes and assumptions that surrounded diagnoses of "mental retardation," that such persons' situations were without hope. As she told it, having reached for a lifeline, Evans ended up deeper in the waters of her despair.

A few days later, she explained, Evans was again walking past a magazine shop, inclined to rush by, when a title "fairly leaped at her."[37] It was Peale's *A Guide to*

---

[34] For a summary of some of these concerns, see A. Roy Eckardt, *The Surge of Piety in America, An Appraisal* (New York: Association Press, 1958). See also, George, *God's Salesman*, 123-156.
[35] Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 47.
[36] Ibid. By Buck's own lights, she locates "hope" in her daughter's story and life, but it is primarily the hope of working with others in order to improve conditions for people with cognitive disabilities and to eliminate such forms of difference through scientific cure.
[37] Ibid., 48. It must be noted, again, that the details of Evans' narrative(s) shifted in different tellings. In another version, she encounters Peale's work much earlier. The point, however, remains the same, namely, that circumstances—forces beyond her—conspire to bring her to the

Confident Living, the preacher's most successful book to date.[38] The author's name rang a faint bell, she would explain, and, though knowing little of him, Evans recalled thinking to herself, "[Oh] how I needed to learn about confident living right then." Buying the book, "almost desperately," Evans flipped to the chapter titled "How to Meet Sorrow." As she explained, she immediately "began to feel herself assimilating what had happened [vis-à-vis Robin], [and] began to feel better."[39] Having grasped again for a tether, this time she found her way to more stable ground.

Evans' experience of Peale's writing, in some ways, marked the beginning of *Angel Unaware*. *A Guide to Confident Living* provided almost endless examples of individuals encountering circumstances that looked to be dead-ends, but that turned out in fact to be new sorts of opportunities, realized through a shift in perspective. Although Evans was unaware at the time that Robin's death loomed in the near future, Peale's preaching on loss provided a paradigm that mapped onto both Robin's disability and her eventual passing, persuading Evans of their spiritual significance. In "How to Meet Sorrow," Peale affirmed what he described as a "basic fact taught by Christianity…what seemed to be death is not death at all."[40] Through a host of families' experiences of their loved one's endurance beyond the grave and the consequent ability of families to "conquer" feelings of sadness, Peale provided a language for Evans to accept both that

---

point of publishing *Angel Unaware*. For a different version of events, see Davis, *The Answer is God*, 221-222.

[38] Norman Vincent Peale, *A Guide to Confident Living* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948).

[39] Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 48.

[40] Peale, *A Guide to Confident Living*, 215.

Robin's condition was not what it seemed (or what others told her it was) and, later, that her death was by no means the conclusion to her life.[41]

Whether or not Evans thought of Peale specifically when she penned her daughter's words is unknown, but the resonance between Robin's "message" and Peale's is unmistakable. This likely explains why Evans approached the pastor for help in securing a publisher for what would be *Angel Unaware* and why he gladly agreed to pen the book's introduction, announcing his eagerness to "be a part of Robin's plan."[42] It was not, after all, too different from his own.

So what was Robin's message?

Proof for Positive Thinking

Angel Unaware took the form of something like a missionary report, with Robin Rogers relaying to God the observations she gleaned while in the field of her assignment. Early in the narrative, like so many other missionaries, Robin the narrator laments the misguided ways of the natives among whom she has dwelled, specifically regarding their attitudes about her diagnosed difference: "They didn't realize that You provide certain conditions in order to accomplish some wonderful purpose. A lot of them Down There don't understand yet, Father…You always have a blessing in mind, in everything you plan."[43] At its outset, this book coupled cultural responses to cognitive disability and faith (or the absence of faith) in divine intention. Robin lamented to God, "Many mothers with

[41] In this particular chapter, the reader gets a sense of some of the proscriptive and perhaps more punitive implications of Peale's theology. He commands readers not to "hamper [their deceased loved ones] with…dark and dismal thoughts of grief. They have earned joy and delight. Do not spoil it for them." Ibid., 217.
[42] Davis, *The Answer is God*, 221.
[43] Evans, *Angel Unaware*, 12.

babies like me wouldn't be so bitter and so heart-broken if they just knew you and your ways better."[44]

Nowhere was what Robin described as this dearth of trust in providence brought into clearer relief in *Angel Unaware* than in the attitudes and prescriptions of various medical professionals with whom Robin and her family came into contact. This group functioned in many ways as foils for positive thinking in *Angel Unaware*, representing both the professional as well as a broader tendency toward what Peale often called "defeatism." Throughout *Angel Unaware*, readers encounter physicians giving voice to the kind of "hopelessness" that Evans was disappointed to find evinced in Pearl Buck's account of her daughter. Readers encounter one doctor announcing that children like Robin "were no good to themselves or to anybody else."[45] Another explained to Robin's parents, "you have a real problem…There's absolutely nothing we can do…*There is no help*."[46] As *Angel Unaware* represented them, mid-century Americans could think little to nothing positive about "mental retardation" and persons labeled accordingly.

Robin looked down on these attitudes with gentle pity, readers found. She relayed to God the story of one doctor suggesting that "babies who came into the world in [her] condition should be…'machine-gunned,'" and requested, "Father, if that remark was really made, forgive him, for he knows not what he's saying. I wish he could meet You."[47] Her story represented these kinds of attitudes, even in their most violent expressions, as failures of imagination—failures to see God's activity in the world and to find value in individuals like her with cognitive impairments.

---

[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 52.
[46] Ibid., 27, emphasis in original.
[47] Ibid., 52.

Angel Unaware represented its challenge to these failures formally, though a device that marked Robin's distance from the logics that precluded contemporary Americans' appreciation of persons like her. By frequently placing words and categories in quotation marks, the text of *Angel Unaware* suggested that its audience might question what were supposed to be definitive, expert descriptions of human difference.

In some instances, this formal device simply invited readers to note Robin's identity as a non-adult, communicating with charming naïveté. Robin refers to her parents "finishing up a 'recording' of a radio broadcast"; she explains how they "put me in a contraption called a 'bassinet'"; and notes how on one occasion her father approached her "with a funny looking thing called a 'camera.'"[48] But, in others, Robin's qualification of words or concepts was more pointed. This was especially the case with categories tied to the arena of medical diagnosis and treatment.

Throughout *Angel Unaware*, terms like "affliction," "muscle-tone," "normal," "Mongoloid symptom," and "coordination" are all couched in pairs of inverted commas.[49] Insofar as these categories were devices by which the *negative* meanings of Robin's difference were defined, the text's quotation marks introduced suspicion about their interpretative power, suggesting that they might be products of what *Angel Unaware* referred to as an "earth-minded" ken.[50] Placing such categories in quotation marks opened an aperture for readers to ask: what other meanings might be assigned to cognitive disability? How else might one speak of persons like Robin?

---

[48] Ibid., 18; 21.
[49] Ibid., 23; 46; 35; 18; 30. Katherine Castles has made a consonant point about the rhetorical force of Robin's naïveté, which she describes it as "deceptively gentle." Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 156.
[50] Evans, *Angel Unaware*, 25.

One way *Angel Unaware* answered such queries was by illustrating Robin's capacity to transform and improve the lives of those around her. This contrasted with what were commonly articulated warnings about the threats children with cognitive disabilities posed to "normal" families.[51] Evans confronted such warnings in the words of one friend who pleaded with her to place Robin in an institution. She insisted, "You must not allow this tragedy to ruin your lives."[52] In response to assumptions and assertions of this sort, *Angel Unaware* demonstrated what it suggested was the *cohesive* power of children like Robin within their families.

In narrating her story, *Angel Unaware*'s Robin described the success of her "mission" in terms of how her presence in the Rogers' family transformed her kin. She explained that she "saw thoughtfulness developing in all the children in 'the house of Rogers.'"[53] As a result of her presence, her siblings were developing more concern for "people who were weaker than they were" and were becoming more "unselfish."[54] With respect to her parents, Robin described how her presence in their lives augmented their religious faith. She helped her mother to realize that "real success was *spiritual*" and she emboldened her father to be more forthright about his faith in public, noting that he began to incorporate explicitly Christian elements into his rodeo performances. Over and against assertions about persons with cognitive disability's destabilizing effects on

---

[51] As Allison Carey explains, mental deficiency professionals in this period often based their recommendations for parents to institutionalize their children on the argument that "the presence of the disabled child at home would destroy the abilities of the family to function normally." Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship*, 116. I discuss these arguments in further detail in Chapter 4.
[52] Dale Evans Rogers, "Foreword," 7.
[53] Evans Rogers, *Angel Unaware*, 57.
[54] Ibid., 58.

families, *Angel Unaware* suggested that children like Robin might, in fact, help to harmonize the Christian home.

What made such possibility visible to the Rogers was their trust in God and their ability to refuse despair, *Angel Unaware* explained. This book provided what might register as compelling evidence for the ways in which the adjustment of one's perspective could radically alter one's circumstances—the basic creed of the era's increasingly popular therapeutic Christianity. For audience's familiar with Peale's preaching, Robin's narrative provided yet another example of the kind of story that populated the pastor's publications and sermons (what he called "bone-fide demonstrations in actual human experience") wherein adversity gets translated into some form of flourishing: a promotion secured; a relationship repaired; or a faith reinvigorated. Peale recommended *Angel Unaware* in precisely these terms, inviting audiences to pursue in it an extension of his own teaching. In the book's introduction, he celebrated how Evans and Rogers "found the very joy of God in what might otherwise have been an overwhelming tragedy."[55] The suggestion was, as always with Peale, so might you.

Responses from some of *Angel Unaware*'s readers demonstrate the fact that mid-century audiences were ready to receive this text as another parable for positive thinking. In these responses, one finds the familiar fecundity of evangelical testimony, whereby narratives of transformation beget narratives of transformation, demanding more of their kind. The year following *Angel Unaware*'s publication, the Rogers' publicist, Maxine Garrison, produced her own book, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, which documented the story of *Angel Unaware*'s making and offered an account of, as the subtitle explained, "The Inspiration of *Angel Unaware* and the Influence of the Roy Rogers Family in the

[55] Peale, "Introduction," *Angel Unaware*, 6.

American Home." The book curated selections from the voluminous amount of letters Evans received after the book's publication. It was a testimony of testimonies.

In one of the book's chapters dedicated to readers who "had no immediate personal connection with retardation," one finds accounts that would have fit just as easily in one of Peale's volumes.[56] One businessman confides in another on a commuter train: "That book [*Angel Unaware*] saved my life…I was messing up my job, fighting with my wife…It was getting worse everyday." Encountering the Rogers' ability to "[stick] by what they believed in"—presumably their conviction that Robin's life had purpose—"made everything so plain," he explained. "I didn't really have problems, I was just making them up…I went home, and I asked my wife to forgive me, and we've been getting along fine ever since."[57] While this response may have been motivated in part by the suggestion that Robin's disability was a "real problem" in contrast with this businessman's marital troubles, what stands out from his reading of *Angel Unaware* is the lesson that apparent problems dissipate with an adjustment of attitude.

Another reader, an American soldier, wrote to Evans from his post in East Berlin. He conveyed how *Angel Unaware* assuaged his feelings of despair about his and his fellow soldiers' situation—his response taking a surprising violent turn. "I was so relieved mentally, spiritually, and physically [after having read a serialized selection of *Angel Unaware* in a newspaper]…I could have taken on the whole Chinese army. I'm not joking…that article did me more good than a rest leave."[58] In Robin and her parents' story, people like this soldier and the businessman above found themselves persuaded that their woes might be undone with a shift in perspective. The book's early reviewers

[56] Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 93.
[57] Ibid., 98-99.
[58] Ibid., 105.

promised the same, christening the volume "purely inspired" and guaranteeing, as did Charles Allen of the *Atlanta Constitution*, "This little book will help all who read it."[59] For these audiences, *Angel Unaware* was immediately recognizable as the kind of inspiration many mid-century readers craved, yet another reminder that happiness was within reach.

Envying angels

Beyond providing readers with another script of positive thinking's power as evinced in the Rogers' response to Robin's life, *Angel Unaware* also addressed the appetites of its readers for inspiration and happiness by positing Robin's difference—as both angel and child with a disability—as *exemplary* of the kind of disposition or subjectivity that positive thinking Christianity prescribed and promised. *Angel Unaware* invited audiences to identify Robin, and to identify *with* her, as embodying the "peace of mind" prescribed by the likes of Peale. She was to serve not only as a messenger but also as a kind of model. In presenting her accordingly, the book furthered its case for the social value of persons like Robin, its efforts to interrupt the logics that presented this population as unmitigated tragedies.

Throughout the text of *Angel Unaware*, Robin offered observations of mid-century Americans' troubles that demonstrated her distance from and ability to transcend worldly woes. "Humans worry too much," she noted, then inquiring, "If they could

[59] Charles Allen, "'Angel Unaware' Lifts the Heart," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 23, 1953, 4. See also, International News Service, "Roy and Dale Tell Story of Doomed Tot," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1953, 14A; Ruth Gans Willett, "Letters," *The Courier-Journal*, March 11, 1953, 8.

somehow trust more and worry less, they'd have heaven on earth wouldn't they?"[60] In other instances, the book conveyed this admirable detachment with slightly more specific commentary. Describing her experience of an air raid warning, she opined, "How they do make noise, and how people do scamper around like a lot of frightened ants! I just couldn't understand it. Maybe you can explain it to me later, Father."[61] She continued, sharpening the tool of her criticism: "It's so foolish to go out of your way to get scared…I asked myself, 'What's wrong Down Here anyway? Why don't they just get Your peace?'"[62] In passages like this one, Robin both rehearsed the basic convictions of positive thinking—explaining the problems of a tense political environment in terms of attitude—and modeled the ability not to let such things disturb her contentment. Along these lines, the book prompted its readers to look at things from a similar distance.

In her commentary on and around *Angel Unaware*, Evans made explicit what the text was meant to illustrate by linking the value of persons like Robin to their supposed immunity from the world's worries. In a preface added to the paperback edition of the book, Evans wrote, "To the retarded and handicapped [God] gives a treasure few people can ever attain. He gives them the double blessing of purity of thought and an amazing capacity for love."[63] As bearers of this double blessing, this population might be looked upon as emblems of the kind of frictionless freedom positive thinking promised. Evans continued, "Should we not look with at least some sense of envy on those who will never attain the questionable freedom of knowledge which enables them to say, 'I'm not sure I

[60] Evans Rogers, *Angel Unaware*, 31.
[61] Ibid., 46.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Evans Rogers, "Foreword," 9.

believe in God!'?"[64] Here, Evans interprets incapacity as corresponding with a contentment and credulousness that is contrasted with a world consumed by worry, one that Evans described elsewhere as "tense, frustrated, [and] always rushing."[65]

To be sure, representations of persons with cognitive impairments that suggested that this population's social value might be located in their apparent distance from the world and its constraints were, of course, not unique to *Angel Unaware*—or to the postwar era. As historians of disability have demonstrated, constructions of cognitive difference have long served as means to describe gaps between authentic moral selves and social encumbrances, between the compromising forces of the worldly and idealized visions of nature, the past, and the holy. In examples ranging from early modern discourse and practices surrounding "holy fools" to representations of "idiots" in Romantic poetry, one finds the manufactured use of such forms of difference for launching various claims about value, the human and social forms.[66] What was distinctive about *Angel Unaware* within this longer representational history were the connections it drew between these forms of difference and the mid-century appetite, informed and stoked by Peale and his peers, for a particularly unflappable combination of faith and happiness—or a kind of faith *in* happiness. In its representation of Robin and others like her, *Angel Unaware* recast diagnosed impairment and the faith with which it supposedly

---

[64] Ibid., 10.
[65] See Davis, *The Answer is God*, 176.
[66] See, for example, Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008); Irina Metzler, *Fools and Idiots?: Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Patricia Puccinelli, *Yardsticks: Retarded Characters and their Roles in Fiction* (New York: P. Lang, 1995); and James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

resonated as a kind of salvation from psychic stress and, therefore, as a source of desperately needed wisdom in an anxious age.

On the Possible Politics of Positive Thinking

As I've described them here, *Angel Unaware* and its uptake provide a curious and unique angle from which to view positive thinking Christianity and its postwar analogs. Prevailing interpretations of Peale and his compeers have largely represented this group's therapeutic preaching as both politically enervating, insofar as they are seen to have distracted from social concerns, and—as a consequence of that enervation—as consistent with an emerging rightward lean in American politics. In this final section of this chapter, I explore how the story of *Angel Unaware* both corroborates and contradicts some of these interpretations with particular reference to this book's role in spurring a nascent politics of intellectual disability among some of its readers.

Many of Peale's contemporaries smeared his gospel and its purchase as a "cult of reassurance," which, through its insistence upon the accessibility of the individual's happiness, commanded compliance with powers that governed much of postwar American society. Alongside criticisms that worried that Peale's and others' so-called "easy religion" neutralized the moral power and demands of "orthodox" Christianity, mid-century critics like the journalist William A. Miller and sociologist Arthur Eckardt wryly described such faith's compatibility with hierarchy's maintenance.[67] In a relentlessly sardonic essay ("Some Negative Thinking about Norman Vincent Peale"),

[67] On criticisms of the so-called "easy religion" of Peale, Rabbi Joshua Liebman and others, see Martin Marty, "The Popular Religious Revival Is...Tied to a Popular Patriotism," in *Modern American Religion, Volume 3: Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Miller noted how books like *The Power of Positive Thinking* were pitched to employers and executives as resources for conjuring their employees' submission, quoting advertisements that promised things like: "EXECUTIVES: Give this book to employees. It pays dividends!" And "Greater efficiency from the *office staff*. Marked reductions in clock watching[!]"[68] Eckardt offered similar commentary on how Peale's promises could be aimed to occlude power dynamics in ways that were both deceptive and punishing. Of this cult's "priests," he suggested, damningly, "[They] are not unlike Red Cross workers in wartime, binding up the wounded so that they can go forth and get shot to pieces all over again."[69] While Eckardt left much of the specifics of his metaphor's battle largely undescribed, it was clear that both he and Miller took such phenomena to be cases of opiates for the masses and then some.

Recent scholarship has lent more substance to these critical salvos. Kevin Kruse and Christopher Lane have offered histories that make explicit Peale's investments in promoting an aggressively capitalist economic policy alongside a politically conservative Christian nationalist agenda.[70] As Lane argues, Peale's theological assault on "defeat" and "failure" as states of mind take on a different cast when viewed through the lens of mid-century American imperial ambition and political paranoia. Kathryn Lofton summarizes Lane's insights with punch: "This [i.e., positive thinking] is not a request to rethink your dark thoughts and switch them into cheerier ones; it was an order

---

[68] William A. Miller, "Some Negative Thoughts About Norman Vincent Peale," in *Piety along the Potomac; Notes on Politics and Morals in the Fifties* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964).
[69] A. Roy Eckardt, *The Surge of Piety in America,* 84.
[70] Lane, *Surge of* Piety; Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015). For an earlier, equally critical account of Peale's ministry and its connection to questions of political-economy, see Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers, A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965).

from a militarized state to stay on the sunny side of their Cold War surveillance."[71] If one listens more closely, these scholars suggest, one hears decidedly ominous chords subtending what were these proliferating promises of happiness.

While I think the evidence that Peale and some of his peers nursed the health of American empire, capitalism, and a vague Christian supremacy as much as they did the health of their audience's souls is plain (indeed these were paired projects), I must admit some concern about how these narratives and assessments have a ring of inevitability to them. This may not be a property of the aforementioned works, rather the product of a reservoir of broader assumptions, but it strikes me that one might leave these accounts with the impression that the content and style of Peale and his peers' therapeutic-evangelical gospel, as an iteration of its New Thought predecessors, *necessarily* hoodwinks and hamstrings its adherents in concert with particular conservative political projects—rendering them pawns in another's game. In other words, I wonder about the extent to which this story is over determined and what doesn't fit neatly within the accounts of political pacification with which we are already familiar.[72]

Part of what I find helpful, however, about some of the recent work on Peale's production of a so-called "surge of piety" is its demonstration that as an ideology or

---

[71] Kathryn Lofton, "Resurgent Christianity," review of Christopher Douglas, *If God Meant to Interfere: American Literature and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2016) and Christopher Lane, *Surge of Piety: Norman Vincent Peale and the Remaking of American Religious Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) in *American Literary History* 30.1 (Spring 2018), 177-187.

[72] To clarify further, my aim is not to tangle in debates and juxtapositions between "agency" and "ideology," "people" and "structures," rather it is to provide further depth to our understandings of how positive thinking as a set of discursive resources was mobilized and made to move in this particular moment. This depth, I think, encourages us to continue to be mindful of potentialities we might otherwise overlook. For an example of the endurance of some of the above mentioned debates with the field of American religious studies, see Kathryn Gin Lum, "The Historyless Heathen and the Stagnating Pagan: History as Non-Native Category?," *Religion and American Culture 28.1* (Winter 2019): 52-91.

discourse, this therapeutic religion had teeth. Not only did it lull its adherents with promises of contentment, as Miller and Eckardt suggested, it also provided them with opponents—in the case of the studies mentioned above, those who stood outside of a particular nationalist imaginary. What I have begun to demonstrate in the discussion at hand is how such teeth could also be cut and pointed toward other objects, to different ends.

In *Angel Unaware*'s representations of the prescriptions and prognoses of medical professionals, we saw how an insistence upon positive thinking provided means by which to challenge particular forms of authority and the social arrangements that extended from them. What the book presents as Robin's guileless trust in God and optimism becomes a vantage from which to envision new possibilities for persons with disabilities and their kin.

Many of *Angel Unaware*'s readers eagerly assumed this point of view. Scores of the letters Evans received in response to the book from parents of children with disabilities reported both similar encounters with physicians as well as their resistance to them. "The doctor advised us to put our child in a home for retarded children...but to put her away and hide from the world, I couldn't do it. We have given her all the love we could, same as a normal child," wrote one mother.[73] Another explained, "They told me that I should put my baby in an institution, but we always want to have her at home with us. I know God will give us strength for everything."[74] This same parent made explicit how it was Robin's guidance that left her feeling empowered to refuse prescription: "The words of your daughter have given me great strength…I shall no longer be

[73] Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 122.
[74] Ibid., 117.

coward."[75] Such responses sound less like the "yessirs" of Miller's imagined readers of Peale and more like the echoes of a collective determination.

In their communication with Evans, many parents also affirmed their ability to recognize that which doctors and others had denied with respect to both their children's capacities and influence within their homes, echoing the book's understanding of these capacities as indices of divine presence. As one mother explained, "[Our 'little angel'] brought my husband and me closer together. He made our children more tolerant of defects in others. He taught our whole family a lesson I know we will never forget. The children, instead of wondering what other people will say, are proud of the fact that they had a brother like him. They know he was an 'Angel Unaware'."[76] In response to what they experienced as intensely circumscribed interpretations of their loved one's difference, these readers joined *Angel Unaware* in elaborating understandings of persons with cognitive impairments that were not reducible to an enumeration of deficits, but instead stemmed from a confidence that their loved ones' apparent limitations might be better understood as distinct, divinely intended forms of value.

To borrow from the language of disability studies, we can see how in the case of *Angel Unaware* the application of positive thinking helped parents and other readers to marshal a critique of what is often referred to as the "medical model of disability." While professional discourses clearly located "mental retardation" in the individual bodies of those described accordingly, as that which had to be managed through expert treatment and enclosure, *Angel Unaware*'s readers drew attention to how the "problem" of "mental retardation" was a matter of *social* impairment as much as it was a matter of individually

[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 140.

measurable limitation. They testified to the ways in which it was cultural attitudes—expressed in, but not limited to, professional medicine—that in part confined what their children might do or be in the world.[77]

And *Angel Unaware's* readers linked these claims to efforts to try to transform their communities in order to better accommodate their loved ones. In addition to challenging prescriptions about institutionalization, readers reported to Evans on their work to lobby political representatives for access to education and to try to form schools and training programs of their own.[78] As part of a broader emerging movement of parent advocacy (the subject of the following chapter), *Angel Unaware*'s readers worked to combat the "hopelessness" surrounding intellectual disability as a failure of will and imagination rather than a feature of "mental retardation" as such. Such efforts reflect an extension of the book's commitment to finding purpose and value where others deemed it absent.

Relatedly, *Angel Unaware* also provided a paradigm for advocacy itself in its performance of a mother's *voicing* of her child's thoughts and needs. Large numbers of mothers who wrote to Evans explained how *Angel Unaware* offered them new kinds of access to their loved one's personhood. "Your book showed me through your Angel into my Angel's heart," wrote one. "By reading it, I understand so much better." Recognizing that her child was "here to tell us something," this same individual felt galvanized to serve as a mouthpiece for her son's "message," which consisted of both less obvious spiritual meanings ("What [they are], I've got to learn") as well as the imperative to try

[77] For a useful introduction to the medical model of disability, as well as its limitations, see Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, "Disability," in *Keywords for Disability Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
[78] Garrison, 126; 124.

to help other children and families in similar situations.[79] As another reader explained about her child, "[H]e has given me the very things I lack—patience, courage [and] love for other handicapped children, a need to reach other parents. I too feel that he is one of God's angels."[80] Here we get some sense of how *Angel Unaware*'s ontological claims about Robin's identity as an angel pointed up a register in which one's agency or even voice were not reducible to linguistic abilities or utterances (most of these parents inferred that their children had limited capacities in this respect), but rather that which emerged through specific relations of care. The supposedly firm partitions between mother and child, articulate and "disarticulate" thin and blur, with parents endeavoring to both give voice to and, in some sense, *speak with* their loved ones.[81]

In this respect, *Angel Unaware* and responses to it resonate loudly with a broader set of phenomena within the archives of American religion, wherein the communication between human and more than human subjects provides a context for contending with and perhaps revising biomedical claims to the body. In his classic study of American Catholic women's devotionalism, *Thank You, St. Jude*, Robert Orsi describes how

---

[79] Ibid., 145.
[80] Ibid., 130.
[81] The texts within disability history that have discussed this book have emphasized what we might think of as the symbolic violence of the book's performance of voicing. Scholars like Janice Brockley have suggested that the child Robin "disappear[s]" in *Angel Unaware* behind Evans. In this view, the text reduces Robin to a "rhetorical extension" of her mother, to borrow a phrase from Barbara Johnson. While I share some of Brockely's concerns about how *Angel Unaware* might have reinforced broader assumptions about persons with disabilities' supposed disqualification from representing themselves, I also am inclined to consider the book's performance of inspired writing as one parent's effort to theorize subjectivity and her relationship to her child in ways that could not ultimately be reduced to two discrete autonomous persons. In this respect, I think Evans' effort resonates with still live questions within the field of disability studies about care, representation, surrogacy, and intersubjectivity. See Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Ideologies of Parenting and Intellectual Disability in American History," 150. See, for example, Eva Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999). On "rhetorical extension," see Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986), 29-47.

twentieth-century Catholic women's relationships with Jude, Patron Saint Hopeless Causes, afforded discursive footholds in an increasingly unstable social landscape. As professional medicine arrogated to itself almost total authority to name and narrate the body's vicissitudes in the twentieth-century, Orsi shows how his subjects improvised roles for themselves as characters in alternative stories—defined by desire, submission, and reciprocity—in ways that translated diagnosed ailments into the language of a sacred, relational drama. In doing so, they worked to requisition dimensions of the gendered authority medicine had wrested from them.[82]

In the case of *Angel Unaware*, readers' identification of their children as heaven-sent agents helped them to challenge and expand the sorts of rubrics that determined what their loved one's diagnosed differences could mean. Reference to God's will—understood as registering in persons in the forms of particular positive affects, filial happiness, "courage," etc.—provided new means to conceive of their kin beyond their apparent limitations. And this language similarly relocated disability's significance and, by extension, the subjectivity of those deemed "mentally handicapped" *beyond* the individual, within broader networks of the family and an emergent community of parents in similar situations. While studies like Orsi's focus on the power dynamics at a relatively low scale, in the case of *Angel Unaware*, we see how its role as a text helped to mobilize its audience into a collective effort to transform these specific categories'

[82] Robert Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Other relevant examples include: Carolyn Rouse, "'If She's a Vegetable, We'll Be Her Garden': Embodiment, Transcendence, and Citations of Competing Cultural Metaphors in the Case of a Dying Child," *American Ethnologist* 31.4 (2004), 514-529; James Opp, *The Lord for the Body: Religion, Medicine and Protestant Faith Healing in Canada, 1880-1930* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2005); Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Jean Langford, *Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

meanings and the positions of persons who lived under the description in mid-century American society. In this case, a theological resolution against "defeat" functioned as a kind of incitement.

To recognize how *Angel Unaware*'s performance of positive thinking Chrisitanity proved politically catalytic in these respects does not preclude an appreciation, however, of how this very power also functioned in the service of the sorts of political projects that Kruse, Lane and others have linked to Peale and his allies. In fact, noting how these discursive resources animated challenges to medical authorities and structures extending from their expertise brings into clearer relief how "mental retardation" could be enlisted in the service of broader political and moral claims as well as how *Angel Unaware* assertions about persons like Robin's value were dependent upon them.

For one, the sorts of insistence we've encountered on the cohesive power of "handicapped" children fit neatly with broader mid-century investments in the healthy, "normal" household. In rebuffing arguments about such persons' disruptive effects within the family, *Angel Unaware* and its readers reinforced visions of heteronormative reproductive harmony as the locus and definition of personal fulfillment. Through claims that children like Robin enriched rather than hampered the *happiness* of families, *Angel Unaware* helped to strengthen particular social forms' hold on that category's meaning as that toward which all persons were to orient themselves.[83] If the presence of children with disabilities within families raised questions about the gendered distribution of care or imperatives surrounding the reproduction of wealth and status, such queries were largely neutralized by a kind of doubling down on the domestic. In this respect, we see

[83] My thinking here is indebted to Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

how *Angel Unaware* might have appealed not only in its participation in the suggestion that one might achieve one's own happiness through positive thinking but also in its affirmation of how that happiness ought to be defined.

Relatedly, the question of obligation with respect to the care of persons with intellectual disabilities could be leveraged in the service of a political-economic ideology that was averse to the public provision of social services. One mother, after noting her refusal of her neighbor's advice to institutionalize her son, wrote to Evans defiantly, "But as long as the Lord gives me life he will always be with us. *As he is our responsibility, not the state's*."[84] Peale derived a similar imperative from his reading of *Angel Unaware*. In his "Confident Living" advice column, he instructed readers on "How to Handle a Handicap" not long after the book's publication. He stated his first piece of guidance plainly, "Resolve to accept the child...No institution can substitute for a parent's love."[85] While such a recommendation was of a piece with *Angel Unaware*'s assertions about the value of children like Robin and their entitlement to "acceptance" (although the book did not oppose institutionalization so directly), these sorts of juxtapositions—between the state and home, institution and parent—no doubt helped to undergird a more fundamental set of distinctions that opposed the instrumentalist realm of the public (defined in terms of competition and economy) with the supposedly apolitical realm of the family (defined by freedom, happiness, and love). The clarity of these distinctions was of course essential to someone like Peale's defense of an anti-New Deal politics and a business friendly capitalism as described by Kruse. And viewed through this lens, *Angel Unaware* and its

[84] Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings*, 124.
[85] Norman Vincent Peale, "How to Handle a Handicap," *The Pittsburg Press,* June 3, 1956, 148.

readers' challenges to medical and institutional authorities can be seen as buttressing a wider suspicion of what we might simply gloss as "the public."

The point here is not to try to locate in *Angel Unaware* and its reception radical texts of "resistance" or to assert once and for all what they were *really* about. Rather, it is to underscore the indeterminacy of the effects and objects of the style of positive thinking Christianity represented in this book and its uptake. Without obscuring its congruence between particular conservative claims about the family and social order, *Angel Unaware* illustrates how insistence upon a divinely prescribed optimism and a confidence in the individual's ability to shape their circumstances through thought could render social formations and scripts both suspect and subject to revision. Its role in the reshaping of the politics surrounding cognitive disability at mid-century highlights sequelae of positive thinking that have heretofore escaped the attention of scholars of postwar religion. This escape might in fact tell us more about what scholars have been primed to recognize as "the political" in their accounts of the period than about a text like *Angel Unaware*'s significance. With our attention turned toward this text and the parents of children with disabilities who read it, we find less a case of "easy religion" and instead what looks much more like hard work—the tasks of contending with and making a world.

Conclusion

In the fall of 1953, residents of Gadsden, Alabama were meant to find heaven in their local bookshop. A high-school senior working as a clerk at Duggar's Book Store had arranged to dress dozens of his peers with makeshift wings and halos in order to

transform the small shop into "a veritable heavenly bower."[86] They were to play their roles in homage to Robin Rogers as part of a promotional event for Evans' *Angel Unaware*, which had been initiated by the student-clerk in conjunction with a school project. The shop's owner placed advertisements for Evans' book in the local paper—as did hundreds, if not thousands, of booksellers across the country— and, needless to say, the organizers were happy with the fruits of the labor. Writing to Evans after the event, the owner reported that 2,000 of the county seat's residents had gone home with her book when "[selling] one hundred copies might have stood as something of a [store] record."[87]

The foregoing discussion has marked an attempt to explain the kind of enthusiasm that brought so many of Gadsden's residents to Duggar's and that led some among their number to dress as they did for the occasion. While costumes were perhaps an unusual response to *Angel Unaware*, the impulse toward identification, with both the Rogers and with Robin, was not. As the festivity of the scene in Gadsden suggests, *Angel Unaware* was met in the early 1950s with an audience ready to revel in this book's account of what one of its reviewers dubbed "tragic joy."[88]

In this chapter, my central argument has been that this readiness was a consequence of the Rogers' story's resonance and representation of a broader set of sensibilities and desires circulating in the postwar United States that can usefully be organized under the banner of positive thinking Christianity. I've demonstrated how, in Evans' relay of her family's experience with a child with a so-called "tragic handicap" and Robin's own voice, *Angel Unaware* offered both a parable for positive thinking (one

[86] Garrison, *The Angel Spread Her Wings*, 101.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Betty Owens, "Malformed Child Brings Tragic Joy," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 22, 1953, 94.

that demonstrated how Christian optimism led to "triumph" in difficult circumstances) as well as a set of resources, via the figure of Robin, whereby audiences could experience and express their longings for freedom from doubt, anxiety, and the sundry pressures of social life.

This argument offers us a deeper understanding of how and why the forms of difference organized under labels like "mental retardation" became newly salient for many Americans in the 1950s. In what was, without question, the most prominent story of intellectual disability in the United States to date, cognitive impairment surfaced as rich fodder for many Americans considering and perhaps anxious about their place and power in the world. *Angel Unaware* brought what was formerly a topic and population broached almost only in hushed or derisive tones to the foreground of popular culture and it did so, in large part, by translating persons like Robin into emblems of and means to the happiness to which all Americans were supposed to aspire.

Chapter 2 | "Out of the Shadows": Religion, Narrative, and the Early History of the Parent-Advocacy Movement

Introduction

To have a physician inform you that your child was "mentally handicapped" constituted for many mid-century parents a profound fracturing and disordering of the world. It marked a kind of banishment, a discovery that the landscapes in which one had anticipated to dwell, whose features were described, however loosely, by normative scripts of childhood development, personal fulfillment, and social reproduction, were suddenly made inaccessible. Perhaps especially for those who imagined themselves to occupy positions of social privilege, such discoveries registered as if a promise had proven hollow, as if the future itself had been foreclosed.

As some postwar parents told it, these experiences could assume the intensity of something like biblical affliction, whereby the very substances of life seemed to transform or curiously curdle. On one evening in the early 1950s, shortly after discovering their newborn daughter, Vivian, had been diagnosed with a cognitive impairment, Hannah Kahn and her husband, Frank, of Miami, Florida agreed to meet their neighbors for an evening of card-playing and conversation—what they thought of as a stoic effort not to be consumed by this life-altering news. Yet, as Kahn sat at the table, she later recalled, each coffee she drank—"cup after cup"—filled her mouth with the taste of blood. No saving transubstantiation, what was supposed to have been a pleasure and relief had become bitter and metallic, intimating death.[1]

Indeed, such experiences of disorientation left many parents with a sense that there no longer existed a way forward for them in the world. As Kahn later wrote, she

[1] Madeline Blias, "The Poet and the Birthday Girl," in *The Heart Is an Instrument: Portraits in Journalism* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 291.

began to steel herself, not long after her daughter's birth, to take both her and her child's lives. She later explained, "death, that had sometimes seemed a fearful thing to me, suddenly became a friendly path."[2] Betty Pendler of New York City saw her own options radically retract in a similar way after an appointment with her young daughter's pediatrician who had diagnosed her with a cognitive disability, recommending her institutionalization. Standing on the train platform on her way home, with her daughter in arms, she later reported, "I actually contemplated jumping into the pit of the subway." It was as if the only available route was downward.[3]

This chapter explores the alternative courses that parents like Kahn and Pendler discovered and hewed in the wake of their initial devastation. It tracks their efforts to make what seemed like an uninhabitable world habitable for themselves and their children. To do so, it focuses upon the emergence of the broad network of advocacy organizations formed by the parents of children with cognitive disabilities in the postwar era—specifically the National Association for Retarded Children (NARC) and its partner, New York City's Association for the Help of the Retarded (AHRC).[4] Reading the textual production of the early members of these groups, as well as coverage of them in the press, this chapter offers a description of how the members of these organizations worked to plot their children's lives and their own in ways that challenged dominant renderings

---

[2] Hannah Kahn, "I am Her Mother and I No Longer Cry," *Children Limited*, June 1956, 11.
[3] David Goode, "And Now Let's Build a Better World: The Story of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, New York City, 1948-1998," unpublished manuscript (1998), 2, https://www.ahrcnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/History_Of_AHRC.pdf. As I will discuss below, accounts like these became crucial elements of the emerging genre of parent testimony/memoir. For another example, see Lucille Stout, *I Reclaimed My Child: The Story of a Family into which a Retarded Child Was Born* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1959), 7.
[4] As I will note below, a host of independent parent groups formed in this period, most of which came to affiliate in some way with the NARC. The AHRC did so, but also maintained itself as an independent enterprise. Therefore, I often refer throughout this text to both the NARC and AHRC, although sometimes I simply refer to the NARC and its "partners."

of "mental retardation."

While a small handful of organizations of parents of children diagnosed with cognitive impairments predated WWII (often composed by the families of children who lived in large residential institutions like the Western State Custodial School in Buckley, Washington), the late 1940s and early 1950s witnessed an eruption of organizing and activism around these forms of difference. A prime example of what historians have described as the postwar era's "joiner" culture, parents of children with cognitive disabilities flocked to one another and to the work of social advocacy with notable zeal at mid-century.[5] No less than 77 local parent groups cropped up throughout the United States between 1946 and 1950. That year, several among them moved to form what would become the National Association for Retarded Children, an umbrella organization for local groups that grew to include over 1,000 chapters and 100,000 members by the early 1960s. What had begun, in many instances, as a few parents connecting over a classified ad or a conversation in a grocery store aisle quickly became a formidable national movement.[6]

---

[5] On the early history of parents groups, see Allison Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 105-109; Larry Jones, *Doing Disability Justice: 75 Years of Family Advocacy* (Lulu Press, 2010). On mid-century "joiners," See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books 2017). For a postwar observation of this enthusiasm for joining, specifically regarding parent advocacy for children with disabilities, see Alfred Katz, *Parents of the Handicapped: Self-Organized Parents' and Relatives' Groups for the Treatment of Ill and Handicapped Children* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas, 1961). Katz quipped, "hardly a month goes by that does not see the creation of a new organization to serve sufferers from a newly discovered or diagnosed disease," 3. See also, Katherine Castles, "Little 'Tardies': Mental Retardation, Race, and Class in American Society, 1945-1965," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006), 92-93.

[6] On group numbers and early growth, see Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 79-83; Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship*, 108. See also, Stanley High, "Forgotten Children No Longer," *Reader's Digest* (Sept. 1960), 121-123.

The effects of this rapid organizing were sundry. As several historians have shown, individual parent groups transformed local landscapes for themselves and their loved ones. Chapters of the NARC and its partners established special-education classes throughout the postwar United States, both public and private, when many public school systems not only lacked such programming, but also, in some instances, actively disallowed it. Local organizations helped to found specialized medical clinics to assist with diagnosis and medical care. They developed and expanded vocational training programs and so-called "sheltered workshops," providing unprecedented economic opportunities for the individuals they served. And these groups successfully pressured both federal and local officials to provide persons with cognitive disabilities with greater access to public resources, as demonstrated in the passage of the 1958 Act to Encourage Expansion of Teaching in the Education of Mentally Retarded Children and the 1963 Mental Retarded Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act.[7]

Yet, perhaps the most notable achievement of these groups was their role in transforming public sentiments surrounding what was known at the time as "mental retardation." Essential to the institutional and legislative formations that these groups helped to erect were the contributions of their members to engineering what one might think of as a new affective infrastructures vis-à-vis these forms of difference. One of the tasks that these groups dedicated themselves to most earnestly was rerouting particular feelings to and away from persons with cognitive disabilities and their parents through novel representations of this population and their kin. These could take the form of a billboard; an ad in a newspaper; a public testimony; a conversation with a neighbor; or a

[7] Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship*, 120-124; Janis Fine, "Catalysts for Change: Parents of the Handicapped, 1930-1960," (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago), 1989.

published memoir. In their accumulation, they worked, as one popular slogan had it, to "make retarded children regarded children."[8]

In what follows, I make an argument consistent with the broader claims of this dissertation. I make the case that parent advocates and their allies depended upon religious idioms and forms in their efforts to change how people felt about cognitive disability. I highlight how religious resources and ideas about religion proved central to both 1) how parents narrated their own transformations (i.e., away from the emotions with which this chapter opened) and 2) to the work of persuading a broader public of the social value of persons with cognitive impairments and their families.

Previous scholarship on this movement has paid minimal attention to religious idioms and forms within it. This seems to be the case because these organizations did not adopt a specific religious identity.[9] As is true in many other settings in the mid-century United States, however, I show that designating these groups as "nonsectarian" did not index a disinterest in thinking about cognitive disability in religious terms or in drawing upon religious resources to do so.[10] In fact, I stress that the avowed ecumenism of these organizations proved central to their efforts to situate cognitive disability within the postwar frameworks of tri-faith collaboration, religiously-inflected optimism, and American civil religion.

---

[8] See, for example, *Not Alone: Indiana Association for Retarded Children Newsletter* (March 1962), 3.
[9] See for example, Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship*, 235, n. 5.
[10] Kevin Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held America to its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); *K. Healon Gaston, Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Leslie Ribovich, "The Production of Judeo-Christianity in New York City Public Schools: Religion, Race, and Moral Education, 1950-1969," PhD diss., (Princeton University, 2017).

There are several important connections between this chapter and the previous one. Most obvious among them is the fact that Dale Evans donated the proceeds of *Angel Unaware* to the NARC, covering more than a quarter of the group's budget in its earliest years.[11] At the local level, organizations used the book both for fundraising and for its promotional power. Evans also often addressed the national group and paid visits to local chapters while she and Rogers toured the country with their rodeo show. Evans and *Angel Unaware* were essential to making this movement possible. Beyond these obvious connections, however, I demonstrate that there were also important continuities between Evans and *Angel Unaware* and how these groups represented persons with cognitive disabilities and their parents' experiences as sites of spiritual inspiration.

Responding to unrecognizability

It has become something of a scholarly truism that disability demands narrative. Identifications of human impairment that are understood to confound or contradict expectations of what it is to be a person in different contexts engender practices of interpretation and storytelling that function to explain such forms of difference and their relationship to social formations. They seem to spur what Clifford Geertz has called "quests for lucidity."[12]

It is useful to think of the NARC and its partners as emerging in the postwar era as venues for voicing discontent with what were existing interpretations of "mental

---

[11] For more on Evans' donations and involvement, see Maxine Garrison, *The Angel Spreads Her Wings: The Inspiration of* Angel Unaware *and the Influence of the Roy Rogers Family in the American Home* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1956), 67.

[12] Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 101. See also, Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 2.

retardation" and as platforms for elaborating new accounts of what such differences might mean. Early members of these groups took themselves to be responding to representations of cognitive disability that regarded these conditions as something like narrative impasses or impossibilities. While early-twentieth century accounts that had equated what was formerly known as "feeblemindedness" with moral degeneracy and hereditary pollution had lost much of their purchase by the postwar era, medical and professional diagnoses of cognitive disability continued to represent such forms of difference as largely incompatible with what it meant to be a person and dominant social forms.

As historians of cognitive disability have documented, the authority of medical and mental deficiency professionals throughout much of American history has rested upon descriptions of cognitive impairment as relatively intractable forms of incapacity.[13] The description of such intractability has helped to underwrite the paired projects of social containment in large state-sponsored institutions and of research into the causes and possible cure of these perceived deficiencies. The idea that little to nothing could be done for this population in society has consistently worked to produce the felt need for the experts who would manage and eliminate such forms of difference.

An example of this relationship between posited intractability and professional authority appeared in a 1945 feature story in the *Saturday Evening Post*.[14] The article offered a profile of the research efforts into the origins and possible treatment of

---

[13] See, for example, James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Sarah Rose, *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s-1930s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

[14] J.C. and Helen Furnas, "Ill-finished Children," The Saturday Evening Post , December 29, 1945, 17.

"mongolism" at a large residential school in Wrentham, Massachusetts.[15] The authors of the article, the journalists J.C. and Helen Furnas, presented readers with an especially dire portrait of this condition. Contrasting "mongolism" with other kinds of physical impairment, the authors wrote, "infantile paralysis [polio], even when it cripples, need not result in *human uselessness*, whereas the Mongoloid baby has *no chance whatever of becoming a recognizable human being*."[16] Such an assessment helped to lend urgency to the efforts of researchers at Wrentham. If nothing could be done to make such persons "recognizable," resources must be funneled toward the professionals who might make such conditions impossible.

The members of the NARC and AHRC mobilized to contest these sorts of claims, claims that undergirded the belief that parents of children with cognitive disabilities ought to institutionalize their children and forget about them, as discussed in the previous chapter. These parents made it their task to challenge the widespread assertion that "nothing could be done" for their loved ones and to make the case for the recognition of their children—as well as themselves—within broader frames of human being.[17]

One way to do so was to directly confront claims about this population's perceived *uselessness* by showing how persons labeled accordingly might benefit from educational and other resources. The NARC and its partners did plenty of this, highlighting the success of vocational training programs and new pedagogical

[15] For more on this category and its history, see chapter 1.
[16] J.C. and Helen Furnas, "Ill-finished Children," 17.
[17] This phrase—"nothing can be done"—was common shorthand for what members of these groups took to be debilitating social attitudes. See, for example, "Reasons Why Parents Organized," Parallels in Time: A History of Developmental Disabilities," http://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels/five/5a/6.html, accessed December 12, 2019

techniques.[18] However, these groups seemed to dedicate equal or even greater energy to the task of situating persons with cognitive disabilities within wider narrative frameworks that helped to tie their lives and their stories to those of a general public. Within these frameworks, the concern was less with what this population could, in fact, do, and more with what such persons might tell American audiences about themselves.

"Out of the backrooms of intolerance"

The early members of the NARC and AHRC were keenly aware of their contemporaries' education in what Tracy Fessenden has referred to as the postwar era's "well-behaved pluralism."[19] These parent-advocates and their allies registered mid-century Americans' now decades-old inundation with discourses of brotherhood and broadmindedness that both demanded and supposedly demonstrated the United States' ability to transcend the divisive forces of social difference and discrimination. As Kevin Schultz and others have demonstrated, in venues ranging from etiquette manuals to Hollywood films, many many-century Americans worked to elevate tolerance, specifically with respect to religion, to perhaps *the* index of national moral character.[20] The leaders of the NARC and AHRC saw it as essential to their collective endeavors to both embody this unprejudiced spirit and to incorporate persons with cognitive

[18] For examples, see "IQ and Social Tests Improve After 6 Months," *Children Limited* (November-December 1953), 12; "New York Pilot Project Prepares 'Unemployables' For Employment," *Children Limited* (April 1956), 22.
[19] Tracy Fessenden, Religion Around Billie Holiday (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2018), 5.
[20] Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*; Ribovich; "The Production of Judeo-Christianity in New York City Public Schools."

disabilities into the catchment of its promises.[21]

With respect to the former, the efforts of those who founded Indianapolis' first organization of "Parents and Friends of Retarded Children" (what came to be a local chapter of the NARC and the Noble School for Exceptional Children) were largely representative. Initiated by a local rabbi and his Protestant colleague, the group declared its insistence at its founding that its board of directors "be ecumenical in regard to race, religion, or national origin."[22] As was the case with most stock declarations of inclusiveness, the middle category proved most salient for what was for many years the group's exclusively white membership. While they would still lament in the early 1960s the flagrant absence of any African Americans from their board, the group's members pressed ahead with their enactment of the "tri-faith" ideal, regularly enlisting local white Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy to introduce, sanction, and sponsor their activities.[23]

In the pages of the NARC's national newsletter, which was entitled *Children Limited*, readers regularly encountered similar demonstrations of religious cooperation. As the publication began to report on the emergence of various religious education programs throughout the country, editors were sure to include stories that reflected the organization's representation of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.[24] Through these

---

[21] Katherine Castles has offered a similar description of cognitive disability's situation within the rhetorics of what she calls "Cold War liberalism." My focus trains more specifically on the importance of religion to the imagination of what she calls "social harmony and American inclusiveness." See Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 24, 78.
[22] Grace Conway, "History of Noble Industries, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1952-1973," unpublished manuscript, Indiana Historical Society, Library Manuscript Collection, SC 2051, 3.
[23] Ibid.
[24] See, for example, "Jewish Religious Experiment Proves Retardates Can Profit," *Children Limited* (June 1956), 28; "Sodalists Teach Catechism," *Children Limited*, (November-December 1953), 8; "Trainable Can Learn of God's Word," *Children Limited*, (April 1956), 19.

accounts, the leaders of the NARC drew the ligaments of a shared problem, underscoring how cognitive impairment helped to rally distinct communities into a purposeful collective.

However, more important than parents organizations' performances of their ecumenical composition was their ambition to convince a wider American public that predominant approaches to and attitudes surrounding cognitive impairment chafed against the pluralism that was meant to define the United States' distinctive role in the world. The NARC and AHRC's early leaders worked to enfold the population to which they were dedicated within existing visions of a tolerant, progressing nation. One of the ways they did so was by reinforcing particular kinds of historical feeling, specifically those that distinguished groups and persons in the present from the ignorance and feelings of others in imagined pasts. Denigrating the attitudes of some of their contemporaries as out of step with the values and dispositions of the modern moment, these organizations worked to persuade their neighbors and peers to embrace individuals with cognitive impairments as occasions for the expression of their own enlightenment.

At the first meeting of the NARC in 1950, Minnesota Governor Luther Youngdahl lamented to attendees that "the provisions we [i.e., Americans] have made for [this population] are barbaric."[25] In a pamphlet in 1956, the AHRC echoed this sentiment, declaring, "Ideas from unenlightened generations past cause our children to be brutally punished on earth now."[26] One speaker at a local NARC meeting in mid-1950s declared,

---

[25] See Gunnar Dybwad, "[NARC] Farewell Address," October 26, 1963, Disability History Museum, https://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=2233, accessed January 22, 2020.

[26] Program, "Seventh Annual Dinner of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children," May 19, 1956, Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard University, Clemens E. Benda Papers, Association for the Help of Retarded Children, 1953-1958, Box 1, Folder 11.

"Mental retardation is as much a blight on our society as leprosy was at the time of Christ."[27] Condemnations of this sort were invitations to members and to a wider public to imagine themselves as agents of progress, on the right side of history's unfolding. Against them, parent-advocate organizations could surface as beacons of a more just future.[28]

This was, it seems, in many instances, persuasive. In a report on the above-mentioned Indianapolis' organization's establishment of a "special" school, the city's Junior League applauded the organization's efforts as a "proud banner waving gallantly in the wind of discrimination."[29] "As you leave the school," an article in the League's newsletter reported, "you feel that these children are...at last being brought out of the backrooms of intolerance and repulsion and into the open air of knowledge and non-secretiveness."[30] To see such persons, whether virtually or physically, was an opportunity to become a participant in the steady defeat of a certain kind of narrow-mindedness.

While the persistent framing of these organizations' efforts in terms of "enlightenment" often relied upon reference to eras at some remove, ideas about nondiscrimination and progressive tolerance also had important foils in contexts more proximate. For example, many parent activists insisted that the American public must prove its distinction from what one parent-author dubbed the "intolerance of weakness" that characterized Nazi Germany through their concern for and forbearance with persons

---

[27] Lucille Stout, *I Reclaimed My Child*, 60.
[28] As the first president of the AHRC put it, the work of his the members of his organization meant that "despair is giving way to hope [...] and inertia...is disappearing before an enlightened compulsion to plan and work for the retarded." Program, "Seventh Annual Dinner of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children."
[29] Lucille Starks, "Unto the Least of These," *Pen and Inklings* (April 1954), 3, unprocessed archives, Noble Industries, Indianapolis, Indiana.
[30] Ibid.

with cognitive disabilities.[31] Others referred to the looming threat of communism as equally intolerant in its supposed reduction of persons to their "material usefulness."[32] References of this sort helped advocates to position feelings toward and the treatment of persons with cognitive impairments as matters of global-historical import and as means of proving the nation's moral rectitude.

However, it was not simply the case that this population provided American audiences with the opportunity to demonstrate their tolerance, advocates suggested. Rather, parents and their allies invited their neighbors to recognize persons with cognitive impairments as inspirational figures who embodied dimensions of the virtues that purportedly set the United States apart on the world's stage. "Let's dwell today on the subject of what retarded children cannot do," a 1953 editorial in *Children Limited* prompted.[33] "Retarded children cannot discriminate against those of another faith or race," the editorial continued, "They just aren't capable of it."[34] Without feeling obligated to substantiate such a claim, this voice of the NARC prompted the readers of *Children Limited* toward an embrace of this population predicated upon an understanding of intelligence—what such individuals supposedly lacked—as that which, in part, generated prejudice and social discord.

This makes sense if one considers the negative quality or definition of mid-century virtues like tolerance and interfaith cooperation. Although what different parties

---

[31] Dorothy Murray, *This is Steve's Story* (Elgin, Ill: Brethren Publishing House, 1956), 69. Ann Hamill suggests that for the members of the predominately Jewish parent groups at the center of her study in Ohio, references to Nazi violence vis-à-vis persons with disabilities were especially salient as parents worked to define their advocacy and recruit their peers. See Ann Hamill, "Two Moral Universes: The Social Problem of Idiots from 1845 to 1855 and Mentally Retarded Sons and Daughters from 1945 to 1955," PhD diss., (University of Cincinnati, 2008), 294-296.
[32] See Gunnar Dybwad, "[NARC] Farewell Address."
[33] "The Editor Talks Things Over," *Children Limited* (January-February 1953), 3.
[34] Ibid.

meant by these terms and the political projects they signaled varied as widely as their effects, most broadly, such categories identified and assigned value to the inability or refusal to register particular forms of difference. This negativity got one of its clearest articulations in Frank Sinatra's baritone in the 1945 short film *The House I Live In*. Stepping out onto a city street for a cigarette, Sinatra—as Sinatra—is confronted with a group of young boys bullying what viewers are to recognize as a Jewish peer. He intervenes on the latter's behalf and offers a short and punctuated lesson meant to encapsulate a national disavowal of anti-Semitism and associated prejudices. "Look fellas," he clarifies, "religion makes no difference. Except maybe to a Nazi or somebody stupid."[35]

In their efforts to represent the so-called "retarded child," the leaders of organizations like the NARC encouraged audiences to draw inspiration from this population. There was limited intelligence and there was *moral* stupidity, they suggested, and those associated with the former might serve to distinguish and to shame the latter. Such constructions rendered this population's supposed lack as a positive value, one that might also be described in terms of love. In a letter in a February 1957 issue of *Children Limited*, one parent explained that "the retarded child...teaches us that [brotherhood] is the most important thing in the world."[36] She continued,

> Somehow I have the feeling that all the problems of the world, and all of the problems close to us, would solve themselves, if instead of continually trying to out-shine the 'Joneses,' we could just humble ourselves to be as little children: realizing that the one great need in this world of ours today is love.[37]

In contrast to those who would refuse resources for individuals like her child, this author

[35] *The House I Live In*, dir. Mervyn LeRoy, Frank Ross Productions, 1945, qtd. in Fessenden, *Religion Around Billie Holiday*, 161.
[36] C.H. Snow, "Letters," *Children Limited* (February 1957), 25.
[37] Ibid.

recommended such persons as emblems of a socially cohesive, almost salvific power.

Such associations also helped express and address broader anxieties about contemporary politics, those that linked the era's aspirations with the threats engendered by the technological advancements of contemporary warfare. The above-quoted parent continued, after having underscored her understanding of how the "retarded child" directed others' attention and intentions toward love: "The more we develop the intelligentsia of the world...without considering the brotherhood of man...the closer we come to enabling ourselves to wipe all living organisms completely off the face of the earth. Quite an accomplishment for smart people, don't you think?,"[38]

This mother penned her letter in response to an article published earlier that same year in *This Week* magazine that argued that the United States could not afford to divert social resources to "weak" populations, but rather, given its precarious position in global affairs, must reserve its investments for the "intellectually gifted person." In order to counter this claim, this mother marshaled an attack on intelligence as an overrated value in the absence of moral direction, positing the "retarded child" as a model for a gentler, kinder diplomacy. She went on to imagine global leaders assuming the dispositions the author attributed to children with cognitive impairments, writing: "I wonder how our President Eisenhower would feel if Mr. Kruschev would come to the United States and greet him with 'I like you Uncle (and mean it.)"[39]

Through representations of this sort, the leaders and members of organizations like the NARC and AHRC challenged representations of persons with cognitive disabilities as impediments to social flourishing by recasting them within the dramas of

[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

American life as both something like moral mnemonics—figures who, by virtue of their vulnerabilities might orient Americans toward affection and peace—and, at the same time, as unique embodiments of those same values. The above-quoted editorial about what "retarded children cannot do" concluded by questioning regnant assumptions about society's moral and existential direction. The authors wrote of persons with cognitive disabilities, "[T]hey cannot wage wars. They cannot ponder the wonders of nuclear fission nor the employment of the atomic bomb...did you say backward children? Sometimes we wonder…"[40] Invoking what had formerly been a label for this population ("backward children"), the author held up such individuals' difference as an opportunity for Americans to be pointed forward, away from their shortcomings and various existential threats on the horizon.

Mountain moving: narrating parent experience

While the above-discussed efforts helped to situate the individual with a cognitive impairment within broader visions of tolerance and moral identity, another function of the NARC and AHRC was to cultivate greater social recognition *for the parents* of persons with cognitive impairments. Part of what was so devastating about finding out that one's child had a cognitive disability was the sense that this somehow invalidated one's identity as a parent.[41] These groups had an important role to play, then, in providing social footing for their members, in helping to change feelings that were associated not

[40] "The Editor Talks Things Over," *Children Limited* (January-February 1953), 3, ellipsis in original.

[41] Edith Gramm, one of the earliest national leaders of the NARC described her own experience of this sense of disqualification upon learning of her son's diagnosis in the following terms: "I am not of the elect. There is something important at which I have failed." See Edith Gramm, "Peter Beautiful: The Story of An Enchanted Child," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 56 (Oct. 1951), 273, qtd. in Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 99.

only with "mental retardation" but also with the identities of parents of children labeled accordingly.

One of the primary ways in which these organizations did so was by helping to consolidate and communicate narratives about parenting a child with a cognitive disability. These narratives helped to render members' experiences into something with which a broader public might engage, transforming their subjects from objects of pity or shame into persons with whom audiences might identify and whom they might admire. A closer look at a prominent example will help to bring the functions and structure of these accounts into clearer relief.

The May issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1955 featured a profile of Dorothea Forester, the founder of what came to be Knoxville, Tennessee's chapter of the NARC.[42] The article began, as almost every story of its kind did, with the event of diagnosis.

"Doctor, is he all right?," Forester and her husband, Charles, asked about their second child, "Chucky," not long before his first birthday. After some initial tests, the feared answer came. Readers were told, "The doctor explained…He would not walk until he was four or five. His speech would be similarly late. As an adult, no more could be expected from him than from a two year old…[He would be] a complete dependent."[43] Consistent with other parents' accounts, doctors advised Forester and her husband to institutionalize their son, but, upon visiting one of the state's large custodial institutions, Forester found herself unwilling to consign her offspring to such a fate, describing what she observed there as "the worst of human degradation."[44] The article tells readers that Forester's anguish consequently deepened, leading her to consume a bottle of sleeping

[42] Flora Rheta Schreiber, "A Retarded Child's Mother," *Cosmopolitan* (May 1955): 58-61.
[43] Ibid., 59.
[44] Ibid.

pills one afternoon while her husband was at work. Later finding her unconscious on the floor, her husband rushed her to the hospital where medical staff successfully revived her. And it was there, readers were told, that everything changed.[45]

In her convalescence, an anonymous friend delivered to Forester a small bracelet adorned with what the *Cosmopolitan* article described as "the amulet of faith": "a little round glass ball containing a mustard seed," accompanied by a verse from the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew which read: "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed…nothing shall be impossible to you."[46] Forester requested a bible from her attending nurse and, as the article explained, she eagerly searched for the rest of this passage: "Verily I say to you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you."[47] Forester explained that it was through this encounter that she felt a "new vigor," whereby she became "determined to do something for her child."[48] The author of the article, Flora Schreiber, put it this way, "If Knoxville and Tennessee made no place for Chucky and children like him, it was clearly up to her to make that place." And so she did.[49]

Consuming as much information as she could about parents in similar situations, Forester became convinced, contrary to the prognoses of her physicians, that "[her son] and children like him could be trained to become happy members of their families and communities."[50] She subsequently set about organizing fellow parents of children with

---

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 60.

cognitive disabilities in Tennessee and, by 1953, she had established a local parent-advocate group and was elected as its president. She then secured an audience with the city's mayor, George Dempster, whom she persuaded to help establish the state's first public school for children with cognitive disabilities and initiated an audit of local custodial institutions, including the one she first visited upon learning of her son's diagnosis.

As if to clarify that Forester's public roles and ambitions did not distract from her commitments as a mother, the article also relayed how her determination helped to unlock potentials in her son that doctors and others had originally ruled out with their dire prognoses. Readers were assured that "Chucky is progressing"; that his IQ had been raised considerably; that "he is [now] expected to finish the fifth or sixth grade; and, most importantly, that "he will be able to earn his living doing routine factory and farm jobs."[51] To summarize these accomplishments and others, the article returned at its conclusion to the gospel verse which Forester cited as the spark of her personal transformation: "Mountains have been moved by Mrs. Forester's faith and determination," Schreiber wrote.[52] It seemed this woman had made the impossible possible.

While Forester's story, as relayed to *Cosmopolitan*, was certainly unique, many of its elements reflected a broader set of conventions and convictions that organizations like the NARC and AHRC helped to circulate. These groups not only promoted public accounts like Forester's, they actively provided their members with scripts for interpreting and describing their own experiences—for themselves and for other

[51] Ibid., 61.
[52] Ibid.

audiences.

The most explicit example of how they did so can be found in a text published by the NARC entitled "The Three Stages."[53] Penned in 1950 by Dan Boyd, a member of a local New Jersey parents' group, this text outlined a basic course for interpreting and narrating parents' experiences. The first of the three stages the text's title named consisted in what Boyd called "disappointment and disillusionment," examples of which appear at the outset of this chapter. Like Kahn, Pendler, and Forester, Boyd described his own experience of what he called "the awful moment of disclosure" when he learned of his daughter's diagnosis. This discovery led to his becoming overwhelmed with "queer, hysterical thoughts": "what would people think—how could I face them—what would I say?—what did the future hold?—how could I go on living?"[54] Here, the parent, like Pendler at the subway tracks, stands before a frightening precipice.

This first stage, Boyd explained was followed by one in which the parent becomes consumed with more practical questions about what to do with one's child. This stage might be recognized in Forester's account when she first endeavored to find institutional placement for her son. At this juncture, according to Boyd, parents scramble in a terrain unfamiliar to them.

The final stage consisted in what Boyd depicted as the discovery of a broader sense of divine purpose superintending one's life. For Boyd, like Forester, this stage was occasioned through his encounter with a bible, what he called "one of the oldest of

---

[53] Dan Boyd, "The Three Stages in the Growth of the Parent of a Mentally Retarded Child," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 55 (1950-51): 608-611. This text circulated more widely as a pamphlet published by the National Association for Retarded Children and also in mimeograph form. See, for example, https://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels2/pdf/70s/71/71-TTT-DB.pdf, accessed January 10, 2020.
[54] Boyd, "The Three Stages," 608.

books."[55] He described himself as rifling through its pages in search of a "philosophy of life."[56] Reciting verses that seemed to emphasize "man's" vulnerability and God's sovereignty over the world ("Behold, thou hast made my days as a hand-breadth"), Boyd recounted how he found said philosophy in the thought that his life and his daughter's could not "drift beyond [God's] love and care."[57] This sense of divine oversight and intention—Boyd also stressed the importance of believing that God created his daughter—empowered him to regard his daughter's life as an opportunity to work on her behalf and for the sake of others like her.

Some of the other most popular narratives written by the parents of children with cognitive disabilities in this period shared the Protestant ethos of Boyd's and Forester's stories, with much weight resting on the power of textual encounter. In Lucille Stout's memoir, *I Reclaimed My Child*, for example, it was her engagement with the writings of the celebrity preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick—and what she represented as a semi-mystical experience in church with an "unseen Guide"—that persuaded her that her child was a divinely ordained "blessing."[58] In Stout's case, this realization enabled her to "accept" her child, leading her to withdraw her daughter from a residential institution into

---

[55] Ibid., 610. Other scholarly mentions of this text note Boyd's suggestion that parents' experiences ought to translate toward helping others, but do not discuss the ways in which he framed both his own and others' experiences in terms of spiritual discovery. See Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," 115-116; Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 167-168.

[56] Boyd, "The Three Stages," 610.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Lucille Stout, *I Reclaimed My Child: The Story of a Family into which a Retarded Child was Born* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1959), 49; 62-63. Note how Stout's description of an "unseen Guide" mirrored Dale Evans' description, noted in the previous chapter, of her encounter with an "unseen Presence." Fosdick represented a particular corner in the landscape of popular religion in the middle of the twentieth century. Unlike Norman Vincent Peale (see Chapter 1), his pastoral guidance was aligned explicitly with liberal Protestantism and tri-faith projects, built from his formidable pulpit at Manhattan's Riverside Church. For more on Fosdick, see Matthew Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 92-100.

which she had been placed. She then also became a leader in her local chapter of the NARC.[59]

However, Boyd was careful to clarify that he did not regard this last stage as denominationally or religiously specific. Rather, he insisted that it might apply to anyone who subscribed to what he took for granted as the beliefs of the tri-faith American. With a quick sweep, he introduced this third stage in the following terms: "Whatever our several religious tenets may be, we all believe in God, an omnipotent Being, all-powerful and supreme. And we all have some belief in a life after this one." And yet, in addition to Boyd's quick and supposedly capacious credo, he also posited another—perhaps more important—common ground that he hoped his reader would agree to, one that was especially essential to the experience and representation of parenting a child with a cognitive disability.

As Boyd represented it, the hinge to the third stage was the recognition that: "It all depends upon our thinking; upon whether we think that all is lost, or whether we think that a great opportunity lies before us."[60] Although Boyd called upon Shakespeare rather than Norman Vincent Peale to reinforce this point ("For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."), such an insistence easily fit within broader postwar frameworks of confidence in the effects of attitudinal adjustment as discussed in the

[59] It should be noted that while Stout's story featured the dramatic rejection of the choice to institutionalize one's child, organizations like the NARC and AHRC were deliberately flexible when it came to the question of institutionalization. Although many members chose not to place their children in institutions, at least during childhood, some defended such choices and regarded them as compatible with working for better services and resources for this population. Occasionally, this led to conflict between members, especially when the parents of children in institutions felt condemned by their peers. See, for example, Mrs. Malgert Cohen, "Letters," *Children Limited* (February 1957), 17. See also Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," 251-254.
[60] Boyd, "The Three Stages," 611.

previous chapter.[61]

It was along these lines that a wider range of members of the NARC and AHRC might also understand and describe their stories. Joseph Weingold, one of the first directors of the AHRC, described the identity of members of the parents' movement as those who had "cast off despair as an unworthy garment."[62] Formulations of this sort helped to reinforce an understanding of the members of these groups as people who embodied the life-altering potential of optimism—as icons of at least a certain kind of positive thinking.

In this way, members of these groups were encouraged to outfit themselves in ways that comported with a broader public's appetite for what Stephen Knadler has referred to as "enhancement narratives."[63] The NARC and AHRC provided settings and techniques for representing and understanding one's identity as the parent of a child with a cognitive disability in ways that others might regard as inspiring and motivating with respect to their own ambitions for self-improvement and happiness. The lives of such parents might surface, accordingly, as stories of—and media for—what I described in the introduction to this dissertation as *spiritual rehabilitation*. They might serve as examples of personal fortitude and transformation. While stories of this sort shared much in common with the representation of Dale Evans' experiences in *Angel Unaware*, the NARC and AHRC provided a framework for them that was not tied to her book's supernatural claims or larger-than-life setting of Evans' account.

---

[61] Ibid.
[62] Joseph Weingold, "From One Father," *Children Limited* (October 1956), 8
[63] Stephen Knadler, "Exceptional Minds, Unstated Exceptions: Intellectual Disability and Postwar Racial Liberalism in African American 'White Life' Novels," Studies in American Fiction 43.2 (2016): 231-257, 233.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted some of the principle ways parents' organizations worked to change public feelings about persons with cognitive disabilities and their kin. Previous scholars have noted the "tremendous impact" of parents' choosing to "com[e] out" and disclose their experiences to wider audiences vis-à-vis the growth and success of the parents' movement.[64] However, part of what this chapter has insisted upon is the fact that the uptake of these accounts—and, by extension, the success of this movement—depended upon the compatibility between these narratives and other stories mid-century Americans were already invested in telling themselves. I've argued here that some of the most important ways that organizations like the NARC and AHRC secured such compatibility was by emplacing persons with cognitive disabilities and their families within the plots and promises of mid-century popular religion and pluralism and by embracing them as resources for distinguishing between the mundane and the spiritual, between this world's ills and the values and power that transcend it. By documenting invocations of persons with disabilities as irenic symbols as well as the means by which these groups scripted parent experience, I have offered new resources for appraising how these groups brought their members and their children, as it was often put, "out of the shadows."[65]

[64] Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship*, 109.
[65] See, for example, Gerald Astor, "Out of the Shadows," *Look Magazine*, February 10, 1953, 21.

Chapter 3 | Imagining Exceptional Selves: Cognitive Disability and American Catholic Identity

Introduction

At the conclusion of October in 1953, several hundred men, women, and children were gathered alongside a rural stretch of Route 3 linking Boston and Cape Cod in Massachusetts. The crowd had assembled to celebrate the dedication of the Portiuncula Chapel, a fastidiously built replica of the small Italian structure in which St. Francis of Assisi was remembered to have received his vocation and founded his religious order in the early thirteenth century. Consisting of 90 tons of pink Carrara marble, shipped, as the American Catholic press eagerly reported, from the same quarry out of which the original Italian structure was built, this "true reproduction" was erected to serve as a gleaming symbol of a spiritually thriving postwar American Catholicism and a most prominent jewel in the crown of Boston's ambitious Archbishop Richard Cushing.[1]

The town of Hanover, in which the shrine was placed, might have seemed a strange choice for this highly anticipated project. One might have thought, for example, somewhere closer to the city would have suited better. Yet, for the informed, or, as many would learn, the placement of this edifice was to be as significant as the structure itself and the materials from which it was crafted.

Archbishop Cushing had insisted that the shrine be built—and, privately, that he later be buried beneath it—on the campus of St. Coletta-By-the-Sea. St. Coletta's was a recently established residential school for "exceptional children," operated by the Congregation of the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi, that had, along

[1] For examples of press coverage surrounding the chapel, see "Stone Arrives for Use in Portiuncula Chapel Replica in Bay State," *The Catholic Advance* (Wichita, Kansas), July 3, 1953, 7; "Abp. Cushing Celebrates Feast of Portiuncula," *Daily Boston Globe*, August 3, 1956, 4.

with its sibling institutions in the West and Midwest, recently garnered national attention for its leadership in training children and adults with cognitive impairments. Cushing had for several years positioned himself as a champion of this population, often lauding what he dubbed the "*exceptional* way in which [such persons] manifest the wonder and mercy of God."[2]

During the dedication ceremonies in Hanover, Cushing, alongside the school's faculty, endeavored to make the "wonder and mercy" supposedly manifested by St. Coletta's students visible. Bearing flowers and processing in white satin dresses and in suits, the school's students helped to stage this structure's sacredness, as they would for countless feast days and special masses in the years ahead.[3] These performances encouraged attendees and more distant audiences to marvel at the ritual proficiency of persons often and otherwise described in terms of "social incompetence." It was, in many ways, this new shrine's proximity to these students' lives—defined by Cushing and their teachers as "exceptionally close to god"—that invested it with distinctive power as a site of presence, devotion, and sacrifice.[4]

This scene of congregating and this chapel provide a point of departure for this chapter, which explores the various ways in which cognitive disability figured in the imaginations of many mid-century Roman Catholics in the United States. Looking at how

---

[2] Richard Cushing, "The Exceptional Child," pamphlet (c. 1954), St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children, Cardinal Cushing Center archives, unprocessed.

[3] See, for example, "Portiuncula Chapel," *The St. Louis Register*, August 13, 1954, 9, which reported the attendance of over 10,000 visitors over the course of a two-day period in the summer of 1954. Visitors were able to obtain what was known as the Portiuncula indulgence for their attendance, special merit that commemorated the dedication of the original basilica. As noted in previous chapters, "social incompetence" was one of the most basic—and generic—ways in which professionals defined "mental deficiency." See, for example, Israel Zwerling, "Initial Counseling of Parents with Mentally Retarded Children," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 44 (1954), 469.

[4] "Days of Blessings," *Boston Pilot*, August 7, 1954, 8.

parents, clergy, educators, and institutional leaders engaged these forms of difference, it explores how their efforts invited and admonished Catholic audiences to incorporate the so-called "exceptional" into their social and devotional worlds, as a group of persons and as a potent set of symbols.

These invitations could take a variety of forms. They might look like building a hub of Catholic ritual life on the campus of a residential school, as in the case of the Portiuncula Chapel, but they might also appear as an Advent wreath hung in one's home, made by "exceptional" participants in a religious education program. They might appear as a literal invitation to a play performed by students with cognitive impairments. They might also surface in the Catholic press' eager coverage of first communion programs and educational initiatives dedicated to the oft-dubbed "least of these." In these and other instances, the message conveyed was that persons with cognitive disabilities were salient touchstones in relation to which mid-century Catholics ought to orient their lives.[5]

I argue in what follows that this salience and the eagerness with which many mid-century Catholics turned to cognitive disability were consequences of the utility of these forms of difference for marking and negotiating American Catholic identity in the postwar era. It has become commonplace within the historiography of US Catholicism to note that the postwar era marked a distinctive moment for many Catholic communities that had previously found themselves at the margins of an imagined American mainstream. For Irish, Italian, and other "ethnic" Catholics of European descent, participation in the war proved to be "powerfully integrative," as Leslie Tentler

[5] On Christmas wreaths, see Claire Leeds, "For a More Reverent Season," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 29, 1959, 7. See also John O'Connor, "Nativity Relived—By 'Least of These'," *The Monitor*, December 18, 1953.

Woodcock has recently described it.[6] The war's many theaters "pried open the door to whiteness" for these groups, a door that then swung open thanks to a host of exclusionary privileges, enabling them—in John Seitz's words—to "move en masse into the middle class."[7]

These changes were fraught, however. Scholars note that they yielded a novel set of anxieties about what was being offered in exchange for newfound economic opportunity and the accepting regard of Protestant neighbors. As Seitz puts it, the promise of inclusion "raise[d] concerns about the possibility of the loss of unique Catholic forms."[8] Would affluence, suburban living, and the other promises of the mainstream entail the dissolution of communities' coherence and the "dense ritual worlds" that knit them together?[9] What was on offer and what was at risk?

I hope to illustrate that persons with cognitive impairments provided generative resources for inhabiting and perhaps taking some of the edge off of these worries. Concern for this population provided Catholic leaders and institutions with an increasingly prominent arena in which to demonstrate their commitment and contributions to the nation's well being. These were yet another set of "powerfully integrative" occasions. What's more, this arena, against the backdrop of the Cold War, enabled Catholics to position themselves as essential to the United States' moral integrity and superiority on the world's stage. And yet, while these opportunities enabled the

---

[6] Leslie Tentler Woodcock, *American Catholics: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 266.
[7] John Seitz, "Altars of Ammo: Catholic Materiality and the Visual Culture of World War II," *Material Religion* 15.4 (2019): 401-432, 405; 404.
[8] Ibid., 404.
[9] Ibid. Of course this was another version of a problematic defined in previous generations under and against the banner of "Americanism." On scholarly efforts to both expand and get beyond this framework, see *Roman Catholicism in the United States: A Thematic History*, eds. Margarent McGuinness and James Fisher (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

demonstration that Catholics had, as it is often put, "come of age" within the American family, engagements with cognitive disability also paved outlets for expressing anxieties about the pressures and privileges that often accompanied social ascent and validation.[10] These anxieties were often linked to desires for selves and experiences defined against worldly aspiration and agency, those that registered within existing Catholic devotional grammars of weakness and resignation. As we have seen in other instances, here, too, the "exceptional child" and her presumed asynchrony with the social emerged as both a sign of and means to what the anthropologist Joel Robbins has called "disjunction with the world."[11]

Focussing upon Catholic discourse proves useful for several reasons. For one, Catholics played a prominent role in public discussions of cognitive disability in the postwar era, a fact that has gone largely unmentioned in existing scholarship. For many, institutions like the St. Coletta schools served as a kind of lodestar for progressive treatment of this population. When groups of parents like those who organized Indianapolis' Noble School (mentioned in the previous chapter) looked for models upon which to base their efforts, St. Coletta's was often their first stop.[12] Protestant denominations looked to Catholics for guidance and with envy as they sought to establish

---

[10] On American Catholics and notions of maturation, see Robert Orsi, "The Infant of Prague's Nightie: The Devotional Origins of Contemporary Catholic Memory," *US Catholic Historian* 21.2 (Spring 2003), 1-18. See also *Catholics and the American Century: Recasting Narratives of U.S. History,* eds. R. Scott Appleby and Kathleen Sprows Cummings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Colleen McDannell, *The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); and Catherine Osborne, *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow: Building Churches for the Future, 1925-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[11] Joel Robbins, "Afterword: On Limits, Ruptures, Meaning, and Meaninglessness," in *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*, eds. Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson (London: Berghahn Books, 2006), 215.

[12] Grace Conway, "History of Noble Centers, Inc," unpublished manuscript, Indiana Historical Society, SC 2051, 4.

their own programs for the "exceptional." "[In] this field where parents need all the help the church can give them," one Methodist layman wrote to the church's General Secretary of Hospitals and Homes in 1960, "we are lagging behind the Catholics."[13] Even before Catholics could look to President Kennedy in the White House as a representative leader on this issue, public officials were citing Catholic influence to assert the urgency of and their investment in "mental retardation."[14] Paying closer attention to what Catholics were doing and saying in this moment, therefore, helps to provide a more robust picture of the forces that spurred this moment of cultural transformation.

More than this, however, focussed attention upon Catholic engagement with cognitive disability provides a productive lens through which to address some of this dissertation's animating questions about human difference, vulnerability, and the "habits of valuation" common to a secular age.[15] In Catholics' investments in this population, we encounter afresh questions about how these forms of difference might be appraised

---

[13] Letter, Hassal Sullivan to Olin Oeschger, April 20, 1960 in 2081-6-7:11 Mentally Retarded General File—Correspondence, 1959-1967 (1973-020), Health and Welfare, United Methodist Archives, Drew University. Shortly after this, the denomination's General Conference established a committee dedicated to "mental retardation" and dispatched its members to Catholic institutions in the Midwest: St. Coletta's of Wisconsin and Misericordia in Chicago, run by the Sisters of Mercy. See Mentally Retarded General File 2080-4-5 04 (1963), Health and Welfare, United Methodist Archives, Drew University.

[14] See, for example, "Congressman Says Example of Archbishop Was One of Things That Stimulated His Own Interest In Retarded Children," National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service, March 28, 1955, 2. In existing scholarship on changing federal policy surrounding cognitive disability and the Kennedys in the 1960s, the family's Catholicism is mentioned passingly as an animating factor in their interest in this issue, one that is mostly subordinated to the fact that President Kennedy's sister, Rosemary, was diagnosed with cognitive impairments and lived, for much of her adult life, at St. Coletta's of Wisconsin. One way to describe this chapter's contributions is that it illuminates a much larger set of Catholic resources, institutional and discursive, that preceded the changes effected by the Kennedy administration and family in the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, it highlights the wider world of Catholic engagemetns with cognitive disability in which the Kennedy family participated in an earlier era. See Edward Shorter, *The Kennedy Family and the Story of Mental Retardation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

[15] I've borrowed the phrase in quotations from Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 142.

within the modern United States. In what ways might vulnerability be asserted as a good? And whom might such assertions serve?

I explore these questions through a range of sources. As I've begun to illustrate, Catholic discourse concerning cognitive impairment took shape in many venues during this period. The following discussion is grounded in the archives of two particularly influential religious orders but extends beyond them to examine materials that include: theses published at Catholic institutions of higher education; discussions of the "exceptional" in Catholic periodicals; advice manuals and catechetical materials published by clergy; and the testimonies of Catholic parents of children with cognitive impairments. A narrower focus on particular subsets of these sources would bring different sorts of arguments to the fore. An account that focused on the writings and actions of clergy might examine in greater depth how investments in this population subtended particular performances of pious masculinity. An account centered more deliberately around the work of women religious might do more to situate their labors within existing stories of professionalization and negotiations of the "new" and "old."[16] My goal, however, is to look across these materials in order to document what they shared in common in their interest in and attention to the "exceptional."

"*One of the Glories of America"*

When Catholic leaders joined their contemporaries in announcing a novel historical juncture vis-à-vis the treatment of persons with cognitive disabilities, it almost

[16] Kathleen Sprows Cummings, *New Women of the Old Faith:Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Brian Titley, *Into Service and Servitutde: How American Girls Became Nuns, 1945-1965* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017).

went without saying that what was often referred to as "the dawn of a new day" for this population could set Catholics in a flattering light.[17] The fact that such persons had become, as one Catholic leader put it, "the center of nationwide interest" provided a poignant opportunity for Catholics to prove their importance to the nation's improvement and moral integrity.[18]

As increasing numbers of Americans grew discontent with existing facilities and educational opportunities for persons with cognitive impairments, many Catholic leaders and institutions were well prepared to mobilize resources in response to these calls for change. While several Catholic residential schools had existed prior to the postwar era, their number multiplied in the 1950s, with new schools and facilities sprouting up across the United States.[19] These institutions often partnered with neighboring Catholic colleges

---

[17] For example, see Maxine Garrison, *An Angel Spreads Her Wings* (Westwood ,NJ: Fleming Revell, 1954), 159.

[18] Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, 159.

[19] Educational and residential institutions established in the United States in the fifteen years that followed WWII for this population included: The Misericordia Home (Chicago, established 1951); St. Mary's Training Scool (Louisiana, established 1954); St Mary's Special School for Exceptional Children (St Louis, established 1952); St. Louis School (Detroit, established 1961); The Benedictine School for Exceptional Children (Maryland, established 1959); St. Coletta (Massachusets, establshed 1947); Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. School for Exceptional Children (Chicago, established 1949); Our Lady of Providence School (Detroit, established 1957); St. Martin Home (Ohio, established 1949); St. Anthony School for Exceptional Children (Pennsylvania, established 1953); Holy Child School, (Oklahoma, estalibhsed 1957); St. Mary of Providence Institute (Pennsylvania, established 1948); St. Joseph School for Exceptional Children (New York, established 1955); St. Mary Child Center (Indianapolis, established 1956); Sacred Heart Educational Center (Connecticut, established 1958); Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Institute (Washington, DC, estalibshed 1955); Our Lady's Day School (Atlanta, estalibshed 1957); St. Maurice Day School (Washington, DC, established 1959); Bishop Donne School (Peoria, established 1957); Marian Day School (Indiana, established 1958); Good Counsel School (Kentucky, established 1955); Christ Child School for Exceptional Child (Minnesota, estalibshed 1948); Marillac School for Special Education (Kansas City, established 1958); Cantalician Center for Children (Buffalo, established 1956); School of the Holy Childhood (Rochester, established 1951); Our Lady of Confidence (Philadelphia, established 1954); St. Barbara Day School (Philadelphia, established 1953); Mercy Day School (Philadelphia, established 1954); St. Coletta Day School, (Virginia, established 1959); Our Lady of the Holy Souls School for Exceptional Children (Arkansas, established 1958). For more, see *Directory of Catholic Special Facilities and Programs in the United States for Handicapped Children and Adults*, eds. E. Behrman and M.

and universities, like Cardinal Stritch College in Milwaukee, Loyola University of Chicago, and Holy Family College in California, to help train local special educators and social workers (both Catholic and non-Catholic) who served in both public and private contexts. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) also positioned itself as an important clearinghouse for disability professionals when it began, in 1952, hosting annual conferences on training and treating so-called "forgotten ones," bringing together Catholic and non-Catholic professionals from across the country. The church had quickly elaborated a considerable network of resources for, as the slogan went, making "retarded children regarded children."[20]

Within many of these venues, Catholic leaders announced their commitment to and success in transforming persons with cognitive disabilities into "self-respecting individuals," as Frank O'Brien, an official with New York City's Division of Child Welfare put it at the NCEA's meeting in 1953. Their task and talent was in helping to produce "partially, if not fully self-supporting and contributing members of our society" by way of education and vocational training.[21] Catholic educators were proving that the so-called "mentally handicapped child" could be made to "*hold his own*," as another speaker at the 1953 conference put it.[22] And, in this respect, these leaders echoed the calls of their colleagues in organizations like the National Association for Retarded Children to

---

Ann Dolores, fourth edition (Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 1965). See also "Catholics Schools for Retarded Triple in 5 Years," *The Monitor*, August 22, 1958, 5S.

[20] *The Atypical Child, Proceedings of the Second Annual Workshop on Special Education of the Exceptional Child*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954); *The Forgotten Ones: Third Annual Workshop on Special Education of the Exceptional Child* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955).

[21] Frank O'Brien, "The Place of Special Education in Modern Education," in *The Atypical Child*, 10.

[22] Sr. Mary Johnice Flanagan, "The Mentally Retarded Child," in *The Atypical Child*, 47, emphasis added.

cultivate this population's previously ignored potential and to furnish "more acceptable" persons for their families and society.[23]

In newsletters and in promotional materials, institutions like the Archdiocese of Chicago's Lt. Joseph Kennedy Jr. School for Exceptional Children, which was part of the St. Coletta network, eagerly showcased their answers to calls of this nature. Images and reports of students folding laundry, farming, and operating tools and machinery all attested to these institutions'—and, by extension, the church's—success in the work of turning what were sometimes referred to as "social liabilities" into "social assets."[24] These were, like celebratory accounts of training programs in other venues, stories of rehabilitation gone right.[25]

Such successes, however, Catholic leaders hastened to point out, were significant and laudable not only because of what might be glossed as their socio-economic benefits. Like some of the members of the NARC encountered in the previous chapter, Catholic educators and clergy often framed care and concern for this population as a rubric for assessing America's moral righteousness and its alignments with immaterial power.

---

[23] Francine Lamb, "The Establishment of a St. Coletta School for Retarded Boys in the Archdiocese of Chicago," MA thesis, (Loyola University of Chicago, 1952), 51. And, to be clear, there was ample overlap between Catholic organizations and institutions and groups like the NARC.

[24] See, for example, "St. Joseph - Patron of Laborers," *Little Pages*, April 1953, 2-3; "There's Nothing Like the New Laundry," *Little Pages,* October 1952, 3; "Outdoor Work and Play," *Little Pages*, July 1952, 3; "Junior Craftsmen," *St. Louis Register*, May 25, 1956, 10. On transforming "liabilities" into "assets," see Sr. Mary George, "Problems Related to Mental Retardation," speech (c. 1949), Cardinal Cushing Centers archives.

[25] Context, of course, often shaped which aspects of such institutions' work different authors emphasized. For social workers, like Francine Lamb, these sorts of calculations—about liabilities and assets—were especially common. She warned of those who "become *public charges*, unless they have had the opportunity to attend and benefit by a specialized program of care, training and education especially adapted and geared to their level, interests, and needs." She explained, "If mentally retarded children can obtain this specific training during the plastic years of childhood, a good percentage of them can be *returned to society*." Lamb, "The Establishment of a St. Coletta School for Retarded Boys in the Archdiocese of Chicago," 6; 9, emphasis added.

In her monograph, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, Sr. Mary Theodore, superintendent of St. Coletta's of Wisconsin, asserted, "One of the glories of America today is the rising interest in aiding children with mental retardation."[26] Sr. Miriam Auxilium, the founder of Helpers of the Holy Innocents, a series of religious education programs and homes for the "exceptional" along the West Coast, often made similar claims, while tuning them more precisely to the worries of the Cold War era. "While we worry about Sputnik's [sic] and our national loss of 'face,'" she wrote, "we have reason to be proud, as Americans, of the great national movement to Aid Retarded Children."[27] In these sorts of representations, Catholics could surface as diligent contributors to the nation's probity and its standing in the world.

Leaders like Sr. Auxilium and Sr. Mary Theodore were often sure to attribute this "rising interest" to their and their compatriots' deference to supernatural authority, a move that was consistent with commonplace constructions, especially intense in this period, of America's religious exceptionalism. Sr. Auxilium insisted that this "great national movement" was, what she christened, a "spiritual one." "The religious tenor," she explained, "the unselfish motivation, the real cooperation between members of all faiths...for all Holy Innocents is something one feels as well as sees and hears." She noted that such "spiritual" collaboration—this hallmark of mid-century "brotherhood"—was Americans' "best answer to atheistic communism." Not only were Americans proving their moral superiority in their attention to this population, their commitment to those Sr. Auxilium referred to as "these Little Ones" was also leading a general public "back to our

[26] Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, 5.
[27] "Helpers of the Holy Innocents," brochure (c. 1955), Sisters of the Holy Family Archives, 2.

true American idealism—away from the materialism that is selfish and calculating."[28] There is more to say about this kind of juxtaposition, but, for now, it is worth noting how such an acknowledgment of the possibility of America's failures to live up to its ideals opened space for Catholics to assert their importance as preservers of national conscience—alongside their Protestant and Jewish neighbors.

We see an example stressing the importance of Catholic leadership in this domain in a letter published in the Jesuit magazine *America* by the leader of San Francisco's first parent advocacy organization for children with cognitive impairments, Rosemary French. Responding to news coverage of a proposed 1953 sterilization law aimed at the "mentally unfit" in Hawai'i, French lamented what she referred to as the perduring "dehumanization of our retarded children."[29] She then went on to describe how Catholics' treatment of this population might serve as "proof positive of the Church's stand on their human dignity" and a witness to their neighbors, many of whom had become recently concerned for this population.[30] She explained, "When we really believe that retarded children also are made in God's image, we cannot be satisfied with having them herded into overcrowded, understaffed state institutions."[31] She then recommended Sr. Auxilium's Holy Innocents ministry as a model of Catholic dedication and humanitarianism. While explicit discussions of sterilization were relatively rare in the

[28] Ibid.
[29] Rosemary French, "Letter: Human Sterilization Proposal," *America*, May 2, 1953, clipping, Sisters of the Holy Family archives.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

postwar period, French's suggestion that American Catholics ought to serve as moral compasses for their peers was not uncommon.[32]

This notion of Catholics providing America with conscience was often reinforced through Catholic leaders' penchant for narrating the history of the treatment of cognitive disability. Such narratives connected contemporary efforts to a lineage of holy figures in the tradition who committed themselves to persons analogized to "the mentally retarded." In *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, Sr. Mary Theodore invoked the apostle Paul's admonishment to "comfort those who were weak of mind" as well as St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, as one who, in the third century, "recognized some children who would continue partially little in mind and provided tender care for them."[33] She also mentioned, as did other histories, St. Dymphna, patron saint of mental illness, and the French St. Vincent de Paul's charitable work among the poor as predecessors in this work.

These accounts occasionally featured representations of Protestants as foils to this lineage of compassionate care. Sr. Mary Theodore noted, with reference to the early modern period, "So-called reformers spread the idea that the mentally weak and the demented were possessed by evil spirits," leading to centuries of "superstition" and

---

[32] For more on the history of Catholic engagements with and opposition to sterilization during the first half of the twentieth century, see Sharon Leon, *An Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Talk of sterilization was not very common at the level of what Katherine Castles calls "parent-centered poster child advocacy," upon which I am largely focussing in this dissertation. However, as Castles points out, discussions and practices of sterilization by no means receded in this period when it came to the institutional, carceral treatment of persons with cognitive disabilities. See Katherine Castles, "Little 'Tardies': Mental Retardation, Race, and Class in American Society, 1945-1965," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006).

[33] Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, 161. For a nearly identical historical narrative, see Sr. Mary Elodie Wissuchek, "The Development of the Lt. Joseph Kennedy Jr. School for Exceptional Children," MA thesis, (Cardinal Stritch College, 1965), 9. For a different version, that contrasts "pagan" antiquity with Christian "civilization," see Cushing, "The Exceptional Child," 5-7.

"persecution" in some parts of the world.[34] While this way of narrating the past was likely not intended as too strong a slight vis-à-vis twentieth-century Protestants, it certainly helped reinforce the broader points that Catholics were heirs to a tradition of concern for this population and that, as such, they had important roles to play in joining and encouraging their contemporaries in transforming the treatment of persons with cognitive disabilities in the United States.[35]

It is worth noting that it was not uncommon for non-Catholics to concur with this promoted self-understanding. The 1952 memoir *My Son's Story*, penned by John Frank, a father who identifies himself in the book as a "Jew who long since abadoned the faith," featured a scene in which Frank consults a "Protestant" physician who strongly advises him to place his "severely retarded" son in a Catholic residential school. The doctor explains,

> Catholic medical institutions usually do a very good job...It takes the patience of an angel to care for the mentally defective. These Sisters [who run such institutions] are more likely to have it than anyone else. Your own peace of mind will be greater if your child's care is entrusted to someone who sincerely believes that the spirit of God is in that child, and who regards her own task, not as a job to be got over with but as a duty done in a great cause.[36]

For many Catholic institutions, a better endorsement would be difficult to imagine. Here were their peers—their counterparts in the tri-faith imaginary—offering them pride of place in a matter of great consequence.[37]

---

[34] Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, 159.
[35] The author of a 1948 history of the religious community that operated the St. Coletta schools asserted this proudly humane tradition in these terms, "Holy Mother Church is as concerned for the soul of the mentally retarded child as she is the soul of an Augustine or Thomas Aquinas." Sr. Mary Eunice Hanousek, *A New Assisi: The First Hundred Years of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1849-1949* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1948), 127.
[36] John Frank, *My Son's Story* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1952), 92-93.
[37] This example helps to explain some of the purchase of Catholic leadership when it came to cognitive disability within American culture at this time. This forthrightly gendered endorsement

Expressing ambivalence

Assuming and asserting their place as essential components of the national body in these ways did not preclude the identification of what many mid-century Catholics took to be the deficiencies and dangers of social life in the United States. As others scholars have noted, in this moment that provided unique occasions for some Catholics to posit themselves as quintessentially American, it became important to hold newfound opportunities for social acceptance and success at arm's length.[38] That is, it became important for many Catholics to demonstrate, to themselves and to others, that theirs was an "ambivalent embrace" of the culture in which they'd found new standing for themselves.[39]

This ambivalence could be underscored, as seen above, by way of distinctions between things like America's "true idealism" and "[the] materialism that is selfish and calculating." Such formulations functioned to clarify what it was that American Catholics ought to be signing up for. Many commentators insisted that there was a kind of embrace

---

of the Catholic residential school set it against the state-run institution as that which lacked maternal, feminine care. As more and more Americans grew critical of large, under-funded public institutions for persons with cognitive disabilities, Catholics who ran institutions stepped in as providing a service that was not equivalent to abandoning one's child, but rather that functioned like a kind of surrogate family—a notion that seemed to be intensified by the understanding that women religious did not have children of their own. Frank's memoir ends with his celebration of his choice to enroll his son at St. Rita's Home in the state of New York run by Felician Sisters. He notes with satisfaction, after he and his wife visit him, that, "the Sisters are his 'Mommy' now." To be sure, not all parents whose children lived at such schools would be happy with so direct a substitution, however most agreed that those running these institutions were especially satisfactory surrogates. This consensus is partially evinced by the fact that schools like St. Rita's often had waiting lists that ran hundreds of persons long. Frank, *My Son's Story*, 209.

[38] Seitz, "Altars of Ammo, "

[39] I've borrowed this phrase from Rachel Kranson's discussion of parallel experiences and affects among Jewish Americans. See Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

of American culture that was consistent with Catholic faith and that there were other forms that might compromise it.

The work of representing and appraising the value of persons with cognitive disabilities provided productive occasions for some Catholics to make clarifications along these lines. Take, for example, an article published by the anonymous mother of a "congenitally defective son" in the Catholic magazine *Integrity* in 1947—and reprinted in promotional materials for the St. Coletta schools in the early 1950s.[40] Consistent with the genre of parent testimony encountered in previous chapters, the author of this article described her initial despair upon the discovery of her son's condition and her arrival at the knowledge that he would not develop into the kind of "normal" person she had expected. She then explained how that despair eventually gave way to an appreciation of her child's life as a profound rebuke to what she called "the irreligion and materialism of the world in which he will never move."[41] In announcing this to her readers, this mother invited her peers to recognize her child's—and, by extension, others'—supposed immobility within a particular social geography as an opportunity to highlight their wariness of it.

In his catechetical manual for persons with cognitive disabilities, the priest Thomas Skinner offered similar formulations. He praised those "holy innocents" for the ways in which their "limitations" putatively prevented them from "undue attachment to worldly things."[42] He suggested that this population's "inability to compete with their normal associates" left them "free and unencumbered in their spiritual life and nearness

[40] "St. Coletta School for Exceptional Children," brochure (c. 1950), Cardinal Cushing Centers archives, 43.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Thomas Skinner, *Instructional Manual for First Communion of God's Holy Innocents* (New Hartford, NY: St. John the Evangelist Church, 1959), viii.

to God."[43] Like the mother in *Integrity,* Skinner ascribed to the "exceptional" a detachment from the mundane that could help others to express their circumspection about the forces and priorities that governed it, what appear here as briefly indexed concerns about consumption ("attachment to worldly things") and social striving ("competition with...associates").

Other authors were quite forthright in communicating their sense of fatigue with some of these same forces. One gets the sense of their exhaustion with a postwar life "on the make." In a poem, written by another anonymous mother—one that opened the priest Gerard Breintenbeck's advice book, *For Parents of Retarded Children*—the speaker asks a series of rhetorical questions:

> Is it so tragic to live out one's life,
> Free from the worry of struggle and strife?
> Free from the gnawing of envy and greed?
> Free from the desire to fill every need?
> To show the world we're so big and so smart,
> To spend all our time just playing a part
> For which perhaps we're not even fitted?[44]

These queries structured a juxtaposition between the life of the "free" individual with a cognitive disability and a presumed-to-be "normal" audience. This juxtaposition emphasizes the tragedy, not of being unable to achieve particular things within the domain of the social, but of being overwhelmed by social pressures that inflame one's insecurities and appetite for particular kinds of recognition. Here, the modern individual that the speaker invokes is, to use Skinner's language, *encumbered* by the apparent relentlessness of opportunity—opportunity for new things, for pleasure, for status. This author offers the "exceptional" individual and—we should note—her dubiously imagined

[43] Ibid.
[44] Gerard Breitenbeck, *Confession for the Retarded*, (Liguori, MO: Liguorian-Queen's Work Pamphlets, 1958), 5.

immunity from social injury as a way to name how aspects of social aspiration might start to feel like domination or unfreedom.

Moreover, the poem's speaker also seems to identify how the competitiveness of social life, the felt need to prove oneself in various ways, might compromise an individual's sense of self or integrity. Skinner made a similar kind of juxtaposition when he contrasted persons with cognitive disabilities with "the intellectual striving which leads to so much revolting pride and duplicity."[45] Both cases articulate a worry about the degrading or adulterating effects of the modern life's performative dimensions and demands.

In these constructions, various authors recommended persons with cognitive disabilities to Catholic audiences as resources for affirming their desire not to be corrupted by the "world in which they moved." Insofar as this population was defined in terms of their "inadequate social adjustment" (i.e., their inability to participate in and fulfill normative social roles), they provided Catholics with occasion to reflect upon their own pursuits of what might be glossed as "social adequacy."[46] In admiring "exceptional" individuals' presumed detachment from certain kinds of value, Catholics could articulate their ambivalence about the pursuits of prestige, wealth, and "worldly" goods. Doing so was one way to underscore their movement in and allegiance to yet another world.

Exceptional examples

As Rev. Skinner's remarks above begin to suggest, it was not only such persons' detachment from various dimensions of the social that constituted what might be

[45] Skinner, *Instructional Manual for First Communion of God's Holy Innocents*, vii.
[46] Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, 20.

appreciated about them. Rather, their value, as many mid-century Catholics described it, also consisted in the ways in which their apparent inabilities made them uniquely available to divine power and presence. Along these lines, Catholics who wrote about and advocated for this population encouraged their peers to adopt the "exceptional" as models of devotional subjectivity, upon whom others might rely in working out their own salvation.

One of the reasons for this suggested adoption was this population's usefulness for sketching visions of faith that exceeded the discursive and intellective. An example of this opened a newspaper article that Sr. Auxilium contributed to the Diocese of San Francisco's newspaper *The Monitor* in late August 1958:

> Linda, 8, came into class, her eyes shining, her face glowing. "God made me!," she said to the Sister, who was making her monthly visit. She went to her teacher with the same message and smile—then to one of her classmates. As the Sister who was visiting the class for the Holy Innocents described the scene later, "This was no catechism answer. Linda knew it, not **by** heart, but **in** her heart."[47]

The purpose of Sr. Auxilium's article was to enlist readers in the Bay Area to volunteer to help her and the Sisters of the Holy Family's religious education program for Holy Innocents. This opening scene, in addition to highlighting the success of their efforts, helped to underscore what potential volunteers might gain in return for their willingness to lead classes and drive students to and fro—namely, the opportunity to witness the uniquely unvarnished and emotionally authentic faith that individuals like Linda supposedly embodied.

Others were more explicit in their insistence that their fellow Catholics ought to emulate the faith of persons with cognitive disabilities, which one author admired as

[47] Sr. Miriam Auxilium, "Helping Hands Bring Awareness of God to Holy Innocents," *The Monitor*, August 22, 1958, 4S, emphasis in original.

"open" and "unaffected"—rooted, like, Linda's *in the heart*.[48] In a description of the devotional lives of students at St. Coletta's in Wisconsin, Sr. Mary Theodore wrote:

> The speechless ones who fold hands, bow heads, and bend knees so piously, undoubtedly do not understand the theological implications of even the most elemental Christian truth. Nevertheless, they are devout, they are expressing love for God. This is the practice of religion. And their holy innocence is really something to behold. No wonder we have been charged to follow their example.[49]

Representations of this sort functioned in multiple registers. On the one hand, they were arguments for the recognition of people with cognitive disabilities as potential participants in Catholic sacramental life. In this respect, such assertions were responses to offstage adversaries who might disqualify such persons from faith on account of what was presumed to be their inability to comprehend and affirm matters of belief.[50] However, beyond this, these representations also seemed to suggest that such persons' faith was worthy of admiration precisely because of its distinction from cognition or belief, narrowly defined. Such expressions of religion, many Catholics argued,

---

[48] Joseph Owens, "God's Exceptional Children*," America*, April 26, 1958, 138.
[49] Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child,* 53.
[50] Most Catholics were in agreement that the majority of persons diagnosed with cognitive disabilities existed in a kind of prelapsarian state, as the moniker "holy innocents" suggests. One educator explained the theological anthropology undergirding this conviction succinctly, "If he [i.e., the person with a cognitive disability] will never attain the age of reason, he can never offend God." Some clergy and lay Catholics held that this supposed sinlessness made the participation of such persons in the sacraments, beyond baptism, unnecessary. In some instances, said individuals actively opposed the efforts of organizations like the Helpers for the Holy Innocents. However, it seems that the majority of Catholics held that even though such persons might be recognized as the "most probable saints of God," their holiness still needed cultivation. Descriptions, like Sr. Mary Theodore's, of the piousness of individuals labeled accordingly helped to make the case for the fruitfulness of efforts at ritual inclusion. On the impossibility of "offend[ing] God," see "Dear Parents," Little Pages, January 1952, 3. On the limited opposition to these efforts at ritual inclusion, see Owens, "God's Exceptional Children." Church authorities seemed to recommend lenience when it came to questions of cognitive impairment and inclusion, a lenience that was made possible by earlier efforts in the twentieth century by church leaders to loosen constraints around communion in order to generate greater lay participation. See for example, Francis Connell, "Holy Communion for Mentally Deficient Children," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 121 (September 1954), 199. For a discussion of these broader changes, see Carrie Schultz, "Do This in Memory of Me: American Catholicism and First Communion Customs in the Era of *Quam Singulari*," *American Catholic Studies* 115.2 (2004), 45-66.

represented other, perhaps, especially profound ways of knowing and being in relation to God.

Many Catholics employed images of so-called "exceptional" individuals participating in the ritual life of the church as a means to showcase this kind of exemplary devotion.[51] Catholic newspapers eagerly printed photographs of first communion ceremonies for the "exceptional" and educators and institutional leaders circulated images as a way of suturing broader Catholic audiences to their work and the lives of their students. One picture from St. Coletta of Wisconsin's promotional materials provides a particularly good example of how people might visualize the "holy innocence" that was, as Sr. Mary Theodore put it, "something to behold."

Filling the entirety of the page of an 8 x 11 glossy brochure for the school, the black-and-white photograph features four adolescent boys positioned in front of an outdoor, life-size crucifix on the school's campus. Their arms drape over the top of a wooden kneeler and from each of their hands hangs a rosary. The students' faces vary: one gazes smilingly at the Christ-figure, who occupies a small sliver of the right-hand side of the photograph; another, with furrowed brow, looks downward. Yet, what is most striking about the image is the photographer's choice to have allowed much of the frame to be filled with the rural Wisconsin countryside's empty fields and cloudless sky. More than half of the image is a bright, expansive white. While the image foregrounds the kind of comportment Sr. Mary Theodore named in the above quote—piously bent knees,

[51] See, for example, "Happy with their Shepherd," *St. Louis Register,* April 24, 1953, 1; "'Exceptional Children' Given Christlike Home," *The Pilot*, November 6, 1954, 22; "Little Soldier of Christ," *The Monitor*, April 10, 1959, 1.

bowed heads, and so on—its notable *visual silence* seems to rhyme with the kind of faith she and others imputed to, and admired in, persons like these students.[52]

One educator offered a description of this faith while extending what was meant to be comfort to the parents of students at Chicago's Kennedy School in its newsletter. She noted, "Of all your children, this little angel is most completely doing the Lord's will—without question with full resignation."[53] This author articulated an idea shared with many of her peers, one that associated the kinds of incapacity that defined "mental retardation"—what might surface as "speechless[ness]" or difficulty with comprehension—with the sort of diminished agency that was to define proper reverence for and submission to God for all Catholics. Rev. Skinner offered an analogous formulation in his catechetical manual when he wrote: "Their simplicity makes them most wholehearted in their faith in God."[54] And others admiringly described the authenticity and intensity of such persons' faith in terms of the "*selfless* glory" they rendered to God.[55]

In elaborating admiring portraits of this sort, Catholics who worked with and advocated for persons with cognitive disabilities offered this population as means of stimulating and answering what one contemporary author described as "the modern hunger for a *simplified* form of spirituality."[56] In the mid-century literature of Catholic devotionalism, invocations of simplicity—and the need to become simple—could

---

[52] "St. Coletta," brochure (c. 1950), author's collection.
[53] "Dear Parents," Little Pages, January 1952, 3.
[54] Skinner, *Instructional Manual for First Communion of God's Holy Innocents*, vii.
[55] This phrase appears in a poem that was etched into the wall at the entrance to St. Coletta of Wisconsin's administrative building in the early 1950s. See "Inscription in Entrance," postcard (c. 1950), Cardinal Cushing Centers archives.
[56] Pierre Blanchard, "Introduction," *Spiritual Guide for Our Times* (Pittsburg: Holy Ghost Fathers, 1955), x, emphasis added.

describe both the desire for escape from the modern world's oft-lamented complexity (as discussed in the previous section) as well as an understanding of faith as entailing a kind of profound reduction of the self. Such simplification might be described in different contexts in terms of Christ-like "self-emptying" or the pursuit of a "Mystical passivity" in relation to God—in all cases with emphasis on personal diminishment.[57]

The most common way of articulating this vision of piety as simplification, of course, was with reference to children. As historians of Catholicism in the US have documented, the twentieth century witnessed an intense preoccupation with young persons within the cultures of Catholic devotionalism. At the center of this preoccupation was the suggestion that children provided "*the* model of adult faith"—as Robert Orsi has put it—in their supposed innocence, artlessness, and vulnerability. [58] Under the sign of the gospel warning that the kingdom of heaven would be restricted to those who "become as little children," Catholics encouraged one another to cultivate childlikeness. As a 1953 Christmas-time editorial in *The St. Louis Register* put it, Catholics were to adopt that "characteristic virtue of children...*simplicity*...It was displayed by the Christ Child," the article continued, "and is displayed by every other child until the sophistication of maturity overcomes him."[59]

The figures I have focused on in this chapter presented persons with cognitive disabilities to their fellow Catholics as intensified or purer embodiments of this

---

[57] On "self-emptying," see "'Unless You Become as Little Children,'" *St. Louis Register*, December 25, 1953, 4; On "self-emptying" and/as "mystical passivity," see Blanchard, "Introduction."

[58] Robert Orsi, "Material Children: Making God's Presence Real for Catholic Boys and Girls and for the Adults in Relation to Them," in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious World's People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 81, emphasis added.

[59] "Unless You Become As Little Children," 4.

widespread vision of Catholic subjectivity, calling upon many of the same tropes and injunctions to do so.[60] They encouraged mid-century Catholics to embrace this population, as Sr. Mary Theodore put it, as "truly childlike children," who ought to be incorporated into the broader repertoires of Catholic life as exempla and media for others' relationships with the divine.[61]

Conclusion

It has been my contention that the variety of ways in which mid-century Catholics in the United States represented cognitive disability helped them to process the ways in which they wanted to be both American and Catholic.

In the first section of the chapter, I stressed how broader enthusiasm for investment in the "exceptional" as a social group enabled Catholic leaders to elaborate a role for the church and its members as contributors to the nation's social health and moral rectitude, as not only professionals and institutional leaders but also as a group that understood itself as uniquely attentive to groups identified as vulnerable. In the following section, I demonstrated how constructions of cognitive impairment, defined in terms of distance from many of the obligations of social life, enabled some Catholic advocates to clarify distinctions between the this-worldly and that which transcended it. I show how doing so provided the opportunity to engage worries about dimensions of the new social worlds in which many postwar Catholics were now moving. In the final section, I've emphasized how representations of the "exceptional" helped to describe not only some of

[60] The abovementioned gospel verse was regularly used in representations of persons with cognitive impairments as a means to cultivate others' moral investment in this population. See for example, "Of Such is the Kingdom of Heaven," *Little Pages*, July 1951, 1; "A Lost Pupil, A Gained Intercessor," *Little Pages*, April 1954, 4.
[61] Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*, 144.

the pitfalls of contemporary life, but also visions of Catholic piety that were in terms of immediacy, authenticity, and attenuated agency.

While this discussion has centered around how these forms of difference may have helped mid-century Catholics to work out and through tensions in their identities, it has also surfaced some of the ways in which aspects of these tensions reverberated in Catholics' engagements with persons with cognitive impairments. The pull between aspirational integration and pious detachment resurfaced in how mid-century Catholics represented cognitive disability and the social arrangements built around persons labeled accordingly.

On the one hand, as I have illustrated, Catholic educators, institutional leaders, and others were keen to participate in making this population socially "useful" and in addressing these forms of difference as a matter of improving an imagined body politic. Along these lines, Catholics positioned their schools and training programs as means to ensure, as one educator put it, that the nation brooked "no intellectual waste," exploiting all of its "human resources" for collective gain.[62] Yet, at the same time, many Catholics suggested that, given what was understood to be the spiritual status and significance of such persons, emphasis ought to be placed on stewarding and cultivating these forms of difference within a wider understanding of the church's "mystical body." Engagements of this sort were encapsulated by the occasional description of this population as "*cloistered* children," suggesting that such persons' value consisted less in their possible "return" to

[62] Sr. Mary Vernice Makovic, "How to Provide for the Needs of the Exceptional Children," *The Atypical Child*, 13.

society and more in their ability to stand apart from it as agents of a larger supernatural economy.[63]

The ways in which Catholic engagements with cognitive disability pulled in multiple directions is evident in one of Sr. Mary Theodore's summaries of her and her colleagues' work at St. Coletta's and beyond. She wrote,

> I like to think that the soul of our work with the mentally retarded is reverence, a respect for a creation of Divine Wisdom, not so much for what the child can *do*, but for what he *is*. Truly, the challenge of our work is to bring limited minds to realize their highest potential for creative living.[64]

While this passage seems to be drawing a distinction between what was meant to animate persons like Sr. Mary Theodore's work (its soul) and its difficulties (its challenge), expressed in it were also broader questions about cognitive disability and Catholic interpretations of these forms of difference. To what extent did the recognition of what the "exceptional" person *is* mandate or preclude his molding into something more like "normal" persons? To what extent was his or her difference something to be prized or conserved?

Some Catholic advocates for the "exceptional" demonstrated their eagerness not to be seen as excessive or irrational in their attachments to and appreciation of these forms of difference—perhaps responding to a genre of accusation that will be explored in the following chapter. In his memoir, *Sunshine: A Slow Miracle,* Bernard Schmalzried recounted his experiences with his daughter who was diagnosed with a cognitive impairment shortly after her birth in 1956.[65] Again, like other accounts in this growing genre, Schmalzried's narrative traced his personal conversion from feelings of dejection

---

[63] See, for example, Sr. Miriam Auxilium, "You Can Assist These Handicapped Children," *The Monitor*, August 19, 1960, 17S.
[64] Theodore, "The Challenge of the Retarded Child," 142.
[65] B.R. Schmalzried, *Sunshine: A Slow Miracle*, (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1965).

and shame to an appreciation of his daughter's difference for various reasons. Throughout the text, Schmalzried offers evidence (as in *Angel Unaware* and the accounts explored in the previous chapter) for his child's salubrious effects on those around her and the pleasure she occasioned for them—especially insofar as she was understood to galvanize their spiritual lives. While this is the central purpose of *Sunshine*, after Schmalzried states his transformation most forcefully—proclaiming, "We should thank God…especially for the retarded"—he quickly moves to clarify his position:

> Surely, I am not saying that mental retardation is something to be prized, and I do not propose that expectant parents pray for defective offspring! Certainly not. This would indeed be perverse…In itself, mental retardation is a deficiency, an affliction. We should do everything possible to prevent and alleviate it […].[66]

Here, it appears that Schmalzried expects a reader who might regard his affection for his daughter and appreciation for those similarly identified as grossly out of step with broader understandings of health and what it is to be a "normal" person. He appears to anticipate and, accordingly, to distance himself from the would-be scandal of appearing to actively desire his daughter's difference.

And yet, just pages later, he appears willing to risk something like perversity. While explaining his incredulousness at the fact that at one point he regarded his daughter as a "cross," he writes, "The thought of having a normal child…had little or no significance to me now…My only regret is that 'Sunshine' is not twins."[67] While not quite a prayer for "defective offspring," in this instance, Schmalzried seems to permit himself the desire not for the "alleviat[ion]" of his child's difference, but rather for its doubling.

---

[66] Schmalzried, *Sunshine: A Slow Miracle*, 2nd edition, (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1982), 84.
[67] Ibid., 91.

It is not my intention to suggest that one side of the tensions evinced in these examples represents *the* Catholic position while the other moves away from it. Rather, it is my intention to illustrate how many Catholics concerned with and writing about cognitive disability in this period situated themselves between different impulses and imperatives, further forging who they were in the process.

What these efforts yielded in the postwar era were relatively distinct social formations within the larger landscape of cognitive disability and its treatment. The scene with which this chapter opened—of thousands of lay Catholics gathering on the grounds of a residential institution dedicated to training and rehabilitating the "exceptional"—highlights how Catholic leaders worked to combine various priorities and social forms within this field. Institutions like the St. Coletta schools offered programs for educating and treating this population that might also serve as venues for a broader public to convene and cohere. And in this respect, many Catholic seemed to offer what was a welcome vision of expert treatment for this population that was not equivalent to the sort of rejection or shunning to which many Americans were increasingly opposed.

Chapter 4 | Bad Devotion: Mothers, Mental Deficiency Professionals, and the Profligacy of Care

Introduction

It was possible to care too much about persons with cognitive impairments. At least, this was the assertion of a chorus of voices, both professional and popular, that grew steadily throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s. Composed of an expanding group of so-called "mental deficiency professionals," including physicians, institutional superintendents, social workers, psychologists, and educators, as well as various laypersons, this ensemble collaborated to warn of the risks of embracing this increasingly visible population overmuch. In venues ranging from professional journals, to advice manuals, to popular culture, these commentators sought to both describe and decry this potential excess.

At the center of these warnings was an often described figure, that of the *overly-devoted mother*. In many ways, this woman stood for the kinds of parental advocacy and identification explored in previous chapters, but viewed from another angle—that of the experts and authorities to whom she represented a threat. This is not to say that most professionals and those sympathetic to them necessarily objected to the claims and endeavors of figures like Dale Evans Rogers or the parent-members of the NARC.[1] Rather, it is to highlight what worried some about the possible extension of the positions these parents took and the broader cultural sea changes they occasioned. What might people be willing to risk in order to include their children with disabilities within their

[1] For specific examples of professionals worrying about the influence of parent activism, see Alfred Katz, *Parents of the Handicapped: Self-Organized Parents' and Relatives' Groups for the Treatment of Ill and Handicapped Children* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas, 1961).

homes? And what might the authority and knowledge enacted by such relationships mean for the professionals who claimed disability as the arena of their expertise?

A set of religious references was basic to how most commentators structured the conflict between excessive care and what was prescribed as acceptable love and accommodation for persons with disabilities. In previous chapters, I have demonstrated how mid-century discussions of cognitive impairment mirrored other scenes within the archives of American religious history, those in which particular religious actors contested medical and institutional professionals through competing claims to knowledge and authority. Here, my focus shifts to how notions of religion—paradigms of religious difference and evolution that could be conjured quickly—surfaced even when religion as such was not the topic at hand.

More specifically, in voicing their warnings about excessive care, almost without exception, mid-century commentators employed tropes of religious extremity. When naming mothers who had supposedly gone too far in their commitments to their loved ones, clinicians, educators, and other would-be advisors reached for the vocabulary of "sacrifice" (often modified—e.g., "overly sacrificial), "devotion," "offerings," and "martyrdom." Such language occasionally appeared in discussions of parents' specific religious commitments. More frequently, the use of this vocabulary conveyed that certain habits and emotions, regardless of the confessional identities of those who kept them, *resembled religion* in what were presumed to be its less than flattering forms.

Scholars of religion often tune themselves to metaphors and invocations of this sort in order to grasp the other distinctions and evaluations with which they correspond. In this case, what I am interested in is how this language helped various authorities and

commentators to adjudicate what forms of attachment to persons with cognitive disabilities were acceptable in the postwar United States and the beliefs upon which they based their judgments. As I will demonstrate, this language was central to how professionals asserted themselves in this moment, setting particular behaviors and relationships beyond the normative bounds of motherhood and kinship. In deploying these vocabularies, professionals reinforced their authority over parents, particularly mothers, as those best suited to determine the meanings of cognitive impairment and the proper courses for treating these forms of difference. This comes into especially clear relief in relation to questions surrounding institutionalization. While it is not my intention to depict a simple division between professional advocacy for institutionalization and parental opposition to it, professional (and others') arguments about the reasonableness of delegating a child's care to institutions rhymed with broader assertions about the need for experts to adjudicate what kinds of care were proper to mid-twentieth century American society.

I emphasize here how cognitive impairment continued to trouble many Americans even as they thought themselves to be *feeling better* about it. Though these forms of difference were increasingly prised away, as discussed previously, from their associations with social degeneracy and shame, they nevertheless continued to represent threats to social order as forms of vulnerability that could occasion revisions to said order's maintenance. In his 1951 memoir about his coming to terms with the choice to place his son with a cognitive disability in a residential institution far from home, the author John Frank posed the challenge facing him and others in these terms: "How can one remain a normal human being when living with a much-loved mentally defective person?" One

way to frame this chapter is as an account of how professionals made use of the anxiety that animated such a query and of the fear that some might in fact elect to be other-than-normal.[2]

This account builds upon the work of previous historians of cognitive disability by paying attention to how objections to some expressions of maternal care and attachment indexed broader assumptions about motherhood, the family, and human agency in this period—assumptions, as I've noted, that often rested upon ideas about religion and religious difference.[3] I stress the point that mid-century discussions of cognitive impairment raised questions for many not only about the social inclusion of persons with disabilities but also about which forms of life, oriented around difference and vulnerability, might be recognized as modern, fulfilling, and free.

This chapter also contributes to American religious history by adding to ongoing conversations about the regulative functions of discourse about religion in contexts ranging from classrooms, to courtrooms, to hospitals, and beyond.[4] In doing so, it

---

[2] John Frank, *My Son's Story* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 119.

[3] Janice Brockley, "Martyred Mothers and Merciful Fathers: Exploring Disability and Motherhood in the Lives of Jerome Greenfield and Raymond Repouille," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 293-312; Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Ideologies of Parenting and Intellectual Disability in American History" in *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 130-164; Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2001); Katherine Castles, "'Nice, Average Americans: Postwar Parents' Groups and the Defense of the Normal Family," in *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 351-370; Katherine Castles, "Little 'Tardies': Mental Retardation, Race, and Class in American Society, 1945-1965," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2006).

[4] These conversations have become one of the principal avenues of inquiry within studies of American religion. See, for example, Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jean Langford, *Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill:

foregrounds "the family" as a critical venue through which questions about human subjectivity and good and bad religion have been advanced within the conditions of a secular age, revealing defining assumptions about kinship and its economy.[5]

The first section of this chapter explores the emergence of a glut of articles and monographs aimed at what one psychiatrist referred to as the "emotional involvements" of parents in the postwar era.[6] I then turn to the descriptions and diagnoses of the *overly* or *badly* devoted mother that appear in these texts, highlighting how authors explained this figure's choices and their supposed effects. I then demonstrate that representations of and anxieties about excessive emotional investment in persons with cognitive disabilities spread beyond the domains of experts with a discussion of Abby Mann's story *A Child is Waiting*, first released as a teleplay in 1957 and produced by Stanley Kramer as a major motion picture in 1963, starring Judy Garland and Burt Lancaster. In the final sections of the chapter, I offer reflections upon this figure's scandalousness and what it tells us about mid-century ideas about cognitive disability, the social functions of mothering, and the appetite for expertise.

University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Mark Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[5] In this respect, this chapter takes up Kathryn Lofton's recent call for the exploration of parenting and what she christens the twentieth-century emergence of a "scientia parentis" as key archives for students of religion that offer unique vantages onto the modes of social reproduction. Kathryn Lofton, "Religion and the Authority in American Parenting," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84.3 (September 2016): 806-841.

[6] Leo Kanner, "Parents' Feelings About Retarded Children," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 57 (1952-1952), 375.

Treating Parents, Too

Alongside—and, in part, as a response to—the postwar proliferation of personal accounts from parents of children with cognitive disabilities (see Chapters 1 and 2), there appeared a new set of texts aimed at helping professionals to better understand and to manage this increasingly specified type: the parent of the "exceptional child." With titles like *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parent*, "Parents Feelings About Retarded Children," and *Understand Those Feelings: A Guide for Parents of Handicapped Children and Everyone Who Counsels Them*, experts from various disciplines identified a new terrain of professional practice.[7] These works suggested that, in order for the educator, physician, psychologist, or social worker to do his or her job well in treating and training persons with cognitive disabilities, it was necessary that he or she learn to treat not only the diagnosed individual, but also their closest kin.[8]

---

[7] Stella Slaughter, *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parent* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960); Kanner, "Parents' Feelings About Retarded Children"; and Eugene McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings: A Guide for Parents of Handicapped Children and Everyone Who Counsels Them* (Pittsburg: Stanwix House, 1962).

[8] As the subtitle of *Understand Those Feelings* suggests, many of these works were aimed in two directions, as advice for both professionals and parents themselves. While some texts' audiences were obviously limited (articles that appeared, for example, in *Diseases of the Nervous System*), books generally addressed both parties. See, for example, Edward French and J. Clifford Scott, *Child in the Shadows*: *A Manual for Parents of Retarded Children* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1960); Edith Stern and Elsa Castendyck, *The Handicapped Child: A Guide for Parents* (New York: A.A. Wyn, 1950); and Florence Goodenough, *Exceptional Children* (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts 1956). For works aimed primarily at professional audiences, see See, also, Israel Zwerling, "Initial Counseling of Parents with Mentally Retarded Children," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 44 (1954): 469-479; Harry Bakwin, "Informing the Parents of the Mentally Retarded Child," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 44 (1954): 486-498; John Waterman, "Psychogenic Factors in Parental Acceptance of Feebleminded Children," *Diseases of the Nervous System* 9.6 (June 1948), 184-187; S.R. Laycock, "Helping Parents to Accept Their Exceptional Children," *Exceptional Children* 18.5 (February 1952): 129-132, 160; Mary Hauser, "Working with Mentally Retarded People," *The American Journal of Nursing* 53.7 (July 1953): 822-825.

This suggestion no doubt stemmed partially from the swell of bad press that appeared in the memoirs and narratives of parents of children with cognitive disabilities. In many texts within this genre, professionals appeared as embodiments of the social prejudices that persons with disabilities and their families faced in the postwar era.[9] What was represented as their dispassionate doomsaying and harsh recommendations provided the foils against which most parents narrated their own transformations and arrival at more "hopeful" and "accepting" attitudes vis-à-vis their children. By making the experiences and feelings of parents important objects of professional concern, many experts worked to distance themselves from these stereotypes and to announce their alignment with the changing cultural attitudes for which parents and others advocated.[10]

Professionals could be integral to, rather than obstructive of, these changes, or so many contended. The emotional experiences of mothers and fathers of children with disabilities ought to be understood as one of the primary fronts along which more salubrious attitudes and approaches to cognitive impairment might be advanced. Professionals of various stripes posited themselves as holding uniquely important

---

[9] Recall Lucille Stout's depiction of professional advice and attitudes, noted in Chapter 1: "We don't want your child in our society. We have no place for her here. We don't want to think of such people, or be reminded that they exist, so please keep her put away out of our sight." *I Reclaimed My Child: The Story of a Family into which a Retarded Child was Born* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1959), 50.

[10] These developments must also be situated within broader developments in many professional fields that emphasized what one might characterize as the *pastoral* responsibilities of physicians and others to attend to the "whole" person—this another manifestation of the purchase of psychological and therapeutic discourse in this era. On such shifts, see Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society*: *America 1941-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Deborah Weinstein, *The Pathological Family*: *Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Andrew Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). On the religious genealogy of some of these changes, particularly in professional medicine, see Pamela Klassen, *Spirits of Protestantism: Medicine, Healing, and Liberal Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

positions to manage parents' reactions, interpretations, and questions regarding their children's apparent differences and to mold them in concert with changing sentiments.

In texts seeking to advise parents of children with disabilities (or to advise other advisors), experts styled themselves as preachers or apostles of "acceptance," a therapeutic category closely related to others like "adjustment" that named both a state of mental well being and the acknowledgment and affirmation of professional interpretations of a diagnosed condition.[11] Most professionals assumed that mothers and fathers would react poorly upon learning of a child's impairment. The author of *Understand Those Feelings,* the speech therapist and Pennsylvania State University professor Eugene McDonald, summarized many professionals' assessments when he wrote, "In a sense parents are like primitive people when they try to explain to themselves why their child is handicapped. The only information available to them is unscientific information so they naturally come up with unscientific explanations."[12] The result of this supposed lack or ignorance, McDonald and others contended, were those beliefs that held children with disabilities to be occasions for personal shame and/or "self-incrimination," the vernacular etiologies that explained impairments in terms of things like bad-stock, maternal impressions, and personal sin.[13]

---

[11] On the gendering work of constructions of "realistic acceptance," see Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children With Intellectual Disabilities," 100.
[12] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 69.
[13] McDonald's text is replete with explanations or interpretations of this sort. He notes that he deliberately solicited them from parents; even if they had come to alternative understandings of their offspring's differences, he encouraged them to relay how they initially accounted for their loved one's conditions. He eagerly recorded stories of mothers who thought their child's disability was a result of her having slept with a Halloween mask in her bedroom, or the consequence of having too strong of a preference for one gender over the other, or for a transgressive adolescence. Ibid., 65-84. On self-incrimination, see also Kanner, "Parents' Feelings About Retarded Children," 375.

Professionals therefore had a crucial role to play in promoting what the New York physician Harry Bakwin proclaimed as a "campaign of enlightenment."[14] Their task was to help defuse the disgrace that parents experienced by providing both what McDonald called "twentieth-century information" concerning the origins of many cognitive impairments as well as what another expert recommended as the services of an "experienced and sympathetic listener."[15] By helping parents—and by extension others—to recognize such forms of difference as "natural" and scientifically-knowable, professionals could buttress the efforts of organizations like the NARC in challenging what they identified as dominant prejudices and "superstitions"—making them allies rather than adversaries. This approach would help to counteract the marginalization of this population on the most intimate of fronts, by ensuring that parents did not apply regnant prejudices to their own offspring, helping them to instead follow the rehabiltiative prescriptions of professionals.[16]

Yet, while most commentators expressed concern about parents "rejecting" their children with cognitive disabilities (thereby recommending themselves as intercessors), what appeared to worry most authors even more, or, at least, what garnered much more attention in this advice literature, were approaches that looked like *severe attachment*. At the outset of his book, McDonald explained that he and his peers should understand that the bounds of their responsibility extended beyond a diagnosed individual, writing, "Unless [parents'] feelings are understood and properly directed, *handicapped families*

[14] Bakwin, "Informing the Parents of the Mentally Retarded Child," 496.
[15] Kanner, "Parents' Feelings About Retarded Children," 383.
[16] Some of this was informed by or motivated by the intensity of the power that many mid-century experts in various fields assigned to parents affect, what many regarded as the disastrous effects of parental ambivalence or rejection, most exemplified in diagnoses of autism which, as Silverman has noted, was a kind of metaphor or occasion to talk about parenting more broadly. Silverman, *Understanding Autism*, 70.

tend to develop around handicapped children."[17] This could presumably take a variety of forms, but one in particular seemed to worry most.

The Wages of Martyrdom

The way most told it, the overly-devoted mother must have been a consistent presence in professionals' clinics and offices. Authors wrote with a knowing familiarity of mothers who appeared to have in some sense *given themselves over* to their children with disabilities. The leaders of Pennsylvania's Deveraux School, a private institution for "retarded children," Edward French and J. Clifford Scott, lamented their encounters with those for whom "Everything is centered on the child, […] the whole life being a dedication to the child, so that there is complete identification with the child's activities and interests"—their prose hammering out this supposed obsessiveness.[18] In an article published in *The American Journal of Nursing*, Mary Hauser, a public health nurse, offered similar words of warning about mothers' whom she encountered whose "li[ves] revolved around" their "mentally handicapped" children, those who, as a profile in the American Medical Association's magazine *Today's Health* put it, "devote[d] every waking hour" to their loved ones.[19]

With remarkable consistency, authors spoke of such "dedication" and "devotion"—already religiously-resonant categories—in terms of religious expenditure and violence. Edith Stern and Elsa Castendyck in *The Handicapped Child: A Guide for*

[17] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, xiv, emphasis added.
[18] French and Scott, *Child in the Shadows*, 26.
[19] Hauser, "Working with Mentally Retarded People," 823; "Don't Speak to Us of Living Death (as told to Robert Robinson)," *Today's Health* 29.6 (June 1951), 24-27, 52, 54, quotation appears on 26.

Parents warned of mothers "martyring" themselves for their children.[20] The special education expert and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor Stella Slaughter, in *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parents*, bemoaned the ease with which a mother could "become a martyr to a mentally retarded child," describing what she posited as women's "natural" tendencies to become "overly sacrificial" in attendance to her "exceptional" offspring.[21] In other examples, authors invoked or decried mothers transforming themselves into "self-pitying martyrs," those whose "extreme devotion and care" was sustained by a "martyr...complex."[22]

While these metaphors were ubiquitous, the costs of this figure's troubling zeal—the precise nature of the losses or injuries occasioned by her dedication—were often assessed in different arenas and described in different ways. There was agreement among commentators that some kind of injury or violence was transpiring through such behavior, yet its forms were multiple.

In some instances, authors identified the physical body of the mother as the site of loss. The psychiatrist Abraham Levinson in *The Mentally Retarded Child* wrote of mothers encountered in his practice "who lost their health and youth," as a consequence of their choice to look after their children and not to place them in institutions.[23] Others described women "haggard" and "hair hung straight and unkempt," in order to convey the

---

[20] Edith Stern and Elsa Castendyck, *The Handicapped Child: A Guide for Parents*, 10.
[21] Slaughter, *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parents*, 6-7.
[22] Mrs. Malgert Cohen, "Letters," *Children Limited*, February 1957, 17; Waterman, "Psychogenic Factors in Parental Acceptance of Feebleminded Children," 186. The first of these examples comes not from a professional but from a parent advocate lamenting what she described as the "holier-than-thou" perspective of some mothers who opposed institutionalization. This letter writer's description and impugning of "martyr"-mothers highlights how such language was employed not only by professionals in order to buttress their authority, but also by those seeking to defend their choices to delegate some of their offspring's care to others.
[23] Abraham Levinson, *The Mentally Retarded Child: A Guide for Parents* (New York: Day, 1952), 30.

apparently sapping effects of their commitments to their children.[24] Such visible tolls were often mentioned as indications of much more serious damages, however, those pertaining not just to mothers but to those around them—a fact pointing to the ways in which a mother's body was not presumed to be her own.

Husbands often appeared in these discussions as if dispossessed. In *Understand Those Feelings*, McDonald wrote of one individual who confided to him: "I still want to love [my wife] but she won't let me. She's always too busy with that kid. We were having a good time together until he took up all her time and energy."[25] Others named losses more concrete, like an anonymous father who described having been left to "prepare...his own meals" and his wife's reluctance or unwillingness to have sex with him as she became increasingly consumed with their young child's needs.[26] In these reports, the substance of mothers' sacrifice appeared as that to which their spouses thought themselves entitled—i.e., time, sex, and domestic labor. These losses registered as a kind of death with respect to mothers' identities. As McDonald put it, "Many a husband has said in effect, 'I lost my wife to our handicapped child."[27]

Authors often wrote about losses incurred by the "normal" siblings of a child with a disability in similar ways. In *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parent*, Slaughter

---

[24] Cohen, "Letters," 17; "Don't Speak to Us of Living Death," 54.
[25] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 122.
[26] "Don't Speak to Us of Living Death," 54. Husbands' complaints about their spouses' refusal or reluctance to have sex were often indirect and how such avoidance was interpreted varied. In some instances, professionals—and, occasionally, women themselves—cited exhuastion from domestic labor; in other instances, their choices were explained in terms of fears about heredity and reproduction. See McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 122. Professionals were keen to disabuse parents of these worries and their eagerness might best be understood as part of broader pronatalist imperatives in this moment directed at white middle and upper class women. For more on this imperative as an extension of eugenics, see Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 150-181.
[27] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 125.

warned of siblings developing "feelings of resentment" on account of their losing their "share of a mother's devotional care."[28] Stern and Castendyck, in *The Handicapped Child,* sounded a similar alarm, noting, "Sometimes mothers devote themselves so completely to a helpless, seriously handicapped child that the normal children are neglected."[29] This supposed neglect was not only lamentable because it amounted to what these authors depicted as an unfair distribution of maternal attention. In their supposed neglect of the siblings of children with disabilities, mothers were also sacrificing the anticipated dividends of child rearing, their children's ability to translate nurture into forms of value recognized beyond the home. Levinson clarified in his advice manual that the problem with the overly-devoted mother of a child with a disability was not that she expended herself for the sake of her offspring, rather, it was that she did so *improvidently*. "Sacrifice is a greater human virtue," he wrote. "[But, there] is no point in sacrificing one's self when nothing is gained."[30] The offense of martyr-mothers, at least in part, was their apparent refusal of this logic or distinction, their divestment from the basic purposes of parenting as a gainful project.[31]

Many authors underscored a version of Levinson's distinction by describing what might be wasted or lost in the course of caring for a child with a disability more explicitly. In *Understand Those Feelings*, McDonald offered a story of one man whose career as a physician was almost forestalled on account of the needs of a "mentally sub-normal" sibling. "Now which would be better for society," one of McDonald's interlocutors asked, "for him to have stayed home to help his mother care for a mentally

[28] Slaughter, *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parent*, 7.
[29] Stern and Castendyck, *The Handicapped Child: A Guide for Parents*, 136.
[30] Levinson, *The Mentally Retarded Child*, 30.
[31] Mothers' accounts of being counseled by physicians and others often featured admonishments to think of children yet unborn. See for example, Frank, *My Son's Story*, 148.

defective brother, or for him to become a doctor?"[32] Advice literature for and about parents was replete with calculations of this sort, which consistently suggested that to give to a child with a cognitive disability was to take something from not only other children—real or imagined—but from the world that children were expected to eventually inhabit.

One way that authors wove together these various appraisals of injury was to speak of damage to the home's "happiness," which named both an emotional state as well as a kind of stabilizing force that ensured the integrity of the family as a unit. As evinced in some of the quotations introduced at the outset of this section, experts explained that much of the harm of mothers' relationships with their children with disabilities consisted in disturbances in the emotional physics or engineering of the home. Recall depictions of lives "revolving around" or being "centered" on children who were deemed deficient. Stella Slaughter used similar language, writing, "Whenever a mentally retarded child becomes a hub about which all family activities must rotate […] happy family relationships become endangered."[33]

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed offers an extended account of happiness as a kind of political instrument, one that organizes society through its attachment to and relays between particular things and ideas. In her description of the making of "happy objects" (one of her prime examples being "the family"), she notes how happiness operates not just as a feeling but as "a way of being aligned with others, of facing the right way."[34] She suggests that much of the substance of "happiness" exists in the fact and performance of agreement itself. That is, to be a "happy family" is to believe

[32] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 92.
[33] Slaughter, *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parent*, 7.
[34] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 45-46.

in the family as a source of happiness and to practice that belief through what Ahmed calls the "reproduc[tion] of its forms."[35] What was perhaps most alarming about mothers deemed overly-devoted to their children with cognitive disabilities was that their investments surfaced as a kind of renunciation, seemingly a choice to turn away from the "happy object," understood as what Slaughter referred to as "the family as a whole," favoring a single member.

Explaining Excess

Many mental deficiency professionals suggested that they were uniquely suited to explain these sorts of excessive attachments. Most texts that addressed this topic offered some combination of three different interpretations of the so-called "'martyr' attitude."[36]

The first type tied maternal expressions of dedication and affection to feelings of guilt. Many clinicians suggested that parents, in spite of assurances to the contrary from professionals, persisted in holding themselves responsible for their offspring's impairments in ways that were consistent with what I've referred to as vernacular etiologies—references to past transgressions, unregulated feelings about an unborn child, or hereditary deficiency. While these tendencies to what professionals called "self-incrimination" explained the choices of some parents to shun their children, an equally likely outcome, accordingly to many, was the effort to atone for one's putative faults or inadequacies with demonstrative performances of care. French and Scott of the Deveraux school noted, with announced empathy, "few of us can tolerate feeling guilty." In "overindulging the child," mothers rehearsed the following, penitential logic, they

[35] Ibid., 46.
[36] French and Scott, *Child in the Shadows*, 26-27.

explained: "I have done this terrible thing to my child...Therefore, I must suffer, I must sacrifice myself to him."[37] Against appearances, experts claimed, what animated mothers' dedication was something other than love, what the Houston physician John Waterman referred to as "an accusing sense of obligation."[38] For their part, French and Scott issued the judgment blunty: "The attitude is not one of real affection."[39]

A second, often related, interpretation presented maternal devotion as what one psychiatrist named an "open and sometimes impatient rebellion against destiny," a refusal to countenance the reality of a child's impairment as explained by professionals.[40] This type of interpretation obtained frequently when parents expressed their dedication to their child in the form of advocacy—insisting upon access to particular resources or by working to demonstrate their children's abilities to exceed expert prognoses. One case described in McDonald's *Understand Those Feelings* encapsulates this reading.

Paul's mother was a thorn in McDonald's side. McDonald met her when she sought speech therapy for her adult son at a clinic where he worked, however the staff had determined the young man ineligible on account of his "severe retardation." Upon their encounter, Paul's mother offered a kind of testimony, mediated in *Understand Those Feelings* through McDonald's voice, during which she recounted the many instances in which she and her son had been disappointed by and had disproved the pronouncements of experts. "[The] doctors did not expect him to live when he was born

---

[37] Ibid., 26.
[38] Waterman, "Psychogenic Factors in Parental Acceptance of Feebleminded Children," 186.
[39] French and Scott, *Child in the Shadows*, 26. For a discussion of similar "psychologically sophisticated" explanations of parents' feelings and behaviors, see Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Profeisonal, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965," 99, 104-5. See also Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 147-148.
[40] Kanner, "Parents' Feelings About Retarded Children," 373.

but 'with God's help' she had nursed him 'back to strength,'" McDonald reported her as saying. He continued,

> When he was a year old a doctor had told her that Paul would not learn to walk or talk and that he would never be able to go to school. He advised institutionalization. Again with God's help, she had exercised his legs and feet and by his fifth birthday, Paul was walking.[41]

Paul's mother told McDonald, "With God's help, I'll teach him to read and write and everything else."[42]

When McDonald and his peers informed Paul's mother that they did not advise speech therapy, she accused them of being "faithless," asserting that "all professional workers needed more faith in God and not until they found this faith would they be fully prepared to help handicapped persons."[43] A churchgoing Episcopalian himself, McDonald noted that he and many of his fellow professionals entrusted their work to God and that what was worrisome about Paul's mother's perspective was that it seemed impervious to their guidance. This, McDonald branded—with the most conventional of metaphors—as"blind faith," which was, for him, less a matter of trust in God, or even confidence in her son, but rather, an avoidance technique that proved her inability to be "objective." He explained that Paul's mother's "faith provided an ever-ready and powerful defense against what she did not want to hear." This was not, he assured, admirable advocacy or tenacious love, this was an illustration of how zeal precluded acceptance of a child's diagnosis, getting in the way of what he called the "proper management" of disability.[44]

---

[41] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 140.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 141.
[44] Ibid. 141-142. Especially troubling about this case, McDonald reported, was that Paul's mother *promoted* her beliefs—i.e., "the point of view that God, working through parents, could do more

While the case of Paul's mother highlighted specific religious convictions, the "blind faith" which McDonald denounced could be applied to manifestations of the "martyr attitude" in general. Mary Hauser, in her article, "Working with Mentally Retarded People," also reached for disability metaphor when referring to a mother who, in spite of her being "extremely well versed on the general topic of retardation," was "blind to the inescapable fact that [her child] could not be trained to compete with the normal child."[45] This resulted in her deflection of professional recommendations. McDonald himself described another case in which one woman objected to the assessments of her local physician and school officials who suggested that her daughter could not benefit from education on account of what they understood to be her cognitive disability. Asserting her own knowledge as the child's primary caretaker, this mother argued that it was others' failure to understand her daughter's speech that resulted in their determinations of her low cognitive capacity. In response, she committed herself to her daughter's education and social development, her husband complaining that she "spen[t] too much time with her…[bringing] her every place we go."[46] McDonald concurred with his fellow professionals, concluding after a brief visit with the family that this woman's daughter's primary problem was "severe mental retardation," averring that her mother's commitments to her—and claims about her abilities—were simply evidence that she "was not yet able to accept this diagnosis."[47] Regardless of the accuracy of either party's assessments in this case, what is clear is that for many professionals the amount of time

---

for handicapped children than any trained specialist could do." He cited a father in her community who said to his own wife, "You'd think [Paul's mother] was one of the disciples the way you fall for her preaching." McDonald reported with dismay that he later learned Paul's mother had been named an officer in a local "program for handicapped children," 143.

[45] Hauser, "Working with Mentally Retarded People," 823.

[46] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 119-120.

[47] Ibid., 120.

and energy some parents put into opposing prognoses or demanding access to services for their children could serve as evidence of willful ignorance and emotional immaturity.

The third explanation of maternal devotion offered by commentators described the motives of mothers in terms of the announced or presumed pleasures associated with caring for a child with significant or exceptional support needs. This type of interpretation drew on much broader suspicions that regarded mothers' attachments to dependent children and the fulfillment they derived from their roles as caretakers as both self-serving and as a social liability.

As scholars like Rebecca Plant, Emily Abel, and Christina Hardyment have demonstrated, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a transformation whereby traits or behaviors formerly regarded as maternal virtues—"tender solicitude," "sacrificial devotion," and so on—came to be seen as evidence of gendered weakness, often described in terms of emotional "dependency" and "indulgence."[48] Early twentieth century psychologists and others warned that these tendencies threatened to undermine what was perhaps the primary task of parenting: the production of eventually self-supporting economic and political subjects. The changes the above mentioned scholars describe are evident in widespread censures within discussions of parenting, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, that were directed at the putatively disabling and emasculating effects of "coddling," "spoiling," and "smothering."[49] Such behaviors, insofar as they

[48] Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Emily Abel, *Hearts of Wisdom: American Women Caring for Kin, 1850-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Christina Hardyment, *Perfect Parents: Baby Advice Past and Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). On "tender solicitude" and/as "indulgence," see Abel, *Hearts of Wisdom*, 264.

[49] On undermining children's eventual independence, see Janice Brockley, "Martyred Mothers and Merciful Fathers," 304; Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew," 86-87, 94-98. For the application of these warnings beyond the home, see Rachel Elder, "Safe Seizures, Schoolyard

were imagined to gratify mothers' and their supposed need to be needed, were thought to prove that, left to their own devices, many women wouldn't *raise* their children at all, instead preserving them in states of vulnerability.

Janice Brockley has noted how these assumptions and anxieties grew when refracted through questions about children with cognitive impairments. She describes how, with increasing intensity in the postwar era, mental deficiency professionals suggested that mothers of so-called "eternal children" were especially likely to seek "illegitimate emotional satisfactions" from their children's needs.[50] Having offspring who were not expected to assume many of the responsibilities of adulthood would "tempt" mothers, the logic went, to abandon themselves to parenting at its least productive.[51]

Some represented such imagined indulgence as a kind of escapism. The anonymous father whose story was related in a 1953 article in *Today's Health* described his spouse's increasing investment in their son in the following terms: "I lay awake at night, realizing Joyce no longer lived in my world. She was in that other one with [him]."[52] Earlier in the article, this "other world" was intimated in terms of an Edenic naïveté—"some rich greenness"—giving additional meaning to many professionals' descriptions of mothers' devotion as a kind of "retreat."[53]

Stoics, and the Making of Contained Citizens at Detroit's School for Epileptic Children, 1935-1956," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 7.3. (2014): 432-461. In many instances, the critiques of mothers' overinvestment revolved questions and fears about sexuality, or, put differently, voiced concerns about independence and autonomy were often also interpreted as concerns about normative heterosexual subject formation. See, for example, Jennifer Terry, "'Momism' and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals," in *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, eds. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 169-190.

[50] Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew," 144-145.

[51] Ibid.

[52] "Don't Speak to Us of Living Death," 52

[53] Ibid., 25. On caring for children with disabilities as a "retreat," see French and Scott, *Child in the Shadows*, 27.

The use of the category martyr itself and its colloquial resonance functioned to describe an indulgence and pleasure that stemmed from one's ostensible labor and suffering for another. When one author decried a mother having made herself a "self-pitying martyr," she named the often implicit suggestion that among the *real* motives behind performances of dedicated care was a combination of self-importance—the desire to be seen as a martyr—and what were imagined as the dubious but opaque pleasures gleaned from having one's life preoccupied.[54]

Thankfully, many professionals insisted, these tendencies could be treated—with proper guidance. As French and Scott put it in their manual, "Unless parents are fortunate enough to have the requisite emotional maturity...they can get to it [i.e., maturity] only through expert professional help."[55] This help would convince them that to be ashamed of one's child was "illogical," that feelings of guilt for a child's condition were "irrational," and that the pleasures one might indulge in caring for a child with a disability were often more injurious than noble. With these premises embraced, parents, especially mothers, would be prepared to act in ways consistent with professional assessments of their children's differences and with the broader expectations encompassing them as wives and mothers. While the pages of texts like *Understand Those Feelings*, *Child in the Shadow*, and *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parents* were well populated with examples of such hoped for transformation, professional pundits were not the only ones wanting to hear stories of maternal zeal reined in.

---

[54] Cohen, "Letters," 17. Similar assumptions appeared in denuciations of mothers of children not diagnosed with disabilities acting like "martyrs." See for example, Teresa Wilson, "The Martyr Parent," *Seventeen* (March 1950), 31-32.
[55] French and Scott, *Child in the Shadows,* 27-28.

A Child is Waiting

The screenwriter Abby Mann's story, *A Child is Waiting* dramatized the tensions at the center of the texts discussed in this chapter, those that pit what one reviewer referred to as the "crisp authority" of the professional against the "misty-eyed compassion" of the emotionally unrestrained caregiver.[56] Its narrative celebrates the latter's coming to see things the way of the former and, in doing so, provides both a utterly conventional account of gendered difference and a more specific script for feeling reasonably about persons with cognitive impairments. While Mann's fiction focuses on the dynamic between two professionals (a psychiatrist/institutional superintendent and a teacher), it should be evident in what follows how this dynamic relied upon and rehearsed tensions between mothers and professionals.

Viewers (or readers—the screenplay was novelized the year the film was released) meet the protagonist of *A Child is Waiting*, Jean Hansen (Judy Garland), as she seeks a position at the fictional Crawthorne's State Mental Hospital. We soon learn this character has had a peripatetic and unsuccessful young adulthood as an aspiring musician and now, having reached almost the end of her proverbial rope, she's come to Crawthorne in order to "find something to do that had meaning."[57] If this last search did

[56] Bosley Crowther, "Social Drama is Painful but Compelling," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1963, 5.

[57] Abby Mann, *A Child is Waiting* (New York: Popular Library, 1963), 14; *A Child is Waiting*, dir. John Cassavettes (United Artists, 1963). Throughout this discussion, I refer to both Mann's novelized version of the screenplay and the film itself. Mann's text often provides important insight into some of the intended effects of a scene or plot development, which is not to say that all of these effects were achieved in the film, nor that all of these apparent intentions were shared by everyone involved in its making. (Indeed, there was considerable conflict between Cassavetes

not deliver, Mann's notes explained, "she would just go ahead and drown, in whatever you drowned in when you needed oblivion."[58]

Consistent with accusations launched in the direction of mothers' supposed overinvestment in their children with disabilities, Hansen's personal desperation and emotional instability leads her to develop a particularly intense attachment to one of the institution's more troubled residents shortly after she is hired as a music teacher—a young boy named Reuben. Reuben is withdrawn and shows few signs of benefitting from Crawthorne's rehabilitative program. We learn that his parents have chosen to sever nearly all of their ties with him. Unlike other mothers and fathers who continue to visit their children at the institution, Reuben's parents have accepted the recommendations of its leaders—that their son will do best without the interference of a sustained relationship with him.[59]

Hansen finds herself eager to make a difference in Reuben's life. She dedicates special time to the boy, protecting him from the taunts of his peers and the embarrassments occasioned by the demands of the school's education program. In defiance of the judgments of the institution's superintendent, Dr. Clark (Burt Lancaster), she eventually summons Reuben's mother to Crawthorne after observing the boy's

---

and Kramer about the film's editing, leading to Cassavetes's eventual removal from the project. See *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, ed. Ray Carney (London: Faber, 2001). While the film and novel are closely aligned, I am sure to indicate when dialogue in the film differs from Mann's text.

[58] Mann, *A Child is Waiting*, 40. Viewers of the film noted how this character's distress was augmented by rumors about Garland's personal and professionals troubles. See, for example, Joe Hyams, "'I Was Unemployable': Judy Garland Back in Movie Swim," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 20, 1962, 14.

[59] For more on institutions discouraging parents' visits and involvement in the lives of their institutionalized children, *Hearts of Wisdom*, 237. On this position's relation to "milieu therapy," see Silverman, *Understanding Autism*, 78-86. This was not a universal practice, but a common one. For evidence of other apporaches, see Willard Abraham, *Barbara: A Prologue* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), 48-64.

ongoing disappointment on visitors' days. Reuben's mother travels to the institution, but, upon learning she was not in fact called upon by its leadership, she departs without visiting her son. Reuben spots her, however, as she drives off the campus and his caretakers are unable to console him. The film cuts from Reuben crying out on the lawn to his escape from the institution later the same evening.

Reuben is eventually returned to Crawthorne with the help of local police, but not before the audience accumulates evidence to prove his supposed unfitness for the world. Viewers witness him attempt to join a game of football, played by other boys his age, where he is laughed off the field for his failure to comprehend the game's rules or the jokes of the other players. The audience also watches Reuben wander into traffic along a busy highway, apparently oblivious to the danger he faces. Once Reuben is brought back to Crawthorne, tragedy narrowly avoided, Hansen is ready to pay the cost for her disobedience and packs her bags.

The story's denouement consists in an extended argument between Hansen and Clark, which, in Mann's text, is laced with erotic charge and violence, and is conveyed onscreen by way of Garland's tremulousness and what one reviewer dubbed Lancaster's "effective, urgent, and virile" performance.[60] Clark spends the previous day busy with Reuben's return to Crawthorne and preparing to fire Hansen. In Mann's text, we hear him rehearse his assessment of his new employee's impetuousness to himself. "[U]nrestrained giving," he notes, "was not what the children here needed...such an attitude was as dangerous here as a rattlesnake." So he concluded, "she had to go."[61]

---

[60] Marjory Adams, "Retarded Children Theme of Picture at Orpheum," *The Boston Globe*, January 18, 1963, 15.
[61] Mann, *A Child is Waiting*, 114.

Hansen had prepared for the consequence of her actions, but not, initially, because she had come to see things Clark's way. In his office, she offered her first direct objections to what she took to be the coldness of the institution and Dr. Clark's "methods." "Music class!," she cried, "Workshop class. It's not enough! [...] You don't know how [children like Reuben feel]...Waiting every Wednesday afternoon. Just waiting—."[62]

Clark interrupts her to defend himself from this accusation of insensitivity: "You think I don't? You think every person that works in this institution doesn't have feelings?"[63] It is then his turn to attack. As Mann describes it,

> His voice was a knife slashing at her...Her face had gone paper white. Her mouth was open, working. Clark bored in relentlessly. "You want to take the falls for them! You want to coddle them. You want to suckle them at your breast [...]Well, they need more than that." He could see her self-control crumbling now like dry sand. He knew what he was doing to her, and yet somehow he knew he must not stop.[64]

Hansen suddenly appears to concede, words "burst[ing] forth from her in anguish" and, on the screen, tears streaking Garland's cheeks.[65] She exclaims that she does not, in fact, have what it takes to do the task at hand, to care for this population as Clark sees it.

The doctor decides to give Hansen one more chance to convert to his ways and to keep her job. His admonishment continues, "I haven't been able to do one thing for Reuben...I may never be able to do anything for him...But I'd rather go down that way, fighting for one inch of his dignity, than to have him denatured by your feeling for him."[66] The audience has been left to infer what Clark's "philosophy" entails, the clearest

---

[62] Ibid., 116.
[63] Ibid., 116.
[64] Ibid., 116-117.
[65] Ibid., 117.
[66] Ibid.

statement coming from one of his colleagues who explains that his approach is based on the belief that "these children must help themselves."[67] Clark moves to show Hansen what he takes to be the perilous alternative to his approach. "Come with me," he orders, and leads Hansen to a cottage on the institution's campus that he describes as "our inheritance from the older regimes here."[68]

The audience then encounters what is meant to be experienced as disturbing abjection. In the novel, Mann describes Hansen entering "Cottage H" on Crawthorne's campus, where her stomach "lurched...triggered by the fetid smell that assuaged her nostrils."[69] The film offers a jump-cut—early signs of its director's famous style—from Clark's office to intrusive close-ups of the faces of grown men, in states of undress, punctuated by high-pitched, staccato shouts coming from somewhere off-screen, echoing off of a distant ceiling. In Mann's language, Hansen finds herself in a room of men with "dead" eyes and "expressionless, heavily-bearded faces…[with] the stunned blank look of retardation."[70] After Hansen briefly and fearfully interacts with some of these men, Clark returns to his lecture. "That's Reuben," he says, "twenty years from now, if we're not careful. [...] Those inmates, someone loved *them*, too."[71] The power of the example Clark makes of these men rests on the analogy he draws between what is presumed to be

[67] Ibid., 129. Other suggestions within these texts include Clark's insistence, pointed in Hansen's direction that "Love is not enough," the title of a 1950 monograph penned by the famed—later, infamous—theorist of autism Bruno Bettleheim. In this work, Bettleheim recommends his "milieu therapy" as practiced at the Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago for "emotionally disturbed" children which prioritized environmental order and segregation. Other sources of inspiration for Mann and Kramer included the Vineland Training School in Vineland, New Jersey, where Mann first spent time researching in the mid-1950s. Bettleheim, *Love is Not Enough: The Treatment of Emotionally Disturbed Children* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950). See Chloe Silverman, "Love is not Enough: Bruno Bettelheim, Infantile Autism, and Psychoanalytic Childhoods," in *Understanding Autism*, 61-92.
[68] Ibid., 117.
[69] Ibid., 119.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 121, emphasis in original.

the overweening care of this group's loved ones and caretakers—"some of them were sheltered from everything until they came here," he tells Hansen—and her unchecked tenderness for Reuben.[72] It is care's excesses, Clark insists, that produce the kind of disturbing vulnerability that these abandoned men, crowded in a small room, supposedly embodied. These were victims of feeling.[73]

Yet, to clarify that Clark's position was one of *superior*—because, restrained—feeling, rather than its refusal, the character continues to narrate to Hansen the events that occasioned his becoming Crawthorne's superintendent. He explains he once was the type of physician who casually told mothers of children with disabilities: "Give them up...just forget them."[74] He then had occasion to visit a place like Crawthorne and, overwhelmed by what he found to be its appalling conditions, committed himself to reform, to what he called "a battle of small victories." He told Hansen, "You have to believe in their goals...No one ever needed to succeed in any...little way as much as they do."[75] As *A Child is Waiting* hurtles toward its conclusion, the audience is invited to recognize that the "tough" love of the expert and institution is perhaps the realest kind, defined as it is by the ambition to make something of its recipient.

Hansen agrees. The protagonist demonstrates her transformation by refusing to offer Reuben the special attention he'd come to expect in her classroom in the following

---

[72] Ibid.
[73] While critiques of the martyr-mother most often focussed upon the injuries this figure supposedly inflicted upon herself and the family unit, professionals also insisted, like Clark, that her excessiveness might inhibit the exceptional child's development, this resonating with broader concerns about the disabling effects of affection. As French and Scott explained, "over-indulging" often resulted in the child being "denied the opportunity of developing those capacities which he has, of reaching the level of which he is capable," *Child in the Shadows*, 26.
[74] Mann, *A Child is Waiting*, 122.
[75] Ibid., ellipsis in original.

scene.[76] The audience then witnesses the power of this refusal in what happens afterwards, in a performance of the institution's annual Thanksgiving play. Reuben, after hesitating, musters the courage to recite a line of verse before a full auditorium. The audience finds that Hansen's conversion is complete when she congratulates him *without* a hug and when, in the final scene, she coaxes another young boy out of the back of his parents' car and into his new institutional home—the conversion complete.[77]

Reviews of the film were largely in agreement that, as a piece of art, *A Child is Waiting* embodied the restraint that Hansen was meant to have learned over the course of its narrative. It was "unflinchingly frank," as one reviewer put it, in spite of the "mawkishness" one might expect from its subject matter.[78] Another critic praised Mann's script as "realistically unsentimental."[79] *TIME* christened it "bone-honest."[80] And while some complained that the film did not entertain as much as it should have, these critiques did not amount to a rejection of the film's message, which Marjory Adams of *The Boston Globe* summarized in the following terms: "[Retarded children] should receive competent care in an instutiton where there are other children with the same problems and self-reliance can be substitute for a too-protective love."[81] As the film bridled itself, so should the parent, the community, and the nation when it came to questions of care and cognitive difference.

In a line that appears early in Mann's story, but only partially in the film version of *A Child is Waiting*, Clark relays to Hansen his understanding of why many people seek

---

[76] Ibid., 126.
[77] Ibid., 140-141.
[78] Frank Morriss, "Film About Retarded is Unfliching but Kind," *The Globe and Mail*, January 18, 1963, 42.
[79] Larry Glenn, "Sharp Focus on Troubled Youth," *New York Times*, February 18, 1962, X9.
[80] "Love is Not Enough," *Time*, February 8, 1963, 66.
[81] Adams, "Retarded Children Theme of Picture at Orpheum," 15.

employment at institutions like Crawthorne, cuing the audience to anticipate the revelation of Hansen's own problematic motives and eventual transformation. "[T]hey want to give up their lives for these children like burnt offerings," Clark complains. "But working for these people is not an act of charity! It's a full-time, demanding job. Very few people are qualified for it."[82] Although the film omits the specific reference to the sacrificial, *A Child is Waiting*, in many ways, occupied the same terrain as professional critiques of mothers and their relationships with their children with cognitive disabilities. This was a fable about feelings and their management. In its correction of excess, it offered audiences assurances about their own abilities to countenance particular forms of difference, but also to defer to those who would ensure that nothing was needleesly or foolishly spent in the process.

The Scandal of Sacrifice

The unanimity with which commentators cast the relationships of mothers with children with cognitive disabilities and those likened to them in terms of religious extremity bespoke a broader set of cultural agreements that so-called mental deficiency professionals drew upon as they sought to reinforce their own claims to authority and to manage those with whom they worked. And, as *A Child is Waiting* suggests, wider publics consumed and circulated these agreements in order to explore and affirm particular understandings of themselves.

In her recent work, Kathryn Lofton has noted how references to religion within the conditions of what's often referred to as "the secular" regularly function to describe particular evaluative distinctions, most often those that differentiate between "control and

[82] Mann, *A Child is Waiting*, 14.

freedom."[83] Within the discourse of the overly-devoted mother, professionals, producers of popular culture, and others mobilized familiar notions of religious difference in order to help adjudicate which forms of life in relation to persons with cognitive disabilities could register in postwar America as free and which could not. Paying closer attention to this vocabulary helps to clarify what many understood to be the limits of this population's inclusion within a larger social imaginary.

Descriptions of mothers as devotees and martyrs recruited generic understandings of particular forms of bad or outdated religion as both disabling and indicative of impairment. Professionals called upon images of persons in distant places or pasts eagerly seeking to please their gods as denigratory symbols of muddled or misguided human agency. These images were often vaguely sketched, but a parallel construction from the same time period, albeit in a different context, may help to bring into clearer relief what professionals wanted to bring to mind.

In March of 1950, *Seventeen* magazine published a short article describing adolsecent women's fatigue with their parents' guilt-inducing dedication to them. Beneath the headline "The Martyr Parent," a subtitle read, "Martyrdom was popular around 50 A.D., but in 1950 it's out of style when practiced by parents."[84] This chatty reference to Christian history was paired with a cartoon—incidentally, drawn by a young Andy Warhol—featuring a Kali-like figure, fitted with a crown and earrings and juggling the accoutrement of the postwar household (broom, sewing machine, and telephone) on six arms. Here, one encounters the flexibility of the martyr ascription, moving between a distant Christian past with which readers might identify and a figure of religious and

[83] Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 2.
[84] Wilson, "The Martyr Parent," 31.

racialized otherness, whose bodily and symbolic strangeness helps to place the parent's apparently annoying zeal beyond the reasonableness and "style" of the modern moment.

While most commentators did little to specify their references of this sort, McDonald, in *Understand Those Feelings*, did offer some additional sense of their substance. In addition to his above-mentioned likening of parents of children with disabilities to "primitive people," he averred that like "early man," who fervently served and "invented" gods on account of his fear and ignorance of natural phenomena ("famines, plagues, floods"), so, too, did many parents of children with disabilities expend themselves out of a naive desperation.[85] Like these imagined others, overly-devoted mothers were impaired by their emotions, which impeded their comprehension, leading to similar acts of subjection.

In this respect, this language built upon aspersions common to a wider repertoire that has been routinely deployed to disqualify the authority of mothers and other caretakers throughout US history. As Emily Abel, Chloe Silverman, Paul Starr, and others have discussed, professional authority in fields ranging from medicine, to social work, to psychology has, in large part, been established through distinction from forms of knowledge and practice that emerge from informal, intimate relationships.[86] Experts have defined such relations as impeding the judgments and perspectives of caregivers, affirming the need for what one postwar physician described as a "certain

[85] McDonald, *Understand Those Feelings*, 70.
[86] Emily Abel, *Hearts of Wisdom*, 221; Chloe Silverman, *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). On the effects of this rhetorical power play in a different arena, see Jennifer Klein and Eileen Boris, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

impersonality."[87] Dismissals of mothers' "extreme devotion" and "martyr attitude[s]" highlighted how conceptions of excessive religion could further reinforce the often explicitly gendered distinctions that separated the professional and the lay, the objective from the subjective, and the rational from the emotional.[88]

While these references helped to buttress professional expertise by asserting that some mothers' lacked or fumbled the agency required for properly responding to their children's conditions, they also operated on another level. These descriptions asserted not only the impairment of mothers' capacities for judgment, they also suggested that mothers' very relationships with their children with cognitive disabilities might be regarded as sites or instances of unfreedom.

On one hand, the violence of this vocabulary cast the supposed demands of caring for a child with a cognitive disability as dominating insofar as it was understood to exceed what might be reasonably expected of a parent. Although few texts spelled out with any specificity what these demands looked like, they invited readers to take them for granted based upon descriptions of mothers' exhaustion and the practice of care as a kind of enclosure. Recall the descriptions of "mothers who lost their youth and health" and others being confined within their child's "sick room." Ascriptions of martyrdom and ascetic devotion—alongside the occasional characterization of caring for such a child as a form of bondage—helped to reinforce existing notions of this population as uniquely consuming.[89]

---

[87] Frank, *My Son's Story*, 145.
[88] And as we have seen, one could do so by talking about both the specific religious convictions of people—recall Paul's mother "blind faith"—or a *religiousness* that professionals ascribed to individual habits or dispositions.
[89] For a reference to care as potentially "hopeless slavery," see Muriel Lawrence, "Out of Tragedy Stems Hope," *Children Limited* (June 1956), 15.

On the other hand, what made sacrifice on behalf of children with cognitive disabilities especially scandalous was more than what was assumed about what care for such persons entailed. As noted above, much of what scandalized was the idea of being obliged to self-giving within a relationship that did not pay socially recognizable dividends, that confounded what we might think of as the promissory nature of child-rearing and family making. In this respect, the discourse of the martyr-mother helped to reinforce which forms of obligation or submission appeared as consistent with—and definitive of—an individual mother's agency.

This discourse helped to reinforce the idea that the duties and pressures that coincided, for example, with maintaining a contented husband and producing socially and economically *productive* offspring were not constraints upon but were the means to exercise one's freedom, tied as they were to what it meant to make and have a "happy home."[90] Devoting oneself to a child with a cognitive disability, on the other hand, signaled constraint not only because it was presumed to get in the way of one's pursuit of prescribed happiness but also because it was presumed that such efforts did not *yield*—as the author Levinson put it, they were sacrifices without "gain."[91] According to these assessments, one's freedom as a mother was largely defined by what one furnished for society. One informal advisor, the Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, writing to his friend John Frank, author of *My Son's Story*, described this point in terms of a universal consensus,

---

[90] Rebecca Plant describes this idea in terms of the "therapeutic model of motherhood," how she names a postwar shift toward requiring mothers to regard their domestic performances in terms of "individual self-realization" rather than as sacrifices or duties fulfilled. Plant, *Mom: The Transformaton of American Motherhood,* 116.
[91] Levinson, *The Mentally Retarded Child*, 30.

> My own belief is that whatever [your wife] might think, it would be utterly ruinous to her life to have the constant care of a mentally helpless child. I know that some people believe that their duty requires that such children be kept at home...My belief is that no sound precepts of any good religion or any philosophy requires such a sacrifice of those who can make contributions to society.[92]

A free, or un-ruined life, was appraised in terms of its contributions. The language of martyrdom and sacrifice helped to underscore that to invest in relationships apparently detached from, or deleterious to social reproduction was to intend zealous and unnecessary death.

Institutionalization, then, was a means to liberate mothers from such a fate. Professionals and media like *A Child is Waiting* presented institutional care as a ready and necessary solution to the tempting excesses of mothering. Although many of the experts who turned their attention to advising parents in this period were less inclined to automatically prescribe putting children "away" than their predecessors, there continued to be wide consensus that institutional care was appropriate once signs emerged of a family being disordered by the presence of a child with a cognitive disability.

Some historians have noted the irony of the fact that, even as robust challenges to the practice of institutionalization emerged in the postwar era, thanks to groups like the NARC and increased scrutiny from journalist and activists, rates of institutionalization among the same white, middle-class demographic that populated parent organizations actually increased throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. Authors like Katherine Castles have noted how the intensification of what Elaine Tyler May has described as this period's "domestic ideology" put increasing pressure on parents to "place" their children

[92] Frank, *My Son's Story*, 91.

elsewhere so that they might maintain their statuses as "nice, average Americans."[93] Focussing upon concerns about caring too much for the exceptional child and the discourse of the overly-devoted mother highlights how these pressures were brought to bear on many parents by way of advisors, professional and otherwise. How commentators framed the dangers of mothers' attachments to and relationships with their children with disabilities shows that particular forms of care within the home were not only regarded as optional, but perhaps as alien to what it meant to be a mother and a person in the modern world.

The repetition of these representations and the dramatization of the moral judgments that defined them assured not only professionals but also broader audiences that they were capable and right to restrain their feelings and practices of care for persons deemed cognitively "subnormal." This discourse helped to affirm that love and compassion should be exercised prudently and that the embrace of persons with cognitive disabilities—within homes and communities—ought to be contingent upon the maintenance of said prudence. The mental deficiency professionals most invested in these representations offered their services and secured their authority by positioning themselves as those who would determine the difference between excess and moderation and, in doing so, recommended themselves as not only specialists with respect to the mind and its variations, but as custodians of the health and ability of society writ large.

[93] See Castles, "Little 'Tardies,'" 123, 145-146; Castles, "'Nice, Average Americans,'" 360-365; Brockley, "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilties, 1910-1965," 225-227.

Conclusion

My choice to end here is not to suggest that these figures got the last word when it came to cognitive disability, care, and kinship in the postwar era. Indeed, these denunciations of maternal excess or profligacy betray the fact that, in spite of compelling efforts to disparage the choices some mothers made, many persisted in practices and relationships with their loved ones that flouted expectations about what mothering was for. As in examples discussed throughout this project, many mid-century Americans found their relationships with persons with cognitive disabilities to be occasions to question and revise what it meant to be a child, parent, or person—to explore, returning to Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp's language once more, "new kinship imaginaries."[94]

Yet, in underscoring such flouting, it also isn't my intention to offer too simple of an assessment of the choices these criticized mothers made. It must be acknowledged that, for those with the privilege to make choices about their children's care (i.e., those who were not compelled by spouse, physicians, or the state), these decisions were vexed and made with any number of motives in mind. And, beyond simply noting that some choices to institutionalize may have been in the child's best interest or that some choices to care for a child at home may have been harmful, I am interested in the extent to which mothers' choices and moral agency might be acknowledged beyond—or in addition to—reading them as readily recognized acts of "resistance."

In her scholarship exploring how mothers of children with cognitive impairments and epilepsy engaged with professional experts on the opposite side of the World War II, Emily Abel notes her commitment to resisting the temptation to "glorify women's

[94] Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, "Reverberations: Disability and the New Kinship Imaginary," *Anthropological Quarterly* 84.2 (2011): 379-410.

rejection of expert care," but also seems to indulge it slightly by dividing her subjects into two groups: "challengers," who refused expert advice, and "overwhelmed mothers," who enlisted professionals' and the state's help. Although Abel is careful to clarify that these classifications are not meant to be moral judgments, they nevertheless seem to provide the former with flattering light, affirming an understanding of agency as a largely zero-sum equation; one either acts or is caught up in the swell.

Of course, the study of religion has offered a number of resources for thinking about agency differently. Pointing to the ways in which habituation, submission, and suffering might function to undergird projects of ethical self-cultivation, scholars like Saba Mahmood, Brenna Moore, and Tracy Fessenden have encouraged readers to ask what it might look like to acknowledge something or someone as agentive without quickly translating their lives into feel-good proof of a kind of liberal self-assertion.[95] In what ways is it possible to see moral agency in the acts that comprised what was disparaged as some mothers' martyrdom? What type of choice was it to give one's self to the "sick room," to routines oriented around vulnerability, sometimes with goals for the future in mind, other times without them?

Surely, in some instances, the choice to dedicate oneself to being consumed with a child's care was, indeed, a way to resist the other demands of marriage or motherhood, but, perhaps, just as often, such choices were acts of surrender—combining intention and relinquishment—to being shaped by a child's needs and one's capability to respond to them.

---

[95] Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Brenna Moore, *Sacred Dread: Raissa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival, 1904-1955* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012); and Tracy Fessenden, *Religion Around Billie Holiday* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018).

The readiness with which mid-century commentators repudiated choices of this sort emphasizes the extent to which, for many, the postwar embrace of "mental retardation" as a population and set of social problems was also a gesture of containment, one aimed at ensuring the direction of influence between persons deemed "mentally handicapped" and those around was singular. We see how, in many ways, the project of this population's rehabilitation was contingent upon everyone else getting to remain—in the language of John Frank's question—"a normal human being."

Conclusion

In 1960, Sigurd Petersen, the chaplain at a large, recently-established residential institution for persons with cognitive disabilities in Parsons, Kansas, declared in his book *Retarded Children, God's Children* that "the problem of mental retardation is deeply religious, and we must seek to deal with it."[369] Such a claim certainly might be expected from a religious professional. Petersen made it as part of a call for the expansion of work like his own in providing religious education for persons with cognitive disabilities. However, as this dissertation has demonstrated, the basic thrust of Petersen's assertion encapsulated a broad—if heterogeneous—consensus among many postwar Americans about the resonance and relevance of cognitive impairment as a moral and social matter. Indeed, there were few among prominent advocates for persons with cognitive disabilities who would not assent to this basic characterization in the decade and a half that followed the Second World War.

As we have seen, the "deeply religious" nature of "the problem of mental retardation" might be appraised in various ways. It could be sketched in terms of the significance of such persons' treatment for proving Americans' alignment with divine purposes. Reform in this arena was announced as an indication of enlightened progress, brotherhood, and America's "glories."[370] The religious character of this "problem" might also be assessed in terms of interpretations of cognitive impairment that took marked incapacity as a sign pointing toward forms of value and power beyond the this-worldly. Along this front, mid-century commentators and advocates often identified the

[369] Sigurd Petersen, *Retarded Children, God's Children* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 110.
[370] Sr. Mary Theodore, *The Challenge of the Retarded Child* (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1963), 5.

"exceptional" as figures uniquely positioned between the human and the suprahuman. We've also seen how representations of the experience of parenting children with cognitive disabilities located these forms of difference within broader paradigms of spiritual striving and capacitation that were ubiquitous in postwar popular culture.

Throughout this project, I have emphasized how such a consensus about the religious resonance(s) of "mental retardation" often underwrote what other scholars have rightly described as the remaking of cognitive disability in the postwar era. I have insisted that mid-century Americans "morally absolved" these forms of difference, as one scholar has put it, in contrast to a recent eugenic past, by elaborating them as *morally conductive*, as media by which putatively "non-exceptional" persons might negotiate their relations with the modern world and what they imagined beyond it.[371] As I have shown, these elaborations enabled parents of children with cognitive disabilities and many of their peers to contest regnant assumptions about persons with cognitive impairments and to challenge some of the authority held by medical and other professionals. They provided means to insist upon forms of knowledge and agency that were not reducible to diagnosed deficits. They carved out new social space.

And yet, as the final chapter of this project illustrates, the story I have aimed to tell should not be understood simply as one in which some actors mobilized religious perspectives and resources against non-religious authorities or assumptions. Instead, I have highlighted how many "mental deficiency" professionals were equally persuaded that "the problem of mental retardation" was a religious one, in the sense that many of these figures understood themselves to be responsible for adjudicating parents' beliefs

[371] Ann Hamill, "Two Moral Universes: The Social Problem of Idiots from 1845 to 1855 and Mentally Retarded Sons and Daughters from 1945 to 1955," (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008).

about their children with cognitive disabilities and the sorts of relations those beliefs occasioned.

To make claims about "mental retardation" was, for my subjects, to engage a host of political and existential questions about identity, social reproduction, and human being. Such engagements were often strategic and moved in multiple directions: they helped to support arguments for social resources for persons with cognitive impairments; they helped to bolster parents and professionals' authority at different turns; and they could reinforce various constituencies' senses of themselves. In describing engagements of this sort, I have sought to leverage a particular account and a particular set of sources to underscore the often generative entanglements of religion and cognitive disability—the ways that, to return to Julie Livingston's language, constructions and experiences of impairment often spur the moral imaginations of social collectives toward different questions and ends.[372] In doing so, I hope to have accomplished some spurring of my own, namely, toward more sustained attention within the study of American religion to the differences human communities deem "exceptional" and the effects of their description.

[372] Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

Bibliography

Archival Collections Cited and Consulted

Cardinal Cushing Centers, Hanover, MA
Unprocessed Archives, Clippings, Records

Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Boston, MA
Clemens E. Benda papers

Indiana Historical Society, Library Manuscript Collection
Grace Conway manuscript, History of Noble Industries

Noble Industries, Indianapolis IN
Unprocessed Archives, Clippings, Records

The ARC, Washington, D.C.
Unprocessed Archives, Clippings, Records

Sisters of the Holy Family Archives, Fremont, CA

Sisters of St. Francis Archives, Milwaukee, WI

United Methodist Archives and History Center, NJ
Records of Health and Welfare Ministries Division of the General Board of Global Ministries

Periodicals

Children Limited, 1952-1965
Little Pages, 1951-1964
Not Alone (Indiana Association for Retarded Children Newsletter), 1955-1965
American Journal of Mental Deficiency 1945-1965

Digital Databases

Catholic News Archive
ProQuest Historical Newspapers
ProQuest Women's Magazine Archive

Primary Sources

"Abp. Cushing Celebrates Feast of Portiuncula." *Daily Boston Globe*, 3 August 1956, 4.
Abraham, Willard. *Barbara: A Prologue*. New York: Rinehart and Co., 1958.
Adams, Marjory. "Retarded Children Theme of Picture at Orpheum," *The Boston Globe*, 18 January 1963, 15.
Allen, Charles. "'Angel Unaware' Lifts the Heart." *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 March 1953, 4.

Astor, Gerald. "Out of the Shadows." *Look Magazine* (February 10, 1953): 21-24.
Auxilium, Miriam. "Helping Hands Bring Awareness of God to Holy Innocents," *The Monitor*, 22 August 1958, 4S.
---------. "You Can Assist These Handicapped Children." *The Monitor*, 19 August 1960, 17S.
Bakwin, Harry. "Informing the Parents of the Mentally Retarded Child." *Journal of Pediatrics* 44 (1954): 486-498.
Baskette, Kirtley. "The Gift of Debbie." *Good Housekeeping* 160.3 (March 1965): 92-93; 190; 192; 194; 196.
Behrmann, E. and M. Ann Dolores, ed. *Directory of Catholic Special Facilities and Programs in the United States for Handicapped Children and Adults*, fourth edition. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 1965.
Benda, Clemens. *Mongolism and Cretinism*. New York: Grune and Stratton, 1949.
---------. *Down's Syndrome: Mongolism and its Management.* New York: Grune and Stratton, 1969.
Bettleheim, Bruno. *Love is Not Enough: The Treatment of Emotionally Disturbed Children.* Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950.
Blanchard, Pierre, ed. *Spiritual Guide for Our Times*. Pittsburg: Holy Ghost Fathers, 1955.
Breitenbeck, Gerard. *Confession for the Retarded*. Liguori, MO: Liguorian-Queen's Work Pamphlets, 1958.
Boyd, Dan. "The Three Stages in the Growth of the Parent of a Mentally Retarded Child." *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 55 (1950-51): 608-611
Cassavettes, John, dir. *A Child is Waiting*. United Artists, 1963.
"Catholics Schools for Retarded Triple in 5 Years." *The Monitor*, 22 August 1958, 5S.
"Chit-Chat." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 8 April 1950, 11.
"Congressman Says Example of Archbishop Was One of Things That Stimulated His Own Interest In Retarded Children." *National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service*, 28 March 1955, 2.
Connell, Francis. "Holy Communion for Mentally Deficient Children." *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 121 (September 1954): 199.
Crowther, Bosley. "Social Drama is Painful but Compelling." *The New York Times*, 16 February 1963, 5.
Davis, Elsie Miller. *The Answer is God: The Inspiring Personal Story of Dale Evans and Roy Rogers*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1955.
"Days of Blessings," *Boston Pilot*, 7 August 1954, 8.
Doll, Edgar. *The Measurement of Social Competence: A Manual for the Vineland Social Maturity Scale.* Minneapolis: Educational Publishers, 1953.
"Don't Speak to Us of Living Death (as told to Robert Robinson)." *Today's Health* 29.6 (June 1951): 24-27, 52, 54.
Dybwad, Gunnar. "Farewell Address [October 26, 1963]." *Disability History Museum*. https://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=2233 (accessed January 22, 2020).
Eckardt, A. Roy. *The Surge of Piety in America, An Appraisal.* New York: Association Press, 1958.
"'Exceptional Children' Given Christlike Home." *The Pilot*, 6 November 1954, 22.
Frank, John. *My Son's Story.* New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1952.

French, Edward and J. Clifford Scott. *Child in the Shadows*: *A Manual for Parents of Retarded Children*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1960.
Furnas, J.C. and Helen. "Ill-finished Children." *The Saturday Evening Post*. (December 29, 1945): 17.
Garrison, Maxine. *The Angel Spreads Her Wings: The Inspiration of* Angel Unaware *and the Influence of the Roy Rogers Family in the American Home.* Westwood, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1956.
Glenn, Larry. "Sharp Focus on Troubled Youth." *New York Times*, 18 February 1962, X9.
Goodenough, Florence. *Exceptional Children.* New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1956.
Gordon, Arthur. *One Man's Way: The Story and Message of Norman Vincent Peale, Minister to Millions.* Pawling, N.Y.: Foundation for Christian Living, 1972.
Hanousek, Mary Eunice. *A New Assisi: The First Hundred Years of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1849-1949.* Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1948.
"Happy with their Shepherd." *St. Louis Register,* 24 April 1953, 1.
Hauser, Mary. "Working with Mentally Retarded People." *The American Journal of Nursing* 53.7 (July 1953): 822-825.
Hegeman, Mary Theodore. *The Challenge of the Retarded Child.* St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1963.
High, Stanley. "Forgotten Children No Longer." *Reader's Digest* (Sept. 1960): 121-123.
Hyams, Joe. "'I Was Unemployable': Judy Garland Back in Movie Swim." *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 February 1962, 14.
International News Service, "Roy and Dale Tell Story of Doomed Tot." *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 March 1953, 14A.
Jenks, William, ed. *The Atypical Child, Proceedings of the Second Annual Workshop on Special Education of the Exceptional Child*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954.
---------.*The Forgotten Ones: Third Annual Workshop on Special Education of the Exceptional Child.* Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955.
Kanner, Leo. "Parents' Feelings About Retarded Children." *American Journal of Mental Deficiency* 57 (1952): 375-383.
Katz, Alfred. *Parents of the Handicapped: Self-Organized Parents' and Relatives' Groups for the Treatment of Ill and Handicapped Children.* Springfield, Ill.: Charles Thomas, 1961.
Lamb, Francine. "The Establishment of a St. Coletta School for Retarded Boys in the Archdiocese of Chicago." MA thesis, Loyola University of Chicago, 1952.
Laycock, S.R. "Helping Parents to Accept Their Exceptional Children." *Exceptional Children* 18.5 (February 1952): 129-132, 160.
Leeds, Claire. "For a More Reverent Season." *San Francisco Examiner*, 29 November 1959, 7.
Levinson, Abraham. *The Mentally Retarded Child: A Guide for Parents.* New York: Day, 1952.
"Love is Not Enough," *Time* (February 8, 1963): 66.
Mann, Abby. *A Child is Waiting*. New York: Popular Library, 1963.
McDonald, Eugene. *Understand Those Feelings: A Guide for Parents of Handicapped Children and Everyone Who Counsels Them*. Pittsburg: Stanwix House, 1962.
Miller, William A. *Piety along the Potomac; Notes on Politics and Morals in the Fifties.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964.
Morriss, Frank. "Film About Retarded is Unfliching but Kind." *The Globe and Mail*, 18 January 1963, 42.

Murray, Dorothy. *This is Steve's Story.* Elgin, Ill: Brethren Publishing House, 1956.
O'Connor, John. "Nativity Relived—By 'Least of These.'" *The Monitor*, 18 December 1953, 1.
Owens, Betty. "Malformed Child Brings Tragic Joy." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 22 March 1953, 94.
Owens, Joseph. "God's Exceptional Children*." America* (April 26, 1958): 136-138.
Peale, Norman Vincent. *A Guide to Confident Living*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948.
---------. *The Power of Positive Thinking.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1952.
---------. "How to Handle a Handicap." *The Pittsburg Press*, 3 June 1956, 148.
Petersen, Sigurd. *Retarded Children, God's Children.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
"Portiuncula Chapel." *The St. Louis Register*, 13 August 1954, 9
"Reasons Why Parents Organized," Parallels in Time: A History of Developmental Disabilities," http://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels/five/5a/6.html (accessed December 12, 2019).
Roberts, Jesse. "There Can Be Strength in Tragedy." *Together* (April 1960): 21-22, 24.
Rogers, Dale Evans. *Angel Unaware*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1953.
---------. *My Spiritual Diary.* Westwood, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1955.
---------. *Christmas is Always.* Westwood, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1958.
---------. *Dearest Debbie*. Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1965.
---------. *Where He Leads*. Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1974.
Rogers, Dale Evans and Floyd Thatcher. *The Home Stretch*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986.
Rogers, Roy and Dale Evans, with Jane and Michael Stern. *Happy Trails: Our Life Story*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
Schmalzried, B.R. *Sunshine: A Slow Miracle*. Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1965.
Schreiber, Flora Rheta. "A Retarded Child's Mother," *Cosmopolitan*. (May 1955): 58-61.
Skinner, Thomas. *Instructional Manual for First Communion of God's Holy Innocents*. New Hartford, NY: St. John the Evangelist Church, 1959.
Slaughter, Stella. *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Parent.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960.
Stern, Edith and Elsa Castendyck. *The Handicapped Child: A Guide for Parents.* New York: A.A. Wyn, 1950.
"Stone Arrives for Use in Portiuncula Chapel Replica in Bay State." *The Catholic Advance*, 3 July 1953, 7.
Stout, Lucille. *I Reclaimed My Child: The Story of a Family into which a Retarded Child was Born.* Philadelphia: Chilton Co., 1959.
Thuring, Paul. Letter to the editor, *Jersey Journal*, 4 April 1955, 26.
---------. Letter to the editor, *The Advocate: Official Publication of the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J. and Diocese of Patterson N.J.*, 10 December 1959, 11.
"'Unless You Become as Little Children.'" *St. Louis Register*, 25 December 1953, 4.
Waterman, John. "Psychogenic Factors in Parental Acceptance of Feebleminded Children." *Diseases of the Nervous System* 9 (June 1948): 184-187.
Willett, Ruth Gans. Letter to the editor. *The Courier-Journal*, 11 March 1953, 8.
Wilson, Teresa. "The Martyr Parent." *Seventeen*. (March 1950): 31-32.
Wissuchek, Mary Elodie. "The Development of the Lt. Joseph Kennedy Jr. School for Exceptional Children." MA thesis, Cardinal Stritch College, 1965.
Young, Bryan. *Meant for Heaven: A Little Girl's Journey to Paradise*. Springville, UT: Cedar Fort Publishing, 2017.
Zwerling, Israel. "Initial Counseling of Parents with Mentally Retarded Children." *Journal of Pediatrics* 44 (April 1954): 469-79.

Secondary Sources

Abel, Emily. *Hearts of Wisdom: American Women Caring for Kin, 1850-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Adams, Rachel and David Serlin. "Disability." In *Keywords for Disability Studies*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Ahlstrom, Sydney. *A Religious History of the American People.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972.

Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

---------.*The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Appleby, R. Scott and Kathleen Sprows Cummings, ed. *Catholics and the American Century: Recasting Narratives of U.S.* History. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Baynton, Douglas. *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Berger, James. *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and Narratives of Modernity.* New York: New York University Press, 2014.

Blias, Madeline. *The Heart Is an Instrument: Portraits in Journalism*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

Brockley, Janice. "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Parents, Professionals, and Children with Intellectual Disabilities, 1910-1965." PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2001.

---------. "Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Ideologies of Parenting and Intellectual Disability in American History." In *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, ed. James Trent and Steven Noll, 130-164. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

---------. "Martyred Mothers and Merciful Fathers: Exploring Disability and Motherhood in the Lives of Jerome Greenfield and Raymond Repouille." In *The New Disability History: American* Perspectives, ed. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky, 239-312. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Buescher, John. *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth Century Religious Experience.* Boston: Skinner House, 2004.

Carey, Alison. *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Civil Rights in Twentieth-Century.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.

Carlson, Licia. *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Carney, Ray, ed. *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*. London: Faber, 2001.

Castles, Katherine. "Little 'Tardies': Mental Retardation, Race, and Class in American Society, 1945-1965." PhD diss., Duke University, 2006.

---------. "'Nice, Average Americans: Postwar Parents' Groups and the Defense of the Normal Family." In *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, ed. James Trent and Steven Noll, 351-370. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
Chen, Mel. "'The Stuff of Slow Constitution': Reading Down Syndrome for Race, Disability and the Timing that Makes Them So." *Somatechnics* 6.2 (2016): 235-248.
Chidester, David. *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
Cohen, Adam. *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck.* New York: Penguin, 2016.
Cohen, Lawrence. *No Aging in India: Alzheimer's, the Bad Family, and Other Modern Things.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
Cummings, Kathleen Sprows. *New Women of the Old Faith:Gender and American Catholicism in the Progressive Era.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
Davis, Lennard. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. New York: Verso, 1995.
Dayton, Cornelia. "'The Oddest Man that I Ever Saw,': Assessing Cognitive Disability on Eighteenth-Century Cape Cod." *Journal of Social History* 49.1 (2015): 77-99.
Deutsch, Nathaniel. *Inventing America's Worst Family: Eugenics, Islam and the Fall and Rise of the Tribe of Ishmael.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
Dole, Christopher. *Healing Secular Life: Loss and Devotion in Modern Turkey.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* New York: Routledge, 2002.
Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
Elder, Rachel. "Safe Seizures, Schoolyard Stoics, and the Making of Contained Citizens at Detroit's School for Epileptic Children, 1935-1956." *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 7.3 (2014): 432-461.
Engelke, Matthew and Matt Tomlinson, ed. *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*. London: Berghahn Books, 2006.
Fessenden, Tracy. *Religion Around Billie Holiday*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018.
---------. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
Fine, Janice. "Catalysts for Change: Parents of the Handicapped, 1930-1960." PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 1989.
Friedner, Michelle. *Valuing Deaf Worlds in Urban India.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015.
Gaston, K. Healon. *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
George, Carol. *God's Salesman, Norman Vincent People and the Power of Positive Thinking.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
Ginsburg, Faye and Rayna Rapp. "Reverberations: Disability and the New Kinship Imaginary." *Anthropological Quarterly* 84.2 (2011): 379-410.

---------. “Family.” In *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
Gloege, Timothy. “Faith Healing, Medical Regulation, and Public Religion in Progressive Era Chicago.” *Religion and American Culture* 23.2 (2013): 185-231.
Goode, David. “And Now Let’s Build a Better World: The Story of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, New York City, 1948-1998.” Unpublished manuscript, 1998.
Gutierrez, Cathy. *Plato’s Ghost: Spiritualism and the American Renaissance.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
Hamdy, Sherine. *Our Bodies Belong to God: Organ Transplants, Islam, and the Struggle for Human Dignity in Egypt.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
Hamill, Ann. “Two Moral Universes: The Social Problem of Idiots from 1845 to 1855 and Mentally Retarded Sons and Daughters from 1945 to 1955.” PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008.
Hardyment, Christina. *Perfect Parents: Baby Advice Past and Present.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
Heinz, Andrew. *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
Hirschkind, Charles. “Is There a Secular Body?.” *Cultural Anthropology* 26.4 (2011): 633-647.
Imhoff, Sarah. “Why Disability Studies Needs to Take Religion Seriously.” *Religions* 8 (2017).
Johnson, Barbara. “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion.” *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 29-47.
Jones, Kathleen. “Education for Children with Mental Retardation: Parent Activism, Public Policy, and Family Ideology in the 1950s.” In *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, ed. James Trent and Steven Noll, 322-350. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
Jones, Larry. *Doing Disability Justice: 75 Years of Family Advocacy.* Lulu Press, 2010.
Jordan, Mark. *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
Kittay, Eva. *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency.* New York: Routledge, 1999.
Klassen, Pamela. *Spirits of Protestantism: Medicine, Healing, and Liberal Chrisitanity.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
Klein, Jennifer and Eileen Boris. *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
Knadler, Stephen. “Exceptional Minds, Unstated Exceptions: Intellectual Disability and Post-War Racial Liberalism in African American ‘White Life’ Novels.” *Studies in American Fiction* 43.2 (Fall 2016): 231-257.
Kranson, Rachel. *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.
Kruse, Kevin. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.
Kulick, Don and Jens Rydström. *Loneliness and its Opposite: Sex, Disability, and the Ethics of Engagements.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
Kwilecki, Susan. “Ghosts, Meaning, and Faith: After-Death Communications in Bereavement Narratives.” *Death Studies* 35.3 (2011): 219-243.

Lane, Christopher. *Surge of Piety: Norman Vincent Peale and the Remaking of American Religious Life.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.
Langford, Jean. *Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exile*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
Leon, Sharon. *An Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
Livingston, Julie. *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
Lofton, Kathryn. "Religion and the Authority in American Parenting." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84.3 (September 2016): 806-841.
---------. "Resurgent Christianity," *American Literary History* 30.1 (Spring 2018): 177-187.
---------. *Consuming Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
Longmore, Paul. *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
Lum, Kathryn Gin. "The Historyless Heathen and the Stagnating Pagan: History as Non-Native Category?." *Religion and American Culture* 28.1 (Winter 2019): 52-91.
Mahmood, Saba. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
Marty, Martin. *Modern American Religion, Volume 3: Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
Mattingly, Cheryl. *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril, and the Struggle for a Good Life.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2014.
May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 4th edition. New York: Basic Books, 2017.
McDannell, Colleen. *The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America.* New York: Basic Books, 2011.
McDonagh, Patrick. *Idiocy: A Cultural History.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.
McGuinness, Margaret and James Fisher, ed. *Roman Catholicism in the United States: A Thematic History*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.
McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability.* New York: New York University Press, 2006.
Metzler, Irina. *Fools and Idiots?: Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016.
Meyer, Donald. *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth, and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.
Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder. *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015.
Modern, John Lardas. *Secularism in Antebellum America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
Moore, Brenna. *Sacred Dread: Raissa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival, 1904-1955.* South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012.
Mulder, Mark and Gerardo Martí. *The Glass Church: Robert H. Schuller, The Crystal Cathedral, and the Strain of Megachurch Ministry.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020.

Nakamura, Karen. *A Disability of the Soul: An Ethnography of Schizophrenia and Mental Illness in Contemporary Japan.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013.
Nielsen, Kim. *A Disability History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.
Opp, James. *The Lord for the Body: Religion, Medicine and Protestant Faith Healing in Canada, 1880-1930.* Montreal: McGill University Press, 2005.
Ordover, N. *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
Orsi, Robert. *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
---------. "The Infant of Prague's Nightie: The Devotional Origins of Contemporary Catholic Memory." *US Catholic Historian* 21.2 (Spring 2003): 1-18.
---------. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious World's People Make and the Scholars who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
Osborne, Catherine. *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow: Building Churches for the Future, 1925-1975.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
Petigny, Alan. *The Permissive Society*: *America 1941-1965*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
Petro, Anthony. "Bob Flanagan's Crip Catholicism: Transgression and Form in Lived Religion." *American Religion* 1.2 (2020): 1-26.
---------. *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
Plant, Rebecca Jo. *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
Puccinelli, Patricia. *Yardsticks: Retarded Characters and their Roles in Fiction.* New York: P. Lang, 1995
Rabinow, Paul. *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
Ribovich, Leslie. "The Production of Judeo-Christianity in New York City Public Schools: Religion, Race, and Moral Education, 1950-1969." PhD diss., Princeton University, 2017.
Rodríguez-Hernández, M. Luisa and Eladio Montoya. "Fifty Years of Evolution of the Term Down's Syndrome." *The Lancet* 378.9789 (2011): 402.
Rose, Sarah. *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability, 1840s-1930s.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.
Rosenberg, Charles. "Introduction: Framing Disease: Illness, Society, and History." In *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History*, ed. Charles Rosenberg and Janet Golden, xiii-xxvi. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
Rouse, Carolyn. "'If She's a Vegetable, We'll Be Her Garden': Embodiment, Transcendence, and Citations of Competing Cultural Metaphors in the Case of a Dying Child." *American Ethnologist* 31.4 (2004): 514-529.
Schultz, Carrie. "Do This in Memory of Me: American Catholicism and First Communion Customs in the Era of *Quam Singulari*." *American Catholic Studies* 115.2 (2004): 45-66.
Schultz, Kevin. *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held America to its Protestant Promise*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
Schweik, Susan. *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Seeman, Erik. *Speaking with Dead in Early America.* Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 2019.
Seitz, John. "Altars of Ammo: Catholic Materiality and the Visual Culture of World War II." *Material Religion* 15.4 (2019): 401-432.
Sherwood, Timothy. *The Rhetorical Leadership of Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent People, and Billy Graham in the Age of Extremes.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013.
Shorter, Edward. *The Kennedy Family and the Story of Mental Retardation.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.
Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.
Silverman, Chloe. *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
Stanley, Erinn. "Sensing Exclusions: Disability and the Protestant Worship Environment." In *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally Promey. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
Starr, Paul. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine.* New York: Basic Books, 1982.
Stern, Alexandra Minna. *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
Stiker, Henri-Jacques. *A History of Disability.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.
Taves, Ann. *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
---------. *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths.* Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016.
Terry, Jennifer. "'Momism' and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals." In *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, 169-190. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
Titchkosky, Tanya. *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.
Titley, Brian. *Into Service and Servitude: How American Girls Became Nuns, 1945-1965.* Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017.
Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
Tremain, Shelley, ed. *Foucault and the Government of Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015.
Trent, James. *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
Weinstein, Deborah. *The Pathological Family*: *Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013.
Weisenfeld, Judith. *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
Wenger, Tisa. *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
White, Raymond E. *King of the Cowboys, Queen of the West: Roy Rogers and Dale Evans.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2005.
Williams, Peter. *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Woodcock, Leslie Tentler. *American Catholics: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
Zoanni, Tyler. "Appearances of Disability and Christianity in Uganda." *Cultural Anthropology* 34.3 (2019): 444-470.