

*Berkley Forum*

# *Disability and the Politics of Vulnerability*

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Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Vulnerable Populations

Pandemic has brought religious communities to the front lines of crisis care. Clergy and chaplains are offering spiritual support to the ill and the dying; to their loved ones; and to health care providers who are working to save lives amidst tremendous risk, many of whom are now the sole witness to their patients' final words and last wishes. Congregations are responding to immense need, maintaining food pantries, organizing grocery delivery, and maintaining virtual spiritual community amidst lost jobs and bitter choices, amidst hunger, grief, and fear.

Religious voices are also raising [urgent calls](#) for a revolution in our civic values and public commitments: for debt relief and living wages, for rent forgiveness and universal health care, for the release of prisoners, for immigration justice. This is crucial testimony, and it underscores the disproportionate vulnerability that certain bodies face.

COVID-19 [hits hardest](#) among communities that are already marginalized: disabled people, people of color, queer and trans people, fat people, and others whose bodies are maligned and disdained; people who live in poverty, people who rely on public transit, people who live on the streets, people who are incarcerated or institutionalized, people at risk of deportation, and people who work essential, low-wage jobs.

As a scholar of religion and disability studies, as a rabbi and a disability activist, I am often asked: How can religious communities better support disabled people in pandemic times? How can religious allies address not only the immediate needs of people in crisis, but also act in long-term solidarity with disabled people and other marginalized communities?

## **Recognize the root causes of disabled people's vulnerability.**

In the early days of COVID-19, we were told again and again that it was elders and those with "underlying health conditions" who were most at risk of serious complications from the virus. That message chilled me. Not just because I fit that category, but because I know that vulnerability talk is a dangerous business.

Let's leave aside for a moment the way the "vulnerable populations" message slowed our response to the virus, keeping young and healthy folks from taking the threat seriously. Let's leave aside the way that message bought reassurance to the nondisabled world by positioning other bodies as expendable. *Don't worry, it said. It's only the older ones and weaker ones who're going to die.*

Here's the other problem with vulnerability:

Focusing our attention on the vulnerability of the body makes disabled people's deaths seem inevitable. It obscures the social and political dimensions of risk. It lets us off the hook for the way we've built a world that makes certain people less likely to survive.

For people with disabilities, the social risks of COVID-19 are stark. Many of us rely on care workers and personal attendants who work for low wages and few benefits, whose social safety nets are thin or non-existent. Many of us live in poverty, making it harder to stock the fridge and prepare for quarantine. Many of us live in institutions or group homes, where residents have few choices and no good options; where staff have even less access to personal protective equipment than hospitals; where lockdowns have further eroded already shoddy systems of accountability, leaving people even more vulnerable to violence, neglect, and abuse.

These aren't body problems. This is ableism in action, working hand in glove with capitalism and white supremacy.

## **Name the violence and marginalization that disability communities face.**

When religious voices engage with disability, they often affirm love and welcome. This kind of declaration matters, especially in a world that disparages disabled people and treats us with disdain. All too often, though, that doctrine of love is left to stand alone. Proclaiming the infinite value of each and every individual as an image of God is a powerful theological principle. But it's cheap talk, unless it's coupled with a deeper commitment to reckon with the concrete ways disabled people's lives are harmed by ableism, racism, poverty, and structural violence.

## **Confront the politics of triage and medical rationing.**

Disabled bodies, black and brown bodies, immigrant bodies, fat bodies, old bodies, queer and trans bodies have long borne the brunt of this brutality. We live—so many of us—with the visceral knowledge that our lives are valued less. But pandemic lays it plain. As physicians and health care workers on the front lines of crisis face wrenching decisions about how to allocate scarce resources, disability communities are terrified.

Yes, if I get sick, I'm afraid my lungs might fail. But I'm even more afraid of this: that someone will use my wheelchair or my disability diagnosis as a reason to move me to the back of the line. That if we're running out of ventilators, I won't get a chance because they've already decided I'm less likely to survive.

## **Practice solidarity.**

One of the most powerful acts of solidarity religious communities can offer in these times is to help channel money and resources to mutual aid networks led by disabled people of color. Consider two examples: The [Disability Justice Culture Club](#), based in Oakland, California, pairs higher risk people with volunteers who help meet their [day-to-day needs](#); they're also making and distributing protective kits for disability communities, elders, and unhoused neighbors in tent encampments. Or the [Autistic People of Color Fund](#), which provides critical mutual aid and empowerment through individual micro-grants. The fund is currently overwhelmed with need.

Both organizations—and similar initiatives around the country and around the world—are powerful sites for grassroots action. Want to support disability communities in these days? Tithe resources. Redistribute wealth. Follow the lead of those most affected.

## About the Author

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### Julia Watts Belser

Julia Watts Belser is an associate professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown University and core faculty in Georgetown's Disability Studies Program, as well as a senior research fellow at the Berkley Center. Her research centers on gender, sexuality, and disability in classical Jewish texts, as well as queer feminist disability ethics. She is the author of *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Gender, Sex, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem* (Oxford University Press, 2018). She has held faculty fellowships at Harvard Divinity School and the Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She is an ordained rabbi, as well as a longtime activist for disability, LGBTQ, and gender justice. She co-authored an international *Health Handbook for Women with Disabilities*, developed in collaboration with disability activists from 42 countries and translated into 14 languages. She currently directs an initiative on disability and climate change, which brings together disability activists, artists, policy makers, and academics to address how disability communities are disproportionately affected by environmental risk and climate disruption. She previously taught a class supported through the Berkley Center's Doyle Seminars project.

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