SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR ADULTS WITH ASPERGER’S SYNDROME

by

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A minor thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology

MELBOURNE COLLEGE OF DIVINITY
26 February 2010
ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the topic of providing spiritual direction within the Catholic tradition for adults with the disability Asperger’s Syndrome who seek help from people ministering in the field of spiritual direction. The writer undertook a literature search to establish the key findings of the investigation. The focus of this literature search was in the following fields: studies in theology of disability; psychological studies in the disability, Asperger’s Syndrome; studies of the Catholic tradition of spiritual direction and Christian meditation; some recent literature that investigates the spirituality of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. The investigation from this literature search enabled the writer to develop a set of key findings to establish a framework for spiritual direction for people who live with the disability Asperger’s Syndrome. The author believes that from his research, little has been written on this area and the findings are therefore exploratory in nature, and it is hoped they will lead to further investigation in the future.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Rev. Dr Cormac Nagle OFM, DCL, my supervisor, who has guided my path in the development of this thesis. His wisdom, guidance and encouragement in tackling this topic have been greatly appreciated.

To Rev. Dr Michael A. Kelly CSsR, the Postgraduate Coordinator at Yarra Theological Union, who has always provided me with sound advice and clear direction in managing the rules and regulations that one needs to know about in the development of a thesis.

To my brother Gerry Naughtin for his support and encouragement for this thesis.
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Introduction

The understanding of the spiritual needs of people with the disability Asperger’s Syndrome is an area that has received little attention with spiritual writers. Like all humans, people with Asperger’s Syndrome search for meaning in their lives and try to make sense of the circumstances of their own lives. The problems many of them can have with communication makes it difficult to discover what their spiritual needs are. However, a new interest in the specific spiritual needs of people with Asperger’s Syndrome is emerging. This thesis explores the implications of understanding the inner lives of people with Asperger’s Syndrome for pastoral workers in Catholic Church communities with responsibility for providing spiritual guidance and direction. By investigating the personal and spiritual journey of Christian adults with Asperger’s Syndrome, it draws attention to the need many may have for spiritual direction. It offers a framework for spiritual direction for people with Asperger’s Syndrome and a guide to the development of further practice in this area.

My interest in undertaking this study has grown out of my reflections on my many years as a teacher of students with special needs, some with Asperger’s Syndrome and my interest in their particular journeys in coming to know and understand who they are and their relationship with God. On reflecting on this experience, I became aware that many people involved in spiritual guidance are uncertain or ignorant about how to best offer guidance and support for people with this disability. The investigations I have undertaken for this thesis indicate that there is very little information on this topic within the Catholic tradition of spiritual direction. I was not able to identify any authors within the tradition who have taken up this particular line of investigation,
although there is a growing interest in theology of disability within the Catholic community in Australia.

The methodology for this study involved an examination of the literature in a number of areas: traditional approaches to spiritual direction; studies in the emerging field of theology of disability; psychology studies on Asperger’s Syndrome and its management; studies in spirituality and Asperger’s Syndrome from outside the Catholic tradition and studies on spirituality and religious faith for health and well-being. The findings of this study are drawn from these inter-disciplinary sources and represent tentative findings that require further investigation and study. The analysis of this literature suggests that people with Asperger’s Syndrome have unique patterns of seeing and understanding spiritual life. I have used the findings from this literature review to propose guidelines for spiritual direction for people ministering to this group of people. The method adopted is considered the most appropriate given the lack of writings on this subject in the Catholic tradition and the inter-disciplinary nature of the investigations and analysis.

This thesis explores ways of providing spiritual direction to people with Asperger’s Syndrome by drawing on the literature of theology of disability, the psychological literature on Asperger’s Syndrome and some writings of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. The spiritual journey of people with Asperger’s Syndrome is affected by the nature of their disability and their relationships and learning patterns. These particular relational and learning characteristics need to be better understood so that people with Asperger’s Syndrome can be more fully included into the life of the Catholic community and their pastoral needs met. The findings offer some important
insights into the ways in which spiritual direction may be adapted to meet the learning and emotional needs of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. The study and scope of this subject is by nature exploratory. However, it provides some important insights for spiritual directors and guidelines for further study. It has been undertaken as a contribution to knowledge and pastoral practice in an area that has received insufficient attention in Australia.

Chapter One of the thesis investigates an emerging discipline within theology, called theology of disability, and the inclusion of people with disabilities into the Catholic Church community. It explores the ways that disability is framed within contemporary sociological and theological thinking of disability. The central issue of inclusion and access for people with Asperger’s Syndrome in the life of the Church is discussed. The important issue of how people with Asperger’s Syndrome can find meaning, purpose and spiritual direction in their lives through the Christian message is investigated. Chapter Two of the thesis provides an overview of the disability of Asperger’s Syndrome and investigates what psychological research shows about the causes, the diagnosis and the difficulties of living with the disability. This review is necessary if the emotional and learning profiles of people with Asperger’s Syndrome are to be understood by spiritual directors. It provides the basis for my argument that traditional spiritual direction should be adapted to the specific needs of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. Chapter Three of the thesis investigates the literature I used to understand the learning, emotional and spiritual needs of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. This literature provides first hand accounts from the lives of individuals living with Asperger’s Syndrome. The chapter also investigates recent studies in religion and well-being for people with disabilities. Chapter Four investigates the
process of spiritual direction within the Catholic tradition and how spiritual direction can be adapted to suit adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. It also explores the importance of meditation in this process. Chapter Five presents the key findings from the literature search and proposes a framework for spiritual directors in dealing with people with Asperger’s Syndrome.
CHAPTER ONE  THEOLOGY OF DISABILITY AND INCLUSION

1.1 Theological Framing of Disability – Inclusion and Access

The research I have undertaken for this thesis has been set within the context of a theological understanding of disability. In previous generations theological reflection on disability, disease, suffering was set within the context of the problem of suffering and how the Christian message of God’s redemptive plan in Christ brings hope and healing to the individual sufferer. New theological understandings of disability have emerged in recent decades that place reflection on theology and disability within the larger perspective of the social and political movements for disability rights since the 1960’s. This reflection is often referred to as theology of disability. Many attempts at theological reflection on disability today are done within this context. J. Weiss Bloch, a theologian who writes on disability, states:

it is demeaning and impossible to theologize or minister to people with disabilities without understanding the experiences and culture from which they come.¹

Furthermore, other theological writers reflect on the personal struggle of the individual to find meaning in their experience of disability. My discussion of theology of disability will include both aspects.

The struggle for liberation and transformation of the lives of people with disabilities emerged out of the disability rights movement in the 1960’s when people with disabilities enter history with greater visibility and a new vision for their lives.² At this time people with disabilities began to demand a place in mainstream society. In the

² Ibid.,55
United States and other Western countries many governments over succeeding decades passed laws to enshrine the rights of people with disabilities. This enabled people with disabilities the opportunity to express their desire for independence, equality and full inclusion into all aspects of life.³ Weiss Bloch shows that the key philosophical ideas of the disability movement were: the principle of normalization – the right to have the same patterns and conditions of everyday life as mainstream society; the principle of self determination- the process of taking control of one’s life, achieve self-defined goals; the principle of inclusion-being a valued member of the community and the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of community life.⁴

Nancy Eiesland, an American Protestant theologian writing in the field of theology of disability, shows that the other aspect of the experience of living with a disability is the social environment that devalues and discriminates against people with disabilities. Society wide structures of marginalization and discrimination can be a fact of life for many with disabilities.⁵ These processes in society constrain the capacity of people with disabilities to manage positive impressions of themselves and they become stigmatized and “they are marked as bearers of what Goffman identified as a spoiled identity.”⁶ So often the dominant culture focuses on norms of attractiveness, independence, self sufficiency and productivity and avoids the two great fears humans have – we are not perfect and we are not in control.⁷ Such attitudes

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³ Ibid., 71
⁴ Ibid., 74-5
⁶ Ibid., 59
⁷ J. Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting*, 37
in society lead to the stereotyping of people with disabilities and the oppression by society of their aspirations for a fuller life.\(^8\)

In summary, this important contemporary perspective of disability explores two central themes: the way social structures discriminate against people with disabilities; the challenge of inclusion of people with disabilities into mainstream society based on their human rights for independence and self-determination.

In the context of the Catholic Church, the implications of this thinking are important for the life of the Church. The Church should, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, provide a liberatory access to all and should be a show place of God’s love, mercy and compassion. The Gospel of Jesus is a Gospel of access for all, especially those on the margins of the society.\(^9\) Many people with disabilities have some experience of exclusion from many Church communities in the past and even today. Because Jesus was always the one who identified with the outsider, the lack of access for people with disabilities narrows the ability of the Church to respond to its mission.\(^10\) Weiss Block sums this view up well:

>a theology of access acknowledges that our commitment to inclusion is not because we are being generous or good Christians, but because it is a Gospel mandate. A theology of access demands that we accept that God is not accessible to us on our terms and that making a place and a space for others, even and especially people of exclusion, is one of the basic requirements of Christian life. A theology of access demands we search our communities with truth and face the serious reality that some of the people of God have been systematically denied access to the community.\(^11\)

\(^8\) Ibid.,42
\(^9\) Ibid.,120
\(^10\) Ibid.,121
\(^11\) Ibid.,122
My thesis explores the applications that this theology of access should have for people with Asperger’s Syndrome who seek spiritual direction from Catholic Church ministers.

1.2 Disability and the Search for Meaning

The second strand of theology of disability explores important theological reflection that tries to understand the meaning of disability in God’s plan of creation and redemption. I plan to use three sources for this discussion: in the living Word of God in the Scriptures; in Catholic teachings on the status of persons with disabilities within the Christian community; through the writings of Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche.

1.3 Disability and the Scriptures

This section explores some important insights that the Scriptures can provide in understanding disabling conditions. Nancy Eiesland points out that the attitude towards people with disabilities in the Scriptures is a complex one. In her discussion of the Christian interpretation of disability, she shows that key biblical passages have conflicting messages about the theological significance of disability and points to “the persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero.”¹² She believes it is important to examine these passages to show the way they have been used to provide comfort to people with disabilities, but also to show how they have been used to discriminate against people with disabilities within ecclesial institutions.

¹² N.Eisland, *The Disabled God*, 70
1.3.1 Biblical Sources - The Hebrew Scriptures

In this section, I want to explore the insights the Sacred Scriptures can bring to understanding disability within a creation that God has created as good. The Hebrew Scriptures contain a number of different explanations to explain why things go wrong in the world – why there is evil, why God’s good creation is not as it should be, why people become ill, disabled. A full analysis of this theme is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I want to discuss some insights briefly.

There are three fundamental tendencies in the interpretation of suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first one shows suffering and death as a punishment for sin. The Book of Genesis (Gen 1-11) presents the causal connection between suffering and death and God’s retribution for sin. The link between moral impurity and punishment in the form of physical disability is a common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. Leviticus 21: 17-23 prohibits anyone “blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes” from the priestly activities of bringing offerings to God or entering the most holy place in the temple. Such a passage has historically been used to stop people with disabilities from positions of authority in the Church.

Blindness and other afflictions can appear to be punishment for misdeeds.

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14 Ibid.
15 N.Eiesland, The Disabled God, 71
16 Stewart Govic, Strong At The Broken Places- Persons with Disabilities and the Church (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) 22 In the OT other passages have this link. Deut 5: 9-10 – guilt of parents is avenged on their children. Num 21:6 – God punishes the chosen people for their misdeeds and snakes are sent which bit at the Lord’s command. In the NT the elderly Zechariah was silenced because he lacked faith in the angel’s promise (Lk1: 8-25)
However, other writers came to understand these afflictions in other ways. The second tendency is to present the absurdity and meaninglessness of suffering. The Book of Job is a key text in this context and a reaction to the idea of the link between sin and suffering and it offers what has been described as “the ancient’s world’s most significant theodicy and still one of the best ever written” on the problem of evil. This book dealt with the mystery of innocent suffering and challenged one of the most commonly held views of the day that people suffer because of evil they have done.

R.A.F. McKenzie, in his commentary on the Book of Job, shows that this doctrine of divine retribution for sin has a long life in the Bible and refers to one such passage in the Gospel of John (Jn 9:1-3) where the disciples of Jesus believe that the blind man or his parents must have sinned to cause the blind man to lose his sight. The Book of Job shows that the problem of God’s justice is wrongly put and that God may have other purposes in allowing suffering than the exercise of retributive justice when tragedy strikes. The writer of the Book uses the three wise friends of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar to present the defence of the traditional case for suffering. McKenzie shows that their mistake is to believe that all the workings of God are clear to them and Job’s sufferings are because of something he has done wrong. Job asserts his innocence many times in the book against all the arguments presented by his friends to explain his fall into destitution. He insists that the explanation of his problem must be found in God, not Job (Job19:28). Job forces his friends to consider that they were wrong and that there is innocent suffering and suffering might not be retribution for evil committed.

17 R. Michiels, Jesus and Suffering, 33
The climax in the Book of Job comes in the famous speech where God speaks from the whirlwind and states: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38:4). The author of the book of Job comes to the conclusion that God is simply beyond human ability to understand and for some inexplicable reason, a God who could prevent innocent suffering allows it. Therefore, humans can only trust that he cares for them and somehow innocent suffering fits into a larger plan that God has for humans. So Job concludes:

Therefore, I uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. (Job 42:3)

Job’s complete incapacity to understand God’s plans and ways have been demonstrated. All he can do is to acknowledge the mystery and vanity of his efforts. The Book of Job is a revolutionary theodicy, proclaiming that God does permit innocent suffering that is beyond the capacity of humans to understand.

The third tendency presents suffering as a means of purification towards the good. The Book of Wisdom (3:1-6) presents suffering as something sent by God not to punish, but to purify people, to refine them as silver in a furnace. The Hebrew Scriptures also occasionally show suffering as vicarious or redemptive. The four songs of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh (Isa 40 – 55, especially Isa 53) show this approach.

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20 J. Kelly, *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition*, 20
22 J. Kelly, *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition*, 20
23 R. Michiels, *Jesus and Suffering*, 33
1.3.2 The New Testament – The Gospels

The teaching of the New Testament transforms the biblical understanding of suffering and disability because of the life, the teaching and the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospels are full of people with disabilities – the man with the withered hand (Mt 12.10), a paralytic (Mk2:3), woman with a bent back (Lk 13:11-12) and focus on the attitude Jesus takes towards these people.\(^{24}\) Jesus took pity on these people, reached out to them to heal them. Jesus dismisses the view that suffering and death are divine punishment and are always related.\(^{25}\) He speaks instead of God’s coming Kingdom and the work of redemption. His approach can be seen in the account of the Ten Lepers, the most despised group in ancient society. Jesus embraced them as part of the Kingdom of God and cured them. In healing the many outcasts who came to him, he was proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was for those rejected by society and the religious leaders of the day.\(^{26}\) Jesus had no reluctance to associate with these outcasts and was even prepared to touch a man full of leprosy (Lk 5:12-13). One of the key stories Jesus told on this theme was the Parable of the Banquet (LK 14: 12-24). When the invitations to the banquet were rejected, the master of the household told the servants to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. It is this group who are able to accept the generosity of the host, not those more concerned for their good fortune.\(^{27}\) In Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom of God, as presented in the Sermon on the Mount, it is the poor (e.g. the disabled) who are blessed because the Kingdom of God is theirs.\(^{28}\)

\(^{24}\) S Govic, Strong in Broken Places, 6
\(^{25}\) R Michiels, Jesus and Suffering, 33
\(^{26}\) S Govic, Strong in Broken Places, 38
\(^{27}\) Ibid.,15
\(^{28}\) Jurgen Moltmann, Jesus Christ – for today’s world (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1994)16
The New Testament (NT) contains many references to disabled people being healed by Christ and impairment and disability are used by writers of the New Testament to express central themes of the Gospels. In certain passages hearers of the NT message are led to identify with characters and their impairments and are contrasted with able bodied characters who have ability, but not faith in Jesus. This concept of paradox is at the heart of Jesus’ teaching – those who are blind see, those who are lame walk and the deaf hear. People with impairments lack physical ability, but are endowed with signs and unexpected abilities in other respects, often as a result of impairment.

Two stories from the Gospels that show this theme are the blind man in John Chapter 9 and the curing of Bartimaeus (Mk:10: 46 – 52; Lk:18: 35 – 43). The blind man in John Chapter 9 comes to faith in Jesus (v38), while the leaders are unable to see (v40). The long story of the blind man is used by John to show the process of coming to faith in Jesus as gradually he sees him as a man, a prophet, the son of God and finally, “Lord, I believe.”

Frank Moloney in his commentary on this passage develops the point of this passage further. At the start of the story the disciples ask Jesus who is responsible for the evil suffered by the blind man- his sinful parents or a sin committed by the child while still in the womb(v2). Jesus explains that this situation exists “that the works of God might be made manifest in him”(v3). Moloney explains that Jesus shows by his words that “God is to reveal his works in the events of the life of this blind man.” Jesus revelation of God brings light to the world (Jn 1:4-9). Jesus is the light of the world (Jn 8:12). This is a very important insight to understand disability because it radically

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30 Ibid., 88
31 Ibid., 89
changes our perspective to realize that through the saving action of Christ, disabled conditions are occasions for the revelation of God’s power.\textsuperscript{32}

The story of the curing of Bartimaeus (Mk10: 46- 52; Lk: 18: 35- 43) makes the same point. The blind man calls out to Jesus to be cured and ignores the hostility of the crowd and will not be put off by their rebuking. He shows great persistence in calling on Jesus and follows Jesus in full discipleship. Therefore, important passages in the NT show clearly that it is often people who have sight that lack the ability to truly see, while those who are blind can see through the eyes of Faith.(Mk 10: 43; Lk: 18: 39; Jn: 9:40).\textsuperscript{33} So, the New Testament is clearly showing that disability can open peoples’ lives to the mystery of God’s power in quite unique ways.

After the crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, New Testament writers realized in a profound way Jesus took on himself all the suffering of humanity. Christ entered into this humiliation and sense of being abandoned by his Father so that he could become a brother for the humiliated and forsaken and bring them God’s kingdom.\textsuperscript{34}

One important writer from the Protestant Lutheran tradition, Jurgen Moltmann, makes a similar point in his important work, The Crucified God. He shows that the suffering and death of Jesus brings in a revolution in the understanding of God and the suffering of the world. In the suffering of Jesus, the ancient idea that God cannot suffer or be affected by the suffering of the world is rejected. In Jesus, the Son of God, God suffers with us, sharing in the real human sense of being forsaken by God which is at

\textsuperscript{33} S Horne, Those who are Blind See, 91  
\textsuperscript{34} J. Moltmann, Jesus Christ – for today’s world, 40
the heart of all suffering.\textsuperscript{35} On the cross he utters the words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” (Mark 15:34) In these words, Jesus takes up the protest against all suffering. Moltmann describes the death of Jesus as an event that takes place ‘in God’, within the very subjective relationship between Father and Son. The Son suffers abandonment by the Father and the Father suffers grief over the death of the Son.\textsuperscript{36} The suffering of all humanity is taken up into this cry of Jesus and all Christian theology is an answer basically to the question Jesus asked when he died.\textsuperscript{37} The idea that God, the Supreme Being and supreme good should be revealed and present in the abandonment of Christ by God on the cross, is difficult to comprehend. For this reason faith in the cross distinguishes Christian Faith from the other religions.\textsuperscript{38}

In the course of Christian history, people who suffer have discovered a fellowship with the suffering Christ. Moltmann shows that in the Middle Ages the sick, cripples, incurables were brought before images of the suffering Christ and experienced relief from their suffering and often healing as well by identifying with the sufferings of this hideous figure on the cross.\textsuperscript{39} One of the most famous images is the famous painting, the Isenheim Altarpiece by Grunewald in a hospital where the sick and incurables were brought that they might identify with the suffering of Christ and find some solace in their pain. A close view of the painting shows the marks of the plague (or possibly a skin disease) on the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., xii
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., xx
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 34
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 41
The man of sorrows spoke to those in pain and Jesus brings help by his wounds and suffering.\textsuperscript{40} Matthew 8: 17 shows that Christ helps us not by his omnipotence, but by his weakness and suffering and that only a suffering God can help. So the pain of God in Christ heals our pains and in the suffering of Christ God suffers our pains.\textsuperscript{41} A passage from 1 Peter 2:24 also supports this view: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

One important writer from the American Protestant tradition who takes up these themes in her theology of disability is Nancy Eiseland in her book,\textit{ The Disabled God}. She argues that Christians do not have an abled-bodied God as their primal image. Instead, the disabled God, promising grace through a broken body, is at the centre of piety, prayer and practice and mission.\textsuperscript{42} She believes that this idea of the disabled God

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.,42
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.,43
\textsuperscript{42} N. Eiseland, \textit{The Disabled God}, 11
would enable disabled people to affirm their bodies in dignity and reconceive the Church as community for people with disabilities.\textsuperscript{43} She argues that a key symbol from Christian tradition is the appearances of Jesus as the resurrected Christ showing the impaired hands, feet and the side of Christ. Because Christ showed himself as disabled through his wounds, this alters the avoidance of the taboo of physical disability, so common in history and helps disabled people identify with Christ’s experience of disability.\textsuperscript{44} Amos Young in his discussion of this idea of the disabled God argues that this metaphor distorts our view of God and is largely ineffectual beyond showing that God is in solidarity with people with disabilities and is limited as a dominant model for contemporary disability theology.\textsuperscript{45} Controversial as this view of the disabled God is, it still highlights the power of Christian symbols to show the identification of God with the struggles of people with disabilities through the incarnation of God in Christ.

1.3.3 The Apostle Paul

The life of the Apostle Paul is also important in developing a theology of disability as his writings frequently discuss the idea, “my power is made complete in inability” (2 Cor 12:9). In Paul’s conversion story in Acts 9, his physical impairments play a central role. In his blindness he encounters Jesus and the dawning of faith. It is only as a blind person that Saul has the ability to address Jesus as Lord (v5). It is through his physical impairment that he is forced to trust Christ and this leads to full discipleship (v20).\textsuperscript{46} It is through his impairment that he can address Jesus as Lord. Paul often boasts of his inabilities (2 Cor12: 5 – 10) and uses the paradox of inability to show

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 94
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 101
\textsuperscript{45} Amos Young, Theology and Down Syndrome-Reimagining Disability in late Modernity (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007) 176
\textsuperscript{46} S Horne, Those who are Blind See, 91
the paradoxical activity of God (v 9-10), “for it is when I am weak that I am strong.”

How then can it be that God’s power is made complete in inability? For Paul, the heart of his message is Christ crucified (1 Cor1: 23, 2: 2. Gal 6: 14). Christ, the anointed one is dispossessed of all dignity, ability, life and laid aside his glory and abilities in being born as a man ( 2Cor 8: 9, Phil 2: 6-8). In 2 Corinthians Paul shows that Christ was crucified out of his inability, yet the redemption and salvation of all people was done out of his inability ( Rom 5: 10 – 21,Gal 3:13). So, Paul is able to boast that the power of Christ rests on him in his inabilities (2 Cor:12: 9).47

The writings of the Apostle Paul provide many important insights in understanding the role of suffering in the Christian life. Brendan Byrne discusses this theme in his exegesis of Romans 8: 18 – 30.48 He states that the centre of Paul’s teaching is “the incomparable richness of the glory to be revealed over against present sufferings.”49 Paul shows that the times we live in involve suffering because we live in an interim stage between justification and full salvation when Christians are buffeted in the body by the conditions of the present age. Christians cannot but be part of this suffering world. However, Paul shows that Christians must keep their eyes upon the full hope that full revelation entails. This full revelation represents the full realization of God’s eternal design for human beings and the world.50

Byrne discusses Paul’s teaching on the ‘groaning of creation (vv19 – 22) and the groaning of ourselves(vv23-25). Paul shows that we groan with respect to ourselves. This is a discontent, a restlessness with our present lot, a sense of and longing for

47 Ibid., 93, Paul also states in Gal 6;17 that “I bear on my body the marks of Christ.”
48 Brendan Byrne S.J., Reckoning with Romans: A Contemporary Reading of Paul’s Gospel (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1986)
49 Ibid.,164
50 Ibid.
something better to come. a sense of incompleteness of our present situation. Paul shows that this restlessness involves awaiting “full sonship, the redemption of our bodies.”  

Byrne points out that “this redemption of our bodies does not mean redemption from our bodies. Rather it means the setting free of that aspect of ourselves making for union, solidarity and communication from crippling attachment to the passing world and its fallen structures. The phrase looks to the resurrection of the body and the sense of corporate and physical freedom that resurrection will involve.” Byrne points out that Paul has no information to offer about the future and chooses to remain in Romans even more agnostic than in the earlier correspondence in Corinthians (1 Cor 15: 35-49). So the attitude of Christians is one of hope for the future, waiting with endurance. Byrne points out that this hope rests entirely on God, but not in the sense that his saving action will effect a kind of rescue. Rather the future of the world is both in the hands of God and in the hands of men and women of each age. He states:

God’s fidelity to the world works through human beings- not through works they do on their account independently of him, but in so far as they live out his gift of righteousness, allow his saving justice to be fulfilled in them through the Spirit.

This discussion on the place of suffering in the lives of Christians is important for people with disabilities. Nancy Eiesland has pointed out how some of these texts can be problematic for disabled people. Eiesland is critical of the NT emphasis on virtuous suffering. She refers to the passage from Paul on the “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor:12: 7-10) that was used by Christ as a sign of divine grace in Paul’s ministry. She argues that such a passage has been used to show righteous submission to divine
testing and a praiseworthy disposition for Christian disciples. They present disability as temporary affliction that must be endured to gain heavenly reward. She describes this notion of virtuous suffering as:

a subtle, but particularly dangerous theology for persons with disabilities. Used to promote adjustment to unjust social situations and to sanction acceptance of social isolation among people with disabilities, it has encouraged our passivity and resignation and has institutionalized depression as an appropriate response to divine testing. 56

However, I believe her analysis of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh text” misses the point in light of the exegesis of Romans just discussed. Byrne points out that Christ’s crucifixion was the place where the cost of bearing life-long fidelity to the demands of being truly human in right relationship to God, one’s fellow beings and the world was lived out. Christian life continues in this pattern of Christ’s fidelity to God’s will and will involve a similar crucifixion.57 So Paul sees “suffering as flowing from deep personal union with Christ and out of obedience to one’s Christian calling in the world. Suffering is not something willed by God, but comes as a price for living in the world and for the world a life that is simply an outreach, an extension of the grace and love of God.”58

Byrne shows that this suffering is not a passive attitude. Rather it involves “surrendering one’s life to the divine reaching out to reconcile, heal and humanize an alienated and frequently vicious world.” 59 Paul’s teaching also shows how God uses the suffering to show the power of God at work (“when I am unable then I am able.”)

56 Ibid.
57 Brendan Byrne S.J., Inheriting The Earth: The Pauline basis for spirituality for our time ( Homebush NSW: St Paul Publication, 1990 ) 66
58 Ibid.,67
59 Ibid, 66
This is different to an attitude of passive acceptance (virtuous suffering). Paul wants to show that in accepting our limitations God can then act as we make ourselves open to his power not our own. Our very suffering is an active virtue, as through it, God can act in ways he chooses to extend the grace and love of God in the world.\textsuperscript{60}

One writer on theology of disability, Simon Horne in his discussion of the implications of Paul’s teachings, shows that Paul’s teaching reverses the levitical tradition (\textit{Lev 21: 16 – 23}) that barred the physically impaired from offering service to God or drawing near to his presence. Drawing on the Book of Isaiah, Paul is able to show that the place of inability and impairment is the place of divine healing and abiding. Paul also applies this teaching to the Body of Christ and in 1 Cor12: 12 – 31 he shows that one group in the body are indispensable – the parts of the body without respect or dignity. It is these parts, not the parts that are more able or respected, who have particular roles to hold the body together (v 22- 25). Paul seems to be saying that there is a purposeful creation by God of people who are less able.\textsuperscript{61} Horne concludes his important chapter by showing that in God’s plan impaired people are not objects of shame or guilt to be rid of or hidden, but in the life of Christian Faith are in fact “a paradoxical cornerstone.”\textsuperscript{62}

In concluding this section, my discussion shows that the life and teachings of Jesus and the Apostle Paul enable us to understand disability with radically new perspectives. Many passages from the Scriptures demonstrate God’s creative purpose in the lives of people with disabilities and challenge the Christian community to

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 67
\textsuperscript{61} S Horne, Those Who are Blind See, 96
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.,99
embrace them into the life of the community and to help them in finding purpose in their own lives. As Horne states:

To these people impairments and inability are not objects of shame or guilt; to these people – as they struggle to understand and interpret how God was active in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and how this activity of God in Jesus continues to encounter and be experienced by humankind both personally and corporately-impairments and inability are a paradoxical cornerstone. 63

1.4 Catholic Church Teaching on Persons with Disabilities

In this section I want to discuss the importance of recent Catholic teachings on disabled persons that have important implications for the inclusion of people with disabilities into the full life of the Church.

Differing views exist about the value of disabled people within our society. Particularly today, it is possible through the genetic testing of fetuses that medical science has within its power the ability to identify the fetuses that have abnormalities and to eliminate them through abortion practices. Philosophers such as Peter Singer argue “that since fetuses projected to be severely or profoundly handicapped will never attain to full human status anyway, their infanticide is ethically justified.” 64 Others argue that people with disabilities lead lives of needless suffering and are often a burden to their families or to society. 65 Such views raise the important issue of the status of the disabled person within society today.

The Catholic teaching on this issue has been frequently expressed in many documents in recent times. The most recent document that sums up the long standing position of the moral status of people with disabilities is stated in the Instruction Dignitas

63 Ibid.
64 Peter Singer, Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of our Traditional Ethics (New York: St Martin’s, 1993) 210 - 217
65 A. Young, Theology and Down Syndrome-Reimagining Disability in late Modernity. 63
Personae from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (2008). The document is an update on the instruction Donum Vitae (1987) and looks at ethics and new biological questions. The Instruction presents the two fundamental principles of Catholic teaching on human life:

- The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.

- The origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and the family, where it is generated through an act which expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman. Procreation which is truly responsible vis-a-vis the child to be born must be the fruit of marriage.

The Instruction further stresses this dignity of each human life when it states:

It is the Church’s conviction that what is human is not only received and respected by faith, but is also purified, elevated and perfected. God has created every human being in his own image and his son has made it possible for us to become children of God. By taking the interrelationship of these two dimensions, the human and the divine, as the starting point, one understands better why it is that man has unassailable value: he possesses an eternal vocation and is called to share in the Trinitarian love of the living God.

There are several important Vatican documents on the disabled that foreshadow this teaching in the context of disabled people. In 1981, the Holy See produced a document for the International Year of Disabled Persons and this was followed up with an important conference on the Family and the Integration of the Disabled.

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67 Ibid.
This document affirmed as a basic principle the fact that the disabled person is a fully human subject, endowed with a unique dignity as a human being. This view is based on the biblical anthropology that humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27), fallen into sin, but redeemed, saved by the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Therefore, the key to human dignity does not lie in human autonomy or in human reason or the ability to decide for oneself or to create one’s own universe. Rather, it is found in the reality of being a human person, the only earthly creature that God wanted for its own sake, formed by God and finally able to know and love the Creator.

The document rejects the idea that God might have made a mistake when he created disabled children. It states that, “on the contrary, we must say that God loves them personally, and that these children, thus conformed to the suffering Christ, are the object of his special tenderness.” The document goes on to state that the person’s dignity is “neither diminished by the gravity of the handicap nor conditioned by the difficulty in communicating with others.” This dignity cannot be taken away or lost and remains with the person to the moment of death. The document shows that “man has a transcendent vocation that goes beyond history and time. For this reason, any attempt to eliminate the life of this unproductive being for financial reason or out of sympathy for the family of the seriously disabled child is unacceptable.” The document is all too aware how easily this vision of the human person is forgotten in modern society where the weakest are often denied these basic rights. 

Pope John Paul II spoke of these guiding principles in 2004 in a speech to an International Symposium on Disabled Persons. He points out that the limitations and suffering of disabled people forces us to question ourselves on the mystery of man.

The wounded humanity we see in their lives challenges us to recognize and promote in these people their value as persons in the way we treat them. He admits the disabled suffer discrimination often because they are not fully autonomous and productive members of society. However, such treatment is just as disgraceful as racial, gender or religious discrimination. He points out that in today’s world the disabled are often perceived as a shame and their problems a burden to be removed or solved. He then sums up well the way the disabled need to be viewed within a proper theology of disability:

Disabled people are living icons of the crucified Christ. They reveal the mysterious beauty of the one who emptied himself for our sake and made himself obedient unto death. They show us, over and over and above all appearances that the ultimate foundation of human existence is Jesus Christ. It is said, justifiably that disabled people are humanity’s privileged witnesses. They can teach every one about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression, but by love, solidarity and acceptance, a new world transfigured by the light of Christ, the Son of God who became incarnate, who was crucified and died for us.

Weiss Block also makes an important contribution to this discussion in showing how disability raises haunting spiritual questions. She shows that throughout the ages theologians have struggled to understand and communicate the mystery of suffering.

Disability is a dramatic reminder that God’s ways are not our ways and that humans avoid suffering if at all possible, just as Jesus wanted to avoid his pain and suffering.

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70 Ibid.

71 J. Weiss Block, Copious Hosting, 91
in the garden before his death. At sometimes in the lives of most people “the cup overflowing with dreaded suffering is passed to us.” She believes in the idea that there is a spirituality of brokenness through which God communicates to us through our pain, weakness, renunciation and even despair. She points to the paradox of the Christian message that we find great beauty in what is thought to be, at first, ugly. Humans often experience transformation through their suffering and encounter God’s grace and mystery in the places we least expect or want to find them.

In conclusion, this discussion has shown that Catholic Church teaching points out clearly that people with disabilities are unique individuals, part of the infinite variety that humans beings are, created in the image of God, with fundamental rights, gifts and talents to share and to be seen as persons of inherent value and should be included into all aspects of the life of the Church.

1.5 The Theology of Disability of Jean Vanier

One of the most significant writers in the Catholic tradition to explore the purpose and meaning of the lives of the disabled is Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche, whose work in setting up communities for disabled people has so transformed the modern understanding of people with profound disabilities. Vanier in his writings and work has challenged people to understand the importance of the lives of people with disabilities through simply living and being with them in community. He began his first community in 1964 in Trosly-Breuil in France and by 2005 there were 125 communities across the world. Vanier’s work and writings stress the importance of

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72 Ibid.,91
73 Ibid.,92
75 Ibid.,3
the inclusion of disabled people into communities where they can find their identity and a meaning in life in relationships within small community groups, rather than institutional settings or difficult home environments.

There are many themes in Vanier’s writings on disability. The focus of his discussion in the early writings were the people with serious physical and intellectual disabilities who were struggling to cope at home. However, in his more recent writings he also discusses how all people share in some form of brokenness in their own lives and his teachings can be applied to many people struggling with their brokenness in whatever form it takes. Vanier always points to the uniqueness of each individual:

People with disabilities are like everybody else. Each person is unique and important, whatever their culture, religion, abilities or disabilities. Each one has been created by God and for God. Each of us has a vulnerable heart and yearns to love and be valued. Each one has a mission. Each of us is born so that God’s work may be accomplished in us.76

In his important book on the Gospel of John, Vanier points out that in L’Arche communities people living there are called to witness in a special way to the gift of people with disabilities. Often they are looked down upon or seen as being without value. He believes that people living there can see their real value and beauty and that they are fully human and loved by God in a special way because God is hidden in love and not in power.77 One theme in the book Vanier takes up many times is the importance of Christ in building communities of love, acceptance of one another and in healing the brokenness we all carry in our lives.

In Chapter Five of the Gospel of John, Vanier shows that Jesus goes to a local asylum by the pool where there were many people with disabilities, lame, blind and

76 Jean Vanier, Man and Women He Made Them (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 2
77 Jean Vanier, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John (Ottawa, Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2004) 32
paralyzed. In the culture of the day these people with handicaps were hidden away, their disability seen as a punishment from God. Jesus takes his disciples there because he wants them to know their first call is to those broken and rejected people. Jesus is greatly moved by the despair of one man by the pool and replies to the cry of despair, “rise, take up your mat and walk.” Vanier shows that in this story Jesus comes to us and meets each of us in those places of blockage and despair within our hearts where we are paralyzed by our known needs and weakness and says to each of us, “Do you want to be healed.” Vanier shows that at the heart of this healing process is a God who accepts to come to us in human flesh, to become weak and wants to be our friend. Many people reject such an image of God and prefer a Jesus will make things right in the world. But the Jesus of the Gospel of John wants us to fix the world, with his strength and in the power of the spirit of Jesus. He wants his followers to feed the hungry, struggle for peace and justice, be with the lonely and oppressed and to reveal the good news of God’s love through our friendships with people who are disabled.

Another important theme in Vanier’s theology is the importance of listening to the disabled because they have much to teach us when we take the time to listen to them. He has often said that our world is divided between the strong and the weak, the powerful and the vulnerable, the clever and the disabled. The rich have work, money, status, but often lack the ability to love and to live in communion without the trappings of wealth and power and success. They often look upon the weak and disabled as problems to be solved, rather than listening to them. Sometimes, they even want to prevent their very existence. The cry of the disabled and the poor challenges the comfortable and those satisfied with life and their anguish shows up our anguish.

78 Ibid., 106
79 Ibid., 130
The parable of the rich man in St Matthew’s Gospel 22: 1-14, shows that those who are rich and comfortable use every excuse possible to not attend the wedding feast.\textsuperscript{81} Vanier understood that the vision of Jesus is a gradual discovery that the poor (disabled) are not people we have to change to make them like us, but people from whom we can learn. The presence of God is in our littleness and poverty and in our need for love and recognition.\textsuperscript{82} God has chosen the weak, the crazy and the despised to confound the strong, the clever and the respected.

Vanier shows that the people that come to L’Arche to help the disabled discover that the disabled are healing them, even if they do not realize it because they call us to love and awaken within us what is most precious, compassion. He knows from his experience of living with these people that in a mysterious way they seem to open up to the God of love and the love of God. By contrast, those who are seeking influence, acclaim and wealth for themselves often seem closed to God in their self-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{83} It is only when those who are powerful experience failure, sickness, weakness, loneliness that they discover they are not self-sufficient and all-powerful and that they need God and others. It is a similar situation to the blind man in John’s Gospel (ch9) who was able to see Jesus as a real person and someone sent by God because he was excluded and pushed aside by society.\textsuperscript{84} Vanier reminds us that Paul in his letter to the Corinthians was also deeply conscious that people with disabilities were chosen for this purpose:\textsuperscript{85}

> God has chosen the foolish of the world to shame the so-called wise; God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God has chosen what is

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, 4  
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.,5  
\textsuperscript{83} J.Vanier, \textit{Man and Woman He Made Them}, 172.  
\textsuperscript{84} K Spink, \textit{The Miracle, The Message, The Story}, 5  
\textsuperscript{84} J Vanier, \textit{Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John}, 182  
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.,173
low and despised, People who are nobodies, in order to reduce to nobodies those who are somebody so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor1: 27 – 29)

1.6 Conclusion

This review of a range of contemporary thinking on disability and theology now enables me to highlight some important insights that could assist people in pastoral ministry dealing with a person with Asperger’s Syndrome or any disability.

The review of theology of disability shows that people with disabilities are unique individuals, created in the image of God, with gifts and talents to share. They are people of inherent value. They are entitled to full participation in the community and the Church. They have often been neglected or discriminated against in Church life and practices that discriminate against them in the life of the Church need to be removed. The Church has a mandate to include all members of the Church with disabilities in pastoral and spiritual activities in Church life.

The review shows that suffering, sickness and disabilities in the lives of humans are deep mysteries. They are part of the human condition. God does not send these conditions. He allows them for reasons that humans find difficult to understand. They result from the evolutionary pattern of creation in the way God has allowed creation to develop. People with disabilities struggle to understand their conditions and to seek ways, through a living faith, to make sense of them.

The review points out that the biblical narrative shows that God acts to show faithfulness and a willingness to save his people and in time to deliver all creation from the forces of suffering, sin, disabilities, sickness and death. His saving action reaches its fullness in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His saving work continues in the Church where Christ enters into the mystery of the suffering of
all people with disabilities and wants to lead them to live life to the full, using the
talents they have and accepting the limitations that disabilities can impose on their
lives. Catholic teaching shows that God, in Christ, is especially present in the lives of
the most vulnerable of society. The love of God and his power in our lives, acting
through the Holy Spirit, can transform the lives of the disabled so that God’s glory
may be shown in their lives. The challenge for people with disabilities is to open
themselves to the power of God’s action in their lives. Faith in Jesus is the path
Christians take to discover his action in our lives. The love of Christ for people with
disabilities brings healing and wholeness.

The final point of this review shows that the inclusion of peoples with disabilities into
the life of the Catholic Church is an important challenge for the future. Their
participation at all levels of Church life, including ministry, is part of the mandate of
the Gospel for an inclusive Church. A theology of access is an important development
in theological reflection for understanding the needs of this group of people for
participation in the life of the Church. They have the right to all spiritual rituals and
practices the Church provides to its members. People in ministry to people with
disabilities are especially called to deal with them with true charity and respect as they
seek to enliven them in the mystery of God’s plan for their lives. As they work
together with people who have disabilities they come to realize they share in human
brokenness together.
CHAPTER TWO  ASPERGER’S SYNDROME
A DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDER

Introduction

The purpose of this section of my research is to provide an understanding of the disability Asperger’s Syndrome from the discipline of psychology and the insights that contemporary research into Asperger’s Syndrome provide into the nature of the disability. Spiritual directors responsible for the care of people with Asperger’s Syndrome need to develop skills in understanding this research and use it in their spiritual direction.

2.1 Historical Context

The diagnosis of Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome as distinct developmental disorders did not exist in the past and its appearance in psychological literature is quite recent.\(^{86}\) The original observations of the condition of Autism was made by Leo Kanner in the United States in 1943 who observed a group of 11 children (8 boys, 3 girls) and reported his observations in his article, “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact.” All these children had something in common and it was not retardation, epilepsy or neurological disease. He noticed that they were different from schizophrenics in not having delusions or hallucinations and did not seem to be retarded.\(^{87}\) His patients showed a disorder characterized by a profound lack of social engagement starting shortly after birth.\(^{88}\) All had problems relating to others, what he called “Extreme autistic aloneness.” They appeared to shut out or ignore anything that impinged on their loneliness. This characteristic defined the condition. He also

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\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 48

\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 44
observed that most had speech delays or unusual language and most had good memories. They also showed an obsessive desire for sameness that no one could interrupt and could be highly skilled at 1 or 2 tasks. Furthermore, they also had sensory problems and could be highly sensitive to a particular noise. Moreover, they had considerable problems with abstract or symbolic thinking and were concrete thinkers.\(^89\) Kanner believed the condition to be a biological disorder:

> These children have come into the world with an innate inability to form the usual affective contact with people.\(^90\)

Kanner is known as the father of contemporary understandings of autism in his observations of this new disorder. No one before him had observed the pattern of symptoms in this way.\(^91\) At the time Kanner presented his observations, most psychiatrists would not accept his observations because of the influence of psychoanalysis that saw mental disorders as caused by psychological disturbances, not genetics or biology.\(^92\) Autism was seen as caused by bad parenting.\(^93\)

The other person, who made similar observations of the same condition, but unknown to one another, was Hans Asperger (1906-80) in 1944 in Vienna when he observed a group of patients at his clinic that lacked social understanding and had limited ability to have a reciprocal conversation with another person.\(^94\) He thought this condition was a personality disorder rather than a mental illness such as schizophrenia.\(^95\) He observed that the group of patients showed distinct delays in the development of

\(^89\) Ibid., 49  
\(^90\) Kanner cited in Grinker 2007, 50  
\(^91\) Ibid.,51  
\(^92\) Ibid.,81  
\(^93\) Ibid.,107  
\(^95\) Ibid.
social maturity and social reasoning. They had great trouble in making friends and manifested impairments in verbal and nonverbal communication, especially in the conversational aspects of language. They also showed impairments in the control of emotions and a tendency to intellectualize their feelings. Empathy for other people was limited. The group also showed extreme sensitivity to sounds, aromas, textures and touch. Another key observation he made was that the children had an eccentric occupation with a specific topic or interest that dominated their thoughts and time. His observations indicated that this condition could be identified in children from 2-3 years or later and that some of the parents of the children observed, shared the personality traits of these children. His observations also led him to believe that these personality traits were due to neurological and genetic factors, not psychological or environmental factors. He believed that their personality type was a life long and stable one and that this group of patients had specific abilities and could be employed and over time develop life long relationships. The children he described, he also noticed, were highly intelligent and verbal. They had skills that were intellectual in nature and their intelligence was especially obvious in one or two subjects. They did not have delayed speech and often talked too much. They rarely made eye contact and it was found they had been teased and bullied at school.

Kanner’s description became better known because it was in English. Asperger’s work was introduced to English audiences by Lorna Wing in 1981 and she first used the term *Asperger’s Syndrome* to describe the condition. Today, Kanner’s description of autism is linked to the severe form of autism, whereas Asperger’s

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96 Ibid.,13
97 Ibid.
98 R.Grinker, *Unstrange Minds*, 59
99 Ibid.,58
100 Ibid.,60
condition is associated with a more mildly autistic type of person who is highly intelligent and highly verbal. The psychological Society of America officially recognized the condition of Asperger’s Syndrome only in 1994. Grinker states that “since Wing’s original 1981 publications, there has been a tremendous amount of debate about the validity and reliability of criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome, much centering on how to distinguish it from autism.” He believes that Autism is best understood as a triad of impairments in social interaction, communication and imagination with repetitive interests and activities. These symptoms can occur in a wide variety of people and when they do occur, they are so variable in their severity that one person with autism might be profoundly mentally retarded and totally non verbal while another might be a physics professor. This concept of autism as a spectrum is used frequently today in clinical observations and it includes the many types of autistic behaviours observed – low functioning, severely impaired or high functioning, mildly impaired. Rutter and Schopler describe it this way:

There is no one basic deficit because the disorder reflects varying patterns of organized brain dysfunction rather than any single disease state.

This concept of autistic spectrum was validated by a series of family studies conducted by Lorna Wing and Michael Rutter and published in the early 1980’s. The paper described ‘autistic probands’, a type of genetic loading of autism in families that resulted in the presence of autism among relatives. Some relatives might have severe symptoms, others might be just aloof or simply socially awkward.

2.2 Diagnostic Criteria

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101 Ibid.,58
102 Ibid.,61
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Rutter and Schopler cited in Grinker 2007, 61
106 Ibid.,62
Today the criteria for the diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome are set out in the Diagnostic Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV). These criteria are:

1. Qualitative impairment in social interaction as shown by 2 of the following:
   - Marked impairment in non verbal behaviours- e.g. eye to eye contact
   - Failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
   - Lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment interests with other people
   - Lack of social sympathy

2. Restricted and stereotypical pattern of behavior, interests and activities
3. Disturbance causes clinical impairment in social and occupational functioning.
4. No clinically significant delay in language
5. No clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in development of age appropriate self help skills, adaptive behaviour and curiosity about environment in childhood.
6. Criteria used are not met for Schizophrenia or Pervasive Development Disorder.¹⁰⁷

The other set of diagnostic criteria used by many clinicians in Europe and Australia are those of Gillberg and Gillberg (1989).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 46
1. Social Impairment
2. Narrow interest
3. Compulsive need for routine and interests
4. Speech and language peculiarities
5. Non verbal communication problems
6. Motor clumsiness

Since Kanner’s description there has been much discussion about the cause of Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome. Leo Kanner seemed uncertain of the causation. He believed that children born with autism were born that way, although he did observe that similar characteristics could be seen in the parents of the children he observed. He was diagnosing in an environment in the 1940’s, dominated by psychoanalysis that saw social impairments caused by abnormal or failed relationships with parents, especially mothers.\textsuperscript{109} Kanner believed that the parents were cold in social relations because genetics made them that way.\textsuperscript{110} Asperger was more convinced that the link between parents and the child was entirely biological and the cause depended on a complex relationship between genes and the environment that had little to do with parenting. Asperger wrote that in the process of studying 200 children with autism for over 10 years, he got to know the parents and relatives and found this pattern of abnormal traits in the parents and relatives. For him, the cold parents of the autistic child were evidence for the role of genetics and not of bad parenting.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{109} R. Grinker, \textit{Unstrange Minds}, 71
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
Asperger’s Syndrome is now seen by psychiatrists as having a strong genetic component. The concordance of autistic behaviour in identical twins is at least 60%.112 During the 1960’s Leon Eisenberg of John Hopkins University studied the fathers of children with autism and noticed autistic traits in the fathers. He concluded, based on observation of 100 fathers, that 85 were obsessive, detached and humorless and perfectionist to an extreme and preoccupied with minutiae to the exclusion of concern for overall meaning.113 Kanner and Asperger also noted that the parents of children with Autism all tended to have something else in common, they were highly educated with professional careers. Grinker makes the point that psychiatrists did not anticipate that the recent genetic, clinical and epidemiological studies have shown that the strong social deficits of the autism spectrum are not only common in the general population, but are more prevalent in the relatives of autistic people.114 Grinker indicates that the most widely accepted conservative estimates for the autism spectrum are: Autism Disorder: 13: 10,000 and Asperger’s Syndrome, 26: 10,000. Combined this is 36.6: 10,000 or 1: 300.115

Recent studies using MRI technology have produced evidence of brain structures that shows there is evidence that implicates maturation defects, particularly in the Cerebellum and Limbic structures. The evidence is not consistent with major neuro anatomic defects in the brain that cause autism. Rather it seems the abnormalities seem to be at the cellular level with deficits in neuronal migration, maturation or synaptic connectivity in the Cerebellum and Limbic structures.116 The brain seems to

112 Ibid., 72
113 Ibid., 74
114 Ibid., 75
115 Ibid., 162
be wired differently, not defectively. This imaging technology shows that Asperger’s Syndrome is associated with dysfunction of the social brain in the frontal and temporal lobes of the Cortex as well as of the Amygdala, the Basal Ganglia and the Cerebellum.\textsuperscript{117} The latest research suggests weak connectivity between these components.\textsuperscript{118}

\textbf{2.3 Impact on Mental Health}

I now want to explore the consequences of Asperger’s Disorder on the mental health of the person with the condition. The research data in this area is well explained by Attwood. He shows that while a person with Asperger’s Syndrome often has considerable intellectual ability, they experience confusion and immaturity with regard to social relating and with regard to emotions and feelings. This lack of social and emotional reciprocity leads to a failure to develop peer relations that involve mutual sharing of interests, activities and emotions.\textsuperscript{119}

One of the consequences of these deficits is depression and anxiety disorders. This is not surprising when you consider the problems that people with Asperger’s Syndrome have in social reasoning, empathy, conversational skills and different learning styles as well as heightened sensory perception. They become prone to considerable stress, anxiety, frustration and emotional exhaustion. There is also much evidence that they are prone to teasing, bullying and being rejected by their peers.\textsuperscript{120} In adolescence they become increasingly aware of their lack of social success and they develop greater insight into being different to others. The consequences are evident from research and

\textsuperscript{117} T. Attwood, \textit{The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome}, 327
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 138
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 128
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 129
Attwood points out that current research shows that 65% of adolescents with Asperger’s Syndrome have an affective or mood disorder and 1 in 3 have clinical depression. This results from the long term consequences of low self esteem, loneliness, feeling unaccepted and misunderstood (even bullied and ridiculed) as well as mental exhaustion from trying to succeed socially. This depression can lead to a severe withdrawal from social contact and thoughts that without social success, there is no point to life. Persons with such conditions may not disclose inner feelings and prefer to retreat into solitude and try to resolve the depression by subjective thought. This can lead to a preoccupation with death and suicide as a means of ending the emotional pain and despair. Attwood shows how a person with Asperger’s Syndrome can be very self critical and quotes one teenager who stated, “the worst thing about disappointing yourself is that you never forgive yourself fully.”

Linked to this depression is anxiety disorder. Attwood points out that many children and adults with Asperger’s Syndrome are prone to being anxious for much of the day or about a specific event. He states:

I have spoken to adults with Asperger’s Syndrome who have needed treatment for chronic anxiety and many have said they cannot think of a time in their lives when they did not feel anxious. I am not sure if this is a constitutional feature of some people with Asperger’s Syndrome or a result of being overly stressed from trying to socialize and cope with unpredictability and sensory experiences of life.

This anxiety can lead persons to become more rigid in their thinking. They can develop a personality that is controlling or oppositional to change or resort to tantrums to avoid anxiety. Because their greatest anxiety is with social relations they can easily

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121 Ibid., 140
122 Ibid., 141
123 Ibid., 142
124 Ibid., 320
125 Ibid., 136
retreat into solitude or their special interest to avoid making social errors or the taunts of others.\textsuperscript{126} Attwood states that social phobia is relatively common in teenagers and adult years as they become very concerned what others think and fear being embarrassed.\textsuperscript{127}

Such anxiety can also lead to the development of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and about 25\% of such people have clear signs of the disorder. Clinical experience and research shows that these obsessive thoughts are more likely to be about cleanliness, bullying, teasing, and making a mistake or being criticized.\textsuperscript{128}

Anger management is also another problem with people with Asperger’s Syndrome and the rapidity and intensity of the anger can be extreme, even over a trivial incident. Attwood points out that the child or adult with Asperger’s Syndrome may only have two settings in the expression of emotion, between one and two and nine to ten. Events that produce a mild anger in a typical child, can precipitate a nine to ten level of expression in someone with Asperger’s Syndrome. He concludes, “there appears to be a faulty emotion regulation or control mechanism for expressing anger.”\textsuperscript{129} For some teenagers and adults with the disorder, anger and aggression can have the function of achieving solitude and turning people away from them.\textsuperscript{130}

Attwood points out that research has been conducted on the family histories of children with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome and has shown a higher than expected incidence of mood disorders in family members. The reason for an association

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 137
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 140
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 138
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 138
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 143
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 144
between a parent having a mood disorder and having a child with Asperger’s Syndrome is not currently understood. It seems that if the parent has a mood disorder, a child can have a genetic predisposition to strong emotions. Problems with the intensity of such emotions and their management are characteristics of Asperger’s Syndrome.\textsuperscript{131} Attwood also shows that the research into Theory of Mind skills indicates that “people with Asperger’s Syndrome have considerable difficulty identifying and conceptualizing the thoughts and feelings of other people and themselves. The interpersonal and inner world of emotions appears to be unchartered territory for people with Asperger’s Syndrome. This will affect the person’s ability to monitor and manage emotions within themselves and others.”

The research using neuro-imaging with people who have Asperger’s Syndrome, previously cited, also confirms structural and functional abnormalities of the amygdale, a part of the brain linked with the recognition and regulation of emotions, including anger, anxiety and sadness. Current research also suggests people with Asperger’s Syndrome may have signs of ‘face-blindness’ which means the person has difficulty reading facial expressions. This can contribute to the misinterpretation of someone’s emotional expression.\textsuperscript{132}

\textbf{2.4 Social Relationships}

The difficulties that children and adults with Asperger’s Syndrome have with social relationships are explained clearly by Attwood. As they grow up, adolescents and adults with the condition can become increasingly aware of being socially naïve and making social errors and they constantly worry about their poor skills. This can lead

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.,129
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.,130
to social phobias and withdrawal from socializing. When friendship occurs one of the problems is knowing how to maintain it, how often to make contact and what topics do you talk about. Normal social occasions can last too long for these people as socializing is so exhausting. They prefer brief and purposeful social interactions and often find difficulty in finding people they want to talk to and spend time with. One of the difficulties research has highlighted is that people with the disorder struggle to develop concepts of friendship based on aspects of personality—being funny, trustworthy, common interest, caring. They have real difficulties in appreciating one’s mind and being able to appreciate and describe that mind. It seems that while normal children learn social habits instinctively, with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome, the social relations have to be learnt by the intellect through teaching specific social skills. Attwood points to the importance of early intervention to help children and adolescents with the disorder to develop these skills which has shown considerable success in the improvement of social skills.

2.5 Long Term Relationships

Attwood describes the problems that adult men with Asperger’s Syndrome have in long term relationships. Men looking for long term relationships and marriage tend to seek a partner who can compensate for their problems in daily life. Women can be attracted to such men who present as kind, attentive, socially immature and can feel strong maternal compassion for a person of limited social skills. Men choose a partner who can act as executive support secretary with organizational problems and continue

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133 Ibid., 88  
134 Ibid., 89  
135 Ibid., 91  
136 Ibid., 22  
137 Ibid., 91  
138 Ibid., 89  
139 Ibid., 306
the emotional supports provided by their mother.\textsuperscript{140} However, these hopes at the start of the marriage can dissolve into despair over the Asperger’s social skills. He does not need the same level of social contact as the female partner and can be content with his own company for long periods. Conversation is not seen so much as enjoyment of the other’s company as imparting information.\textsuperscript{141}

In a typical relationship there is an expectation of regular expression of love and affection. The partner with Asperger’s does not feel the same need and the expression of the obvious is illogical to him. As a result, the partner can suffer affection deprivation and this can contribute to low self esteem and depression.\textsuperscript{142} In one survey of partners with Asperger’s Syndrome they were asked if your partner loves you and 50% said ‘I don’t know.” So people with Asperger’s have real difficulties with the expression of emotions and love. This often means that in times of stress when empathy is needed, the partner is left alone to get over it. The other partner often does not know how to respond and as being alone is often the main emotional recovery mechanism used for people with Asperger’s Syndrome, they assume the same for the partner.\textsuperscript{143}

Sexual intimacy can also be a difficulty in the relationship. The person with Asperger’s Syndrome is often not romantic and does not understand the importance of foreplay and close physical contact in sexual intimacy. Moreover, once children have arrived, the Asperger’s partner can become asexual – why should they want more sex

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.,305  
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.,307  
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.,307  
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.,308
when they have enough children. So sharing and being one’s best friend are not attributes that are easy for a person with Asperger’s Syndrome.\textsuperscript{144}

Other problems in the relationship can be to do with the management of the Asperger’s anxiety and anger which often leads to the development of rigid routines to control the anxiety. Conflict can arise in the relationship and the Asperger’s person often has limited ability to manage this successfully and can impose decisions without consultation with the partner.

The problems experienced by couples in these relationships was made clear in a 2003 survey of partners married to men with Asperger’s Syndrome. The results showed the men felt better because they were not alone and felt less stressed. However, the non Asperger’s partner said that their mental health had deteriorated due to the relationship and they felt emotionally exhausted and neglected and many reported signs of clinical depression.\textsuperscript{145}

\textbf{2.6 Personality Traits}

The personality characteristics Attwood discusses are supported by other studies. An interesting study undertaken in 2002 on 31 adults with Asperger’s Syndrome provides insights into the fundamental deficits associated with Asperger’s Syndrome.\textsuperscript{146} Using the Temperament and Character Inventory, a self rating questionnaire, the research produced a seven dimension rating of temperament and character. It involves four

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.,308-9
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.,310
\textsuperscript{146} H Soderstrom, M.Rastram, C.Gillberg, “Temperament and Character in adults with Asperger syndrome” Autism, 2002 Vol 6(3) 287-297
temperament dimensions (harm avoidance, novelty seeking, reward dependence and persistence) and three character dimensions (self-directedness, cooperativeness and self transcendence). The study produced the following results:

- Harm avoidance was significantly increased in the sample, reflecting pessimism, shyness and also state-dependent anxiety.

- Novelty seeking and reward dependence were significantly lower than in the normative group.

- Classification according to temperament type yielded frequencies higher than expected of obsessional, passive dependent and explosive profiles.

- Self directedness was significantly below the average as was cooperativeness.

- Self transcendence (creative self forgetfulness, transpersonal identification) was significantly higher than in the reference group.

- Only four of the subjects (12.9%) of the survey had a mature character.

- The vast majority obtained scores consistent with an immature personality—poor sense of integrity, control and direction in relation to themselves and to others—hence pointing to an increased risk of having a personality disorder.

- The obsessional type of personality was particularly frequent in the study, followed by passive-dependent, explosive and passive-aggressive types.

- The participants differed significantly from the normal population on all temperaments and character scales except persistence.

- Reward dependence was low, showing impairments in social sensitivity, attachment capacity and adaptability.
• Self transcendence (concept of self as part of a transpersonal or spiritual flow) was high, but in individuals with an immature character, this can lead to disregard for basic realities of human interaction and social responsibilities.\(^{147}\)

The report sums up the conclusions to the study this way by stating “the character dimensions found in our sample reflected pronounced immaturity with poorly developed concepts of autonomy, capacity and responsibility in relation to self and to others.” Moreover, the use of this self rating questionnaire is supported by” the overall similarity between the outcome in temperament configurations and the clinical descriptions of personality in Asperger’s Syndrome.\(^{148}\)

### 2.7 Creativity and Asperger’s Syndrome.

The preceding research presents many challenges for people to cope in daily life. At the same time, there are many positive aspects of the condition that can be highlighted, especially in the intellectual domain and artistic domains. As the public awareness of Asperger’s Syndrome has grown over the last two decades there have emerged interesting studies of the range of people with the disorder. Many adults with Asperger’s Syndrome have been recognized for their high intellectual ability. Many have superb synthesizing abilities and tend to excel in mathematics and computers. Steve Suberman in a 2001 article in ‘Magazine Wired’ suggested that the high technology in Silicon Valley is filled with people with Asperger’s Syndrome. Universities and the high technology industry are great places for autistic synthesizers

\(^{147}\) Ibid.,292-295  
\(^{148}\) Ibid.,295
to live and work because the social eccentricities of Physics and Maths people cause few problems in such settings.\textsuperscript{149}

Other researchers have returned to the biographies of eminent writers, philosophers, painters and musicians and scientists from the past to explore their lives for evidence that they might have many of the classic behaviour traits for a diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome. Michael Fitzgerald, a Professor of Psychiatry, has written an important book in which he argues that many of ‘greats’ in the world of literature, science and the arts showed signs of Asperger’s Syndrome.\textsuperscript{150} He does case studies on William Butler Yates, George Orwell, Lewis Carroll, Immanuel Kant, Simone Weil, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Bela Bartok, Vincent Van Gogh, Andy Warhol, to name a few studied, to argue that certain traits of Asperger’s Syndrome – capacity for persistence, synthesis, and work-aholism, can accompany many forms of creativity. The Asperger ability to focus narrowly on a topic and resist distraction is enormously important in artistic or literary creativity.\textsuperscript{151} Fitzgerald also points to the limitation of social relationships in these individuals, narrow interests and repetitive actions in their lives to make his point.

He shows from the life of Ludwig Van Beethoven that many patterns of his behaviour are characteristic of the classic Asperger’s Criteria. At school he was described as isolated and neglected and learned nothing in school. He had major difficulties in social and emotional reciprocal relationships. He made many strange and unsuccessful attempts to form relationships with women. He had the desire, but not the know-how.

\textsuperscript{149} Suberman, S cited in R Grinker, \textit{Unstrange Minds}, 62
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 11
He was very temperamental, argued much with patrons and could be very insensitive. He was totally focused on his musical work and lived for his music, composing continuously, even producing 3 or 4 works at the same time. To achieve this he was a workaholic and worked with obsessive regularity. He was also extremely controlling and did not take other people’s feelings or views into account. Beethoven’s personality was of a very sensitive type and his closest friends suffered his moods and sudden rages most often followed by expressions of penitence. Beethoven also suffered from depression and at times contemplated suicide.

This summary provides key pointers to a life that Fitzgerald confidently believes meets the criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome and for schizoid personality disorder. It seems that the characteristics of Asperger’s Syndrome in his personality also were important parts of his creative genius as a musician that drove him on to devote himself so intensely to his music. 152

2.8 Living with Asperger’s Syndrome

One of the points my research demonstrated is that it is important to point out the research on the positive outcomes for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. The condition is a developmental disorder and a supportive family and skilled professionals can help to make considerable improvements in learning to cope in social situations and develop a positive self image, accept the strengths and deficits and enjoy the achievements they have, especially through the success achieved in professional work. 153 Attwood states this well when he writes:

152 Ibid., 162-7
153 T Attwood, The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome, 344,
I have met many adults with Asperger’s Syndrome who have described how, in later years they eventually managed to intellectually grasp the mechanisms of social relatedness.....I have observed that, for some adults, the conspicuous signs of Asperger’s Syndrome can decrease over time...I have known some adolescents and adults with Asperger’s Syndrome who have progressed on the continuum where only subtle differences and difficulties remain.\textsuperscript{154}

2.9 Conclusion

This section has demonstrated the considerable research available on Asperger’s Syndrome and the way people with the disability can adjust to living with the condition. People in Church ministry who feel called to work with this group, should they seek help, need to be skilled in the understanding of this psychological research and be able to adapt their ways of dealing with this group in any counseling situation.

This will be discussed more extensively at a later stage in the thesis.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 345
CHAPTER THREE

EXPLORING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF ADULTS WITH ASPERGER’S SYNDROME

3.1 Introduction

In this part of the thesis I want to present the investigation I undertook into the spiritual life of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. I thought it important to try to understand the spiritual life of people with Asperger’s Syndrome- what do we know from research how they construct their spiritual lives? What are the important questions for them in their search for meaning? How do they understand and construct a spiritual life? Any effort at spiritual direction for this group of people depended on the data available through the literature on their spiritual search.

3.2 The Spiritual life of people with Asperger’s Syndrome

One of the challenges for this research was to obtain material on the spiritual lives of people with Asperger’s Syndrome to discover how they perceive spiritual realities. It is only in recent times that people within the autism spectrum have begun to write about their personal and religious experiences. Temple Grandin who has Asperger’s Syndrome published a book in 1986, Emergence: Labelled Autistic and more recently the book Thinking in Pictures.\textsuperscript{155} Olive Sacks points out in his foreword to this recent book that never before has there been an inside narrative of autism because for the last 40 years it had been a medical dogma that there was no inner life in the autistic person.\textsuperscript{156} Temple Grandin was diagnosed with classic autism as a baby but has gone on to be a professor of animal behaviour, earn a PH.D and written of her

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.,11
search for identity as a person with high functioning autism, best described by Hans Asperger in 1944.\textsuperscript{157} Her book does dwell on matters of religious belief and provides an insight into how she constructs a religious faith. Her insights have much relevance for providing insights into the religious mind of a person with Asperger’s Syndrome. Another important book that I investigated was \textit{Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum} by Abe Isanon.\textsuperscript{158} This is a significant book that draws on the Theology of Liberation and the Theology of Jean Vanier to develop a spirituality for people with Asperger’s Syndrome. In his book, Abe Isanon discusses the life of Adam, an adult with Asperger’s Syndrome and the way he has developed his own spirituality through living with the disability. Isanon interviewed Adam and writes in considerable about his reflections on this interview and the poetry Adam has written on his spirituality. A third important book that I discovered was the book \textit{Asperger’s Syndrome and Mindfulness} by Chris Mitchell which explores the experience of meditation in helping an adult living with Asperger’s Syndrome.\textsuperscript{159}

These three accounts, provide many insights into the way adults with Asperger’s construct their spiritual experiences and I wish to examine briefly the contribution each book makes into providing some insight into the spiritual experience of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.,12
\textsuperscript{159} Chris.Mitchell, \textit{Asperger’s Syndrome and Mindfulness – Taking Refuge in the Buddha} ( London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers )
3.2.1 Temple Grandin – *Thinking in Pictures*

Temple Grandin’s most recent book is *Thinking in Pictures* in which she discusses her spiritual perception of reality. She explains that she thinks in a visual way and mentions the remarkable ability of autistic people to excel at visual spatial skills – she thinks in pictures. She is able to run 3D simulations in her own mind of concepts and ideas she has.\textsuperscript{160} She has to convert abstract ideas into pictures to understand them. A word such as ‘honesty’ she has an image of placing one’s hand on the Bible.\textsuperscript{161} The concepts in the Lord’s prayer are incomprehensible until broken down to specific images. For the phrase “for thine is the kingdom” she imagines a rainbow and an electrical tower.\textsuperscript{162} For the idea, ‘thy will be done’ she imagines God throwing a rainbow bolt. The word ‘Amen’ at the end of a prayer makes no sense because she understands the idea as ‘why would you have a man at the end of a prayer.’\textsuperscript{163} She describes herself as having a very logical mind and using these pictures to construct ideas. She updates her knowledge and belief in God. Being a scientist, she bases her belief in God on the fundamental laws of nature and physics and changes her views with updated knowledge.\textsuperscript{164} For her, religion is an intellectual rather than an emotional activity. However, with music she feels more religious feeling, such as when listening to the music of Mozart. Both music and rhythm can open the doors to emotion. She finds Gregorian Chant soothing and hypnotic.\textsuperscript{165} She sees God as an ordering force in the universe.\textsuperscript{166} She goes along with Einstein who did not believe in a personal God, but marveled at the amazing harmony of natural law which reveals an intelligence of

\textsuperscript{160} T. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 23
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 3
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 191
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 190
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 191
such superiority. Music such as Gregorian Chant, seems to open the door to some religious emotion.

3.2.2 Abe Isanon –Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum

Abe Isanon interviewed Adam (a high functioning autistic – Asperger’s Syndrome) about his spiritual thinking and discusses his findings in considerable detail. He show that Adam appears to live a normal life, holds a job and lives independently, but lives an extremely lonely life and struggles to cope with much inner turmoil. He struggles with the emotional dimension of his impairment which was acute in adolescence. Isanon explains that to understand Adam’s spiritual perspective it is important to keep in mind his cognitive impairments and the way he processes information. He thinks in images and when tired he can be haunted by particular images that he plays over and over in his mind. He finds any form of abstract thought extremely difficult to cope with and uses pictures to remember abstract ideas. He uses sense impressions as the primary way of assessing and processing information. His emotional empathy is limited. His obsession for religious experience is an act of compensation and a refuge from his emotional turmoil. He does not like gatherings of people for religious experience such as liturgies. He grew up in a Catholic background, but a religion based on dogma and law is beyond his capacity because he struggles with

167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
169 A.Isanon, Spirituality and the Autism Spectrum, 57
170 Ibid,58
171 Ibid., 63
172 Ibid., 60
173 Ibid., 64
174 Ibid., 61
175 Ibid., 71
176 Ibid., 74
177 Ibid.
abstract ideas and universal principles. He does not like institutionalized religion.  

His concept of God is as a source of light whose rays penetrate all reality. He finds emotionally sharing with others difficult. His struggle with spirituality is a struggle with the turmoil of his inner self. Jesus is not an objective reality, but a projection of himself struggling to be free. He sees Jesus as he did as a child – dressed in a simple white robe, a Jesus of simplicity, a person of compassion and existential presence. He identifies strongly with solitude and silence and with Jesus’ agony in the garden of Gethsemane. He is happy to experience Jesus in a childlike way. He does not relate to Jesus on the cross, or the parables, the miracles. Concepts of salvation, suffering, miraculous events are alien to him. Eventually through his struggle, he has come to terms with his disability and constructed a spirituality to accommodate his specific cognitive and emotional impairments.

Adam works with children with special needs and his experience with them is central to his spirituality. He feels comfortable working with them. Working with them and in meditating he is totally at ease with himself. With the children he works with, he does not have to cope with the emotional demands that go with adult relationships. He does not experience others in a conventional sense and relates to others on his own terms, not theirs. Adam states that if the Christian Faith is to be relevant for the lives of autistic people it must respect the culture of those without the ability to think.

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178 Ibid., 75
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid., 83
181 Ibid., 83
182 Ibid., 84
183 Ibid., 83
184 Ibid., 75
185 Ibid., 82
186 Ibid., 82
easily in terms of universal ideas and abstractions. Notions of creation, salvation, redemption, resurrection, eschatology are cognitively beyond them.\textsuperscript{187}

Isanon makes a number of important conclusions about Adam’s spirituality based on the interviews: he believes that Adam’s religion is an alternative refuge to compensate for his inability to socialize and relate to others. It is a form of emotional compensation; he constructs a spirituality to accommodate his specific autism-related problems; his understanding of reality and religion is primarily experiential, not theoretical; his religion is a path to self-discovery and has been a means of making sense of his reality; dogma unrelated to his immediate experience is beyond him. He bypasses some of the central tenets of Christian faith.(Incarnation, Trinity, Salvation); God is an untouchable light whose rays give life to all creation. Contemplation of Jesus is achieved by simple mantra. Meditation is important as it provides him with a means of stopping or slowing down the barrage of images and obsessive talking he experiences with his emotional impairment. Non discursive prayer helps him to rationalize and express thoughts and feelings that confuse him; his spirituality is lacking in concepts but is unique to his own way of thinking, as with many autistic people. He places a mental blanket over what he cannot cope with and he withdraws into a world of his own; in using meditation he has learnt to transform these periods of isolation and developed his own contemplative dimension of spirituality. he believes his spirituality “effects a creative synthesis between the contemplative and active aspects of spiritual experience.”\textsuperscript{188}

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 79
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 93-4
3.2.3 Chris Mitchell - *Asperger’s Syndrome and Mindfulness*

This book explores the importance of meditation in the life of an adult with Asperger’s Syndrome. While it discusses meditation in the language of Buddhist philosophy and technique, not Christian, I think it is appropriate to draw on the conclusions it makes about the importance of the technique of mindfulness for people with Asperger’s Syndrome.

Chris Mitchell is an adult who has lived with Asperger’s Syndrome and discusses the problems such people have that I have referred to at different points in the thesis – anxiety, low self-esteem, social isolation, personal unhappiness. He shows that meditation is a power technique for managing these conditions and the ups and downs of life. He refers to the importance of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths: Suffering; the origin of suffering; the cessation of suffering and the Eight fold path. He shows that the Buddhist teaching points to attachment as one of the main causes of suffering. He states that many people with Asperger’s Syndrome have obsessive interests, collecting all sorts of things. He believes that these obsessions distance them from people and lead to isolation. Another issue is anxiety and worry or in Buddhist language, craving for things. He believes that if people are able to understand the causes of suffering they can realise the truth of who they are. Meditation allows this understanding to develop. The technique of focussing on the breathing in meditation helps calm the mind, concentrates mental energy, enabling the person to experience thoughts of peace and calmness and facilitating clarity of thought. Meditation leads to insight into the true nature of things and who we are. Meditation also leads to learning loving kindness and compassion to others. Mitchell believes that this assists people with Asperger’s Syndrome from attaching blame to people for present and past offences done to them. This he understands as attachment and meditation helps to free him
from such attachment. Mitchell believes that the Buddhist teaching on meditation enables him to see the truth of who he is as a person with Asperger’s Syndrome and not to hide or pretend to be normal.\(^\text{189}\)

3.3 Religion, Mental Health and Asperger’s Syndrome

There has been considerable research in recent decades on the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of people with serious health issues and disabilities as they struggle to cope with suffering and meaning in the face of illness and disability.

Kenneth Pargament in his important work *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*\(^\text{190}\) and Harold Koenig in his work *Spirituality in Patient Care*\(^\text{191}\) discuss the considerable research that is now available to demonstrate the value of religious faith in coping with emotional stress caused by disease and disabilities. In his book, Pergament shows that all religious faiths offer ways to come to terms with tragedy and suffering.\(^\text{192}\) Psychology also tries to help people deal with suffering and conflict. However, historically the relationship between the two disciplines has been tense and antagonistic. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis saw religion as neurotic and inimical to good mental health. This attitude greatly influenced health care specialists for many decades.\(^\text{193}\) Fortunately, the strong opposition to formal religion as a therapy for the mind from the psychology professionals is changing. Today there is a greater acceptance that psychology and religion have much to say to each other and that both disciplines can deepen our understanding of the human condition and

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\(^{189}\) C. Mitchell, *Asperger’s Syndrome and Mindfulness*, 14-19


\(^{192}\) K. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 3

\(^{193}\) H. Koenig, *Spirituality in Patient Care*, 61
the healing of disturbed minds. There is today a greater acceptance that religious resources can often optimize mental health outcomes.¹⁹⁴ Both psychology and religion are concerned for the welfare of the individual self. Psychology seeks therapies to deal with mental pain and resolve inner conflict. Religion does focus on the self, but it is the relationship of the self to the divine that defines the discipline from psychology.¹⁹⁵

Many studies have shown the importance of religion and mental health. A review of literature by Koenig and colleagues identified more than 1200 studies of religion and health published in the 20th century that reported a statistically significant relationship between better religion and better mental health, greater social support and less substance abuse.¹⁹⁶ Koenig suggests that many with illness feel helpless and not in control of their condition and religion provides an indirect of control in turning the problem to a higher power. Meditation and prayer can encourage the belief that prayer can improve adjustment to health problems and a greater state of relaxation.¹⁹⁷ Pergament points to three important types of positive religious coping: spiritual and religious support from God; clergy and congregation support and cognitive reframing of the illness of disability so that the person accepts that God will work with them in their difficult time and make it easier to accept their fate.¹⁹⁸

These findings are relevant for people with disabilities and support the positive value of fostering a spiritual life and discussing spiritual issues with adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. Gaventa shows that the issue of spirituality of people with intellectual

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 163
¹⁹⁵ K. Pergament, The Psychology of Religion and Coping, 52
¹⁹⁶ H. Koenig, Spirituality in Patient Care, 22
¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 73
¹⁹⁸ K. Pergament, The Psychology of Religion and Coping, 222
disabilities is one that has slowly begun to receive attention. I believe this is also the case for people with Asperger’s Syndrome and across the Autistic Spectrum. Gaventa points out that throughout most of the Twentieth Century it was assumed that people with intellectual disabilities (or autistic disabilities) had limited or if any comprehension of spirituality. However, more recently, there has been a realization that that these people are concerned with spirituality and search for meaning and purpose in their lives, are able to give and receive love and can be hopeful and creative through their experience of spirituality. For this reason spirituality is a powerful coping mechanism, especially in enabling relationships with God and providing support networks with faith communities.\textsuperscript{199}

\textbf{3.4 Conclusion \ Identifying Key Issues}

The analysis of this literature leads me to these key conclusions about the personal and spiritual concerns of adults Christians with Asperger’s Syndrome.

Firstly, adults with Asperger’s Syndrome face many difficult personal issues as they grow and mature. They become more aware of their disabilities as they face problems in dealing socially with others and making friends, expressing themselves and dealing with their unusual behaviours that can alienate people around them. This often leads to depression and behavioural problems. Their awareness of their concept of self becomes a central issue as they ponder why they are different to others around them. The search for a religious faith can assist them in their quest for health, well being and a full life.

\textsuperscript{199} Amos Young, \textit{Theology and Down Syndrome, Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity} (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007) 76
Secondly, adults with Asperger’s Syndrome, are meaning makers and often want to undertake the search for a spirituality and a religious faith to provide meaning in life. This search defines the unique identity of each individual and draws out one’s innate creative ability. It involves a personal quest for seeking understandings about major life questions – who am I? What is the purpose of life? How do I fit into the world? How do I connect with ultimate reality? 200 The ability to form personal relationships and find symbols and ritual to express this search is important. Communication problems may compound the struggle for meaning, but at some level the search for meaning is always there. 201

Thirdly, people with disabilities need to be provided with the opportunity to deal with two important issues in their lives. The first is the struggle with the perplexity of the existence of suffering and an omnipotent and benevolent God. They can become resentful to God who causes so much pain and can become bitter and separate themselves from God and flounder on their own strength. 202 The second is to foster a sense of meaning and hope. A spiritual view of life in the face of suffering caused by disabilities can open up a new horizon of meaning. Meeko points to the importance of spiritual direction because the process brings them in touch with the Word, Jesus Christ coming from within the depths of one’s person. Spiritual direction can provide an opportunity to resolve issues with God and to become empowered to live life with the disability with meaning and hope. 203

201 Ibid.
203 Ibid., 68
CHAPTER FOUR

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND ASPERGER’S SYNDROME

4.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the importance of spiritual direction in the lives of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. As previously discussed, the methodology for this investigation involved several steps. Firstly, I investigated the process of spiritual direction as traditionally understood within the Catholic community. Secondly, I investigated the experiences of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome and the clinical experience of counselors who undertook psychotherapy with patients with Asperger’s Syndrome. These different strands of my investigation enabled me to draw conclusions for proposing a framework for spiritual direction for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome.

4.2 The Process of Spiritual direction

Spiritual direction is a practice that has deep roots in the Catholic tradition and is used in many other faith traditions and fosters spiritual development. The Catholic writer William Reiser defines the practice as becoming more God centered and growing aware of the divine presence that constantly surrounds us.204 Richard McBrien states that “to be spiritual means to know and live according to the knowledge that God is present to us in grace as the principle of personal, interpersonal and even cosmic transformation.” 205 The practice of spiritual direction presumes that God continues to communicate the divine presence and life to all human beings. This is based on divine

204 William Reiser, Seeking God In All Things, Theology and Spiritual Direction (Collegeville, Minnesota, Collegeville Press, 2004) 1
205 Richard McBrien, Catholicism, Revised and Updated (North Blackburn, Victoria, Collins Dove (Harper Collins), 1994) 1019
revelation that God’s self communication is always happening and that God is present and active in the Church today and in the world. As the document of Divine Revelation (Vatican 11) states: “Through this revelation, the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself.” Catholic Theology states that the mystery of God’s will is that we have access to the Father, through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit so that we might share in the divine nature.

Richard McBrien sets out the theological criteria that should form the basis of a Catholic spirituality and process of spiritual direction: we are neither purely bodily creatures nor purely spiritual- we are body-spirits; we are individual human persons; we are distinct centres of consciousness and freedom and there is no single way of experiencing God; we are graced by God and God enters into all that we know to be human; Christian spirituality is Trinitarian – we are created by the Father, recreated by the Son and empowered to be fully human by the Holy Spirit; all reality has a sacramental or mysterious character – the whole created order encompasses Christian spirituality; all human existence is orientated towards the Kingdom of God; we are also sinners and there is no Christian spirituality without the cross; we are ecclesial persons and live and are nourished in the Church; we are called to Christian discipleship; the call to Christian holiness is a universal call.

207. W. Reiser, *Seeking God in All Things*, 20
208. R. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 1056-7
Spiritual direction involves a person seeking direction from someone experienced in the ways of the Holy Spirit, to live their Christian life more fully and to discover God in a deeper way in their life. Reiser points out that the primary requirement for one who wants spiritual direction (the directee) is the ability to notice and speak honestly about what happens in their life. For the director or the one assisting, the primary requirement is to live from faith and be an attentive and discerning listener.\textsuperscript{209} Andrew Meeko states that this direction is “nothing more than a way of leading us to see and obey our real director, the Holy Spirit, hidden in the depths of the soul.”\textsuperscript{210}

In the past the focus of Catholic spiritual direction used to be mostly on the practice of one’s spiritual life, prayer, meditation, discerning God’s will. However, today in contemporary Catholic thought all life is embraced by the presence of God offering himself to human beings. God is the heart’s home and God works in humans to perfect the whole human person.\textsuperscript{211} So the aim of spiritual direction in recent times is to achieve wholeness and integration of the person. The supernatural result of a deepening prayer life is a deepening of self-awareness. The great Catholic mystic Thomas Merton defined prayer as the awareness of one’s inner self.\textsuperscript{212} This idea will be important in my discussion of people with Asperger’s Syndrome as I explore how spiritual direction focuses on the development of the whole person. The modern understanding of spiritual direction embraces all aspects of human development as all human progress in the struggle for justice, freedom and human development is part of the movement toward the reign of God.\textsuperscript{213}

\textsuperscript{209} W. Reiser, \textit{Seeking God in All Things}, 1
\textsuperscript{210} A. Meeko, \textit{Mystical Empowerment}, 49
\textsuperscript{211} R. McBrien, \textit{Catholicism}, 353
\textsuperscript{212} A. Meeko, \textit{Mystical Empowerment}, 52
\textsuperscript{213} R. McBrien, \textit{Catholicism}, 183
4.3 Spiritual direction for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome

Insights from Psychotherapy

One of the issues I faced in this thesis is that I could not discover any literature on the experiences of people who have been directors to adults with Asperger’s Syndrome or accounts of people with the disability taking spiritual direction. So my starting point was to investigate the use of psychotherapy in dealing with adults and adolescents with Asperger’s Syndrome. The insights from this therapy provide a process for understanding a person with Asperger’s Syndrome, an essential tool for any spiritual director dealing with this kind of person.

Psychotherapy involves a therapist listening to persons talk about issues of concern to their psychological well being and providing therapy to help them resolve conflict they experience. Several writers I referred to explored the challenges psychotherapy raises in dealing with this group of adolescents and adults. Tony Attwood draws on his experience as a counselor in stating that psychotherapy can benefit adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. However, the processes used must be modified and adapted to the specific needs of this group.\(^{214}\)

Attwood provides many good suggestions for this modification: He believes adults with Asperger’s Syndrome can benefit from psychotherapy. The therapy undertaken must be based on an understanding of the nature of Asperger’s Syndrome and it is important that the counselor understands the problems the client has in social communication, the expression of thoughts and feelings and how they understand self concept and self-esteem; he believes that the counselor needs to understand the latest

research on Theory of Mind, Executive Function and Central Coherence as they apply to people with Asperger’s Syndrome.

Attwood discusses the importance of the development of rapport between the client and the therapist and shows that people with Asperger’s Syndrome can instantly like or dislike a person, especially professionals with who they have often dealt; he shows the importance of understanding the linguistic profile of the client and the difficulties they have with conversational turn-taking rather than just talking continuously on a topic of interest; he points out that there is also the tendency of clients to be pedantic and to make literal interpretations of what is often said; he points to the need for the client to be given time to process the information discussed; he believes in the importance of planning counseling sessions of shorter duration with clear, structured and systematic goals; he suggests that a review with the client of each session take place by presenting the main points of the previous session and making them available to the client at the start of each session; he points out that personal interaction in sessions can be stressful for the client and asking them to explore inner feelings and thoughts and engage in self-analysis does not come easily for the person with Asperger’s Syndrome. To relieve this stress he suggests engaging the client in therapeutic conversation by interacting on computers. This can be more relaxing for the client and enable them to express greater insight than might be possible in direct exchange; he also suggests the use of art and music forms of expression (songs, drawings of situations) and comic strip formats to express emotions and thoughts. Indirect strategies can give great insights into the inner world of Asperger’s Syndrome; this interaction with a counselor benefits adults with Asperger’s Syndrome and can result in greater maturity and insight into their feeling and emotional states.
through therapy; he shows that people with Asperger’s Syndrome experience great
difficulties in understanding and resolving past injustices to them—bullying,
misunderstanding, betrayal, rejection. These experiences can intrude on their thoughts
for many years after the event. Therapy can help them to explore their thoughts and
feelings and the intentions of others in these painful incidents; he believes that self
concept is a key topic for therapy – who am I? The question of why am I different and
can’t make friends frequently arises. Therapy can help to achieve a relative
appreciation of who they are and lead to greater appreciation of strengths and
weaknesses of their personality. Therapy can help people see they are different, but
not defective; he shows that therapy is important in dealing with self-criticism and
forgiveness of oneself. Therapy can help reduce self criticism and self doubt; he
believes therapy can challenge the client to collaborate with others in pleasurable
activities they can succeed in; he believes that guidance in Theory of Mind can help a
client understand the intentions of others and become more objective in understanding
the motives of others; he believes that therapy is important in helping the client to
develop an understanding of what personality is and the characteristics of personality.
This enables the client to be able to move from just seeing oneself in terms of what
they do or collect; he shows that therapy can be valuable in helping clients develop
skills in making decisions about friendships; finally, he stresses that the ultimate goal
of therapy are to help the client understand and accept their unique personality.215

Paula Jackson, another psychotherapist with experience in working with people with
Asperger Syndrome, also provides many insights in her discussion of the value of

215 Ibid., 317 - 322
therapy.²¹⁶ She points out that counselors must understand they are working with clients whose theory of mind is based on logical knowledge and not identification with affective experience. They need to learn about the reactions and perspectives of others as they struggle to understand the behaviour of others;²¹⁷ she discusses how clients with Asperger Syndrome can appear arrogant, self-assured with a sense of superiority in comments they make. Therapists need to realize that clients are in fact unaware they sound superior to others and don’t take this into account in dealing with others. They struggle to understand how they come across to other.²¹⁸ She shows that therapists must monitor their own reactions to this appearance of arrogance and always look for the intention behind the presenting behaviour. With time it becomes easier to clear up mis-communication. There is always the need to stop, wait and try to understand the intent of a comment;²¹⁹ she shows that clients often are concentrating in communication on thoughts in their mind. Looking at persons can distract them in conversation. They can express themselves better if they concentrate on their mind rather than making eye contact. Looking at others distracts them;²²⁰ she points out that poor executive function is one of the characteristics of Asperger’s Syndrome. Clients struggle to deal with more than one thing at a time. Often they do not pick up what is going on around them. So therapists should not expect the client to notice what is obvious to you;²²¹ she shows that if the therapist wants the client to know or do something you need to tell them directly, without irritation and in clear and precise language as possible;²²² she points out that weak Central Coherence is a

²¹⁷ Ibid., 87
²¹⁸ Ibid., 88
²¹⁹ Ibid., 89
²²⁰ Ibid., 58
²²¹ Ibid., 43
²²² Ibid., 43
characteristic of Asperger’s Syndrome. Clients concentrate on details without relevance to the central meaning. This concept helps to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the personality type; 223 she points out that Theory of Mind shows that clients often have great awareness of factual information, but cannot imagine the other person’s feelings or personal experience as it relates to information; 224 finally she stresses that people with Asperger’s need to live in a world with others, and to know their words and actions have an effect, to learn more than one perspective and to examine their own mind and the minds of others. 225

4.4 Adapting the Process of Spiritual Direction

This discussion has led me to conclude that these insights from psychotherapy have much relevance for a spiritual director counseling an adult with Asperger’s Syndrome who seeks spiritual direction. While the goals of the two processes are different, both processes are dealing with the human person, their self-concept, their pain and hurt, their purpose in life, the development of personal skills and their hope for happiness in life. Spiritual Direction explores these issues within a theological framework of the mystery of God’s love towards humanity and his plan for the salvation of the world. All these issues have relevance for the spiritual life as all our lives as we come from God, we move and have our being in God and that God is our final destiny. 226

The skills of the psychologists have given us many new insights into the mind of the person with Asperger’s Syndrome and it is appropriate that these insights can be adapted and applied to the traditional skills involved in spiritual direction. Certainly,

223 Ibid.,45
224 Ibid.,37
225 Ibid.,58
226 W. Reiser, Seeking God In All Things, 5
clinical experience in dealing with clients with Asperger’s Syndrome would be a great advantage for any spiritual director. It would certainly be of considerable benefit to a spiritual director to have co-supervision of their own direction with a therapist with clinical experience with clients with Asperger’s Syndrome. Without proper training in counseling adults with Asperger’s Syndrome, a spiritual director would be advised to not take on anyone seeking direction. Otherwise, the process would become a frustrating exercise for both director and directee.

In Chapter Five of the thesis I present my key findings for adapting the process of spiritual direction for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome.

4.5 Spiritual Direction and Psychotherapy - What is the Difference?

One issue that emerges in this discussion is whether spiritual direction is a form of psychotherapy. Attwood shows that psychotherapy is an important form of therapy used for people with Asperger’s Syndrome to help them resolve issues of personal identity, pain and conflict, dealing with relationships. The directee in spiritual direction is naturally likely to want to discuss similar issues in spiritual direction to those taken up with a therapist in psychotherapy. However, in spiritual direction, the focus is quite different and the director is there to listen to the issues presented, but not to resolve the psychological problems of the directee. This is well explained by Sperry:

Unlike psychotherapy and pastoral counseling which focuses more on symptom reduction or problem resolution, spiritual direction focuses more on the maintenance and development of spiritual health and well-being. More specifically, the basic goal of spiritual direction is to develop the directee's relationship with God. Because prayer is critical to this relationship, the
directee's prayer life is a major consideration. This includes both discursive and meditative or centering prayer.  

4.6 Spiritual Direction – Teaching the Practice of Meditation

One of the important teachings undertaken in spiritual direction is how to pray and meditate. My investigation shows that Christian meditation and prayer are important for helping adults with Asperger’s Syndrome in their search for meaning and to deal with the many stresses in their lives. The teaching of this technique needs to be adapted to the specific learning and emotional needs of this group of people.

4.6.1 The Practice of Meditation

One of the important goals of spiritual direction is to lead the directee into a deeper experience of God. Prayer and meditation are the ways we enter into that experience. My discussion of Adam in a previous section showed that Adam seemed to discover by himself that meditation in the form of non-discursive prayer using a mantra, became part of his spirituality that brings him much inner peace. He seems to have discovered for himself the truth that many people today are experiencing, the power of silent meditation or the prayer of quiet as central to the modern experience of religious faith. In this section of the thesis I want to discuss the importance of meditation as a practice of great benefit for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome seeking spiritual direction.

The author Kim Nataraja writes that meditation is widely recognized today as a “powerful discipline for integration and transformation for in turning inwards in

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silence and solitude we re-tune the whole of our fragmented lives and become more aware of our link to ultimate reality.” She explores the value of this practice and shows that the effects of meditation clearly show the connection between the parts of the body we tend to separate from each other. Changes on the level of the body result in alterations to our mental attitude. Research, cited by Nataraja, has also shown that meditation produces important physiological effects on the body—lowering of breathing rate, blood pressure and the heart rate, due to the relaxation response. This counteracts the effects of stress, anxiety and pain. People with serious illness can find the decrease in tension improves their general health. Meditation has a healing impact on the body resulting from distinct changes in the brain caused by the experience of meditating.

Fr Lawrence Freeman, the Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation, has also written much about Christian meditation and the renewal of this form of prayer in the life of the Church today. He explains that traditionally prayer was understood as mental prayer—praying in words or using thoughts about God, reflecting on the life of Christ or about God. Today the Church is learning about the other part of prayer, the prayer of the heart where we are not thinking of God or talking to him or asking for things we need. In this form of prayer “we are simply being with God who is in us in the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has given to us.” In this contemplative prayer we go to the depths, to where the spirit of Jesus himself is praying in our hearts in the deep silence of his union with our Father in the Holy Spirit. Lawrence Freeman makes it clear that all Christians are called to this

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228 K. Nataraja, Dancing with your Shadow (Singapore: Medio Media, 2006), 1
229 Ibid., 4
231 Ibid., 10
dimension of prayer of contemplative consciousness as lived in ordinary life. He states:

Meditation leads us to this and it is part of the whole mystery of prayer in the life of any person who is seeking fullness of being.\textsuperscript{232}

He explains that all forms of Christian prayer are centered on Christ. His prayer is the essential meaning and source of all Christian prayer. All forms of prayer flow into and out of the spirit of Jesus worshipping God in and on behalf of creation. They are all informed by the prayer of the human consciousness of Christ which is in us by the grace of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{233} At the centre of prayer you find stillness. Meditation is the work of finding and becoming one with this stillness. It is openness and oneness with the prayer of Jesus. Contemplation is the process of being silent, still and simple. Fr Freeman points out for many people prayer is asking for help in time of trouble, But true faith in God is that God knows our needs before we ask.\textsuperscript{234} So Freeman concludes:

The prayer of the heart, contemplative prayer, meditation is essentially the prayer of faith. In silence we accept that God knows our needs and that this knowledge is the love which creates and will eventually complete us.\textsuperscript{235}

The clear message today is that all are called to this prayer, including people with the great variety of disabilities in the Church today. All people can meet God in the stillness and silence of contemplative prayer.

In his important book, \textit{Jesus the Teacher Within}, Fr Freeman explores the changes that such prayer can bring to the lives of all Christians. He shows that prayer is more than thought- it is the entry into an inner space of silence where we are content to be without answers, judgments and images. Jesus is to be known in relationship, with the

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.,11
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.,12
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.,13
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.,14
eye of the heart. We find this by listening. It is essential for Christian faith that we listen to who Jesus is and listen with full attention. This listening guides us towards the knowledge of who we are. Fr Freeman points out that the true self is more than a person’s thoughts, beliefs, social roles, status in life, fears, desires, pleasure, pains. The true self lies deeper than passing emotional states. Jesus as the Word of God draws our attention from its scattered state of egotism, unifies it and awakens us to the truth he identified in the words, “I have come so that you may have life and have it in all its fullness” (Jn 10.10) This begins a process of transformation of the person. Freeman points out that it is done not by magic or psychic power, but by faith. Faith is far more than belief. It is our capacity for insight. It is not a dream, but the real conviction that things will eventually work out for the best. In the face of suffering, faith gives the conviction that the brokenness in us can be repaired, the meaningless can be understood and the wounded can be healed. This faith is born of listening and through it we find meaning, consolation, joy and fulfillment. Freeman asks how does this transforming healing energy of faith arise through the stilling of the mind and lead to the self shining forth? He states that it happens through every action of life performed faithfully as a disciple.

Freeman explains that prayer is the deepest, primal therapy of the suffering human condition and is the natural way to grow. It can become a universal practice if people are willing to embrace it and take it up, each in their own way. Over time, the practice of meditation harmonizes the discordant dimensions of our consciousness. He points out that all religious traditions are agreed on the fruits of the practice of

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237 Ibid., 51
238 Ibid., 197
meditation – wisdom, generosity, tolerance, forgiveness, kindness, gentleness joy, creativity, happiness and basic human goodness. By liberating these potential qualities meditation advances the cause of human wholeness. With regular practice meditation establishes a deeply satisfying peace within ourselves, between ourselves and others and in all activities in our lives.239

Freeman also discusses that while the practice of meditation is simple, it is not easy. It requires learning to sit still which is not easy as our bodies are not used to being still. Humans are physically restless and learning to concentrate on silence does not come easily. John Main, one of the great pioneers of modern times for Christian meditation, recovered the way of bringing the mind to rest in the heart through the teaching of the early Christian monks. He taught that to meditate you need to: sit still with the back straight; close the eyes; repeat a mantra interiorly and continuously.240 He taught that “prayer is not a matter of talking to God, but of listening to him or being with him.” To listen we must become quiet and still and recite a short verse or mantra over and over.241

Another important book that explores very well the importance of Christian meditation is Silent Music by William Johnston. This text explores in considerable detail the modern development of meditation, the history of Christian meditation and the growing importance of the use of meditation as therapy.242 Johnston points to considerable research on the physiological benefits of meditation for health and describes the process of religious meditation as passive energy which becomes a

239 Ibid., 198
240 L. Freeman, Christian Meditation, 20
241 Ibid., 208
“vehicle for the activity of the Spirit – an activity that transcends all measurable energy.”

He also points out that in his view, the technique of entering into deeper levels of consciousness alone will not heal the mind. He shows the importance of other factors as well; one is love and he points out that meditational therapy will not be complete without love from a counselor or friend, or family or community; the other is meaning and shows the importance of motivation and a reason for living. The technique of meditation alone cannot provide this meaning. He points to the importance of religion to provide this meaning and that Christian contemplation is the answer to a call and a response to a vision of God’s love for us. This response is an interior movement, a motion of love that necessarily expresses itself in an altered of consciousness and opens up a new level of awareness, the experience of being loved and of loving at the most profound level of psychic life and of spirit. Johnston points out that this Christian meditation does not aim at therapy, but from it flow therapeutic consequences.

In conclusion, my research has shown that there are many benefits from Christian meditation and one key one is that over time it can teach people with Asperger’s Syndrome to gradually enter into this mystery of God’s love for each person and therefore to stop worrying about problems, the future and to trust in God. Freeman calls anxiety the enemy of prayer as we worry about ourselves too much. If we set our hearts on God’s kingdom all the other things will come to you as well (Matt 6:33).

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243 Ibid., 113
244 Ibid., 117
245 L. Freeman, *Christian Meditation*, 24
4.6.2 Meditation and Asperger’s Syndrome

The above discussion provides an important background for exploring why Christian meditation is a practice that meets many needs for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome, especially in dealing with the pain of social isolation and problems with personal identity. It provides a path to healing and acceptance of their life through the practice of silence, so familiar to many of them. From a Christian perspective, it is in this silence that Jesus is able to act on the person’s inner self to gradually heal the inner wounds we bear. Vanier expresses the importance of this silence so often in his writing:

We all have to find our own rhythm of prayer in our deepest selves, below the levels of action and understanding, there is a vulnerable heart, a child who loves but is afraid to love. Silent prayer nourishes this deep place.\(^{246}\)

It is important to take time to be silent,
To be alone with Jesus,
To look at the reality of who we are,
be in contact with our hidden places of pain
and little by little we can become a friend of our weakness. \(^{247}\)

The discussion presented would suggest to spiritual directors ways of teaching meditation to a person with Asperger’s Syndrome. It is quite possible that time be spent in silence with the person learning to practice the technique and answering questions about the practice as they emerge. Meeko stresses the importance of teaching practical ways of entering this silence and believes that large portions of time in spiritual direction can be spent with the director and directee sitting in silence. Many with Asperger’s Syndrome could find this quite a comfortable experience. Meeko states that it might become the most productive time of the direction.

\(^{246}\) J.Vanier, *Essential Writings*, 43
\(^{247}\) Ibid., 124
Follow up discussion can consider how successful the practice has been at home.

Another technique that some spiritual writers suggest is keeping a journal on one’s spiritual experiences which might suit some people with Asperger’s Syndrome. Journal writings could be discussed with the director. Gradually the director is able to teach the value and truth of the technique for the person in dealing with their problems and developing a closer relationship with Christ. Gradually the person is lead to understand that Jesus is the one who wants to heal us and help each of us discover who we are and to heal the wounds we carry. The director can suggest that the pain of rejection, difficulties in dealing with social relationships, difficulties in forgiving others and oneself can be presented to Jesus in the inner silence for healing by Jesus

\[248\] A. Meeko, Mystical Empowerment, 54
\[249\] Morton T.Kelsey, Adventure Inward; Christian Growth through Personal Journal Writing (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing house, 1980)
4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to present the value of spiritual direction for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. It shows that the search for identity and meaning is closely linked to the search for God and an understanding of guidance, healing and hope that a spiritual path can provide. Learning skills in meditation and the prayer of quiet are important skills in this search. However, it also stresses the importance of adapting the process of direction to the emotional and learning needs of adults with Asperger’s Syndrome and the necessity for developing skills in spiritual directors who make themselves available to direct people with this disability.
CHAPTER FIVE   KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The methodology I have used for this thesis of using the literature from psychological studies of Asperger’s Syndrome, literature on spiritual direction and the spiritual lives of people with Asperger’s Syndrome and literature on theology of disability suggests the following key findings which I hope can be used as a framework and source of guidance for spiritual directors in counseling people with Asperger’s Syndrome.

5.1 KEY FINDINGS FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS IN COUNSELLING PEOPLE WITH ASPERGER’S

Importance of Personal Relationships

- The relationship between the spiritual director and the person seeking direction is very important. The relationship should develop into a real friendship where there is genuine commitment to the person and affection based on respect.\(^{250}\) The qualities of such a friendship are: honesty between the two develops as they speak truthfully to one another; acceptance of the person as they are;\(^ {251}\) compassion – a genuine sharing of the suffering of the other; be open to others at a deep level and ready to serve them;\(^ {252}\) a willingness to invest real time, energy and an effort to understand the scientific nature of the disability;\(^ {253}\) creative listening and interpreting sensitively the voices of those

\(^{251}\) Ibid. 108
\(^{253}\) Ibid.,111
whose culture and perspective are different to your own; valuing the uniqueness and individuality of the person’s humanity and special needs; recognize their vulnerability as they talk to you as well as your own vulnerability in sharing with them.255

**Training in Understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome**

- The need for a sound knowledge of Asperger’s Syndrome and the person’s unique personality profile. Directors need to adapt spiritual direction to the specific personality profile and emotional needs of the person with Asperger’s Syndrome who seeks direction. A director working with such a person needs to have a thorough knowledge of Asperger’s Syndrome before embarking on this direction. To assist them in this direction, specific training programs could provided for spiritual directors as part of their continuous training and development. It is also recommended that they have co-supervision with a psychotherapist with experience in working with adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. Without this knowledge and experience a director would be advised to not provide direction.

**Understanding the Personality of the Person**

- It is important that the director has the ability to discover the strengths of the person’s personality, encouraging them to talk about special interests, engaging in topics they can discuss that interest them to build confidence and trust. This requires much listening. People with Asperger’s like to talk at length on facts and information that interest them. Encourage them to talk

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254 Ibid.,113  
255 Ibid.,115
about their intellectual skills, their memory, their interests. This is their great personality strength and develops their confidence with you. Early stages in the relationship are important as they try to see if you accept them. Rejection is possible if trust is not quickly built. Be willing to play games where they excel to show their skills and this builds confidence in the relationship.

**Dealing with Emotions**

- It is essential that the director understand the way people with Asperger’s Syndrome manage emotions and feelings. They often find it difficult to interpret the way other people think and feel. However, working with them in this area is essential to develop their skills and draw them out of their social isolation. Encourage them to talk about the issues that have brought them to you for direction - issues of self identity, personal hurt, difficulties in relationships, social isolation. Many find it difficult to understand pain and rejection, why people treat them badly and they need help to explore these feelings. Focus on concrete thinking, their abilities to think visually, getting them to tell stories about their experiences, replay incidents that cause pain. Challenge them to express feeling and states of mind in drawings, through music that expresses feelings, games, acting out scenes they have experienced, writing down stories, poetry, reflecting on the computer and sending message to you on line. Don’t expect long discussions. Variety in strategies is important. Provide summaries of discussions before starting a new session to review what has been discussed.
Knowing the Limits of the Director’s Role

- It is also important for the director not to step beyond his/her role and move into the role of a psychotherapist to resolve the psychological issues (pain, hurt, rejection) presented in sessions. These matters need to be referred on to the psychotherapist. However, these issues are important for discussion in spiritual direction because God is interested in all aspects of our lives and wants to be involved in them. The director teaches how we can bring these problems to God in prayer and meditation.

Making Eye Contact

- The director should not be put off when he/she finds it difficult to make eye contact. This can be a characteristic of many with Asperger’s Syndrome. Gently encourage them to look at you, but don’t push too hard. Consider alternative activities, such as games, where they can talk without having to face you directly. Don’t assume they understand how you are reacting to them. Tell them directly in simple sentences to build their confidence.

Understand Ways of Thinking

- The director needs to remember the different styles of thinking they will show. Some are visual thinkers, thinking in pictures, some think in very concrete terms, some think very literally. Many find abstract thinking difficult.

Using a Range of Strategies

- Directors need to develop a range of strategies in discussions: conversation mode is best in short sessions; expressions of thoughts and feelings can also be
undertaken through using art, music, written stories, games and communication via the computer, journal writing; be prepared to use a number of strategies in any counseling session; discern which strategy might work best on a particular day.

**Interpreting Modes of Talking**

- Directors should understand that if the person’s way of talking comes across in a negative way- with a sense of superiority or arrogance, don’t assume bad feelings or intentions on their part. Outward mannerisms often do not reflect their inner motivation. Always speak calmly, directly and in simple language and ask them if they understand the impact of their way of talking.

**Problems in Social Communication**

- Directors need to be very aware that people with Asperger’s Syndrome often experience difficulties in social communication and the expression of emotions. While directees need to be encouraged to develop skills in these areas, directors must realise the limits of such expression. Short, very focused periods of discussion are preferable in counseling sessions.

**Discussion on Spiritual Issues**

- Discussions on God and spiritual matters will develop once the confidence and trust has been established. Encourage them to use concrete images in talking about God and avoid abstract thought and theological jargon. The use of concrete imagery and good stories can be useful ways to communicate. Their approach to God will reflect their Asperger’s profile. The way they construct
their image of God reflects their cognitive and emotional profile. For many their religion or spirituality has been a refuge from the demands of the social world. Encourage them to see how God is present in the silence they experience.

Dealing with the God Issues

- Some directees may want to discuss issues they have with God. Why was I born this way with Asperger’s Syndrome? Why does God cause or allow this suffering? This is a complex topic and requires you present answers depending on the person’s profile. This is where material from theology of disability can help, adapted to the directee’s profile: Scripture stories that affirm God’s presence in disabled conditions (John Ch 9); Jesus’ acceptance of all people, especially the outcasts; Jesus shares our sufferings and carries our burdens; all people with physical and mentally disabilities are fully human; use positive stories of people who have lived creative and productive lives with the disability and a belief in a higher power in their lives, e.g. Beethoven, Einstein, Bill Gates. Emphasise the positive and creative of their personality and how they might be able to make a contribution to society.

Dealing with Issues of Hurt and Pain

- Directors should encourage the directees to explore the pain, hurt and rejection they have experienced in their lives. Many can hold deep resentments over past incidents, not knowing why they were treated in certain ways. Listen, but do not attempt therapy. This is outside the director’s domain of expertise. Help them to understand how Christ dealt with the pain in the lives of people he
met. Encourage them to pray for healing of past hurts and teach them how to make these prayers, presenting sample prayers they might use and stories of people who have sought prayers for healing. Growth in their understanding of spiritual matters, dealing with pain and personal growth will develop as they build confidence in you and know you accept them for who they are and God accepts them for who they are.

**Teach Skills in Practice of Meditation**

- Many adults with Asperger’s Syndrome are used to social isolation and quiet reflection or meditation (prayer of quiet, mindfulness) can be a practice they naturally develop. This can be fertile ground for deepening their understanding of the God in the hidden depths of their soul and the power of meditation to bring healing and release from tension and anxiety. Use time together to practice meditation and problems they experience in meditating. The practice teaches ways of calming their inner turmoil, opening up to the Holy Spirit in the depths of their being and the healing power of Christ in their lives.

**Involvement in Church Life**

- Many are not comfortable with institutionalized religion and Church life. The rituals and theology of formal religion often are not meaningful to them and they find social communication can be difficult. At the same time, the director should try to explore how the directee can be involved in Church life. Try helping to provide them with mentors who can encourage them to attend regular Church services and become involved in Church life.
The Challenge for Spiritual Directors

- Spiritual directors are challenged to understand that all people are called to a relationship with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Disabilities are no barrier to this relationship as the Spirit acts in the inner depths of the person calling them into a relationship with God. Spiritual direction can provide adults with Asperger’s Syndrome the opportunity to resolve issues they have with God, to deal with spiritual issues that can arise coping with a disability and to assist them in finding meaning and hope in their lives and self acceptance and the belief that God loves them as they are.
Conclusion

This study has been an important exploratory study in an area that has received little attention. It has highlighted the particular needs of adult Christians with Asperger’s Syndrome in their life journey and in understanding the meaning, purpose and the value of the Christian message in their lives. In investigating the literature from interdisciplinary resources, it has identified the particular emotional characteristics of this group as well as their spiritual needs and it has shown that the inner life and search for meaning is an area of real concern for this group.

The study has demonstrated that Asperger’s Syndrome has been one disability that has aroused little attention in spiritual direction. In the lives of many adults Christians with this disability, it is a hidden disability and the fact that many adults can live active and creative lives, often prevents their condition from coming to the attention of pastors. Often people with this disability are concerned about spiritual questions that arise from living with a disability, yet find it difficult to articulate and express them. The need to understand their specific needs and ways of thinking and relating has usually not come to the notice of Church pastors. As the psychological understanding of their condition becomes better known in the community, pastors will be faced with the challenge of meeting with them and assisting them in dealing with spiritual questions they ask. The importance of the adaptation of the traditional practice of spiritual direction to their emotional and learning needs is an important step.

This thesis has presented a framework for spiritual direction for adults with Asperger’s Syndrome and therefore suggests one important direction for the future in
the area of spiritual direction in the Catholic Church. The findings of this study suggest that there are six core elements of spiritual direction practice that need to be considered in the improvement of practice. These are:

- Knowledge and skills of the spiritual director in area of Asperger’s Syndrome
- Building trusting relationships
- Flexible communication techniques
- Focus on the personal strengths of client
- Use of meditation and quiet prayer techniques
- Supervision of spiritual directors with skilled counsellors

The author believes this thesis has made a significant contribution to the understanding of this process and the findings can provide important guiding principles in direction for any spiritual director who feels called to take up direction with adults with Asperger’s Syndrome. Clearly, the process of research in this area is just beginning and it is the author’s hope that further research can be done in this area in the future.
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