Autism and Christianity: An Ethnographic Intervention

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Most scholarly discussions of autism and religion presuppose the absent self theory of autism. The theory holds that autistic persons lack a sense of self and anticipates that they will have trouble relating to a personal God and assigning religious meaning to their lives. I argue that the theory is untestable, which leaves scholars of religion with a choice: either we can say, with proponents of the absent self theory, that autistic persons lack a self, a choice that cuts religious studies off from the lived theologies of autistic persons of faith; or we can view autistic persons of faith as authority voices on their religious self-experience. As an example of what scholars of religion stand to gain by choosing the latter, I present an ethnography of autistic Christians in three web communities. These autistic Christians construct a distinctively Christian understanding of neurodiversity and a distinctively aspie understanding of God.

Current discussions within religious studies about autism and religion presuppose the absent self theory of autism. The theory, which holds that autistic persons lack a sense of self, is the prevailing account of autism among behavioral scientists (Baron-Cohen 1997; Frith 2003 and 2008; Lombardo et al. 2010). Scholars from a range of disciplines have queried the theory's construction of autism as a deficit, though, raising concerns about the way it delegitimizes autistic persons' accounts of themselves (Yergeau 2013). Indeed, proponents of the absent self theory argue that autistic self-expressions do not count against the theory, on the grounds

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, September 2017, Vol. 85, No. 3, pp. 653–681
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfw075
Advance Access publication on January 23, 2017
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that such self-expressions amount to mere miming of a sense of self (Frith and Happé 1999; Williams 2010).

This article argues that scholars working on autism and religion presuppose the absent self theory to the detriment of the field of religious studies. Philosophers of religion have defined autistic theists out of existence (Stump 2010), using received ideas about autistic persons as material for metaphors and thought experiments in order to clarify and test concepts, such as faith (Pinsent 2012) and empathy (Haney 2016). Academic theologians have projected their own fantasies onto their nonspeaking autistic children, turning them into symbols of divine ineffability (Gillibrand 2010). Anthropologists of religion have interpreted the capacity of their autistic informants to describe their personal experiences in religious terms as a mere proxy for personal identity (Brezis 2012). Insofar as these sorts of discussions about autism and religion cut religious studies off from the lived theologies of autistic persons of faith, they impoverish the field.

Accordingly, in this article I challenge and redirect current discussions within religious studies about autism and religion. I do so through three moves: I argue, first, that the absent self theory of autism presupposed in these discussions is in principle untestable. Second, the theory's untestability leaves scholars of religion with a choice. Either we can say, with proponents of the absent self theory, that autistic persons lack a self, a choice that gives us little chance of making sense of their personal experiences; or we can say, with critics of the absent self theory, that this is what their self looks like, a choice that lets us learn from the local knowledge of autistic culture. Accordingly, third, I offer an ethnography of autistic Christians, analyzing user-generated content in three web communities where self-identified autistic Christians build spiritual community with each other and collaboratively develop theological accounts of themselves: Wrong Planet, ASPIESCentral, and the Autism & Aspergers (*sic*) sub-forum of Christian Forums. Viewing autistic persons of faith as authority voices on their religious self-experience stands to enrich academic theological reflection in particular, and religious studies more generally. My ethnography is a first step in that direction.[1]

[1]An explanation of this article's naming practices: I use identity-first language (*autistic person*, *autie*, *aspie*) rather than person-first language (*person with autism*). This is the preferred practice of the autistic persons in the communities I studied. It is also the preferred practice of many autistic activists and scholars (e.g., Sinclair 2013). A number of terms designate persons as non-autistic, each with a slightly different shade of meaning: *neurotypical* is a portmanteau meaning *neurologically typical*; by contrast, *allistic* and *non-autistic* convey that a person is not autistic without implying that she

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THE ABSENT SELF THEORY OF AUTISM

The prevailing account of autism in the behavioral sciences is the so-called *absent self theory* (Frith 2003, 208–10; 2008, 102–4). The theory attempts to explain features of autistic difference—difficulty picking up on social cues; a tendency to develop strong, narrow interests; a penchant for detail; sensory sensitivities; an inability to cope with change—as the result of a neural deficit in self-representation (Lombardo et al. 2010, 620). Put simply, autistic persons are said to have difficulty integrating their experiences into a cohesive sense of self. Without a sense of self, so the theory goes, autistic persons have trouble reflecting on their own intentions, anticipating their own actions, and perceiving others as intentional agents, that is, as conscious persons with desires and beliefs (Baron-Cohen 1997, 51; Frith and Happé 1999, 1). For the same reason, autistic persons pick up on details but miss the big picture (Frith 2008, 90), and they have trouble monitoring their responses to their environment (Hill 2004, 26). The prevailing story about autism among behavioral scientists, then, is a story about deficit.

The absent self theory aims to link three other theories about autism into one larger theory. The three other theories are:

1. *The mindblindness theory*. According to Simon Baron-Cohen most people are "mindreaders." That is to say, they "have the capacity to imagine or represent states of mind that [. . .] others might hold" (2). Because their brains have innate "mindoscope[s]," they can attribute mental states to other persons (24). In other words, most people are capable of mentalizing: they recognize others as intentional agents; they can infer that they are thinking about the same thing as another person; they are "aware of a shared universe" (44). Autistic people, however, lack "the mindreading instinct" (10), says Baron-Cohen. They have difficulty introspecting and ascribing mental states to others (130). Put differently, on Baron-Cohen's view, autistic people lack a "theory of mind" (51). For him, the mindblindness theory explains some of the putative features of autistic deviance, namely, "lack of normal social awareness or appropriate social behavior, 'aloneness,' one-sidedness in interaction, and inability to join a social group" (Baron-Cohen 1997, 2, 10, 24, 44, 51, 62-63, 130).

is neurologically typical. Autistic participants in the web forums discussed in this article mainly use the term *neurotypical*. Outside of quotations from the forums, I use the word *non-autistic*.

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2. *The theory of weak central coherence*. According to Uta Frith, autistic persons cannot see the forest for the trees. They relish parts of things taken out of context, but they have trouble making sense of the larger context in virtue of which these parts come to mean something: a drawing of a house looks to them like a mishmash of lines. Frith hypothesizes that autistic people have a hardwired neurological preference for perceiving parts instead of wholes. By contrast, "the normally strong drive for meaning" is a "pre-set preference" for "perceiving wholes rather than parts" (Frith 2008, 90). Because of "a cognitive style that prioritizes details over gestalt perception" (Brezis 2012, 293), an autistic person might have difficulty deriving the main point from a story. Similarly, she might find it hard to unify her discrete personal experiences into a cohesive sense of self. The theory of weak central coherence is an attempt to explain three other alleged features of autistic deviance: a penchant for detail; a tendency to develop strong, narrow, unusual interests; and a need to *stim*, that is, to engage in self-stimulatory behavior or *stimming* (e.g., rocking back and forth, spinning, hand-flapping, echolalia, etc.) as a way of offsetting sensory inputs (e.g., light, sound, touch, taste, proprioception) that they experience as overwhelming on account of their impaired ability to process and integrate sensory data (Frith 2008, 88, 90, 93).
3. *The executive dysfunction theory*. Executive functions are cognitive processes that play a supervisory role over other cognitive processes. When these supervisory cognitive processes malfunction, a person cannot "disengage from" her "immediate environment" in order to monitor and control her own actions (Hill 2004, 26). The executive dysfunction theory attempts to explain more of the supposed features of autistic deviance—trouble controlling impulses, fixation on routines, and a concomitant inability to cope with change—as impairments in executive function (Frith 2008, 31, 94-98).

Frith uses two analogies to explain how the absent self theory integrates the mindblindness theory, the theory of weak central coherence, and the executive dysfunction theory:

1. *The Russian doll analogy*. A non-autistic mind contains many selves working at once for different purposes: the *bodily self*, the *narrative self*, and so on. At the center of these multiple selves, like the "last one in a set of nested Russian dolls," is the "last visible self," the *self-aware self*. This core self-aware self, the tiniest Russian doll, is intact if and only if a person has a working theory of mind. Or, to put it another

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way, a person needs “a mentalizing mechanism in the brain,” a theory of mind, in order for the tiniest Russian doll to “become consciously aware of itself.” Furthermore, if the mind exhibits the normal “drive for central coherence,” the core self-aware self can access “integrated information.” Finally, the core self-aware self uses the executive function to control and manage a person’s other selves. When a person’s core self-aware self is intact—sustaining her theory of mind, her drive for big-picture meaning, and her executive function—she can connect with other people’s core self-aware selves. Autistic people, Frith claims, lack this core self-aware self (Frith 2003, 208-209).

2. *The restaurant analogy*. A non-autistic mind works like a successful restaurant. Upstairs, a diner orders ratatouille. Downstairs, a cook prepares the ratatouille according to the diner’s exact specifications: extra marjoram, hold the garlic. The kitchen is a riot of ingredients that a local market donated to the restaurant. Implementing the diner’s instructions therefore requires the cook to select certain ingredients and ignore others: no matter how delicious the Nutella or the elderflower cordial look, they do not belong in the ratatouille. The cook in the well-stocked kitchen represents the mind’s delivery of information “from the outside world.” The diner upstairs represents the mind’s “controlling what to do” with that information. When ordering her meal, the diner relies on her memory and on knowledge she has gotten from other diners (theory of mind). The diner’s instructions (executive function) make it possible for the cook to integrate the ingredients in her kitchen into edible meals (central coherence). If the diner were not around to issue instructions to the cook (absent self), the cook would simply throw ingredients onto the stove at random (weak central coherence). An autistic mind, says Frith, works like a restaurant with “an overzealous cook” and an absent or “indifferent” diner (Frith 2008, 99, 101).

Let me clarify who, exactly, the absent self theory purports to explain. Autistic persons represent a wide range of intellectual ability as well as ability to communicate in oral and written forms. This is why researchers, clinicians, and some autistic persons themselves refer to autism as a *spectrum*. Furthermore, an autistic person’s ability to communicate orally does not necessarily correlate with her intelligence. Highly intelligent nonspeaking autistic persons who can communicate in written form explain their inability to speak as a matter of sensory sensitivities and/or poor body-mind coordination: speaking feels like gravel or sandpaper in their throats; their muscles seize up (Sequenzia and Grace 2015). Frith

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makes it clear that her absent self theory covers all autistic persons, regardless of intelligence and ability to communicate (Frith 2008, 27, 94).

THE TROUBLE WITH THE ABSENT SELF THEORY

Despite its current status as the prevailing theory of autism among behavioral scientists, the absent self theory has received trenchant criticisms from behavioral scientists and social scientists alike. Some behavioral scientists question the explanatory value of the experiments that gave rise to the theory (Bloom and German 2000). Some social scientists attend to the influence of culture on the meaning of autism (Bilu and Goodman 1997; Shaked and Bilu 2006; Grinker 2007; Jegatheesan 2010; Olga and Bagatell 2010; Grinker and Cho 2013; Jegatheesan and Witz 2013). These social scientists relativize the prevailing deficit narrative of autism by looking at constructions of autism in places outside the North Atlantic countries where the absent self theory originated.

In addition, autistic activists as well as some scholars in the humanities reject the absent self theory on the grounds that it delegitimizes "actually autistic" people's first-person accounts of their own experiences and mental states.[2] According to the absent self theory, autistic persons have trouble introspecting, experiencing emotions, and reminiscing (Lombardo and Baron-Cohen 2010, 395–96). As one cognitive scientist puts it, autistic persons "have as little awareness of their own mental states as they have awareness of the mental states of other people" (Williams 2010, 474). For that reason, proponents of the absent self theory cast doubt on the reliability of autistic self-expression. They argue that, if an autistic writer recounts detailed personal experiences, she surely does so just in virtue of second-order knowledge of facts about herself—not, like a non-autistic person, in virtue of actual first-order self-experience. So, autistic self-expression may have the veneer of "first-order self-experience," but a researcher must exercise "caution. . .when attributing" actual first-order self-experience to an autistic person, cognitive scientists advise (Williams 2010, 480, 482). They warn that "it might be a mistake to take what is said at face value" (Frith and Happé 1999, 18). In effect, the absent self theory encourages researchers to interpret autistic self-expressions as ersatz performances of selfhood. But a person's self-representation to others is the only access that others have to her first-order self-experience. Insofar as the absent self theory views autistic self-representation as unreliable, then, the theory precludes the possibility of evidence against it

[2]Autistic self-advocates use the hashtag "ActuallyAutistic" on social media to disambiguate autism-related content posted by autistic persons from autism-related content posted by non-autistic persons.

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(Yergeau 2016, 89). Hence, the sheer abundance of richly textured, self-reflective autie-biographies (e.g., Prince-Hughes 2004; Mukhopadhyay 2008) and autie-ethnographies (e.g., Prince 2010; Yergeau 2013) has yet to unseat the absent self theory. An autistic person remains "the ultimate unreliable narrator"; "autistic voice" remains "the ultimate oxymoron" (Yergeau 2013).

Not only does the theory call the reliability of autistic self-representation into question; it can also make it difficult for researchers to recognize autistic expression as communication in the first place. Stimming is a good case in point: non-autistic behavioral scientists view stimming as involuntary and asocial (Frith 2008, 93); autistic persons view stimming as "embodied semiosis" (Nolan and McBride 2015, 1070) and a hallmark of autistic sociality (Yergeau 2012). As one autistic blogger explains, an autistic person's stims "can have the same function" as a non-autistic person's facial expressions: "it gives an idea of how we're feeling" (Hillary 2012). Likewise, Melanie Yergeau (2012), an autistic scholar of composition and rhetoric, describes stimming as "a rhetorical move" and "a kind of literacy." For her, doctors and therapists are "too quick" to dismiss stimming as a symptom rather a "communication mechanism." She describes stimming as "how I naturally operate. It's how I communicate. It's how I interact with others." But teachers and bullies have trained her to hide her stims around non-autistic persons. "It's just wonderful to me when I'm around a group of other autistic people," she remarks. "Our bodies form this chorus, because we're doing things with our hands. We're doing things with our whole bodies, with our faces. We're moving a certain way. And this is autistic space. And this is autistic and rhetorical space." But to behavioral scientists who see autism through the discursive framework of the absent self theory, stimming is not legible as a valid form of communication distinctive to autistic culture. They interpret stimming as an unconscious symptom rather than a purposive rhetorical move (Yergeau 2016, 89).

The most basic problem with the absent self theory is its untestability. A theory is testable if and only if one can adduce evidence for or against it. And for something to count as evidence, it must be public, that is, in principle recognizable by others. The absent self theory, though, posits a private mental object, a hypothetical tiny Russian doll or diner, in virtue of which non-autistic persons organize their disparate sensory impressions into a unified sense of self and recognize other people as selves, too. Proponents of the theory regard autistic self-expression as suspect precisely because they believe autistic minds lack this private homunculus: what separates a non-autistic person's genuine self-expression from an autistic person's "hacking" is not a publicly observable feature of the

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expression, but rather the private homunculus that is assumed to underlie the expression (Frith et al. 1994, 111).

Nor can appeals to fMRI scans provide evidence for or against the homunculus: the same logic of privacy that makes the trope of the unreliable autistic narrator unfalsifiable also governs experiments that purport to find the neural correlates of self-representation by measuring changes in blood flow in the brains of autistic persons while they think about themselves (e.g., Lombardo et al. 2010). In both cases, a researcher claims to make a connection between a public, observable object (self-expression or a brain scan) and a private, unobservable one (the inner presence/absence of a core self-aware self). But I can no more enter into another person's actual subjective experience by looking at a scan of her brain than I can by reading her autobiography: in each case I can only reason backwards from the scan or the text to a guess about what her subjective experience might have been like. That said, autobiography can provide more fine-grained clues to what her subjective experience might have been like, because an fMRI scan can only picture physiological states (e.g., increased blood flow to the insula), whereas a narrative can communicate the felt character of conscious experience (e.g., "I loved listening to the Sisters' stories" [Harris 2015, 61], or "I am flooded with gratitude to those dear friends who helped me" [Goodchild 2009, 95], to quote two autie-biographies).

Therefore, with respect to autistic informants' self-descriptions of their first-order self-experiences, a researcher has two choices. Option (a): the researcher can say, with proponents of the absent self theory, that autistic persons do not have a self. Option (b): the researcher can say, with critics of the absent self theory, that this is what their self looks like. Options (a) and (b) are different interpretations of the same information, namely, an autistic person's testimony about herself. Either choice relies on an assumption about autistic self-expression: option (a) assumes that the narrator is "hacking" it (Frith et al. 1994, 111); option (b) assumes that the narrator is reliably expressing genuine first-order self-experience. But the assumption driving each choice has a different consequence for the dissemination of local knowledge: a researcher who assumes that autistic self-expression only mimes first-order self-experience has little chance of making sense of autistic personal experiences, whereas a researcher who assumes that autistic narrators understand and mean what they say can learn from the local knowledge of autistic culture.

So far, scholars within religious studies have chosen option (a), a problem to which I now turn.

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THE ABSENT SELF THEORY IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

In spite of the problems with the absent self theory, discussions in philosophy of religion and academic theology on the topic of autism and religion tend to proceed on the assumption that, insofar as the theory imputes to autistic persons a lack of first-order self-experience, it gets autism right. Even well-intentioned philosophers of religion and academic theologians—ones who see themselves as disability rights supporters—take behavioral scientists at their word that autistic persons cannot ascribe mental states to others or integrate their own experiences into a cohesive sense of self. Accordingly, these philosophers of religion and academic theologians assume, without consulting the self-described self-experience of autistic persons of faith, that autistic persons will have trouble seeing God as an intentional agent, getting the main point out of figurative religious narratives, and assigning meaning to events in their lives on the basis of such narratives (Bering 2002; Deeley 2009; Gordon 2009). They use autism as a shorthand for being cut off from God and other people (e.g., Pinsent 2012) in order to reflect on the notion of empathy (e.g., Haney 2016) or the practice of Christian love (e.g., Hauerwas 2013). In short, philosophers of religion and academic theologians frequently use received ideas about autistic persons as material for metaphors and thought experiments to clarify and test concepts.

For example, to clarify what faith in a personal God entails, Eleonore Stump, a philosopher of religion, uses the alleged inability of autistic persons to have affective awareness of other people's emotions and motivations as a foil for the type of knowledge that she considers central to theistic faith. An autistic person can have "knowledge *that*" another person is sad on the basis of being told so, says Stump. What an autistic person cannot do, Stump assumes, is tune into the felt sadness of another or read sadness off of another's face. The type of awareness that emerges from such affective attunement to other persons is "not reducible" to "knowledge *that*." And for Stump, it is this irreducible affective awareness that is central to faith in God. Thus Stump definitionally excludes autistic persons from theistic faith. What's more, as an example of "implicit faith," Stump points to a nonreligious mother for whom the suffering involved in raising an autistic daughter has been a "gift": the mother is the recipient of the gift, the autistic daughter is the gift, and the implicit giver is God. In Stump's account of theistic faith, then, autistic people figure as the occasions for non-autistic people's faith, not as possessors of faith themselves (Stump 2010, 47, 53, 61, 66, 67, 81, 470-71, 480).

Similarly, academic theology focuses on the perspectives of non-autistic parents and church communities to the exclusion of the

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perspectives of autistic persons themselves. Either academic theologians project their own fantasies onto their nonspeaking autistic children: for instance, an autistic child with neither speech nor a technology-based communication system is seen by his theologian father as a prophetic embodiment of Barthes's death of the author, a silent witness against Descartes's *cogito*, and a symbol of the ineffable God (Gillibrand 2010, 78–83); or academic theologians reassure parents that they are right to wish their children were not autistic (Hauerwas 2013, 235), even though many autistic persons have pointed out that they experience autism as an essential and valuable feature of their very personhood, so much so that that they hear in a parent's wish that her child did not "have autism" the "wish" that "the autistic child I have did not exist, and I had a different (non-autistic) child instead" (Sinclair 2012). As one autistic activist puts it, "If I did not have an autistic brain, the person that I am would not exist" (Sinclair 2013). In taking it for granted that autistic persons lack first-order self-experience as well as second-person experience, academic theologians and philosophers of religion cut themselves off from the lived theologies of autistic persons of faith (e.g., Goodchild 2009; Harris 2015).

The same problem besets the study of autism within anthropology of religion. Just two previous qualitative studies focus on the role of religion in the lives of autistic persons (Brezis 2012; Visuri 2012).[3] Both studies consist solely of one-on-one interviews between a non-autistic researcher and an autistic interviewee. Both studies are hypothesis-driven, and the absent self theory provides the theoretical framework within which both studies formulate and test their hypotheses.[4] More specifically, the

[3]Schaap-Jonker conducted one qualitative study in the Netherlands that has not yet been published (Schaap-Jonker et al. 2013, 157). Five qualitative studies examine the role of religion in the lives of non-autistic persons with an autistic child, sibling, or co-religionist (Bilu and Goodman 1997; Shaked and Bilu 2006; Jegatheesan 2010; Jegatheesan et al. 2010; Jegatheesan and Witz 2013).

[4]Previous quantitative studies on the religious lives of autistic persons also view autism through the lens of the absent self theory. The blunt instruments that these studies use to generate data may render it impossible for them to detect autistic religious perspectives that fall outside the frame of the absent self theory. One study of 78 "highly religious" autistic patients at a Christian mental health care facility in the Netherlands, for example, claims to have found that autism correlates positively with negative feelings about God. The study used a Likert questionnaire (i.e., one that presents respondents with a series of claims and asks them to mark whether they strongly disagree, disagree, are undecided, agree, or strongly agree) to measure degree of positive or negative feelings about God, together with a test designed by Simon Baron-Cohen, one of the leading proponents of the absent self theory, to measure severity of autism (Schaap-Jonker et al. 2013, 150, 155). But a Likert scale is too blunt an instrument to discover much of depth about "an individual's feelings towards God and perceptions of God's actions" (Schaap-Jonker et al. 2008, 503), let alone to discover a correlation between autism and a certain religious profile. One thing of note, which the authors of the study downplay, is that the autistic respondents' positive feelings about God significantly outweighed their negative ones. Furthermore, how often respondents attended church was a more significant predictor of whether they had positive feelings about God than was the severity of their autism (Schaap-Jonker et al. 2013, 152, 153, 156). A more recent quantitative study found no significant differences between the religiosity of autistic

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researchers assume that autistic persons have an impaired sense of self. Hence, to test whether religious understanding requires a sense of self, the researchers ask autistic children, teenagers, and young adults to describe their relationship with God and their conception of prayer (Brezis 2012, 298; Visuri 2012, 353, 358). But by presupposing a theory according to which autistic self-representation does not amount to genuine self-understanding, the researchers limit what they can learn from their informants. Indeed, the researchers do not hear the self-theologizing of autistic persons of faith as genuine self-theologizing.

For example, in a qualitative study by Rachel Brezis, the trope of the unreliable autistic narrator (Yergeau 2013) eclipses the creative self-theologizing of young autistic Jewish Israelis. In order "to investigate the necessity" of a sense of self "for religious development," Brezis interviews informants she assumes have a poor ability to integrate their personal experiences into a cohesive "sense of self" (298), namely, sixteen autistic Jewish Israelis, ages nine to twenty-six, whose "degree of practice ranged from ultra-orthodox to secular" (Brezis 2012, 297, 298). The absent self theory, which provides the theoretical framework for Brezis's study, anticipates that autistic persons will have difficulty seeing the big picture in a sacred text and interpreting their own lives through the lens of that big picture (Bering 2002; Frith 2008, 90–93; Dubin and Graetz 2009, 33; Brezis 2012, 302). But when Brezis's Jewish-Israeli autistic informants do use their faith tradition to make sense of their lives, Brezis does not conclude that there might be a problem with the absent self theory. Rather, she brings their unanticipated self-theologizing into alignment with the absent self theory: the very fact that her autistic informants understand their lives in terms of the *kavana elyona* (divine intent) or *hashgacha pratit* (intimate divine supervision of every occurrence and every creature) suggests to Brezis that they are merely "appropriating religious narratives as proxies for their personal identity" to "compensate for their weak sense of self." In other words, like behavioral scientists who caution against taking autistic self-expression at face value, Brezis wagers that her informants are not making sense of themselves so much as they are making up for their deficient selves. Brezis redescribes her informants' capacity to weave their own experiences into religiously meaningful personal stories as a symptom of autistic lack (Brezis 2012, 303, 305).

Christians, Muslims, and Jews versus that of non-autistic Christians, Muslims, and Jews. The study's authors invoke the trope of the unreliable autistic narrator as a possible explanation for their unexpected findings: because "the ASC [individuals with autism spectrum conditions] may also have deficits in their awareness of their own mental states," the authors suggest, "it might question the reliability of responses to our questionnaire" (Reddish et al. 2016, 108).

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As I suggested above, a researcher who assumes that autistic self-expression only mimes first-order self-experience—option (a)—has little chance of making sense of autistic personal experience, whereas a researcher who assumes that autistic narrators understand and mean what they say—option (b)—can learn from the local knowledge of autistic culture. Brezis picks option (a): she views an ultra-orthodox child's appropriation of a Hasidic tale and a secular teenager's Dungeons and Dragons-inspired musings about God as theological echolalia, or substitutes for first-order self-experience, not contextual reinterpretations of Jewish tradition, or autistic contributions to the store of lived Jewish theology (Brezis 2012, 302-303, 305). In choosing option (a), Brezis makes it the case that the local knowledge of young autistic Jewish Israelis does not show up to her as local knowledge at all. Consequently, autistic voices that might have challenged or redirected academic theology's and philosophy of religion's current discussions of autism are not heard.

The rest of this article employs option (b) in the interest of just such challenge and redirection. It offers an ethnography of autistic Christians as a corrective to trans-disciplinary conjectures about autism and religion. Unlike previous qualitative studies on the religious lives of autistic persons, my ethnography neither takes the truth of the absent self theory for granted, nor does it ask as its driving question whether the absent self theory is correct. Instead, I take it as axiomatic that if autistic persons tell a researcher about their first-order self-experiences, the researcher should not treat their self-expressions as ersatz performances of selfhood. My questions are, simply, in what terms do autistic persons describe their own religious beliefs and experiences? What forms does autistic sociality take when autistic persons of faith unite over a shared tradition? More particularly, for the sake of scope, what are the self-understandings of autistic Christians? What themes emerge in their first-person accounts of faith-practice? What sorts of community do groups of autistic Christians build?[5]

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVENTION

To answer these questions, I have analyzed user-generated content in three web communities where self-identified autistic Christians discuss

[5]The Christian tradition, with its emphasis on loving "the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" and "your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29), presumes that each person has a self. Not all faith traditions share this assumption: Buddhist philosophical traditions, for example, comprise a vast range of reflection on the nature of subjectivity even as they maintain that there are no ultimately real selves. Thus, it would be interesting to entertain the questions of the present paper in conversation with other faith traditions, though doing so is well beyond the scope of this paper.

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their faith and their autism with each other: Wrong Planet (up and running since 2004); the Autism & Aspergers (*sic*) sub-forum of Christian Forums (up and running since 2004); and ASPIESCentral (up and running since 2010). The specific method of my corrective ethnography is that of non-participant observation or *lurking*, where the researcher reads, without contributing content to, public web forums (Garcia et al. 2009, 58).[6] It is a secondary analysis of public data, in which the public data is ethnographic in nature.[7] The data is ethnographic in nature in that it concerns "people in a community or activity," revealing "forms of interaction, meaning-making, and cultural production through text" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 119). It shows autistic persons in the activity of building spiritual community together.

For the purpose of understanding the self-theologizing of lay autistic persons of faith on the ground, the online ethnographic method of lurking has at least two benefits. First, online discussion forums are one of the main ways in which self-identified auties and aspies have started to build an autistic culture (Prince-Hughes 2004, 176; Bagatell 2007, 419–20; Biever 2007; Sinclair 2010).[8] The fact that the Internet omits some of the "sensorial and emotional demands" of offline interactions explains why it has become a key locus of autistic worldmaking (Davidson and Orsini 2013, 295). As autistic people have explained, someone else's loud speech or strong perfume can make an offline interaction difficult for an autistic person with "sensory sensitivities" (Sinclair 2010). Autistic people have also reported that they can "more quickly and more comfortably" form affective attachments online, because they need not expend energy trying to

[6]That said, I made a "situated compromise" (Steinmetz 2012, 34): I identified myself as a researcher to administrators of each of the three web communities, and I obtained their permission to analyze and publish quotes from public threads. At the request of one of these administrators, I do not include html links in my citations of the threads. My study received IRB exemption from the University of Chicago.

[7]ASPIESCentral, Wrong Planet, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum consist mostly of public threads: one need not register with the websites in order to read these threads, and search engines have access to the content of these threads. To contribute to these public threads, though, one must register with the websites. Registration entails agreeing to terms of use that alert the user to the public nature of most of the threads on the websites. The three web communities include spaces for private discussion (chat rooms and threads that require registration to read and that search engines cannot access). I have not registered with ASPIESCentral, Wrong Planet, or the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum. I have not read, nor do I quote, material from any portion of the three web communities that requires registration. That is to say, my study excludes from its analysis any private, members-only content.

[8]Two other key sites of autistic culture-building include summer camps for autistic kids (Fein 2015) and "retreat-style conference[s] run by and for autistic people, designed to accommodate autistic people as much as possible, with presentations geared to the interests of autistic people," such as Autreat (Sinclair 2010).

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detect and adhere to non-autistic people's expectations about eye contact, facial expressions, and speech patterns (Davidson and Orsini 2013, 295).

Second, the method of lurking minimizes the influence of the researcher on the informants.[9] Previous qualitative studies on the religious lives of autistic persons consist solely of hypothesis-driven one-on-one interviews between a non-autistic researcher and an autistic informant (Brezis 2012; Visuri 2012). Interviews prompt informants with questions that can to some extent dictate the parameters in which the informants talk about themselves. By contrast, insofar as this study takes the form of non-participant observation, it does not prompt the research subjects with any questions that would dictate the parameters in which they talk about their religious lives. Additionally, this study's focus on interactions among autistic persons affords a glimpse of autistic religious culture *in medias res*. In short, lurking promises a more fine-grained picture of the religious lives of autistic people than previous studies have provided.

But in deciding to lurk, I took more than the theoretical payoff of lurking into account. I also took into account perceptions of and expectations about privacy that members of Wrong Planet, ASPIESCentral, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum state in their public interactions. Whether lurking constitutes an ethical research method depends on how the particular online community that a researcher wishes to study interprets the porous distinction between public and private (Boellstorff 2012, 135; Markham and Buchanan 2012, 6–7). In the case of some Internet communities, a researcher's "incognito logging of group interactions" on public web forums might be tantamount to "the secret recording of a table conversation in a restaurant" (Döring 2002, 343). Other communities, however, explicitly embrace the fact that search engines can access the entire digital archive of their conversations. They have a sense of an audience that outstrips their immediate interactions with other participants in the same forum. For these communities, logging group interactions incognito might be more like recording a radio talk show (Soukup 1999,

[9]Ethnography involves studying people in their "natural environments" rather than in "constructed experimental settings." Ethnographers typically favor a method of open participant observation over "hidden" observation, on the grounds that participant-observation lets researchers get a better purchase on what their "presence does to the situation[s]" they study, so they can reflect more responsibly on the "influence" that they inevitably have over their data (Sveningsson 2004, 46, 47). Some online ethnographers deem lurking an inferior data collection strategy: for them, the key payoff of the ethnographic approach is that it is collaborative rather than appropriative (Garcia et al. 2009, 59; Steinmetz 2012, 34). But what the present study loses in collaboration, it gains in noninterference. This is not to suggest the possibility of absolute noninterference. I follow reader-response literary theory (e.g., Fish 1980) and feminist standpoint epistemology (e.g., Anderson 1998) in acknowledging "the impossibility of conducting research without altering the meaning of what is observed" (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002, 238). The aim of my method is not to eliminate but rather to minimize interference.

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170). Among the participants in the three public web forums discussed in this article, the consensus regarding privacy falls on the side of radio talk show rather than restaurant table conversation. For example, some members of the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum see their public activity on the site as a type of evangelism akin to "salvation tracts" that can "spread the Gospel" to lurkers (15 December 2011).

So, although *lurking* may have an ominous sound, members of the forums recognize it as a "non-derogatory term" (Wrong Planet, 2 May 2013) referring to an acceptable practice that visitors to the forums engage in for a variety of reasons: a non-autistic visitor might want to learn more about autism; an undiagnosed aspie might want to see if she recognizes herself in what posters describe; an autistic visitor might "feel more comfortable reading" (Wrong Planet, 12 March 2008). Members regularly address threads to lurkers, reassuring them that "no replies will ever be necessary" (Wrong Planet, 8 March 2008) and "it's okay to lurk and just read" (ASPIESCentral, 15 November 2015). More to the point, members not only anticipate that the pool of lurkers will include researchers from the social and behavioral sciences; they welcome it. As one member of Wrong Planet puts it, such lurking "is a good thing, as in time the researchers will hopefully learn to recognize that we aren't totally useless" (4 September 2015). Another Wrong Planet member reasons that "if a significant number of researchers were observing sites like this, autism research would be less dumb" (13 September 2015).

Given that members of ASPIESCentral, Wrong Planet, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum explicitly embrace the public digital archive of their autistic worldmaking, this article uses the actual names of the three web communities studied as well as the pseudonymous usernames that participants in the communities have created for themselves.[10] There is an additional reason not to withhold or disguise the names of the communities as well as user-created pseudonyms: it acknowledges autistic persons as the authority voices in autism research. A publicly accessible web community can provide "a medium of publication" for a marginalized group, "where users can take control of the means of production, create their own cultural artifacts, and intervene in the production of existing ones." Thus, an online ethnographer's decision to conceal the identity of such a community can exacerbate "unequal power relations of media

[10]A word about anonymity: in the case of usernames that take the form of full or partial given names (i.e., usernames that look like JANE123, JOHNDOE, JDOE, DOEJ, or JANEDOEHEARTSJESUS, etc.) I withhold the username on the grounds that such names are more easily traceable to a person's offline identity. Instead, I simply attribute the material to an unnamed member of the relevant forum. In addition, I paraphrase quotations from members with nonpseudonymous usernames to make it harder to identify these members using a search engine (cf. Boellstorff et al. 2012, 140).

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production" (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002, 235-36, 243-44). Indeed, the autistic Christians who participate in ASPIESCentral, Wrong Planet, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum tell their own empowering stories, rejecting the disabling stories told about them by social and behavioral scientists, academic theologians, and philosophers of religion alike. Pseudonymous usernames are part of the grammar of their online retelling of autism. To withhold or disguise such a pseudonymous username, then, would erase an autistic person's creative disruption of dominant clinical and theological narratives about autism that are distributed through mainstream and academic publishing channels.

AUTIE-THEOLOGY

All three web communities studied in this ethnography are English-language. However, members of the communities hail from countries all over the world, including Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, England, Sweden, the United States, and New Zealand. In addition, the members represent a variety of Christianities: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, charismatic, "Gnostic Christian" (ASPIESCentral, 25 February 2015), Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, Mormon, pentecostal, Presbyterian, Quaker, Seventh Day Adventist, "spiritual but not religious" (ASPIESCentral, 17 December 2012), and United Church of Christ. They use a number of terms to self-identity as autistic: *classic autism*, *autism*, *autie*, *moderate functioning autistic*, *Asperger's*,[11] *aspie*, *non-speaking autistic*, *on the spectrum*, *spectrumite*, and *autistic cousin* (i.e., an autistic-like person without a formal diagnosis of autism). And they describe themselves as having a range of autistic traits: dyspraxia, selective mutism, hyperlexia, sensory sensitivity, perseveration, stimming, echolalia, hyperfocus or "aspie obsessions" (Autism & Aspergers, 30 December 2014), difficulty "looking people in the eye" (ASPIESCentral, 25 June 2015), and a need for structure and routine.

The overall religious atmosphere of each community differs. Nonreligious autistic members of Wrong Planet, who constitute a majority of the membership, frequently put autistic Christian members on the defensive about their faith. For example, when a new Christian struggling with depression reaches out to more seasoned Christians on Wrong Planet for spiritual advice, self-identified nonbelievers suggest that "being a Christian would make anyone depressed" (16 May 2014) and that the original poster evidently "needs more of the Kool-Aid" (17 May 2014).

[11]In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association eliminated Asperger's syndrome as a separate diagnosis from autism. Some people nevertheless continue to self-identify with the term *Asperger's*.

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Additionally, veteran Christian members of Wrong Planet caution UNITEDPRAYR, a newcomer to the site who wants to meet other Christian aspies, to "avoid the religious part of the forum" (1 February 2010). They complain that atheist members frequently "hijack" Christian fellowship on Wrong Planet "in order to debate the validity of faith" (3 February 2010), an act that they describe as the "online" equivalent of "marching into church and interrupting Mass" to start a religious debate (3 September 2010).

Autistic Christians also constitute a distinct minority in ASPIESCentral. Hence, a member of ASPIESCentral who goes by the handle STABATMATER (an allusion to a thirteenth-century hymn to the Virgin Mary) hints that "other Catholics will recognize the source of my username," punctuating the hint with a winking emoticon (23 May 2014). The use of a religious reference for a username, coupled with a sly hint about its origin, interpellates others on ASPIESCentral who are in the know as fellow members of a minority group. As on Wrong Planet, conversations on ASPIESCentral about members' faith traditions, theological beliefs, and spiritual lives are frequently interrupted by criticisms of theistic belief from nonreligious members—so much so that the site's administrators have instituted a rule banning religious debate (2 May 2014).

By contrast, autistic Christians constitute a majority in the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum. Members describe their community as a "sanctuary" from Wrong Planet's "anti-Christian" and "anti-theistic bent" (25 October 2010, 2 March 2012, 27 June 2012). They frequently express gratitude for having found the sub-forum: "I feel like both parts of my life—the Christian part and the aspie part—are compartmentalized, as it seems hard to find a place that combines both," says FLOWERFOREVER7 (Autism & Aspergers, 29 August 2010). FLOWERFOREVER7 continues:

> I have visited forums for people with Asperger's Syndrome, but the Christian aspect is missing. Or gone to forums for Christians where the Asperger's syndrome aspect is missing. It's like speaking two different languages. Most people who don't have Asperger's syndrome don't know what it's like to face the challenges we do regularly. Yet, there are people with Asperger's syndrome who aren't focused on living a Christ-centered life, so then something is missing in that respect. So it's good to have both in the same place! (Autism & Aspergers, 22 September 2010)

Similarly, the sub-forum has allayed the loneliness that GRANDVIZIER1006 once felt as an aspie Christian: "I can't tell you how happy I am to be able to find what I've been looking for—fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are also Aspies!" With a waving smiley face emoticon,

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GRANDVIZIER1006 exclaims, "Thank you all so much for basically existing!" (Autism & Aspergers, 3 December 2014). In short, autistic Christians experience the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum as a space where they can express their full selves, autistic as well as Christian.

Despite the different overall religious atmosphere of Wrong Planet, ASPIESCentral, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum, autistic Christians build community with each other in similar ways on all three sites. Autistic Christian members of each forum see their interactions as a much-needed alternative to church, where they have difficulty participating. "It's important to have people with whom you can share your deepest self," says one autistic Christian member of Wrong Planet (29 April 2014). Another likens the autistic Christian fellowship on Wrong Planet to the support among the early Christians (8 August 2010). Indeed, members of the three forums continually engage in ritual acts of spiritual support. They pray for each other, share Bible passages to encourage each other, and solicit each other's advice about how to put their faith into practice.

Members of all three forums discuss two main obstacles to their participation in the communal life of an offline church. First, some find the sensory environment of church—the "loud music, complicated surroundings, glad-handing, back-slapping, elbow-rubbing and hugging" (Autism & Aspergers, 2 February 2013)—overstimulating. Because of the dress code and rules about bodily comportment at his parish, for instance, a Catholic member of ASPIESCentral finds Mass very sensory unfriendly: "I'm not allowed to stim, and I have to wear long pants even if it's really hot" (12 October 2014). Noise presents a sensory challenge: "when the fellowship hall gets loud," says a member of Wrong Planet, "I must leave, which causes me to miss out on Christian fellowship" (28 August 2010). So, too, does touch: says PHOTOADDICT, "In my congregation, instead of speaking to announce your presence, you grab people from behind. It makes me crazy, and I skip service more often than not because of it" (ASPIESCentral, 13 October 2014). As a member of the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum puts it, "Church is a great place for forced touching. But I don't want people touching me. I don't shake hands. And this offends people" (20 January 2013). These autistic Christians create less sensory-loaded fellowship with each other on the three forums.

A second obstacle to offline church life for members of all three forums is that they feel "rejected" (ASPIESCentral: 24 May 2014), "left out of things" (23 May 2014), "marginalized" (Wrong Planet, 13 April 2014), "sidelined" (ASPIESCentral, 23 May 2014), infantilized (Autism & Aspergers, 26 February 2012), "henpecked" (ASPIESCentral, 8 December 2014), and "misunderstood" (Autism & Aspergers, 22 July 2015) by

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non-autistic Christians. NETBUG009 says, “I need people to care about my existence, even though I don’t fit in easily. I need people to accept that what I have is real. I have yet to receive either from a church” (Autism & Aspergers, 18 November 2011). Similarly, MISSYMISFIT laments, “I have attended loads of churches over 28 years and I don’t fit into any” (Wrong Planet, 13 April 2011). An autistic teenager complains that, whenever she goes to church without her parents, other church-goers act “like jerks” toward her (ASPIESCentral, 6 December 2014). One man regrets that “no one seems to be on the same page as I am at church—they have families and hobbies; all I do is obsess over God” (Autism & Aspergers, 20 December 2014). A girl reports that she is an “outcast” at her Christian summer camp (ASPIESCentral, 10 June 2014). An older man bemoans the fact that, because of his intermittent inability to speak, his church sees him as “unspiritual” (ASPIESCentral, 23 June 2014). “This has been the hardest part of being a Christian for me,” says another man: “the fact that I have had to be one alone” (Autism & Aspergers, 12 August 2012). PHILOLOGOS likens his feelings about church to those of Saint Arsenius, a fifth-century desert father: “In the church he would stand behind a pillar, and as soon as the liturgy was over he would flee, saying, ‘It is the only way I can hang onto my connection to God’” (Wrong Planet, 16 February 2010). JSBACHLOVER, an aspie Roman Catholic priest, observes that “it’s actually harder to be an aspie in the pew. There are always cliques in churches, and it’s difficult to break into the group. I found this to be a problem before I became a priest. I would just go to Mass and leave” (Wrong Planet, 30 April 2014). He finds the priesthood less lonely: a “handful” of priests who “avoid gossip” make up his circle of friends, and his vocation structures his interactions with parishioners. Many of the lay autistic Christians in the forums do have a harder time finding ways to serve in their churches: they report that their non-autistic fellow Christians do not value their distinctive aspie gifts, such as their analytic skills.

Facing such rejection at church, and reasoning “that social skills are more valued in Christian circles than others” (Autism & Aspergers, 6 June 2011), some forum-members cope by trying to pass as non-autistic at church. JSBACHLOVER, the aforementioned Catholic priest, advises a newly diagnosed autistic Christian to “tell only close friends and family” (Wrong Planet, 29 April 2014). Likewise, THEPURPLEFLOWER keeps her autism diagnosis a secret at church. She “put[s] a lot of energy into maintaining a fairly normal facade” (Autism & Aspergers, 18 June 2011). Anticipating that “no one will actually understand,” she shares little in contexts where other Christians “go deep” (Autism & Aspergers, 23 April 2010). DRAG3049, too, “think[s] that” coming out as autistic “would just

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make things more awkward with my relationship with the church" (Autism & Aspergers, 6 August 2011). Autistic Christian members of ASPIESCentral refer to passing at church as putting on their "neurotypical mask" (22 January 2015, 21 February 2016). But they do not consider the mask an ersatz form of selfhood (as a proponent of the absent self theory would). On the contrary, they deem the mask "an expression" of their "true self" (23 January 2015). As DogwoodTree explains, "my mask is a manifestation of something in me that is, truly, me. Even though it might not be the core of me, it does exist because of something I value and a process in which I've engaged" (23 January 2015). Even when describing their attempts to pass as non-autistic, then, these autistic Christians belie the absent self theory's picture of autistic self-expression as mere miming.

Nor do their efforts to avoid the rejection of non-autistic Christians by trying to pass as non-autistic at church bespeak any shame about themselves. In fact, autistic Christian members of the three web communities maintain that autism is a "valid" way of knowing (Autism & Aspergers, 15 December 2006), a "difference" rather than a "disability" (Autism & Aspergers, 21 December 2005, 5 January 2006), an inextricable part of an autie's or an aspie's personality (Autism & Aspergers, 22 March 2006). For instance, by Glass*Soul's lights, "autism colors everything that makes us the unique individuals we are. Non-autism isn't something that is present but hidden within us. There isn't a non-autistic nature inside us struggling to get out. Autistics are whole and complete people. We don't have to be more like non-autistics in order to achieve that" (Autism & Aspergers, 23 April 2014). Moreover, members of the forums attribute their specifically autistic wholeness and completeness to God's intention. Hence, Psalm 139:14 serves as something of an autie-theological anthem on all three sites. "I praise you," the psalmist says to God, "for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well." A member of the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum goes by the handle Wonderfully Made; members of all three web communities cite the verse in discussions of how they feel about being autistic.

In other words, autistic Christians on Wrong Planet, ASPIESCentral, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum riff Christianly on the idea of neurodiversity. The neurodiversity movement is a disability rights movement that sees autism as a welcome variation in human ways of knowing rather than a deficit in need of a cure. Proponents of neurodiversity reinterpret the alleged clinical symptoms of autism—e.g., the tendency to develop strong, narrow, unusual interests—as valuable traits rather than medical problems (Bagatell 2007, 420). Accordingly, the movement argues for the acceptance of autism on the grounds that it is a minority

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identity deserving the same respect as race, sexual orientation, and gender.

The distinctively Christian riff on the theme of neurodiversity that autistic Christian members of the three forums collaboratively construct is that God blessed autistic people with an ability to see and inhabit the world in a special way. As UNIQUETADPOLE explains, God "put us here on this earth to see the world as neurotypicals cannot" (Autism & Aspergers, 12 December 2006). Members of the forums describe their autistic traits as prelapsarian spiritual abilities. "We aspies are somewhat prelapsarian in a number of ways," says GRANDVIZIER1006. "We can't lie well, for example, and many social cues and such are derived from humanity's sinful nature" (Autism & Aspergers, 3 December 2014). Hence, being autistic can make it easier for a person to connect with God: alluding to the New Testament ethic of conforming oneself to God's will rather than the idols of "this world" (cf. 1 John 2:15, 1 Cor 5:9–10 Rom 12:2, James 1:17), ORTHODOXFOREVER reflects that "Asperger's has helped me maintain a state of being *in* the world without being *of* the world. In high school I didn't get caught up in the popularity scramble or petty drama; I resolved to enjoy my true friends and stay out of all that. This allowed me to focus on developing and learning about my faith and made me a better Christian" (Autism & Aspergers, 12 November 2015). Other autistic traits cited by autistic Christians on the forums as prelapsarian spiritual abilities include sincerity (Autism & Aspergers, 18 December 2005), loyalty (Wrong Planet, 30 April 2014), intensity (ASPIESCentral, 28 May 2014), "compassion, acceptance of social outcasts, an ability to celebrate differences more easily" (Wrong Planet, 23 October 2013), and a deep commitment to social justice (Autism & Aspergers, 20 June 2009).

The forums' Christian riff on the theme of neurodiversity has an eschatological as well as an Edenic dimension. VALORWOMAN4JESUS, for example, suggests that, on account of their prelapsarian traits, autistic people can cooperate with God in the redemption of the world: "It may seem like people like us might be living in a dream world, and in a sense we are. However, I believe we have more of a gift for seeing how things were supposed to be in the Garden of Eden," she says. Noting the recent uptick in autism diagnoses, she speculates that

> God has a reason for more people on the spectrum being born. People on the spectrum see more of what's missing in a fallen world where paradise has been lost. God will be using this new wave of people on the spectrum to change the world, putting the wise to shame and helping Him bring the kingdom to earth. So let's keep dreaming, believing in God's promises and the truth of His word, using our unique talents to make this world a

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> better place before Jesus comes back! (Autism & Aspergers, 11 April 2014).

GRANDVIZIER1006 agrees:

> It's kind of tough to type with this big lump in my throat, but I guess there is one thing I can say about "us" that the church needs to know. The thing we want most of all, more than knowledge or accommodation or social permission to act however we want, is for things to be the way they should be. Our prelapsarian characteristics make us realize that things are not the way they should be. (Autism & Aspergers, 30 December 2014)

Thus, as ASPERGERSCHRISTIAN555 points out, autistic Christians can "use" their autism to glorify God in some ways that non-autistic people cannot (Autism & Aspergers, 24 May 2009). Far from a deficit in need of a cure, then, autism amounts to a spiritual gift that God will leave intact in the afterlife (Wrong Planet, 23 October 2013). As an alternative way of knowing, autism is part of God's "mighty plan" (Autism & Aspergers, 24 May 2011).

In addition to their eschatologically oriented riff on neurodiversity, autistic Christian members of Wrong Planet, ASPIESCentral, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum collaboratively construct a Trinitarian theology to explain the fact that, despite their felt difficulties communicating with non-autistic people, they enjoy deep intimacy with God. For INTELLECTUAL-CHRISTIAN, "God is quite literally my best friend," because God is "the only one who 'gets me'" (Autism & Aspergers, 12 February 2011). Similarly, a member of Wrong Planet says that she has "been made reliant on the Lord alone to keep me going" (30 April 2014). And DOGWOODTREE, an "outsider" in "most" Christian groups, characterizes her relationship with God as "heart-to-heart" (ASPIESCentral, 26 August 2014). The novel theology that autistic Christians in the forums develop to explain this intimacy centers on an "omnilinguistic" God who speaks the lingua franca of autistic people (Autism & Aspergers, 25 March 2013). So even if an autistic person "may not understand and communicate like 'normals,'" a member of the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum explains, "God can contact me easily, and can hear me when we talk" (19 October 2008). SABERTOOTH makes the point vividly: "God is not stymied by Aspergers. He knows *exactly* how to speak to our hearts in such a way that we can unmistakably understand Him" (Autism & Aspergers, 13 November 2010). SABERTOOTH again: "God knows how to speak Aspergian" (1 August 2012). Another member of the Autism & Aspergers

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sub-forum affirms Sabertooth's point: "My parents used to say talking to me is like talking to a brick wall," he writes. "Yet God has gotten through, so God must speak Aspergian" (Autism & Aspergers, 13 August 2012). These autistic Christians have no trouble experiencing the polyglot God who talks to them, understands them, and likes them in all their "aspieness" (Autism & Aspergers, 24 October 2012).

The web communities expand their doctrine of an omnilinguistic God into a full-fledged Trinitarian vision. According to their Trinitarian vision, the "loving Father [. . .] can speak and understand you better than anyone." The Father, in other words, "speaks your lingo" (Autism & Aspergers, 2 November 2011). And the Holy Spirit makes autistic and non-autistic people alike receptive to what God says. One member of the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum ingeniously likens the Spirit's work to a concept in computer programming: "The Holy Spirit is like an unported source code that can configure itself to any operating system, which means that the Holy Spirit can be compatible with anyone, autistic or not" (13 April 2007). Porting refers to the activity of adapting a computer program (or a video game) to run on different types of computers (or game platforms). A software engineer rewrites a piece of software to accommodate new hardware for which it was not originally designed. For instance, it is in virtue of porting that one can now play Super Mario Bros., a game originally designed for the Nintendo Entertainment System, on a personal computer. What this member of the sub-forum means, then, is that the Holy Spirit can overcome local peculiarities without difficulty; the Spirit is capable of expressing the same instructions in any language. Finally, the Son, who comes into the world as Jesus of Nazareth, provides a model of autistic devotion to God:

> Jesus was autistically obsessed with the kingdom of God. He did not care in the slightest about impressing others, being funny, or getting kicked out of the Jewish synagogue. He did many awkward things which hinted that he moved to a different beat. He was brutally honest in a very autistic way, which eventually lead to him being crucified. The world claimed that there was something wrong with Jesus because he didn't follow their man-made standards. Neurotypicals should not just assume that we autistic types have a problem because we are different and don't go by usual social standards. (Autism & Aspergers, 17 April 2007)

Members of the web communities wonder if "maybe Jesus was an Aspie" (ASPIESCentral, 23 May 2014). They agree that Jesus had autistic traits. As Dark quips, "40 days alone in the desert sounds pretty Aspie to me" (ASPIESCentral, 23 May 2014). In Ste11aeres's estimate, "Jesus had the

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strengths of both aspieness and neurotypicality" (ASPIESCentral, 28 May 2014). And one member of the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum sees in Jesus's inscrutability a sign of autistic people's special favor with God: "Frankly even back then 2000 years ago no one really had a clue what he was talking about so autistic people are in fact the true disciples and God's chosen ones and the rocking insiders" (Autism & Aspergers, 3 December 2011). What to a non-autistic person might look like a symptom of autistic deviance—repetitive "rocking" or hand flapping, that is, stimming—becomes on this autie-theological interpretation an indicator of God's "insiders." The theology constructed by autistic Christians to make sense of their intimacy with God, then, has Trinitarian contours: the loving Father understands autistic people; the Holy Spirit helps autistic people understand the Father; and the Son exemplifies the best of those traits that autistic people find in themselves, thereby providing both consolation and inspiration.

In sum, autistic Christians on Wrong Planet, ASPIESCentral, and the Autism & Aspergers sub-forum of Christian Forums have built—and are continuing to build—autistic spiritual communities outside official offline ecclesial spaces that they for the most part experience as hostile. They have theologized—and are continuing to theologize—their experiences of acceptance by God and rejection by non-autistic Christians, distributing their theological accounts of themselves outside mainstream publishing networks. According to their distinctively Christian account of neurodiversity and their distinctively aspie account of God, not only has God gifted auties and aspies with an Edenic and eschatological angle of view on the world; God also relates to them—and likes them—just the way they are. As even this very short ethnography shows, religious scholars in general, and academic theologians in particular, have much to learn from the autie-theologies of actually autistic persons of faith.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that the prevailing deficit narrative of autism in the behavioral sciences, the absent self theory, is in principle untestable, because the trope of the unreliable autistic narrator on which it depends is unfalsifiable: what separates a non-autistic person's genuine self-expression from an autistic person's "hacking" is not an outer feature of the expression, but rather an inner state that is assumed to underlie the expression (Frith et al. 1994, 111; Frith 2003, 208). And I have argued that, in view of the theory's untestability, academic theologians as well as philosophers and anthropologists of religion ought not presuppose its truth in their discussions of autism. Finally, to show an example of what

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scholars of religion stand to gain if they do not presuppose the theory's truth, I have offered an ethnography of autistic Christians.

The upshot is simple: Bad assumptions (the absent self theory) lead to bad methodologies (the trope of the unreliable autistic narrator). Bad methodologies lead to bad findings (religion is just a proxy for personal identity). And bad findings lead to bad theologies (ones that do not listen to actually autistic persons). Better assumptions (autistic self-understanding is in fact self-understanding) lead to better methodologies (ethnography). Better methodologies lead to better findings (a more fine-grained picture of the self-understandings of autistic Christians). And better findings lead to better theologies (ones attentive to the empowering contextual theologies that actually autistic Christians improvise in the face of disabling stories told about them by social and behavioral scientists, academic theologians, and philosophers of religion alike).

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