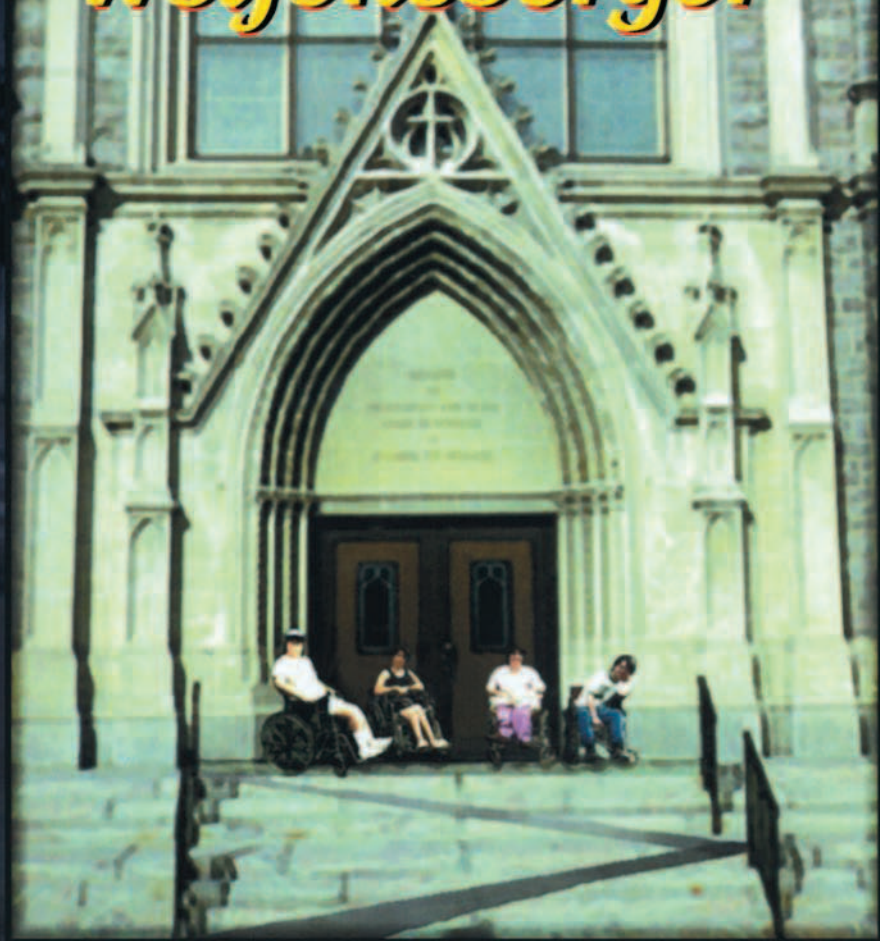


*The*  
***Theological Voice***  
*of*  
***Wolf***  
***Wolfsberger***



William C. Gaventa, MDiv • David L. Coulter, MD  
*E d i t o r s*

# **The Theological Voice of Wolf Wolfensberger**

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***The Theological Voice of Wolf Wolfensberger***, edited by William C. Gaventa, MDiv, and David L. Coulter, MD (Vol. 4, No. 2/3, 2001). *This thought-provoking volume presents Wolfensberger's challenging, outrageous, and inspiring ideas on the theological significance of disabilities, including the problem with wheelchair access ramps in churches, the meaning of suffering, and the spiritual gifts of the mentally retarded.*

***A Look Back: The Birth of the Americans with Disabilities Act***, edited by Robert C. Anderson, MDiv (Vol. 2, No. 4, 1996).<sup>\*</sup> *Takes you to the unique moment in American history when persons of many different backgrounds and with different disabilities united to press Congress for full recognition and protection of their rights as American citizens.*

***Pastoral Care of the Mentally Disabled: Advancing Care of the Whole Person***, edited by Sally K. Severino, MD, and Reverend Richard Liew, PhD (Vol. 1, No. 2, 1994).<sup>\*</sup> *"A great book for theologians with a refreshing dogma-free approach; thought provoking for physiotherapists and all other human beings!" (The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy)*

# The Theological Voice of Wolf Wolfensberger

William C. Gaventa, MDiv  
David L. Coulter, MD  
Editors

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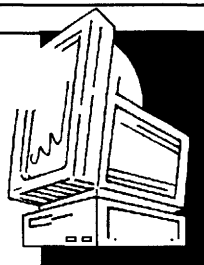
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<<http://www.bowker-saur.co.uk>> . . . . . 1994
- *BUBL Information Service: An Internet-based Information Service for the UK higher education community*  
<URL: <http://bubl.ac.uk/>> . . . . . 1995
- *CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature), in print, also on CD-ROM from CD PLUS, EBSCO, and SilverPlatter, and online from CDP Online (formerly BRS), Data-Star, and PaperChase. (Support materials include Subject Heading List, Database Search Guide, and instructional video)* . . . . . 1994
- *CNPIEC Reference Guide: Chinese National Directory of Foreign Periodicals* . . . . . 1996
- *Family Studies Database (online and CD/ROM)*  
<[www.nisc.com](http://www.nisc.com)> . . . . . 1996
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- ***Human Resources Abstracts (HRA)* ..... 1994**
- ***IBZ International Bibliography of Periodical Literature* ..... 1996**
- ***Occupational Therapy Index/AMED Database* ..... 1994**
- ***Orere Source, The (Pastoral Abstracts)* ..... 1999**
- ***Periodica Islamica* ..... 1994**
- ***REHABDATA* <<http://www.naric.com/naric>> ..... 1999**
- ***Religious & Theological Abstracts. For a free search & more information visit our website at: <<http://www.rtabst.org>> .. 1999***
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- individual articles/chapters in any Haworth publication are also available through the Haworth Document Delivery Service (HDDS).

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# Preface

No one is neutral about Wolf Wolfensberger. I do not think he would allow it. Hank Bersani writes, “Wolfensberger draws controversies as a flame draws moths.” He means to shake us up, challenge our assumptions and make us think. Like Dennis Schurter, I think of Wolfensberger as being like an Old Testament prophet, sure of himself, unafraid, willing to use “extreme terminology” to get our attention, but usually at least two steps ahead of the rest of us. If one listens carefully to what he has to say, one is forced to take a position either in agreement or opposition. And even if one agrees with him, he may still argue the point and keep challenging us to seek the truth.

This volume honors Wolfensberger in the way he might appreciate best, by stimulating vital discussion of some critical issues concerning religion, disability and health. This is not an empty celebratory tribute or festschrift. Rather, we have sought to provoke debate between Wolfensberger and the reader through a dialogue between him and three responders. We first reprint seven of Wolfensberger’s papers which present his religious and spiritual viewpoint on disability and which are not widely available. We selected three responders to represent the readership and asked them to read and comment on Wolfensberger’s papers. Dennis Schurter is a chaplain who has been active in the field of mental retardation for many years and who speaks of Wolfensberger’s influence on him and the field. By contrast, Eric Pridmore is a graduate student in religion and disability for whom the encounter with Wolfensberger is new. Sandra Friedman is a leading physician in the field who encounters Wolfensberger from the dual perspective of a Jewish woman and a health care provider. We asked Kenneth Tittle, also a leading physician in the field, to review one of Wolfensberger’s books which relates specifically to the intersection of religion, disability and health. Finally, we gave Professor Wolfensberger the opportunity to respond to the responders and to have the last word.

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How might the reader best use this material? Let me state at the outset that I do not believe Professor Wolfensberger is always right. And I would expect him to argue with me about it. The conjunctive stage of faith development (according to James Fowler) embraces polarities and is alert to paradox and the need for multiple interpretations of reality. I suspect Wolfensberger is at that point where he expects disagreement and is perfectly comfortable with the fact that he believes what he believes and that others believe something different. Although I may disagree with some of his arguments in the articles reprinted in this volume, I have been challenged by them and appreciate the tremendous impact he has had on the development of my own beliefs. In particular, he alerted me to the very real risks of what he calls “death-making” long before the current societal interest in euthanasia and assisted suicide for people with disabilities.

Do not read these articles with the idea that you must agree with everything Professor Wolfensberger has written. Read them carefully and think about what he is saying. Take a stance either in agreement or in opposition and think about why you may agree or disagree with him. Then read his articles again and see if he can convince you or if you can argue a convincing alternative point of view. Read the responses to his articles and see if they support your arguments, and then read Wolfensberger’s responses to the commentaries. Maybe he will change your mind, maybe he will not. Whatever happens, you will come away from this issue of the *Journal* with a stronger sense of what you believe and why you believe it. Wolfensberger concludes his “Response to the Responders” by writing, “This format of debate and analysis is very much what we need because I expect it will lead to much clarification of thought.” And I think that is the best way to honor Professor Wolfensberger for the enormous impact he has had on all of us.

*David L. Coulter, MD*  
*Co-Editor*

## A Note of Appreciation

This book could not have happened without the cooperation and assistance of many people. That is, in fact, a testimony in itself, both to the contributions of Wolf Wolfensberger and to the crucial importance of the questions and issues which he raises in these papers.

This volume was born in a vision to “resurrect” the papers and presentations that Wolf has made over the past quarter century, primarily in two arenas, the Religion Division of the AAMR and the National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministries (NAIM, formerly the National Apostolate for Persons with Mental Retardation). Most of the presentations, except the last one, had been published in the earlier journals or publications of these two groups. We are very grateful to the Religion Division of the AAMR, and to NAIM for permission to republish these papers.

Why do so? For one, in my opinion, many of them are classics. I will never forget being present for Wolf’s presentation of “An Attempt to Find an Adequate Theological Foundation.” I remember reading his early version of the Prophetic “Voice and Presence” and resonating, as a young chaplain in one of the hellacious large institutions not far from Syracuse, with the words and thoughts that no one was acknowledging those days, i.e., the ways that people with mental retardation were teaching me. They are both papers I have continued to copy and give out, time and time again, to clergy and others coming into the field. One of Wolf’s real contributions is the way he places his questions and issues in an historical context. Thus, from one perspective, this book is one attempt to thank him, in kind.

Thus, I “grew up” as a young chaplain with Wolf Wolfensberger as a living presence in the field. Most other contributors to this volume, i.e., Hank Bersani, David Coulter, Dennis Schurter, and Sandra Friedman, did the same. Hank Bersani was our “insider” from Syracuse. Dennis Schurter has been involved as a chaplain and with the Religion Division of the AAMR for the past twenty-five years, and currently serves as its President. We are very

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grateful to each of them for their wonderful pieces. Sandra Friedman took on the challenge of writing from both her professional role as a pediatrician and her Jewish tradition. Eric Pridmore and Ken Tittle came to his works with fresh perspectives, coming out of their primary involvement with issues of disability and religion in the world of physical disabilities.

It also took many hands and hours to get these papers from old formats, in some cases mimeographed journals (remember the mimeograph) and into new digitalized wineskins. Laurie Bleakley, a Lutheran seminarian and trainee at The Boggs Center-UAP in 1998-99, did much of the first work. She is now an Associate Pastor. Susan Thomas, Wolf Wolfensberger's able associate, compared new versions with older manuscripts, and worked with me till we got it right. Precision and thoroughness have long been "signs" that Wolf was involved. But we also left Wolf's unique use of English words, or invention of new ones, as they stood. My MS Word based spell-check might not like it, but the accuracy of a version faithful to the historical voice demands it.

Our hope is that from whatever perspective and historical vantage point you enter these papers and the dialogue in this work, you will be challenged, nurtured, and enriched.

*Bill Gaventa, MDiv  
Co-Editor*

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## INTRODUCTION

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### Wolf Wolfensberger: Scholar, Change Agent, and Iconoclast

Hank Bersani Jr., PhD

Who is Wolf Wolfensberger, and why are we devoting an entire publication to his work? Well, it occurs to us that some people are quite familiar with the “disability” side of Dr. Wolfensberger. Readers may know several of his books (Wolfensberger, 1972, 1983; Wolfensberger and Zauha, 1973) and even if they disagree with some of his positions, they are quite familiar with his position on topics such as integration, deinstitutionalization, and program evaluation. Many readers will be surprised to see that he has so many things to say in the area of religion.

On the other hand, there is no doubt readers who are familiar with Dr. Wolfensberger’s teachings in the area of religion and spirituality, which while they are always in the context of people who are devalued, do not often make clear the clinical and social policy background from which he writes. Just as this volume seeks to bring together areas of spirituality, disability and health, so do the writings of Dr. Wolfensberger run the gamut from clinical, psycho-

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logical issues in mental retardation, to the role of life, death, and spirituality in all of our lives, including those of us with disabilities.

The purpose of this volume is to feature some of the most challenging writings of this prolific author, who has made his mark on so many aspects of the fields addressed; people with disabilities, issues of religion and spirituality, and health issues.

I remember the day I first met Dr. Wolfensberger. I was a masters student at Syracuse University, and he had just come to join the faculty. The program was abuzz that the developer of the normalization principle was going to be on campus. He was giving his first formal address, and we all filled the room to hear—faculty and students alike. I arrived early and watched as the janitor prepared the room for the lecture with enormous attention to detail. Lining up the chairs just so, wiping down the speaker's table, checking and double-checking the overhead projector and screen. It seemed that even the janitor knew that this was the presentation of the year. Finally, dusting the lens on the projector one last time, the janitor (one I had not seen in the building before) seemed to declare the room ready. He went and stood in the far corner. In his work boots, dark brown pants and dark brown turtleneck, it appeared he was going to stay for the lecture. Burton Blatt, Director of the Division of Special Education, stepped up to the podium and read the impressive credentials of Dr. Wolfensberger. As we all listened, I scanned the front, and then the rear of the room, looking for the famous speaker. Dr. Blatt completed his remarks and the janitor—or the man I thought to be the janitor—strode to the podium and began his presentation. Ironically, much of the presentation dealt with the issue of stereotypes, and although within six months I was traveling and lecturing with him, I never told him about my assumptions made on that day.

### ***BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH***

Wolfensberger was born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1934, lived away from home for several years during World War II, and immigrated to the U.S. as a 16-year-old. He was naturalized as a US citizen in 1956. In later life, he would recount how his value system was shaped by his early years in Europe and World War II. His formal education included a bachelor's degree in philosophy at Siena College (1955) in Memphis, Tennessee (now defunct). He went on to earn a master's degree in psychology and education (1957) from St. Louis University in Missouri, and a PhD (1962) from the George Peabody College for Teachers (which later became a part of Vanderbilt University). Within the psychology program, Peabody was offering a new program not previously offered at any other university—a specialization in mental retardation. Wolfensberger was in the first cohort to graduate with this specialization. Prior to this time, there was not enough interest in the construct of mental retardation for it to warrant an individual specialty.

In the 1950s and 60s Wolfensberger had a number of clinical experiences that shaped his view of services to people with disabilities. He was a laboratory technician for a chemical company in Tennessee, and worked as a clerk-statistician at St. Louis University. Later, he served in prestigious internships with Jack Tizard and Neil O'Connor—two international leaders in psychology at the time—in England. Later, he was the Chief Psychologist at one mental retardation institution, and Director of Research and Training at another.

His groundbreaking work in the state of Nebraska from 1963 to 1971 was based at the Nebraska Psychiatric Institute, University of Nebraska. In that capacity, he headed the Nebraska Mental Retardation Manpower Development and Training Station. He was also influential in the development of the Eastern Nebraska Community Office of Mental Retardation (ENCOR), which attracted national and international attention for over a decade. At that time, the services in ENCOR were so impressive, that leaders from across the US, Europe, and even Scandinavia came to visit and to learn about the construct of community services.

By 1971 Wolfensberger was invited to serve as a visiting scholar at the Canadian Institute on Mental Retardation located at York University (now the Roehrer Institute) in Toronto where he stayed for two years with a joint appointment as special lecturer in the Department of Psychology.

In 1973, Wolfensberger joined the graduate faculty at the Syracuse University Division of Special Education and Rehabilitation where he created his Training Institute. After several moves and career changes in his early life, Syracuse has continued to be his home and his base of operations for over 25 years now.

### ***International Recognition***

Wolfensberger has been widely recognized and honored in the areas of mental retardation and psychology. He has been elevated to the status of Fellow in the American Association on Mental Deficiency (now American Association on Mental Retardation), the American Psychological Association, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. His affiliations and memberships reflect the diversity of his interests and his thinking. He has been a member of Common Cause, the World Future Society, the American Association of University Professors; and local and national Associations for Retarded Citizens/Arc's. He is a lifetime member of Sigma Chi, and has been listed in *American Men and Women of Science*, *World Who's Who in the Midwest*, the *Dictionary of International Biography*, *Community Leaders of America*, and *Leaders in Education*.

In 1991, an article in *Education and Training in Mental Retardation* reported on a study to determine the 25 top classic works in the literature on mental retardation. Dr. Wolfensberger earned two places on the list, with his

1983 article on “Social Role Valorization” ranked as 17th, and his 1972 book on normalization ranked #1. Most recently, the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) named him as one of 36 historic figures in the field.

Wolfensberger is the author of well over three hundred publications from 1957 to the present, including 27 books and monographs, 17 book chapters, over 200 articles and book reviews, and a handful of poems.

Dr. Wolfensberger is also a member of the U.S. Chess Federation, with a rating of “U.S. Chess Expert,” was a co-founder of the Memphis Philatelic Society, and has been a member of various environmental groups including the Sierra Club.

Wolfensberger is married, and he and his wife Nancy have raised three grown children, each successful in their own right.

### ***Ever the Iconoclast***

Wolfensberger draws controversies as a flame draws moths. His pressure in the 1970s for us to be careful about our language shaped the discussion about people with disabilities. He, more than any other writer, speaker, and influencer of the philosophy of our field, led to the shift from talking about “children” when we clearly mean adults, and away from talking about mental age and IQ as if they were self-defining. He urged us to not take ordinary life activities and call them therapy in the context of disability or health care need. For example, enjoying gardening—for people with disabilities becoming horticulture therapy. Benefiting from having a pet becomes pet therapy, and finding riding a horse to be fun and a good source of exercise becomes equestrian therapy.

However, although he taught us to watch our language, he continues to find use for linguistic constructs that many of us have abandoned. He prefers the word “handicapped” to “disabled” citing the etymology of the prefix “dis” meaning “not able,” and saying that people with handicaps may be able, but handicapped. In fact, he often prefers to refer to people who are “wounded,” or “psychically wounded.” He avoids so-called “People First” language, suggested by so many people with disabilities, and continues to write about “handicapped people.” More importantly, the clinician in him clings to the term mental retardation as a legitimate diagnostic label even though he has railed at stereotyping and the excessive focus on diagnostics. And last but not least, he sometimes writes about Satan as a specific individual. There are few mental retardation professionals, people with disabilities, or clergy who do not take issue with some aspect of his writing.

Once writing extensively about the essential role of consumer involvement in human services, he now writes about people with cognitive disabilities as being prophets, and as vulnerable and needing protection in the medical system, but no longer addresses the issue of them also being consumers, with power, self-advocates, capable of contributing to their own well being as well