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BOOK REVIEW

Proud to be deaf: Ministry, saintliness and the history of the Catholic deaf community in South Africa, 1874-1994

James, M., (UJ Press, Auckland Park, 2025), pp. 461, ISBN 978-0-906785-53-9

This book advocates for recognising and respecting the rights and dignity of deaf people in a world that is predominantly for the hearing. This dignity is demonstrated through their ability to use sign language as a means of communication, without feeling that they need to fit into the world of the hearing. The book further argues that the deaf community has a culture and a language, with which they are comfortable, and which makes them take pride in their way of life, the same way that hearing people take pride in their own culture and language. This sense of pride developed through prejudices of eugenics, autism, and phonocentrism from the hearing world. Mark James, a Dominican Catholic priest who has worked with the deaf for over 20 years, recounts the educational journey of the deaf community in South Africa, within the context of the Roman Catholic Church, managed by the saintly ministry of the Dominican sisters. The book intends to challenge the hearing community to recognise the value that the deaf community can bring to society. It recounts the progression of education for deaf people from manualism

and oralism in the 1880s to total communication in signed English in the 1970s until 1994, when the first SABC TV programme in sign language was broadcast in the history of South Africa. This SABC programme paved the way for televising the translation of Nelson Mandela's inauguration in sign language by the teachers at St Vincent School for the Deaf.

The book uses the theoretical framework of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), a Lithuanian-born philosopher, who challenged the egocentrism of Western philosophy that is preoccupied with self and being instead of focusing on the suffering and marginalisation of the "Other" or the neighbour (p. 20). Levinas based his argument on the context of his upbringing in a Jewish Orthodox family, bringing the wisdom of the Bible to the wisdom of Greek philosophy. James uses Levinas' argument of the marginalised in the context of the deaf community to highlight the plight of the deaf as an oppressed people whom the hearing community has unjustly treated. He highlights the saintly acts of the Dominican sisters towards the deaf community, using Levinas' definition of saintliness, which involves prioritising the needs of others over one's own. The concept of saintliness was further developed by Wyschogrod (1936-2009) as hagiographies that challenge people to live ethically. James attempts to do so in this book, by challenging the hearing community on "How to live more ethically, more justly, more compassionately and lovingly towards the Deaf neighbour among us?" (p. 33).

The methodological approach of this book is

> an interruptive and heterological history to record how the institutional Church's approach to the deaf ministry both served and failed the Deaf... (p. 78).

The book discusses the development of the story of the deaf from the patristic period (100 AD to 787 AD), when deafness was viewed as a defect to be cured (Mt. 11:5). This perspective was held through the Middle Ages (476-1400), when there was an apparent neglect of the ministry to the deaf, except for the inception of a possibility of educating deaf people and the use of sign language in the monasteries. The Renaissance period (1450-1700) introduced the education of the deaf and pastoral ministry to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. The Enlightenment period (1800 onwards) experienced an institutionalisation of deaf education. In the 19th century, education for people who are deaf or hard of hearing was flourishing; however, this was often accompanied by a eugenic attitude, due to the influence of evolutionary theory. From the Milan conference (1880 until 1951), oralism (lip-reading and vocalising the spoken language) prevailed over the manual approach (finger spelling) in deaf education. Oralism became a dominant feature in the education of the deaf community in South Africa. It was exacerbated during

the time of apartheid, when non-White schools taught students to use sign language, because it was regarded as an inferior language. In contrast, oralism was taught in White schools as a symbol of superiority.

Total communication started to emerge in the 1970s, and combined sign language, lip-reading, and speech. By 1982, sign language became an acceptable means of communication in education, although it took longer for the Catholic schools to implement it.

The book provides a comprehensive history of the development of education for the deaf community in the Catholic Church, outlined in four parts as follows.

Part 1 (pp. 1-152) consists of four chapters and introduces the terminology of the deaf community and all its nuances. It outlines Levinas' philosophy in detail and how it is applied in the context of Catholic ministry to the deaf community.

The detailed methodology portrays how the author collected and interpreted the data. This is the strength of Part 1 of the book, including a good historical account, in Chapter 4, on the development of the Catholic Church's ministry to the deaf from the patristic period to the end of the 20th century.

The weakness of Part 1 of the book is the elaborate presentation of the work of Levinas in Chapters 1 and 2, which have abstract philosophical interpretations of common words such as Other vs. other (p. 43); totality (p. 50); height (p. 62); election (p. 64), which all mean something different from their standard English definition. This elaborate abstract interpretation, while it can be enjoyed by readers with a philosophical inclination, it may lose those people who want to read about deafness, and can cloud the focus from the subject of deafness to philosophy. The author admits that "Levinas can be confounding to read and difficult to understand" (p. 70). Nevertheless, there is still an extensive discussion on Levinas, perhaps because Chapter 2 is taken from the author's published article on Levinas and the Deaf Community (p. 41, footnote).

Part 2 (pp.153-312) of the book is the heart of the study, and presents the hagiography of the development of the education of the deaf community in the Catholic Church. It discusses the core argument, namely the contribution of the Catholic Church in educating deaf children in Catholic schools in South Africa from 1874 to 1994, highlighting two congregations of the Dominican sisters. The first one was established in 1874 in Cape Town, and the second one was established in 1884 in the small town of the Eastern Cape province that used to be called King Williams Town but is now known as Qonce.

The weakness of Part 2 is the repetition of concepts on issues of racial inequalities (pp. 220, 248, 249, 257, 261, 382), which is sometimes suitable for emphasis but which some readers may perceive as redundant. The use of Steve Biko's Black consciousness ideology brings a refreshing perspective to the book (pp. 82, 375, 378, 381, 388). It could have enriched the book if it had used the ideology of Black consciousness in the same way that Levinas was used, to bring a healthy balance between the North and South discourses on inequality and oppression, especially given the South African context of the book.

Part 3 (pp. 315-416) focuses on individuals and organisations that overcame autism and stood out as beacons of the restoration of dignity for deaf communities, in both church and society.

Part 4 (pp. 419-427) is a challenge to the world on how to live respectfully with the deaf community into the future. It also summarises the three parts of the book and closes with a challenge and a call for "Deaf priests who can minister to deaf people" (pp. 426).

This book is an excellent exposition of the history of the Catholic Church's mission to the deaf community, which stands to benefit other church traditions, by sensitising them to their call to all of humanity, including the deaf. It challenges the prejudices of judging the deaf community as handicapped; instead, it reveals that the real handicapped are the hearing who cannot communicate with people who are deaf. Furthermore, it adds value to the body of knowledge in deaf ministry through a transdisciplinary approach of philosophy, education, and (liberation) theology. It presents a challenge to view deaf ministry from a theology of the oppressed, challenging communities of faith to champion the cause of the hearing-impaired people in the same way they did with the liberation struggle against apartheid.

The inability to communicate through sign language with people who are deaf has deprived both the hearing and the deaf from learning from each other. Mark James' book is recommended as a good attempt to bridge that gap.