SJDR Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research
Established by the Nordic Network on Disability Research

Blind Visionaries and Cheese-Eating Sceptics: The Place of Lived Religion in Disability History

RESEARCH

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STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY PRESS

ABSTRACT

This article advocates for two things: first, that religion be a central focus of disability studies, and second, that the study of disability history pay greater attention to the role of lived religion. It highlights how disability—understood as a culturally shaped form of difference—and lived religion—the everyday practice of belief—intersect as embodied experiences. Although scholars have explored how lived religion shapes gender and social status in (pre)modernity and how disability appears in medieval charity and hagiography, the relationship between early modern and nineteenth-century disability and religion remains understudied. Using fifteenth- and nineteenth-century European case studies, this article demonstrates how approaching disability history through lived religion reveals shifting margins and the meaning-making resources available to disabled people. This approach offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of their experiences and social roles in historical contexts.

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KEYWORDS:
Disability history; lived religion; historical sources; premodern disability

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Blackie, Daniel, Jenni Kuuliala, Riikka Miettinen, and Godelinde Gertrude Perk. 2025. "Blind Visionaries and Cheese-Eating Sceptics: The Place of Lived Religion in Disability History." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 27(1): 508–520. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.1276

DOI: 10.16993/sjdr.1276

INTRODUCTION

Although used profitably by many scholars in the humanities and social sciences, 'lived religion' is seldom deployed as an analytical category in disability studies. Indeed, religious perspectives of any sort are generally peripheral to the field. Relatively few disability researchers consider religion in a systematic or sustained way. The bulk of work in the field foregrounds other topics. This absence may reflect the geographical and temporal biases of disability studies, which still overwhelmingly focus on the Global North and contemporary—rather than historical—societies. Such an orientation means that the field tends to privilege seemingly secularized times and places over those in which religion is or was more obviously prominent. These biases, in turn, have led many disability scholars to discount or downplay the significance of religious beliefs and practices to perceptions and experiences of bodyminded difference.

This article calls for a rethinking of religion—particularly lived religion—in disability studies, arguing that deeper engagement with religious beliefs and practices has much to offer the field. After all, for most of human history and much of the world today, religious beliefs and practices have shaped and continue to shape the meaning(s) of 'disability'. Paying greater attention to the significance of religion in defining human difference will improve scholars' ability to incorporate insights from both the world today and past societies. For an area of research that has long demonstrated the 'constructed', contingent nature of disability (Linton, Mello and O'Neill 1995), such a development will also further enhance recent moves to push the field beyond its epistemologically limiting presentism and Western-centrism (e.g., Barclay 2017; Grech and Soldatic 2016).

Drawing on our ongoing historical research and using the subfield of disability history as a microcosm of the larger field of disability studies to which it belongs, we highlight the benefits a 'lived religion' lens has brought to historical scholarship on disability. To illuminate what this approach looks like and the kind of methodological issues it entails, we present two case studies: one from premodern Europe and the other from the height of the British Industrial Revolution, an era that has assumed great significance in disability theory. We argue that theorizations of disability from a lived religion perspective cast them in a new light, revealing their limitations and posing fresh questions.

The concept of 'lived religion' gained significant scholarly attention in the anglophone world in the late twentieth century, with influential contributions made by historians of modern religion Hall (1997) and Orsi (2010) and sociologists McGuire (2008) and Ammerman (2007). These scholars observed that, rather than strictly adhering to theological doctrines or church teachings, people integrate and adapt religious elements into their daily lives. McGuire (1990, 284) emphasized the role played by the body as 'a vehicle for perceiving and interpreting our world' for understanding lived religion. Historians of the premodern era have noted that these modern observations can fruitfully be extended to earlier time periods (e.g., Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2021; Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2022). In our research covering the medieval period to the nineteenth century, we have observed the presence of similar elements of lived religion as a sphere through which disabled people performed their social selves and participated in communal life. Furthermore, the human body with its disabilities and experiences was at the core of religious life.

Before moving forward, a brief note about language and terminology is necessary. As is commonly recognized, 'disability' is an umbrella term that encompasses various physical and mental impairments and chronic illnesses; however, the term did not exist before modern times. The vocabulary used in historical sources varies and depends heavily on the language and the context of the text.[1] People with disabilities were often labeled based on their impairment, with epithets such as 'blind' or 'deaf and dumb'. The absence of the term 'disabled people' before the twentieth century also reminds us that, for most of history, disability did not operate as a category of identity in the way that it functions today. To early modern Europeans, the idea that people they labeled as 'idiots' had much in common with amputees or that both groups belonged to a special social category would have seemed absurd (Gebke and Heinemann 2020, 5).

1 For example, historically, Swedish or Finnish languages included umbrella terms for bodily injuries (*lyte* and *vamma*) and mental deviance (e.g., *galen, hufwudswag*). No comparable historical terms existed for modern disability terms (e.g., *funktionshinder, person med funktionsnedsättning, vammainen*).

DOI: 10.16993/sjdr.1276

The following pages deploy 'disability' as an organizing category to denote contexts in which perceived bodyminded difference significantly influenced a person's life course or position in society. Acknowledging that disability is a contextually, culturally, and historically contingent category of difference, we adopt a 'cultural model of disability' that views 'impairment' and 'illness' as fluid and culturally defined concepts and 'disability' as a cultural construct (e.g., Eyler 2010; Frohne 2017). Impairment and disability spring from the encounter between culture and bodyminded difference; therefore, an analysis of the conceptions of the body and mind and their symbolic dimensions is needed. Disability studies more broadly, we posit, would benefit greatly from historical perspectives on the cultural variety of disability (see also Rembis 2019).

LIVED RELIGION AND DISABILITY HISTORY

In medieval and early modern history, the concept of lived religion has proven valuable for examining diverse practices associated with 'spirituality', 'lay religiosity', or 'popular religion' (e.g., Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2021; Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2025; Räisänen-Schröder 2023). During this period, religion and the Church influenced most, if not all, areas of life,[2] from social hierarchies and politics to mentalities and welfare systems. As Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo (2021, 3) note, when analyzing premodern history, it is 'much more difficult to separate intentional or purposeful ritual religiosity from the less conscious and less directly religious'. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *habitus* similarly blurs boundaries between doctrine and experience. Scholars now view lived religion as a mode of being, shaping and reflecting intersections of identity such as gender and status and offering a space for interaction with both the community and the sacred (Gasparini et al. 2020; Hollywood 2016).

In recent years, historians have increasingly adopted a lived religion perspective to gain insights into topics that extend beyond the realm of purely religious phenomena, such as gender and the history of experience (Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2021; Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo 2022). Nevertheless, in disability history, the application of a lived religion lens has been limited thus far. Although it is beginning to make inroads in medieval and early modern studies of disability (e.g., Kuuliala 2022; Miettinen 2024), very few scholars have yet to make explicit use of it.

This lack of uptake is surprising, given the focus that pioneers of lived religion research, like McGuire (1990) and Orsi (2005), placed on the body, notably in Orsi's work on the Catholic culture of suffering and its impact on disability experience in mid-twentieth-century America. This gap is also peculiar given the greater visibility of religion in the disability histories of pre- and early modern societies. Scholars interested in the medieval and early modern world have widely discussed the interconnections between religion and disability, particularly from a theological perspective (e.g., Brock and Swinton 2012; Metzler 2006; Miles 2001). Furthermore, historians have examined how religious beliefs influenced the treatment and position of disabled people (Scalenghe 2016; Tovey 2010) and how religious practices, for example, related to healing, affected the lives of disabled people (Kuuliala 2020; Miettinen 2024; Metzler 2006).

Studies on Christian charity and its impact on the daily lives of people with non-normative bodyminds highlight the relevance of lived religion (e.g., Farmer 2000; Metzler 2013, 154–198). Practices like almsgiving show how religious teachings were enacted in everyday life. Norms around who was deemed 'deserving' of aid on the grounds of their disabilities in part shaped both the meanings and experiences of disability. Recently, the religious practice and participation of disabled people have also garnered interest (e.g., Annola and Miettinen 2022; Dubourg 2023; Kuuliala and Välimäki 2020; Oates 2022). This shift enables a more nuanced view of disabled people as active participants in religious life, not merely recipients of care.

The theoretical value of research on lived religion in the premodern period suggests that approaching later periods and other cultures through this prism will be equally generative. For instance, a 'lived religion' perspective that has allowed scholars to navigate the theoretical and methodological challenges inherent to the alterity of the Middle Ages can be extended to different temporal and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the historicization of the distinction between impairment and disability by medievalists underscores the fact that medieval culture lacked 'disability' as a 'category of alterity that "normal culture" can define itself against'

2 This also holds true for the Jewish and Muslim societies of the period (see Scalenghe 2016; Shoham-Steiner 2014).

DOI: 10.16993/sjdr.1276

(Godden 2011, 268). Recent scholarship has therefore favored examining 'discrete channels of disability' (Hsy, Pearman and Eyler 2020, 14). A lived religion perspective therefore reveals the situated, localized interaction between bodyminded difference and culture in specific settings or contexts, while still drawing out differences and similarities between various disabilities. By studying the intersection of religion and disability as they are 'lived', we can gain valuable insights into the meaning of disability in the contemporary world.

Moreover, medievalist scholarship on disability and religion has scrutinized how religious culture harnessed disability to shore up particular norms regarding bodies and minds, even as disabled bodyminds challenged these norms. In doing so, medieval religious culture sought to contain the perceived deviance of disability (e.g., Pearman, 2010). Such attempted containment (showcased by the hagiographical function of Katherina van Arkel's blindness discussed below) was a function of power. To extend these debates into later periods, we must therefore ask what role disabilities played in relation to such norms. Lived religion as a category of analysis can facilitate such scrutiny. It also helps scholars to dissect how the construction of disability was entangled with other power structures, such as gender, class, and orthodoxy. In short, it can ask the crucial questions about how disabled bodyminds relate to religious structures and negotiate a spectrum of attitudes toward difference, possibly by harnessing a range of religious concepts.

BRINGING A LIVED RELIGION PERSPECTIVE INTO THE STUDY OF LATER PERIODS

As is evident from the foregoing, the current application of a lived religion lens within disability studies has focused largely on premodern societies. In this article, we aim to encourage a more chronologically balanced application of the lived religion perspective in disability history: one that considers all historical periods and is not confined primarily to studies focusing on the premodern world, even if the mechanisms and authority of religion vary from century to century.

Religion was such a major cultural force in preindustrial Europe that many sources from the era (from hagiographies to ecclesiastical court records) reflect the religious concerns of their creators or, in some cases, owe their very existence to religious impulses. While it requires skill and a thorough understanding of the religious context of the time, interpreting such evidence from a lived religion perspective does not necessitate a giant leap of imagination from historians.

Historians working on the late-modern era face different challenges. Sources from this period are more frequently couched in seemingly secular and scientific-medical terms, rendering the significance of religious influences less obviously apparent. In such circumstances, a lived religion analysis requires sensitivity and an ability to close-read and contextualize sources to tease out the role of religious beliefs and practices.

Of all the periods studied by disability historians, perhaps the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are most in need of new research from a 'lived religion' perspective. For Western societies, this era has been regarded as crucial to the 'rise of disability as a specific form of discrimination' and the 'invention of disability' as a modern policy category. Processes such as the 'Enlightenment' and the 'Industrial Revolution' are often highlighted as significant contributors to these developments and are depicted as major rupture points in disability history (Gabbard and Mintz 2020; Rose 2017; Slorach 2016, 69).

Traditionally, both the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution have been associated with secularization and a decline in the influence of religion. This association may help explain why disability histories of the modern period have paid relatively little attention to religion. However, recent scholarship (Coleman 2010; Gregory 2011; Sheehan 2003) challenges this view. For example, in Britain—the world's first industrial nation—industrialization was actually accompanied by a profound religious revival (Gregory 2011). Furthermore, churches and religious associations and institutions continued to play a significant role in the care of disabled people.

To be sure, disability histories that examine the period encompassing the Enlightenment and the early phases of industrialization have acknowledged the importance of religion (Turner 2012). Lately, some scholars have even used a lived religion approach without explicitly naming it or engaging with the relevant scholarship (Ranum 2022). On the whole, however, studies on disability in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and the wider Atlantic world tend to

examine religion in a rather cursory way or foreground representation over experience. When religion is discussed, it is often prescriptive texts, scripture, or the works of religious figures, like John Wesley, that are analyzed (e.g., Hall 2011). Although such sources are useful for exploring religious ideas about bodyminded difference, they are less effective at revealing how disabled people themselves regarded or interacted with them. A fuller integration of a lived religion approach into disability histories of the late-modern period would better center disabled people's own religious beliefs and practices. Doing so not only improves the historical accuracy of disability history by promoting a deeper appreciation of the continued importance of religious beliefs and practices in the late-modern period, it also promises to alter the field's understanding of the causes and consequences of historical change regarding 'disability'.

To demonstrate the benefits a 'lived religion' perspective brings to disability history, the remainder of this article analyzes two historical sources from this viewpoint. The first case concerns the interplay of disability and religion in the life of a fifteenth-century Dutch lay sister (a 'free-lance' nun). The second focuses on an encounter between two men in industrializing England. While discussing the use and limitations of two distinct historical source types, we also demonstrate what kind of information a lived religion approach yields and how this can deepen our understanding of disability as a historical and cultural phenomenon. Our examination of these two sources is intended to be suggestive of the possibilities such an approach offers disability history. Its purpose is not to offer a broad and deep empirical foundation for others to build on and debate. Here, our goal is simply to encourage colleagues in disability studies to consider lived religion when interpreting evidence regarding historical understandings and experiences of 'disability'. By presenting examples of the kind of sources that shed light on the historical intersection of lived religion and disability and indicating some of the interpretative strategies and challenges they elicit, we illuminate the practical issues a 'lived religion' approach raises for doing disability history.

A BLIND VISIONARY IN THE PREMODERN PERIOD

Fifteenth-century nuns clearly *lived* their religion. The lives of women committed to a nun-like existence in the same era were also defined by structured religious practices. Although such 'free-lance nuns' did not take vows, communities of laywomen did commit themselves to a communal life of prayer and manual labor in a single location (a sisterhouse). Such communities abounded in urban centers across late medieval Europe. Texts composed by these female communities have survived, including a compilation of religious sisters' biographies (a 'sisterbook') originating from the Master Geert's House in Deventer, in the north-eastern Low Countries (De Man 1919). Completed after 1456 and written in the vernacular, it illustrates how lived religion and disability intertwine in the premodern period. One of the biographies in the collection chronicles the life of a blind sister, Katherina ten Arkel (d. 1451). In this collection, among the 64 women depicted, we also encounter cook Stijne Goringhes (d. 1441), who is hard of hearing; Alijt van Delden, a sister with an intellectual disability; and librarian Griete Otten (d. 1452), a sister with epilepsy. With regard to Katherina, the text recounts how, despite entering the community at the age of 40, she quickly learned to navigate the sisterhouse, which her fellow sisters attributed to the assistance of an angel. The text portrays her as the most visionary sister in the community:

> [During Christmas] she was wont to go to the space under the lean-to where clothes were laundered and meditate there. And she would contemplate that space under the lean-to as if it were the wall-less house in which our dear Lord was born. And the stone tub in which clothes were rinsed she would consider the manger … And she therefore would frequently remain on her knees before this stone tub with great devotion, piety, and an abundance of tears.
>
> (De Man 1919, 219; translation our own, but use of 'lean-to' from Gerrits 2024, 280.)

Unbeknownst to Katherina, the other sisters observe her as she experiences these visions. Her supernatural experience not only inspires great devotion in others, it also sparks other Christmas visions in one of the sisters watch her. When yet another sister asks Katherina about the visions, the text presents Katherina's experience as imagined to a similar degree by that other sister:

DOI: 10.16993/sjdr.1276

> On another occasion, she was kneeling by this stone tub in a similar inner state as just described. And she felt such spiritual fervour that she could not conceal it … And, as she later confided in secret [to someone else], when pressed, she had felt that someone had been there with her. And as far as the sister who was asking her about it could discover, she had seen with her spiritual eyes the Christ child lying before her, crying in the stone tub… But it must be believed, that it took great dying to herself and abandoning of herself, much humbling of herself, and much yielding and prostrating before she achieved this grace.
>
> (De Man 1919, 220; translation our own.)

These supernatural experiences showcase several points of contact with our second case study. First, it illustrates how historical accounts of disability and lived religion frequently used mediated sources over direct ones: sisterbooks constitute communal autohagiographies (life-writing calqued upon saints' legends), not personal autobiographies in the modern sense. We lack access to Katherina's personal experience as a 'disabled' holy woman. Consequently, the communal character of the sisters' lived religion also shapes this account of Katherina's vision. The sisterbook understands Katherina's visionary experience to be created in collaboration with the community, as signaled by the reference to communal spaces and to the vision circulating in the convent.

Second, whereas the second case study encapsulates how religion supplies an individual way of thinking through bodyminded difference, devotional practices in this first case exemplify communal ways of making sense of a community member's blindness. (Such communal interpretation is also dramatized in the other biographies in this sisterbook). We note such communal sense-making in the way in which, in addition to displaying such exemplary devotion that visualization segues into vision, Katherina cannot perceive the others gazing upon her. As the text stresses, her blindness fashions her body into a religious object that transforms all who behold it. Katherina's blindness transmits her devotion to the others. However, the text then goes on to claim that these visions surely result from humility and self-denial, two traits associated with both Christ and saints. In this manner, the text harnesses Katherina's blindness to ascribe to the community the normate body that medieval culture attributed to Christ and saints (McNabb 2020, 16).

Third, like our subsequent case study focusing on industrializing England, this blind woman's Christmas vision suggests that religious change informs embodied experience as well as the construction of the body. (Other biographies of disabled women in other Low Countries sisterbooks point to a similar influence.) The reform movement to which this community belonged, the *Devotio Moderna*, was wary of images mentally crafted during meditation, which involved drawing on one's visual impressions. However, the movement also encouraged the spiritual practice of meditation generally (Newman 2005, 36, 37). Moreover, after an abbess recorded her own reformist visions, women's writing and transmission of visions were prohibited in 1455 by the local General Chapter (a general meeting of the representatives of a congregation of religious houses) (Scheepsma 2004, 25). On the one hand, by having the community co-create the vision with Katherina, the sisterbook presents her as incapable of harnessing sensory impressions to visualize Christ's nativity. On the other hand, it depicts her as capable of sparking similar contemplation in the others by means of her body. In this manner, the text navigates the anxieties about visualization and visions. Katherina's bodyminded difference thus becomes a site of spiritual exemplarity unique to this religious context. However, it is the community, rather than Katherina individually, that benefits from this exemplarity.

DEBATING THE AFTERLIFE IN INDUSTRIALIZING SOMERSET

As Katherina's case shows, searching for the historical 'voices' of disabled people requires historians to examine sources that are not, strictly speaking, *personal* accounts of disability. Although autobiographical writing became more common in the modern era, autobiographies and memoirs are still quite exceptional sources. Historically, few disabled people have recorded their own lives or memories for posterity (Couser 2009). Nevertheless, a variety of other sources include information about the religious ideas, practices, and agency of people who otherwise left few written traces about themselves.

One such source is the *Journal* of John Skinner (1772–1839), rector of Camerton, Somerset, from 1800. Rarely used by disability historians before, Skinner's *Journal* has been deployed

DOI: 10.16993/sjdr.1276

recently by Steven King to furnish insights into the 'construction of disability' in nineteenth-century England. Neither Camerton nor Skinner is the focus of his study; however, King's brief consideration of the *Journal* demonstrates its value as a source for disability history. Skinner regularly encountered circumstances that today would fall under the rubric of 'disability', and he noted many of these in his journal. His entries give a vivid portrait of the kind of treatment 'disabled' people in the area faced. As King observes, this treatment varied considerably, from instances of 'intense neglect and cruelty' to those marked by 'kindness' and 'tolerance'. King highlights some examples from Skinner's *Journal* to illustrate this, but he does not dwell on them, for Skinner is just one of many chroniclers of nineteenth-century life whom King cites (King 2022, 109–110). However, for scholars like us who are interested in the relationship between disability and lived religion, Skinner's account is a treasure trove that invites further scrutiny. Used carefully, the *Journal* enables us to get a sense of what some of the disabled people Skinner met had to say for themselves about religion's role in their lives.

One person who spoke to Skinner about his religious beliefs was a seemingly notorious local character known as Quaddy Evans. In April 1811, shortly after Evans' death, Skinner recalled a conversation he had had with the man 'not long before he died'. Skinner's recollection is worth quoting at length, as it illuminates how historians of disability and lived religion might explore both themes in the absence of autobiographical accounts written by disabled laypeople.

Evans' bodily difference was a notable feature to people like Skinner, attracting attention and comment. Skinner remembered Evans as someone 'so infirm from sores in his legs that he could scarcely put one foot before another'. However, despite his trouble walking, Evans:

> …was accustomed to hobble up to my Parsonage and complain that he was starving, which I believe sometimes was actually the case, as the two shillings a week he received from Dunkerton Parish was frequently spent in drink immediately he received it. On these occasions I used to give him some bread and cheese and any scraps there might be in the house, which he ate lying down in front of the railings. One day whilst he was in that situation he told me he should not long trouble the Parish or anyone else, as he was sure he should not live a fortnight; that he had spent the last night near the Coke Pit fire, and his legs were so bad and full of sores he could scarcely creep along. I asked him, as he thought his end was so near, whether he had prepared for the state he was to enter into: that he must appear before the Judgment Seat of God. He replied, God was a merciful God, and he hoped would receive him. I said it was very true, but to those who were rebellious and forgetful He would assuredly punish at that dreadful day. He said he had suffered enough here and there was no need he should suffer more hereafter, he was sure it was enough to be punished as he was. I said in all likelihood he had been punished through his own vices, and perhaps had to thank himself for the sores which he complained of, the poverty to which he was reduced, and the coldness he complained of his fellow creatures to relieve him; they knew what a sad fellow he had been and treated him accordingly, and if it was true and he did not sincerely repent his misdeeds, and implore the forgiveness of God and the mediation of a Blessed Redeemer he would only exchange this state of torment for a worse, and if with all the suffering he complained of he still continued to pursue his wicked courses it was a sign his mind was hardened instead of being corrected, and that I must tell him, if he did not repent and with sincere sorrow acknowledge his evil ways, he would be condemned to lasting torments in Hell, and what would he do then? 'Why,' said the hardened wretch with a frown and diabolical cast of countenance, '*I must do as the rest do*.' (Skinner 1984, 64–65).

Skinner's moralizing tone cannot be ignored. It reveals something of the attitudes—shot through with religious sentiment—that 'infirm' poor people frequently encountered in Georgian Britain, especially in times of need. Religion informed most non-familial support networks to which poor Britons turned for pecuniary assistance. As an official of the Church of England, Skinner was expected to show Christian charity to the poor. Evans was clearly aware of this expectation, and it was probably the reason for his regular (and successful) visits to Skinner's parsonage in search of a free meal. But there was a price to pay.

As Skinner's entry suggests, when 'disabled' people sought charity, they had to be ready to engage in religious practice. Sometimes this was institutionalized, as in the case of resident pupils at schools

DOI: 10.16993/sjdr.1276

for the blind who were compelled to attend church services (Royden 1991, 270). At other times, the pressure to behave or think religiously was more informal or spontaneous, such as when Evans was forced to contemplate the afterlife as he munched on cheese outside Skinner's parsonage.

Yet this was not a one-way process, with people like Evans simply accepting or doing whatever they were told. Religion was not something imposed wholesale on individuals. It was negotiated, fashioned, and contested, as people thought appropriate. Skinner's exchange with Evans confirms this. Although Christianity seems to have shaped Evans' worldview and understanding of his infirmity, it is clear that his personal religious beliefs and interpretation of his situation were vastly at odds with Skinner's.

Both men agreed that Evans' sores caused him suffering but differed on their meaning. For Evans, his suffering—of which his impairment was only part—gave him hope of heaven. Believing in a 'merciful God', Evans reasoned his earthly sufferings were so great that they atoned for his sins. As God was just, not vengeful, he would not punish Evans twice, in this world *and* the next. Skinner disagreed. For him, Evans' current suffering was indeed a punishment for sin; however, it did not guarantee an easy experience in the hereafter. It was, rather, a warning to put one's life in order and make amends before it was too late. Failure to take notice, 'repent', and ask forgiveness from God would undoubtedly lead to Evans' eternal damnation. For Skinner, suffering was a prompt from a benevolent God to become a better Christian and renounce sin. Ignoring this was foolish, since God's mercy had its limits. If Evans did not heed Skinner's advice, he was doomed.

Despite all the talk of the 'lasting torments of Hell' that awaited him and all the free cheese, Evans stuck to his own version of Christianity, much to the annoyance of Skinner. In a direct challenge to his benefactor's religious authority, Evans forged Christian notions of heaven and hell and a benevolent, merciful God into a set of beliefs that enabled him to view his bodily sufferings as a comfort as he contemplated his own mortality. Rather than a mild foretaste of terrible things to come, he saw them as confirmation that he had already paid for his sins and need not fear death.

For Evans, then, like other 'disabled' people in history, religion was a useful resource for making sense of his bodyminded difference and incapacity, and he fashioned the religious culture of his day to suit his own purposes. He did not accept the pronouncements of religious leaders like Skinner passively but thought—and *believed*—for himself, making religion work for him. Thus, although Skinner's journal clearly foregrounds his own perspective more than Evans', it is not simply a record of his own views. Evans' viewpoint and resistance to Skinner's religious doctrine may be highly refined for dramatic effect in the *Journal*, but it is apparent.

The precise and complete words Evans uttered are probably missing from Skinner's report, for it is obviously not a verbatim account of the two men's conversation. Written and composed with literary flourish by Skinner, it is his, not Evans', representation of what was said. In this respect, Skinner's *Journal* reflects a key characteristic of many of the documents historians have used to explore the historical experiences and standpoints of other marginalized or forgotten groups who left few written accounts of their own. In lieu of autobiographical writings, historians have had to read documents written by officials or other people with power or standing 'against the grain'. As countless historical studies have shown, used skillfully and with an awareness of the mediated nature of such sources, this 'technique' can help reveal perspectives that might otherwise go unnoticed (King 2016; Rizzo 2017). Interpreting Skinner's recollection of his discussion with Evans in this way, as we have done, means paying attention to points in the narrative where tensions or disagreements between the two men become apparent. While no method can plausibly recover Evans' authentic voice from Skinner's *Journal*, this approach does give us a sense of Evans' position regarding Skinner's interpretation of his bodily condition, providing us with a valuable insight into how Evans himself regarded his life.

During Skinner's lifetime, Camerton underwent rapid socioeconomic change, largely due to the growth of coal mining in the area. Consequently, his parish displayed many of the social, economic, and demographic features of British industrialization. However, as mentioned above, industrialization was not the only important process at this time. Although many histories of the Industrial Revolution sideline religion, this was also a period of increasing religious pluralism, stimulated by Evangelical revival. Rather than marking a decline in religion, then, the era actually witnessed a diversification in Britain's religious landscape. Indeed, this was especially noticeable in industrializing areas like Camerton and can be seen in Skinner's *Journal* (Gregory 2011; Thompson 2005).

DOI: 10.16993/sjdr.1276

Skinner recorded frequent tensions between him and the growing (and assertive) Methodist community in the parish, including his disapproval of their spiritual care for a seriously injured worker (Skinner 1984, 299). Evans, then, was not alone in challenging Skinner's religious beliefs and practices. The rich, dynamic, and varied religious culture of the region offered people like him many possibilities for making sense of their lives religiously. This also shaped evolving perceptions and experiences of 'disability' during the period. The changing religious 'marketplace' of the time and the increasing popularity of Christian denominations beyond the Church of England emboldened 'disabled' people like Evans, giving them tools to effectively challenge the authority of the established Church in matters connected to disability. In Evans' case, he *lived* his religion quite differently from the way Skinner wanted him to. He did not seek God's forgiveness or fret about the afterlife, and this stemmed, in large part, from his religious understanding of his bodily discomfort and disability. This stood in sharp contrast to Skinner's and challenged it, recasting Evans' bodyminded difference in a more positive light. Viewing the encounter between Skinner and Evans in this way suggests that religious beliefs and practices could help 'disabled' people resist prejudice and stigmatization.

A lived religion perspective that prioritizes practice over theological dogma offers a new view of disability in the Industrial Revolution. Industrialization may have influenced the shifting meanings of 'disability'; however, disability studies of the period that ignore or downplay religious factors are ill-equipped to assess this influence. In the hands of people like Evans, religion helped to shape understandings and experiences of bodyminded difference. Until this is more fully acknowledged and investigated, explanations of change in disability history will remain inadequate.

CONCLUSIONS

Approaching disability history through a lived religion lens nuances our understanding of disabled people's experiences. Both disability history and the study of lived religion prize the recovery of traditionally marginalized viewpoints or 'voices' (Blackie and Moncrieff 2022; Räisänen-Schröder 2023, 70). Both fields have also used effective tools—from close reading to in-depth contextualization—to achieve their goals. In terms of objectives and methodologies, then, disability history and research on lived religion are well aligned, allowing for dialogue between the two fields. However, as the sisterbook's record of Katherina's life and Skinner's account of Quaddy Evans illustrate, available historical sources rarely center the 'voices' of 'disabled' people. As a result, historians face challenges in studying disability from a lived religion perspective. Nevertheless, paying careful attention to a person's or community's sociocultural context when reading sources, or reading them 'against the grain', can yield insights into how disabled people themselves used religion to make sense of bodyminded difference, often in beneficial ways. For instance, we can chart how Katherina's sensory difference from others informed how she 'lived out' religion and how religious beliefs and practices shaped Katherina's experiences of blindness. For instance, her vision of the 'wall-less house' (a signifier of Christ's humility) possibly presents us with a space recognizable by touch, which suggests that she adapts particular devotional motifs to her embodiment to unmoor sensory perception of Christ's body (a central focus of medieval devotion) from sight. Her reluctance to communicate her vision may convey a struggle to frame her experience within medieval Christianity's emphasis on sight (Wheatley 2020), enacted even by our use of the word 'vision' to denote such a supernatural sensory experience.

Melding disability history with lived religion also reveals how the culturally determined mechanics of disability marginalization change across time. While Katherina is portrayed as a valued member of her community, Evans is presented as dwelling at the margins of his parish by its moralizing rector, who polices the boundaries of his congregation as well as of heaven. Furthermore, whereas the idea of suffering in this present life (which, in the medieval understanding, included disability) as a downpayment on suffering in the afterlife was a central tenet of medieval devotion, to the post-Reformation mind of Evans's rector, the disabled person's suffering in this life foreshadows their continued suffering in the afterlife. A medieval nun's conviction that her embodied experience would lessen her suffering in Purgatory would have been a hallmark of her orthodoxy; Evans's analogous convictions and challenge to his rector's logic situate him on the margins of orthodoxy. Homing in on disability and lived religion, then, reveals how, throughout history, margins and centers shift, are contested, and are ever being redrawn.

In summary, incorporating a lived religion approach into disability history and disability studies more generally opens new vistas onto everyday life and the social relations of disabled people. It allows a more thorough analysis of human variation and the meanings given to bodyminded difference in different times and places. Studying disability from a lived religion perspective also probes the temporally and culturally specific interplay of corporality, the practice of religion, and the spiritual world. Furthermore, weaving lived religion into the analysis of disability allows the detailed study of disabled people's participation in communal life and therefore opens gateways into the everyday lives and positions of people with disabilities in past societies. Similarly, using a lived religion perspective to study contemporary disability may show the ways in which religion still informs the understandings of and attitudes toward disability today.

Finally, since both disability and religion are fundamentally embodied phenomena that significantly shape individual lives and societies, examining lived religion should be as relevant for disability scholars as it is for scholars of religion. While premodern disability history, following premodern history in general, has focused more on religion compared to studies of late modernity, lived religion in any era deserves more scholarly attention. By attending closely to religious beliefs and practices, disability histories of *any* period can be greatly enriched.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the Lived Religion Group at HEX, Tampere University, for comments on an earlier version of this article.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Our research has been funded by the Research Council of Finland, grant number 340242.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, analysis, and writing of this article and are accountable for its content.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Blackie, Daniel, Jenni Kuuliala, Riikka Miettinen, and Godelinde Gertrude Perk. 2025. "Blind Visionaries and Cheese-Eating Sceptics: The Place of Lived Religion in Disability History." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 27(1): 508–520. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.1276

Submitted: 11 March 2025
Accepted: 26 August 2025
Published: 22 September 2025

Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Stockholm University Press.