

Theological Perspectives On The Valuation And “Meaning” Of Human Impairment

One of Wolfensberger’s lesser-known contributions to the field was his perspective on the spiritual meaning and gifts of lowly people, particularly those with mental impairments. His was a theological perspective informed both by his Christian faith and his theory of Social Role Valorization (SRV). Of course, he was much more widely known for the latter, but the two perspectives were very much intertwined. This is not to say that SRV is a “Christian” theory or a “religion,” as some have tried to claim. He was quite clear about this. In describing Social Role Valorization (SRV), Wolfensberger (2012) was very explicit in separating the empirical nature of the theory from the values which could be used to influence its application.

“...I want to emphasize again that even though SRV is the practical application of the knowledge of social science, such an application must be guided by values – and, therefore, some form of *de facto* religion. Social Role Valorization mines a wide range of sociology and psychology, it explains an entire range of phenomena around social valuation and devaluation, it predicts what will happen to people when they are subject to certain valuing or devaluing conditions, and it offers guidance as to what one might be able to do about any of this if one so chooses. But whom one decides to value or devalue, and for whom one decides to seek more positive roles, valuation, and life experiences in society, and how far one wants to pursue this – these are all *de facto* religious decisions, not scientific ones, as explained in more detail in Wolfensberger (1995).” (p. 61)

At the same time, however, SRV theory was not developed or presented in a value-free void. One can do empirical work with the hope that what is learned, informed by values, would be used in a manner to promote pro-social results. Wolfensberger (2012) also indicated this as well.

“So here is the problem: the science that SRV draws on, and SRV itself, can be taught as nothing but science, and one could even bend over backward to purge it of all emotion-laden idiom, all emotion-eliciting examples, and all passion in the teaching process—but of course, this would not be apt to motivate many people to become more pro-social than they were before. It is when the teaching of SRV is ensouled with noble values that audiences become newly motivated and SRV was always meant to be applied in a way that would motivate pro-social action.” (p. 235)

Social Role Valorization and the contribution of Christian values

Wolfensberger understood that the mutual contributions of SRV and Christian values could be a powerful pro-social combination: applying SRV to an arena which should be informed by Christian values (but may not be), while applying Christian values to guide and evaluate the results of SRV's empirical data to change culture. SRV points to the "what" that perhaps needs to be changed, while the Christian perspective provides the "why" one engages in efforts at cultural change.

It is not surprising that SRV and Christianity should work together. The commonality between the two is the wisdom of each. Wisdom works well with wisdom, even though it may come from two very different sources. The empirical understanding that grows out of SRV is one form of wisdom. The teachings of Christianity is another storehouse of wisdom. That the two would work together therefore should not be unexpected.

We see this in Dr. Wolfensberger's theological writing. As the expert on SRV, he clearly understood how to use his Christian faith to apply its principles. Addressing the Christian community in general and the Church specifically, he describes "Judeo-Christian rationales for integration" (Wolfensberger, 1978, p. 58). Under the heading of divine laws and commandments, he writes the following.

"However, one does not have to stretch the law to find rationales in support of integration. For example, if we look at the command to love one's neighbor, together with the hypocrite, we may ask, "and who is my neighbor"? Does it include the retarded, disordered, elderly, prisoner, law offender, poor, racial minority member, foreigner, etc.? Next, can we not safely assume that in order to love one's neighbor, the neighbor first would presumably have to be somewhere around to be loved. If the neighbor is nowhere near, is far away, or is segregated and congregated, it makes hollow that particular command. Also, loving one's neighbor seems to imply that the neighbor should probably enjoy the same benefits and privileges that I enjoy, and should be no more restricted than I myself would like to be restricted." (Wolfensberger, 1978, p. 59)

Earlier in this article he states, "The imprint of Christianity will be put upon all sorts of evil things--which is why we see segregation practices on a massive scale in practically all denominations, and why other secular and even idolatrous practices are widely recapitulated in the churches without being labeled as such, and often without being recognized" (p 58). Because he was a student of the Bible and theology, he

understood the values, the religion, that Christians would bring to bear on the application of Christian principles generally and those that could be applied to develop an application of SRV specifically.

For example, a deep awareness of the many wounds commonly experienced by socially devalued people can provide a starting point for the development of ministry to individuals with disabilities. Inside and outside of religious settings, in country after country, and on almost every continent, when the question is asked, “Do these wounding experiences occur here? Do they reflect the social consequences of disability in this place?,” the answer is always an emphatic “Yes!” The implication is that Dr. Wolfensberger was able to clearly articulate a cross-cultural description of the experience of devaluation, particularly in reference to persons with disabilities. As above, when one applies their “religious” values to this empirical data, the result is a plan for pro-social change.

Prophetic voice

Dr. Wolfensberger also tried to bring awareness of the value of persons with disabilities. Luke 10, particularly verse 21 states, “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do!’” Wolfensberger writes,

“If God is suddenly elevating retarded people to special and worldwide prominence, we may be witnessing the ultimate instance of God choosing the foolish to confound the wise, and there must be a terribly important message. He must be laughing in divine humor at mankind’s intellect, and the products of intellect (namely, science and technology in the broadest sense) are bankrupt and are about to be foreclosed: when these are cut loose from the Spirit, it is the end of the line for them.” (Wolfensberger, 1976, p. 31)

The reality of God’s presence was something else that Dr. Wolfensberger also expressed and was aware of. This was not just an experience of God’s presence to him, but his witnessing of God’s presence to and through the lives of persons with severe disabilities. In relating a time of such an experience, he stated,

“For example, it is only in the last few years that I have been having experiences such as moments of spiritual sharing and worship by groups that may be as large as over a hundred people, of whom maybe half are severely retarded and otherwise handicapped, and where there may occur striking totality and

profundity of silence of a type which overpoweringly conveys THE PRESENCE OF GOD. I was stunned the first time I experienced this.” (Wolfensberger, 1976, p. 24, emphasis in the original)

Then on another occasion, he relates,

“Once in the middle of the floor, a severely retarded man who had very little speech suddenly knelt down, folded his hands and began to pray silently in total ecstatic absorption. As the other people perceived this, they joyfully began to dance around him in a circle. This was the second time that I knew THE PRESENCE OF GOD in a way I had not previously felt.” (Wolfensberger, 1976, p. 27, emphasis in the original).

These experiences are instructive particularly when viewed among his larger body of work regarding the value of people. If God himself will be present among them, shouldn't we as well?

Exhortations

As stated, SRV is rooted in empirical observations about the social order that simply present facts about the way things are. What one does with those facts is informed by one's religion, and other higher order value system(s). Dr. Wolfensberger, perhaps better than any other, was once again in a position to apply his Christian faith to the outworking of SRV. In doing this, he made many recommendations for what the Christian community might be if, once again, the wisdom unearthed by SRV was guided by Christian wisdom. Perhaps nowhere is this marriage of ideas more fully expressed than in his theological “papers.” Gaventa and Coulter published *The Theological Voice of Wolf Wolfensberger* in 2001 which included seven of his papers, responses to these, and then a Response to the Responders by Wolfensberger. The papers were written across a period of 23 years (1978-2001).

There is much that can be understood about his perspective as a Christian and about how one would indeed apply one's religion to determine what to do with the observations growing out of SRV. It is also important to note there are misunderstandings within the Christian and larger religious community about Wolfensberger, SRV, and its application. He writes about these kinds of misunderstandings in regard to Dr. Marc Gold's book, *Did I say that?* Dr. Gold was a reformer and innovator in understanding persons with severe disabilities, in particular related to their education.

“Also, at least portions of several responses brought out that when one is exposed to a high-level view (be it a religious, philosophical, cultural or even other secular position or theory) that is different from one’s own, one is not only likely to disagree, but one may not even understand it, and therefore, one will not be able to explain it accurately to others. I believe that this was a major problem with certain points of critique that needed nuance, nuance, and more nuance. Marc Gold (may he rest in peace) wrote a book entitled, *Did I Say That?* (1980). I could write not just one such book, but a whole series of them, because people constantly attribute sayings or positions to me that were never mine.” (Wolfensberger, 2001, p. 151-152)

Clearly, he was no stranger to controversy and appeared to have no fear in the face of it or in confronting it. This is also a lesson, for those who will pay attention, about how a firm understanding of truth leads to boldness. From his writings one gets the feeling that Wolfensberger loved the Christian Church. But that love informed a type of prophetic voice in relation to it. Many such observations or exhortations might be referenced here. But for the purposes of this article, five were selected for inclusion via a comment from Dr. Wolfensberger and an observation about it. These exhortations provide insight into an SRV-informed Christian perspective on the Christian community.

Relationships.

“...retarded people probably have greater need of enduring loving relationships from Christians (yes, “from” more even than “with”) than they have need for large numbers of brief loving encounters with numerous Christians. The same need may exist in everybody, but it probably exists to a greater degree in persons of impaired intellect; further, their need may be greater because it is less often met.” (Wolfensberger, 1982, p. 81)

It is suspected that here Wolfensberger is alluding, on one level, to the difference between relationships and programs. Churches can with the best intentions develop programmatic approaches to serving people who have been devalued. But often, these come in a form of distantiation, meaning that, at times unconsciously, “People put distance between themselves and those they devalue and reject” (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 18). It is not that there is not some good that can result from programs. Rather, it is loving relationships that are really what the church needs to strive for. It is through these that one truly loves one’s neighbor. Wolfensberger pleads for these on behalf of those with intellectual disabilities. However, he would equally advocate for those without disabilities entering into these relationships.

There are real costs to oneself involved in loving one's neighbor, as he described in a discussion on advocacy.

“This distinct cost may involve any number of things: time that one would much rather have spent on something else, wear and tear on one's emotions, such as one would ordinarily avoid; investment of one's material substance and possessions; sacrifice of rest, sleep and/or recreation; etc. Indeed, the cost may involve one of the highest prices of advocacy, and that is being at risk, such as the risk of incurring resentment and hostility from others, of being taunted, or becoming an object of ridicule, of being considered foolish or crazy, of being rejected by one's peers and colleagues, of being in danger of loss of job... Indeed, without significant cost, an action should not be viewed as advocacy... even if it is otherwise valuable action.” (Wolfensberger, 2003, p. 123)

Although addressing advocacy, Dr. Wolfensberger must have also seen this connection to the demands of loving one's neighbor from a Christian perspective. The embracing of these demands changes all involved in relationships. As stated later in the article on advocacy, “advocates voice other things that they learn about human afflictions and impairments...advocates learn about themselves...learning something about what constitutes the good life...advocates learn to no longer take some of the positive things in their own lives for granted” (Wolfensberger, 2003, p. 140).

Additionally, he points out

“...that research study after research study has shown that regardless of how favorable the living situation of handicapped people in the community may be, the one thing that is lacking – and almost invariably so for mentally retarded people – is genuine social integration” (Wolfensberger 2003, p. 145).

Rather than relying on programs or “boughten relationships” (Wolfensberger 1998, p. 20), that is, paying people to be in relationship with a devalued individual, Christians must invite devalued persons to friendship.

Confused flocks and shepherds.

“The flock is confused in good part because the shepherds are confused. They speak like scribes, without authority. Perhaps as never before, pronouncements on matters of faith and morals coming from the moral authorities of the church (priests, monks and nuns, professors of theology and ethics, even bishops) may be no different than those coming from the secular sector, and

those have to be subjected to the same skeptical analysis as the latter.”
(Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 98)

Wolfensberger is correct when he laments that the secular world has too often led the way in societal change toward devalued people. There has been much progress made in the Christian community in recent years which should be celebrated. However, there is still so much more to do in this regard. Perhaps the “shepherds are confused” because the shepherds have not been trained about persons with disabilities in Christian colleges and seminaries. Often those in leadership have no background, experience, training, or knowledge about people with disabilities whom society has devalued. This is reflected in an SRV teaching about one of the bad things that get done to devalued people. “One particular experience from which devalued people may get cut off is knowledge of, and participation in, the religious or spiritual life of society. There are handicapped people who have never really been given instruction in the religion they may have been born into, nor been permitted to participate in the religious community life of their fellow believers” (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 21). As mentioned, there has been much growth in this area since 1998 when Dr. Wolfensberger wrote about this problem. Gradually, ideas developed by Dr. Wolfensberger are even finding their way into the education of pastors which will be to the benefit of the entire Christian community. For example, the curriculum *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry* (Eareckson-Tada, Bundy, & Verbal, 2014) of the Joni and Friends Organization includes training on this wound of exclusion and other common wounds as a way to bring awareness of the experience of human impairment.

Disability and ecumenical collaboration.

“I also perceive a possible sign in the recent, and sometimes dramatic, drawing together of devout Christians of diverse denominations on the local level, and/or in joint undertakings. I am not speaking of what is happening on the level of administration of denominations, or official joint study commissions, or merger talks, but of small, intimate, genuine joining in genuine Christian tasks. I interpret this development not so much as a harbinger of official mergers of denominations, but as a divine preparation of the faithful few for days of tribulations ahead, when the faithful will not longer be able to communicate with their higher church centers and authorities far away, but will instead draw together with each other in the face of adversity, and where the common bond of submission to the Holy Spirit will be stronger than the differences in denominational identities.” (Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 99)

The needs of persons with disabilities are such that at times they are not easily addressed by individuals or small groups. Collaboration and the pooling of resources may be needed to provide church members the services they need. One needs only a cursory introduction to the work of Dr. Wolfensberger to understand many of the problematic issues that come with human services—especially formal organized ones. We are gradually seeing the development of ecumenical collaboration to provide group homes, day programming and other supports for church members with various disabilities. How interesting that these devalued individuals, somewhat powerless, unimpressed by power and uninterested in theological differences could be the impetus for denominational collaboration. This exhortation leads into the next one.

Human service system alternatives.

“It is time for Christians to detach themselves from the imperial human service supersystem, to confront it, to pronounce judgment over it, and to construct Christian alternatives. These alternatives consist primarily of three major strategies: informal personal friendship and advocacy relationships between impaired and other people, informal Christian communalities of such people, and formation of radical Christian local congregations where the needs of members are met by or through fellow members. These latter two should be assimilative of afflicted people, by which I do not mean that they are communities of or for handicapped people, but of Christians in general who will assimilate a proportion of handicapped persons as members.”
(Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 102).

Potentially, the outcome of the first three of these above strategies could be the development of a unique alternative to the human services supersystem. Imagine a collaboration of Christians in a community where, eschewing aspects of governmental programs and what travels with them, they developed alternatives for their own members. Imagine a Christian community characterized as developing personal friendships and advocacy relationships, radical in their meeting of needs by efforts of fellow congregational members. Loving one’s neighbor would lead to advocacy. Then, “the advocate confesses to having been sheltered from contact with devalued people and the bad things that get done to them, and that the advocacy experience shattered this cocoon” (Wolfensberger, 2003, p. 139). The kinds of changes coming from this form of local community support would change the culture. For those in need, this community would be irresistible.

Relationships as forms of discipleship.

The significant presence of God-mediating persons in the life of a retarded individual can be so powerful as to surpass anything achievable through any

other medium, including through various explicit forms of religious instruction. That this is so, becomes apparent over and over when retarded persons are interrogated in regard to the faith, Those who have experienced what one might call naturalistic forms of religious instruction will give relatively rote or even inappropriate replies. Those whose spirituality has developed through contact with persons who mediate the presence of God often give startlingly creative replies which suddenly turn the inquisitor into an awed, open-mouthed pupil of the kingdom of God. (Wolfensberger, 1984, p. 106)

Naturalistic forms of religious instruction would indeed signal a radical cultural change. One may still engage in traditional types of education, however, relationships once again become the vehicle for discipleship to learn about Christian living and expression. This once again requires the development of relationships over programs. This author has experienced the exact situation that Wolfensberger describes where an adult with intellectual disabilities will make the most insightful and profound observation about a deeply spiritual concern. It is as was stated that group leaders will look at each other, mouths open in awe. These situations are reminiscent of Jesus' comment when Peter recognized him as the Christ, "You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). Once again, this cultural change will result in benefits not just for those who are devalued but for the larger community. It is arguable that forms of faith development for everyone need critical evaluation. The characterization of discipleship provided by Dr. Wolfensberger is another illustration of how changes to include devalued people move everyone in a positive direction: away from unconsciously held, devaluing traditions, and toward positive alternatives for all.

In an SRV kind of way, these five exhortations tell us what needs to be done. But SRV warns,

"Based on their view of what is needed for and by the party at issue (i.e., what they perceive as a positive future for that party), the decision-makers can then decide what "costs" would have to be paid to obtain this end, and whether the "costs" are worth the intended outcome (Wolfensberger, 1995, p. 164)."

Does one have the motivation to see these and other applications of the SRV/Christianity amalgam implemented? Is one willing to embrace the cultural change that a wise Christianity would gain from a wise SRV? Dr. Wolfensberger lived his answer to these questions, and leaves it up to us to provide our own.

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