

Teachings on Disability in the Abrahamic Religions An English Presentation of a 2017 Doctoral Research Study

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Abstract

While disability studies have a history spanning only a few decades, interpretations of sacred texts are as old as the texts themselves. Millennia have passed, each era with its own goals, its own self-perception, and its own ideas about the surrounding world and the transcendent reality above it, namely God. Consequently, the interpretations of teachings evolved, and the translations of texts have also changed over time. What was the objective? What was the message? Who conveyed it, to whom, and about whom? Perhaps it is hardest to break free from scholars influenced by atavistically entrenched and power-driven structures, as numerous elements of contemporary cultures and civilizations are built upon them. The respect for authority, adherence to tradition, and fear of the new and the different can easily bind us. These mechanisms, though seemingly hidden, play an inescapable role in the complex system of social and cultural influences. Is it knowledge? Assumed knowledge? Science? Or merely experiments and constructs? This research undertook nothing less than to identify the fundamental teachings on disability and persons with disabilities within the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Naturally, the term itself is a modern concept, yet the reality of impairment has always been part of community life and its complex structures. However, exclusion, stigmatization, and in extreme cases, annihilation, could not have been part of the revealed teachings. They could only serve as a framework for legitimizing a distorted reality shaped by other interests.

Keywords: history of disability; persons with disabilities; Abrahamic religions; sacred texts; social teachings; protection of the disabled fetus; discrimination

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Research Problem and the Timeliness of the Study

The primary motivation for this research was to explore the foundational principles and interpretations within the teachings of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—based on their sacred texts, in order to trace the origins of pre-

sent-day efforts toward equal opportunity in the educational and historical contexts of disability in later cultural periods.

Over the past three decades, I have studied cultural and social history, Catholic theology, comparative religion, and educational science. Within this framework, I have dedicated more than a decade to examining perspectives on disability and the status and role of persons with disabilities within the teachings and practices of major world religions.

The inspiration for this topic came in 2012 when I was invited by the András Pető Institute for Conductive Education of Motor Disabled and Conductors to deliver a lecture on the perception of persons with disabilities within Islamic teachings. This experience highlighted the lack of Hungarian-language academic resources on the religious, social, and cultural dimensions of disability. Even on an international level, there was an absence of comprehensive works on the topic. This realization led to the research presented here, which formed the basis of my doctoral dissertation in 2017 (Berzsenyi, 2017) and was published in Hungarian in 2020 under the title “Kiválasztott vagy megbélyegzett? Tanítások a fogyatékosyságról: a zsidóság, a kereszténység és az iszlám szent könyvei szerint” / “Chosen or Stigmatized? Teachings on Disability: According to the Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” by Eötvös József Publishing (Berzsenyi 2020). This study marks the first English-language summary of my research.

Structure of the Research

Justification for a Multi-/Interdisciplinary Approach and Its Significance in the History of Education and Disability

In recent decades, the interdisciplinary nature of educational history has intensified, aiming to address issues that were previously neglected or only superficially examined. Today, attention extends not only to the “normal course” of development but also to minorities and individuals with disabilities (Nóvik 2013, 9-10). The concept of disability, much like the concepts of childhood or femininity, has been historically linked to notions of dependency (Szabolcs 1999, 16).

This research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature, identity, and intellectual foundations of the history of education and disability from the perspective of religious history. It incorporates details, elements, and scholarly literature into the field that previously fell outside its investigative scope. Tracking the numerous representations of the human body and its various disabilities throughout the historical and social transformations of past millennia would be a formidable task. However, it is evident that cultures rooted in ancient foundations often regarded disability as an illness with a fixed duration in this earthly life.

The histories of education, disability, and religion are all based on some continuously present, yet evolving concept of humanity. The prevailing interpretation of humanity and the world in a given era significantly influences the educational ideologies and practices of that period (Berzsenyi 2020, 9-19).

Scope and Boundaries of the Research

The aim of this work is not to exhaustively present every trace of disability history within ancient high cultures; rather, this serves merely as a background for the historical analysis of fundamental teachings found in the sacred texts of the major world religions still practiced today. The primary focus is a comparative analysis of teachings within the foundational texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and the Quran – situated within a socio-cultural and anthropological-historical context.

From the ancient timeframe, this research only extends vertically to more recent historical periods where it is necessary to interpret or illustrate significant consequences. It also explores cases where the severity of these historical consequences can only be addressed through contemporary theoretical and practical re-interpretations.

Educational Science Interpretive Framework

In the sacred texts, direct references to education and teaching, in the sense we understand today, are scarce. However, the word “teach” and its various forms appear 561 times (163 in the Old Testament and 398 in the New Testament). A research project focused on the history of disability from a religious-historical perspective aligns with the historical discipline of educational science by highlighting and tracing the details in the sacred texts that pertain to the primary societal mission – teaching – particularly as it relates to people with disabilities and the concept of disability itself.

“God as pedagogue” (Tarjányi 2000) is a thought expressed by a Catholic priest and historian of education, one steeped in faith yet meeting secular professional standards, since scripture is viewed as God’s word and the undisputed foundation of religion. Religion, especially in earlier historical periods, shaped and often exclusively influenced the culture that embraced the individual, embedding them through enculturation. This is a complex area of cultural pedagogy through which individuals assimilate into the society that surrounds and includes them by gradually learning and internalizing its cultural norms (Kron 2000; Loch 1969).

According to the Abrahamic religions, the world is sustained by three principal pillars: worship, love, and teaching. Worship, as a ritual, serves as a transcendent connection; love, or human relations, reflects a secular expression of reverence toward God and faith. Teaching represents the temporal dimension, building upon past experiences to ensure continuity into the future.

In this light, teaching forms the realm through which religion materializes, establishing a continuous and practical link between scripture and education. Thus, the sacred texts play a practical role in providing guidance, extending to the education of people with disabilities. This encompasses both the process of integrating individuals with disabilities into the broader culture and defining societal norms that relate to them.

Intellectual and Conceptual Foundations for Interpreting Disability

According to Günther Cloerkes, experts have yet to develop a unified definition of disability. This shortfall lies in the complexity and individuality of the phenomenon, as each person's physical, intellectual, or social evaluation can only be assessed individually. Consequently, the definition of disability depends on the historical era, societal expectations and customs, the individual's capacities, and, last but not least, the nature and extent of the disability itself. As an umbrella term, disability encompasses a broad scope and demands contextual clarification, primarily from the perspective of the individual and then from the surrounding world (Cloerkes 2007, 43).

It is essential to distinguish between fear of illness and fear of abnormality; the former relates to fear of death, whereas the latter signifies fear of social exclusion, lifelong stigma, and deprivation of opportunities. Such forms of difference have not been viewed consistently across times and places. In fact, apart from a set of social implications and viewpoints, there is no unified position on disability (Stiker 1999, 8-9, 14).

"Our society is more preoccupied with victims than ever before" (Girard 2013, 195). According to René Girard, in no previous historical period or society has there been as much attention and effort dedicated to supporting disadvantaged groups – including individuals with disabilities – as there is today (Girard 2013, 195-201).

Methodological Approach and Research Questions

There is no known work in Hungarian or international scholarship that consolidates the history of disability, the lives and education of people with disabilities, according to the teachings of the Abrahamic religions' holy books in the manner approached in this research. Consequently, this study aims not only to explore the religious-historical aspects of disability and present them within the unique perspectives of educational history, but it must also meticulously process relevant elements from available sources. Since completing this research, I have become aware of only one work of similar scope: in 2016, Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus edited "Disability and World Religions: An Introduction", published by Baylor University Press. This comprehensive 475-page book examines the concept of disability in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, and addresses Western traditions. Unlike this research, it provides a broader emphasis on contemporary analysis while covering less detailed historical and scriptural analysis (Schumm and Stoltzfus 2016).

My own study employs an anthropological approach with a qualitative, content analysis-based hermeneutic foundational research method (Falus 2004, 27-28). Content analysis seeks to uncover and identify the true significance of explicit teachings, or what Gadamer calls the pursuit of truth (Gadamer 1984, 21), as this research navigates fields at the intersection of educational history, disability history, religious studies, cultural history, social history, anthropology, theology, and philosophy. The narratives in sacred texts have received countless interpretations over the centuries, impacting societal and cultural history profoundly, influencing

the fundamental premises in today's social sciences. This work is complicated by the varied terminologies in translations from different eras and the shifts in religious teachings shaped by ecclesiastical separations.

The fact that a particular interpretation endured for centuries in religious tradition does not necessarily confirm alignment with the original purpose of the sacred authors regarding the fundamental meaning of the teachings. This research strives to gain deeper, more nuanced insights by examining behavioural norms and attitudes embedded within different cultures and civilizations across distant historical eras, as they pertain to the living conditions and societal integration of people with disabilities (Danner 1998, 90-93). According to the interpretive paradigm, it emphasizes the constructed, continually evolving nature of the world as created and redefined by humans. Through this lens, the research uncovers hidden meanings that have become taboos, forgotten, overwritten, isolated, detached from their original contexts, and thereby lost to public consciousness – and, consequently, to the potential for scholarly examination (Szabolcs 2001, 23).

Presentation of Sources

For the Hebrew Bible, I used the 1984 bilingual Hebrew-Hungarian edition of “The Five Books of Moses and Haftorahs” by Joseph Herman Hertz. The explanations associated with this text are consolidated in the written law found in the Talmud; for this, I used the German edition by Lazarus Goldschmied, published between 1897 and 1909, which includes the translation alongside the original, without vowel marking Hebrew text. Among the Christian Bible translations, while there are no significant interpretive differences, I favoured the Catholic Bible for quoting scriptural passages, as it contains the most canonical books, making it the most comprehensive and longest version. The apocryphal texts (referred to as pseudoepigraphical in Protestant usage), as well as the works of early Church Fathers, provide important supplementary material for the New Testament books. Additionally, I referenced “The Code of Canon Law” the “Codex Iuris Canonici 1983” (Erdő 1997) and “Teachings of the Second Vatican Council” (Cserhádi and Fábíán 1975) for insights into the modern objectives and missionary activities of the Catholic Church.

For the Qur'an, while there are several translations and commentaries, the original Arabic text is considered suitable solely for devotional purposes. Secondary sources include the Sunna and the Hadith, of which only excerpted collections are available in languages other than Arabic.

Furthermore, the research references various lexicons, works by prominent thinkers of different religions, and scholarly literature – primarily in German and English – addressing the historical domains of religion, disability, and pedagogy and their interconnections. Given that no comprehensive works on this topic exist, the research required meticulous efforts in locating and logically organizing small yet significant details, a process that proved to be highly time-consuming.

Research Assumptions and Questions

This research commenced with the following assumptions:

The historical oppression and exclusion of people with disabilities in certain periods of social and cultural history cannot be attributed to the revealed teachings of the world religions.

Nowhere in the sacred scriptures are the physically “able” majority called upon to eliminate, harm, expel, or exclude those deemed disabled, nor are they encouraged to enact other discriminatory measures. Even in implicit terms, the scriptures do not authorize the exacerbation of perceived or real divine punishments, nor do they support selective, practical implementations of laws otherwise interpreted as sacred.

The goal of my research is to demonstrate that the fundamental teachings of the Abrahamic religions neither endorse nor support the discrimination and exclusion of people with disabilities; on the contrary, such practices are explicitly prohibited in many cases.

The occurrence of such actions in human history does not imply that the teachings themselves are flawed or cruel. Instead, it suggests that these teachings were either misinterpreted or intentionally misconstrued to serve other political, social, or economic agendas. Actions undertaken in the name of faith, even when endorsed by the highest ecclesiastical authorities (such as during the Inquisition), do not guarantee that they align with the true spirit and practice of foundational teachings, nor do they assure adherence to them. Literal interpretations extracted from context have often led to re-evaluations that distort the original essence of these teachings entirely. When these distortions were supported by power interests and paired with prevailing superstitions and fears – along with human ignorance and gullibility – they could result in particularly harmful, destructive, and dangerous outcomes.

Just as contemporary human rights aim to address the most pressing social issues, the same can be said of their legal predecessors: religious laws. The laws affecting society’s most significant concerns were framed as unchallengeable divine commands, constituting social measures for the people.

Scientific and Professional Applicability of the Research

People with disabilities have existed in all eras and cultures. The application of this concept depends not only on the precision of its definition and the tolerance of the society or community, but also on tangible, physical differences that impacted individuals’ lives, making them distinct from the ordinary. Our knowledge about the daily lives of prehistoric and ancient societies is limited, especially regarding the challenges faced by people with disabilities and their immediate surroundings, which we can only trace in scattered fragments and faint hints. Regardless of whether a community revered this form of difference as sacred or rejected and ostracized it, individuals and their families often had to face considerable hardships. In examining social relationships, the fate of the individual, the community’s responses, and the immediate environmental influences all play crucial roles, mutually and necessarily influencing one another.

Disability has always been a part of daily life structures, yet it remains underrepresented in scientific research. The structures that can be read from the sacred texts of the world religions – specifically the Abrahamic religions in this study – are also areas with relatively little exploration. What primarily remains from the ancient world and religious teachings are social doctrines. By following these traces, considering any details that may be discovered, and analysing them within sociocultural contexts, we can draw conclusions within a historiographical framework on mentality.

The topics of illness and, by extension, disability have scarcely garnered attention in historical narratives from the perspective of the “able” or “healthy” majority. Works on medical history typically recorded information beneficial for the majority, while others focused on detailed descriptions of fixed conditions. Social history approaches to the history of disability do not emphasize this direction in research.

The perception of illness has varied significantly across cultures, and attitudes toward disability were already diverse in antiquity. According to Elisabeth Bösl, disability history has only recently emerged as a distinct discipline in the historical sciences within the Anglo-Saxon world, presenting an opportunity to write history from a specialized perspective – one that portrays people with disabilities not merely as patients, victims, or passive recipients of assistance (Bösl 2010, 30). The settings for education have always coincided with social and cultural settings, which is why this field broadly examines the historical changes of pedagogical effects and issues associated with different living environments.

My dissertation presents the lives, education, and social status of people with disabilities within a contextual and historical framework that is absent in Hungarian academic literature and, as previously mentioned, has minimal international coverage.

Structure of the Research

Division

To avoid repetition, I examine the teachings related to disability and people with disabilities within the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – not in parallel, but rather by establishing Judaism as the foundation, with differences and confirmations in the other two highlighted. Certain topics are explored in detail either because they significantly shape the spirit of the religious teachings – such as demonology in the case of Christianity – or because they are frequently mentioned in works addressing the social-historical aspects of disability due to their later significance. For instance, the eligibility for high priesthood in the Jewish temple and the relationship with the Pharisaic movement are discussed in relation to Judaism. In Islam, according to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, we encounter a re-evaluation of the teachings of Judaism and Christianity, aimed at eliminating distortions and returning to pure doctrines through divine revelation.

Ancient Historical Introduction

Following the introductory sections on research, methodology, and the history of concepts, this study includes an extensive review of the history of disability within the high cultures of the ancient Near East. These societies either predated or existed alongside Judaism and Christianity. Often, they not only influenced one another but also impacted religious teachings and the understanding of disability, thereby affecting the practical manifestations of societal behaviours.

In antiquity, revelations were integrated into the societal frameworks of the time, with human laws elevated to divine status to ensure the survival of the community. The instructional and disciplinary power of these laws lay primarily in their ultimate, unknowable consequences. Because disabled individuals represented the most vulnerable social group in every era, laws and customs typically offered them special protection. This approach reflects an enduring principle of ancient legal and social systems, where caring for those with disabilities was considered a sacred duty, providing them with safety and a place within the community (Berzsenyi 2020, 45-81).

Judaism

Among the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism is covered in the most extensive chapter. This is due partly to the vast historical period it encompasses and partly because it serves as the foundation for the teachings of all three religions. The primary educational tools in this faith are the “mitzvot”, or commandments, also known as the obligations, to perform good deeds, which collectively allow for the practice of “tzedakah” – social justice that supports the community (Háberman 2013).

In the framework of expected behavioural norms derived from divine commandments, “tzedakah” requires every individual to serve the community to the best of their ability, while the community, in turn, finds a place for each member in fulfilling these expected tasks or obligations. This is demonstrated by the fact that the term “beggar” appears only once in the Hebrew Bible, and even then, only in the form of a conditional question. In the era when religion was a central part of societal life, there were no unfortunate masses relegated to the periphery of society.

Judaism acknowledges the physical and intellectual manifestations of disabilities. While certain laws mention disabilities in the context of perfectionism, there exists a tradition-based, consciously inclusive system across society, rooted in “tzedakah”.

“He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy” (Leviticus 21:22). Only those with contagious diseases that posed a public health risk were excluded. A healthy lifestyle, proper nutrition, and bodily care were regulated by law. Disabilities were not seen as permanent; while healing was within the realm of human expertise, recovery itself was entrusted to God’s omnipotent grace. In this context, disabilities also take on a metaphorical meaning, drawing attention to human imperfections. Just as metaphorical disabilities can be overcome through acceptance of the teachings, physical disabilities are also embraced through divine laws (Berzsenyi 2020, 82-127).

Christianity

Christianity emerged during a period of social and religious crisis within Judaism, in an era when Hellenistic-Roman forces posed a significant threat to age-old traditions. Judaism responded to these changes in various ways, each focused on preserving religious tradition above all else. Movements such as the Essenes and Pharisees exemplified this desire to safeguard the faith. Christianity itself began as a religiously based social reform movement aimed at redirecting rigid, ritualistic teachings back towards the individual, within a world that had become fragmented in many respects. It introduced the presence of beggars and a marginalized segment of society that included outcast persons with disabilities. With the disintegration of “*tzedakah*” – the practice of social justice in service of the community – the ancient order was disrupted, and there was no replacement to uphold its values.

The core teaching of the New Testament is love. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

In the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, the continuity of divine teaching is personified. He frees humanity from demonic forces, the corruption of the world, and the inhumanity of a religion reduced to strict rules, placing the imperfect and vulnerable human being – as God’s creation – at the forefront. He restores their dignity, grants forgiveness of sins, and promises eternal happiness. Jesus’ role was unmistakably that of a teacher, one he fulfilled both publicly and privately among his disciples. This responsibility of teaching was entrusted to the apostles and, by extension, to the Church itself. The importance of social teaching is embodied in the Church’s threefold mission: sanctifying, teaching, and serving in love.

Following the Old Testament’s perspective, Jesus also recognized disability within the framework of human imperfection and vulnerability, rather than as a punishment for sin. “His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” (John 9:2)

Therefore, it does not allow for a causal connection between disability and behaviour that is estranged from God. In the Gospels, even demonic possession is portrayed as a sign of weakness and vulnerability, not as a manifestation of sin. Jesus frees those he encounters from the power of demonic forces, and we see the term “Satan”, which in Hebrew means accuser, adversary, or opponent. John’s Gospel, written in Greek, uses the word “*diabolos*”, which personifies sin as the fallen angel of damnation, opposing God and aiming for humanity’s eternal ruin.

The Gospels, therefore, are not solely directed at Jewish Christian communities but are for anyone who wishes to follow Christ’s teachings. Removed from their original social and cultural contexts, these texts require new interpretations, provided by the Church Fathers. Tertullian (160-220) believed that human nature was inherently corrupt and prone to evil, making the concept of damnation essential to restrain humanity. The term “*diabolos*” became established in translations, and a few centuries later, Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) unequivocally linked it with sine’s interpretation shaped Christian thought and social ethics for over fifteen

centuries: he viewed only the soul as the essence of humanity, struggling to accept the unavoidable body in which we live in this earthly life. Although divine revelation speaks of the unity and equal dignity of body and soul, Augustine could never reconcile this dualism. His philosophy “continues to overshadow Christian anthropology even today” (Nyíri 1991, 128), as the devaluation and disdain for the body and its needs prevailed well into modern times (Nyíri, 1991, 126-129; Pukánszky 2003, 37-40). In his critically toned work, “The History of Hell” (2012), Georges Minois argues that Augustine, driven by his anti-Pelagian fervour, reached an ultimate level of injustice by condemning pagans and unbaptized children to hell. This perspective is particularly problematic given Augustine’s significant influence as a foremost figure in patristics, a stance that gained substantial weight due to his authority.

The Second Vatican Council, convened from 1962 to 1965, ultimately resolved the relationship between divine punishment and its physical and spiritual manifestations. Even though between Christian enculturation and the New Testament has always been part of the framework of social teaching, its interpretations have evolved significantly. Today, they have largely returned to their original foundations, as understood through Jesus’ teachings (Berzsenyi 2020, 128-166).

Islam

In the sequence of revelations, Islam is considered the third revelation. The Islamic faith recognizes both Moses and Jesus as prophets but holds that the final, corrected revelation was delivered to the Prophet Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel. Moses was a child with a speech impediment and faced abandonment; Jesus, due to Herod’s persecution of infants, lived as a refugee in Egypt with his parents; and Muhammad, orphaned early in life, was often labelled mad because of his visions. Exclusion and peripheral existence were integral parts of each of their lives.

This chapter, the shortest in the study, offers clarification on teachings regarding people with disabilities and examines their historical, social, and cultural contexts. According to Islamic belief, Muhammad is the last prophet, the seal of the prophets, marking the completion of the divine revelations and the establishment of the Arab faith. The God of the Abrahamic religions is one. His name, “El” in Hebrew, has a plural form “Eloah”, which appears in Aramaic as “Elohim” and is rendered in Arabic as “Allah”.

In the view of Islam, society-supporting social justice is reinterpreted and revived almost a millennium after the initial revelations. While it does not dismiss the possibility of human folly and sinful behaviour, Islam explicitly rejects the notion that disability could be a punishment for sin. Humans are seen as vulnerable and mortal beings of God, naturally inclined to imperfection both physically and, as metaphorical interpretations suggest, spiritually as well.

However, God has created a remedy for every illness, leaving it to humans to discover, apply, and embrace healing—even in a metaphorical sense. The mystical branch of Islam, Sufism, has adapted the existential philosophy of Judaism and Christianity into its own worldview. The philosophical concept of humanity, analysed in detail in Abu Abdullah Ghulam Moinuddin’s “Die Heilkunst der Sufis”

(1984), is explained in simpler terms by Jalaluddin Rakhmat in his work “Die Ethik des Helfens im Islam” (2005).

In Sufi thought, a person belongs to three different realms, and thus life can be understood on three different levels. “Nafs” refers to the physical level, the body; “fikr” to the intellectual and psychological level, the mind; and “ruh” to the eternal spiritual reality, the soul.

The term “nafs” in Arabic signifies the body’s needs and desires, including food, warmth, rest, wealth – essentially everything encompassed by instincts and necessities driven by sensory experiences and emotions. Every physical illness or disability can be traced back to either a deficiency or an excess of these basic needs. The word “nafs” holds a broad semantic range, also referring to breath, animal existence, soul, self, personality, and being. In Sufism, it denotes the development of the soul as reflected in human behaviour, personality, and character. The highest state of this development is a form of enlightenment referred to as “nafs-i kull”, the universal soul, symbolizing mystical unity with God and complete spiritual fusion.

The second level is the realm of consciousness and emotions, which significantly influence both the “nafs” and overall physical and spiritual health. Emotions and moods have physical repercussions on the body. Feelings like anger, fear, joy, anxiety, and hatred can directly impact physical well-being. If these emotions dominate one’s mood and feelings over time, they disrupt the body’s internal balance and can lead to illness, and in extreme cases, may even result in a form of disability through persistent imbalance. This mental and emotional realm is termed “fikr” in Arabic, primarily denoting deep meditation or profound thought processes.

The third level of human existence, known as “ruh” or soul, is the element that endures beyond death, continuing after physical life ceases and intellectual existence fades. The harmony of these three levels – the body, consciousness, and the soul – completes the essence of a human being, connecting physical activity with conscious awareness and the indwelling spirit. In everyday language, terms like “spirit” and “soul” have been used interchangeably for millennia, but in the terminology of existential philosophy, they refer to distinct qualities. The spirit pertains to the material world and reflects both mental and spiritual needs related to earthly life and physical existence, while the soul represents the immortal divine part within humans.

The breath of life, signified by the first intake of air after birth, is only possible with Allah’s permission, known as “idhn”. (Rakhmat 2005, 132-134) As stated, “Even if all the doctors on earth were to gather and try every remedy, they would not be able to heal a person from whom the Creator God – by whatever name He is called – has withdrawn idhn, the permission for life and breath. Since it is breath that activates bodily functions, the end of breath marks the end of earthly life.” (Rakhmat 2005, 133-134)

A schematic outline of the human concept as it appears across the three Abrahamic religions is presented as follows:

Body

Flesh and Blood (Hebrew: basar – Arabic: basar [meaning “human”])

Breath

The life force carried in the blood (Hebrew: nefesh – Arabic: nefes and nafs [meaning “soul, self”])

Breath of life, living beings

animals = nefes haya

Spirit of God

Divine energy, excess of existence (Hebrew: ruach Elohim – Arabic: Ruh Allah)

The state of Adam and Eve, or the paradisiacal condition

Consciousness, will, character (Hebrew: neshamah – Arabic: nasamah [meaning “person, soul count”])

The self-sustaining, thinking, and creative human being

At its core, Islam is a human-centred and socially conscious religion, though its teachings have been subject to various distortions and interests throughout history. (Berzsenyi 2020, 167-191)

The Issue of Abortion

One particular topic that I highlight separately in each chapter is the question of abortion. This emphasis stems from the relationship between body and soul, that is, the anthropological interpretations in the religions regarding individuals with disabilities. The formation of a human – understood as the unity of body and soul – is defined differently in each religion and is linked to various stages of development. However, one aspect is common across all three religions: the destruction of human life, even in the fatal stage, is considered a sin. The only variance lies in the judgment of when life begins, viewed through the lens of existential philosophy. Once a person with disabilities is born, they are seen as an equal and rightful creation of God, though their responsibilities may be adjusted or lightened according to their abilities. (Berzsenyi 2020, 85-90., 128-131., 171-173)

The Jewish law, or halacha, approaches the issue of abortion based on foundational works like Fred Rosner’s comprehensive *Biomedical Ethics and Jewish Law* (2001), Michael Klöcher and Udo Tworuschka’s handbook “*Ethik der Weltreligionen*” (2005), and the source commentary by religious philosopher József Szécsi’s study on the question of abortion in ancient Jewish, Roman, and early Christian sources. (2004).

The permissibility or prohibition of abortion in Jewish law primarily depends on when the soul is believed to enter the foetus, as per the philosophical underpinnings of the religion. This ancient framework forms the basis of Jewish legal practice regarding abortion, continuously evolving and updating through the collaborative work of scholars and theologians.

According to Jewish law, a fertilized egg is considered “mere water” for the first forty days, a time when the embryo is not visible and when typically, a woman becomes aware of her pregnancy. Until birth, the foetus does not have a separate personhood status (nefes); it is viewed as an extension of the mother rather than an independent entity until it begins the birthing process (including caesarean section), thus initiating its journey toward autonomy.

This principle is supported by biblical, Talmudic, and rabbinical sources, as outlined by Rosner and Szécsi. Although the Bible does not explicitly mention inten-

tional abortion, it does reference accidental miscarriage in the Book of Exodus: “If men struggle with each other and hit a pregnant woman, causing her to lose her offspring but without further danger to her life, a fine shall be imposed as the woman’s husband demands, and the judges determine. But if there is serious injury, you shall give life for life” (Exodus 21:22-23). Since an unborn foetus is not considered a person or soul (*nefes*), its destruction does not carry the death penalty.

Referring to Talmudic sources, the Mishnah states: “If a woman is having difficulty in childbirth [and her life is endangered], the foetus should be cut up in her womb and removed limb by limb, because her life takes precedence over the foetus’s life. But once the greater part [of the foetus] has emerged, it must not be touched, for one life may not be set aside for another” (Ohaloth 7:6, cited by Szécsi 2004, 12; Rosner 2001, 179).

Throughout the Talmud and rabbinic literature, the consistent perspective is that a foetus is considered a part of the mother and not an independent being or person (*nefes*).

In contrast, following the traditions of Western Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church maintains that a child is considered a human being, a person (*nefes*) from the moment of conception and is imbued with the divine soul (*ruah Elohim*). Thus, upon diagnosing any potential abnormalities during the fetal stage, abortion is not even considered an option. The child is viewed as a gift from God, and consequently, the parent has no authority over the child’s life or death.

The “Catechism of the Catholic Church” (2006), referencing the 1988 Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation (*Donum Vitae*) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, states in section 2274 that a foetus must be treated as a person from the moment of conception, with its integrity and life protected, as well as receiving necessary care. Prenatal diagnosis is permitted if it respects the life and health of the foetus and is aimed solely at preserving or treating the foetus. “It is gravely opposed to the moral law if the diagnosis leads to an abortion. The diagnosis must not equate to a death sentence” (KEK 2006, 2274).

Regarding euthanasia, the Christian stance aligns with Jewish law in its application to persons with disabilities. “Particular respect must be given to those whose lives are diminished or weakened. The sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible” (KEK 2006, 2276). “Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable” (KEK, 2006: 2277). Such acts are considered to oppose divine will and are deemed murder, irrespective of human goodwill or sincere intentions.

Protestant churches, on the other hand, often see a conflict between the rights of the unborn child and the mother’s right to self-determination. This position is significantly influenced by the civil laws of each country and the decisions made by national church synods. Abortion, according to God’s will, is generally impermissible, with the Evangelical Church firmly opposing its legalization. However, in cases where a pregnancy termination is medically necessary to save the mother’s life – where both would otherwise perish – termination may be permissible if the mother

consents. Without her explicit consent, the procedure should not occur (Klöcher and Tworuschka 2005, 29-30).

In the context of birth control, the Qur'an suggests a two-year breastfeeding period in Surah 2:233, providing an opportunity for natural spacing between births. As for preventive contraception, although not explicitly discussed, natural methods practiced in the Prophet's time have generally been deemed permissible by Islamic scholars. However, abortion is strictly prohibited, and there is limited literature specifically addressing the topic. While the Qur'an does not provide a direct ruling on induced abortion, it emphasizes the sanctity and protection of life, which is of paramount importance.

The major schools of Islamic jurisprudence, or *madhhabs*, have a relatively consistent stance on the matter. They stipulate that the "breath of life" fills the embryo by the 40th day after conception, though some interpretations extend this period to as late as the 120th day. Within this framework, abortion may be permissible in severe medical cases, but only up to these specified points in pregnancy. In later stages, the foetus's rights are respected, yet if the mother's life is at risk and both would otherwise perish, priority is given to preserving the mother's life. Islamic law, or *sharia*, also includes the principle of "*darura*" (urgent necessity), allowing for exceptions to otherwise prohibited actions in genuine emergencies, assessed on a case-by-case basis (Klöcher and Tworuschka 2005, 116).

In the Islamic world, every child is considered a divine gift, holding immense value for both family and the broader community. The birth of a child transforms a marriage into a family bond and strengthens the *ummah*, the community of believers.

When prenatal tests reveal a disability, certain Islamic scholars allow for the possibility of terminating the pregnancy only if medical evidence indicates that the foetus will not survive until birth. Stricter interpretations require waiting until the foetus is conclusively no longer alive before permitting intervention. If the foetus is healthy aside from the diagnosed disability, there is no valid reason to terminate the pregnancy. Disability is not viewed as a negative mark or demeaning characteristic. Theologically, each individual is unique, a distinct creation of God, with only the Creator able to truly understand the depths of each person's heart (Schirrmacher and Spuler-Stegemann 2004, 199).

Summary of the Work

The bibliography of over 200 sources was compiled only through gradual discovery, often requiring substantial time and effort to locate seemingly critical details. The research was further complicated by the fact that a significant portion of these works is not available in Hungarian libraries and public collections. Consequently, I obtained most of my sources through the University of Vienna Library or its associated networks.

Overall, this research involved processing roughly ten thousand pages of scholarly material, and I relied solely on my own plans and insights for organizing the material. In several instances, it was the references or ideas from seemingly less significant works, along with professional assistance from colleagues, that led me to unavoidably important details.

Experts specializing in individual religions or historical periods may identify notable omissions. However, my goal was to provide a comparative and comprehensive analytical overview. Within the scope of a doctoral dissertation, it would be impossible to cover every detail exhaustively, even with the greatest care and intent. Therefore, I focused primarily on those characteristic issues frequently highlighted in various sources and on teachings that fundamentally shape the perspective and spirit of each religion's sacred texts.

Conclusion of the Research

The Abrahamic religions do not prescribe any general discrimination against people with disabilities. However, over the course of history, interpretations of their fundamental teachings have sometimes been distorted or misinterpreted, influenced by overzealousness or the demands of power, embedding these misunderstandings into cultural practices. This process, driven by the continuous evolution of culture, is never truly complete, thus requiring periodic adjustments, reinterpretations, and clarifications. The older and more widely established a religion's social teachings, the more challenging it becomes to strip away the distorted elements and reintegrate a refined version back into the culture. The modern-day references in this work aim primarily to illustrate and substantiate this ongoing necessity.

From my research, it is clear that major human cultures defined on a religious basis, such as those rooted in the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, do not inherently endorse discrimination. Their core teachings provide no instructions or even indirect suggestions for such actions. References to discrimination, distortions, misinterpretations, and other agendas are solely the result of efforts to obtain some form of power-based legitimacy.

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