

Nature cannot provide a firm grounding of what it is that makes our humanity special, nor can reason or history. It follows that, if there is anything significant about our existence, it can only be sustained if it is sustained *extrinsically* — that is, from elsewhere, through the love of God. This belief is crucial to my understanding of humanity, whether it be my own humanity or anyone else's. Thus it is also crucial in my understanding of the humanity of human beings such as Kelly and Oliver de Vinck. Only because of who God is, and what he does, can we understand our humanity in a way that sustains their humanity independent of the many and profound disabilities that characterize their lives. That is, their humanity, as well as our own, is grounded adequately only when grounded *unconditionally*. I am convinced that only a theological view can succeed in doing this.<sup>34</sup>

My remarks on how this inquiry will proceed should convey to the reader that it does not in any way set apart human beings with a profound intellectual disability. Nor does it attempt to offer a justification — or give a reason — for their existence, at least not in the sense that their lives are unintelligible unless we can provide a reason for them. It would be difficult to imagine a theological argument implying that, in the eyes of God, Kelly's existence is less intelligible than mine or yours. Something like the reverse is actually true: from the perspective of eternity, my and your existence is hardly different from hers. The issue of "meaning" regarding each of our lives is the same. It is only when we hold on to the perspective of *individual selfhood* that we see them drifting apart; it is only then that we are confronted with the possibility of an anthropological subdivision. Or, to strike a more positive note, it is only because we do not look at their lives as being categorically different from ours that we account for the practices of support in a way that does not set them apart, but includes them in our lives.

To introduce the theological nature of this book in this way may suggest that it aims at a Christian critique of contemporary culture. Though I do not mind criticizing contemporary culture when that is appropriate, I have not written this book for that purpose. The purpose of my analysis here is not to criticize but to empower. Among those who share their lives with a profoundly disabled human being, many would contest the notion that such a person cannot lead a human life, prop-

34. I will return to this claim in Ch. 7.

erly so called. The purpose of this book is to sustain people in exploring the convictions and beliefs that are capable of affirming their judgment in this regard. Second, it would be a mistake to suggest that Christians in this society do not share the dominant view of our moral culture about what it means to be human; as will become evident in the chapters that follow, there is no ground to make this claim. Christian communities are usually not on the frontline when it comes to matters of inclusion. For many people with disabilities, it is still true that it is easier to enter a pub or a cinema than the sanctuary of a church, just to mention one practical problem.<sup>35</sup>

Aside from the many justified complaints about practical matters such as limited access, there are strong historical currents in Christian theology underscoring attitudinal barriers toward people with profound disabilities. There are within the tradition of Christian theology many strands of thinking about our humanity that make interior and self-referential matters central to their conception of being human. In that respect, my aim in this book is not so much intended to be apologetic as it is to be self-critical: it is an attempt to investigate whether the Christian religion can find in itself the resources to develop a view that does not render the existence of profoundly disabled humans inherently problematic.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, it is evidently not true that Christians hold more positive views about profoundly disabled lives than do most other people in our culture, though not many of them would use the word "vegetable." As Kelly has emerged in the first pages of this chapter, I suspect that many readers — Christians and non-Christians alike — would consider her life to be quite atypical of how we usually understand humanity. If so, the reader may well ask why I take her as a test case.

In answer to that question, let me again refer to the hierarchy of disability that exists in the culture. Given the characteristics of Kelly's

35. Deland, "Images of God Through the Lens of Disability," *Journal of Disability, Religion, and Health* 3, no. 2 (1999): 47-79.

36. With regard to finding theological resources to overcome the limitations of theological understanding, my approach is the same as expressed by Nancy Eiesland in her article "Liberation, Inclusion, and Justice: A Faith Response to Persons with Disabilities," in *Impact: Feature Issue on Faith Communities and Persons with Developmental Disabilities*, ed. V. Gaylord, B. Gaventa, S. R. Simon, R. Norman-McNaney, and A. N. Amado, 14 (2002): 2-3.