

ON DISABILITY, SOCIETY AND TECHNOLOGY: AN INFORMAL CONVERSATION FROM SOUTH INDIA

João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira

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ABSTRACT

This article reproduces partially the lecture I delivered at the Albertian Institute of Science and Technology (AISAT), Kochi, Kerala, India, on September 3, 2016. The main focus is the relationship between disability, society and Technology; it also stresses the essential role played by Christianity not only in what regards the social integration of the disabled and the development of Assistive Technology, but also in the development of Science and Technology in general.

Note: Photos and drawings also by João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira

THE MAJORITY IS ALMOST ALWAYS WRONG



St. Vincent de Paul(1581-1660) was born in France and dedicated most of his life to serving the poor, the disabled, the sick and the underprivileged in general. He is also known as the "Great Apostle of Charity".

Notwithstanding his many mistakes, the German revolutionary socialist Karl Marx (1818-1883) was right when he said that the majority is almost always wrong (1). Actually, he evoked a historical constant, therefore valid for every single period of History. Let us take our globalized contemporary society as an example: the great majority of the investigators in the field of Humanities (let alone journalists and mouthpieces of the Great Media in general) usually refuse to admit the measureless debt the human race owes to Christianity. No other institution can be compared to Catholicism in what regards the creation and development of hospitals, social assistance, care for the disabled and charitable activity in general, let alone the development of Science and Technology. It is also important to notice that

The extend of the Church's charitable activity sometimes became clearest when it was taken away. In sixteenth-century England, for example, King Henry VIII suppressed the monasteries and confiscated their property, distributing it at rock-bottom prices to men of influence within his realm. The pretext for the suppression was that of monasteries had become sources of scandal and immorality, though there can be little doubt that such

contrived accusations merely concealed royal avarice. The social consequences of the dissolution of the monasteries must have been substantial. The Northern Risings of 1536, a popular rebellion also known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, had much to do with popular anger at the disappearance of monastic charity, and a petitioner to the king observed two years later (2).

A parallel can be drawn between the persecution suffered by the Roman Catholics at the hands of the Protestants in England and that suffered by the Nestorian Christians (aka “Assyrian Christians”) in Asia, by the hands of the Muslims – undoubtedly a far more terrible historical phenomenon. Founded in 424, the Assyrian Church provided Asia with “some of the most energetic missionaries Christianity has ever known” (3). Only Saint Ignatius’ and Saint Francis Xavier’s Jesuits could match them in the art of bringing the Word of God to those who do not know Her, as well as in erecting churches, schools, centers for scientific studies and diffusion, hospitals for the sick and shelters for the treatment of the disabled: “The Jesuits became the first worldwide order, accomplishing more than Queen Isabella’s knights ever had to carry out her dream of spreading Catholicism to the new global Spanish Empire” (4). From the Mediterranean to the Pacific, Asia “clothed itself in a white robe of Nestorians institutions”; *mutatis mutandis*, it was just as the French monk Rodulfus Glaber (985-1047) reported as personal witness, regarding the process of emergence of Romanic churches just after the millennium: “the earth [i.e., what he knew of it: Western and Central Europe] has covered herself with a white robe of churches: *candidam aecclesiarum vestem indueret* (5). As for the Nestorians, they

Could be found all across Central Asia, as well as in the Byzantine Empire, and particularly in the Middle East and Egypt. At their height, the Assyrians had metropolitan sees in Azerbaijan, Syria, Jerusalem, Beijing, Tibet, India, Samarkand, Edessa and Arabia (at Sana, in Yemen), as well as churches [never stopping founding and promoting other important institutions, such as the already mentioned specialized shelters for treatment of the disabled] from Aden to Bombay and Shanghai. (...) one Chinese emperor called Christianity the “luminous doctrine” and fostered its growth (6).

Nonetheless, “Storm clouds were forming in the horizon” (7). In the 7th century, Islam emerged as a new ideology that achieved to fill the power vacuum caused by the ruin of the two once mighty Asian empires of the Sassanians and the Byzantines. Following the typical Islamic provisions against non-Muslims (8), Islam started to transform that “white robe of Nestorian institutions” into a red sea of Nestorian blood. By the end of the Middle Ages, the Islamic ruler Tamerlane (1336-1405), descendent of Genghis Khan, practically swept them from the face of the earth. The coup de grace has been given in the present days by the Islamic State, with the connivance of the Great Media, the Academy in general and many western leaders (9).

Most of today’s globalized world thinkers and authors have the tendency to ignore, despise or even deny the reality of the measureless debt the Western civilization – let alone humanity in general – owes to the Christianity. Reasons for such disregard are many. Some of them are simple, others not; they range from ignorance, envy and presumption to ingratitude, personal resentments and bad faith. The very ideas of Human Rights, dignity of the human person and freedom – whether freedom of thought, political freedom or economic freedom and “above all, freedom of conscience within the framework of a healthy laicism” (10) – are all Christian in their deepest essence. The same can be said of the democratic origin of political power. In 1528, the famous Basque canonist and theologian Martin de Azpilcueta (1491-1586), aka Doctor Navarrus, defended a quite an original theory at the University of Salamanca. According to him, “The kingdom does not belong to the king and power itself belongs by natural right to the community, not to the king, and therefore the community cannot abdicate its power” (11). Among other vital contributions to Western Culture, Doctor Navarrus also “helped establish and define a new, modern relationship between the two spheres of reality, the civil sphere and the religious sphere”. Actually, he was not the father of these ideas; they had been expressed before by some of his contemporaries and fellow priests, such as Francisco de Victoria and Cardinal Cayetano:

In fact, he was not the first person to express this theory; both Francisco de Victoria and Cardinal Cayetano had previously defended it. What Azpilcueta did was to spell out the theory in more detail and create a more precise terminology, which later authors would do little to change (12).

GOD AS ARCHITECT, PATRON OF SCIENCE



Basilica of Bom Jesus, Old Goa (India), where St Francis Xavier is buried.

In fact, it would be hard, maybe impossible, to find a field of knowledge in which the Christian contribution has been not only positive, but also essential. Among a myriad of examples (all of them as important as usually ignored by the Academy), we could pick this of the introduction of Technology in the West during the early Middle Ages – a hard period during which the priests, the monks and the Christians in general saved the Greco-Roman heritage against all odds and laid the foundation of what we call “Western Civilization”. As Thomas Woods puts in his powerful and important *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, “It would be difficult to find any group anywhere in the world whose contributions were as varied, as significant, and as indispensable as those of the Catholic monks of the West of general turmoil and despair” (13). Those monks were the true “architects of Medieval Technology”, and this include, of course, the Assistive Technology, whose general goal is precisely that of promoting improvements in the quality of life of the disabled. Indeed,

Assistive Technology is an umbrella term that includes assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices for people with disabilities and also includes the process used in selecting, locating, and using them. Assistive Technology promotes greater independence by enabling people to perform tasks that they were formerly unable to accomplish, or had great difficulty accomplishing, by providing enhancements to, or changing methods of interacting with, the Technology needed to accomplish such tasks (14).

It is always important to notice that social rehabilitation must include cultural activities, given that they provide opportunities for the disabled “to take up and cultivate numerous contacts with the public which in turn will counteract the tendency towards segregation” (15). Far from being an exclusive “human phenomenon”, disability is present throughout the animal and the vegetable kingdoms; only rocks do not run the risk of becoming disabled – or maybe they do, depending on the vantage point adopted, since the rocks compete, through the so-called rock cycle, to reach the surface of the planet; and in this competition the most fitted prevail, whereas the less fitted fail and, many times, become “disabled”, so to say (16). Whatever the case, due to our being the most intelligent and easily taught of all animals, we humans are also the most highly individuated: “No two persons are exactly alike in their physical and mental potentialities” (17). The obvious consequence of this is our being much less alike than the individuals of other species. However, we can not do without living in society: men are social beings, as Aristotle correctly pointed out more than two thousand years ago (18). Hence the paradox: each of us carries on an enormous amount of specialized activities; but we depend on one another for the satisfaction of the great majority of our essential needs. Social insects, such as ants and bees are endowed by Nature with instincts we do not have – at least not at the same degree of development. Inside an anthill, perfect cooperation is required; and it is assured “by the physical organization of the various

groups of workers, fighters, and so forth, and by a high development of instincts” (19). Lacking such instincts (rather, being unable to reach such a degree of instinctive sophistication), extraordinarily long and elaborate training are required from us if we want “to function successfully as members of a society” (20). Put it another way, we are highly successfully primates trying to live together like ants, “and, as any philosophical observer can attest, not doing too well at it” (21).

In ancient Greece and Rome, attitudes towards the disabled oscillated between acceptance (Hippocrates, Cicero) and condemnation (Plato, Seneca). Following the teachings and callings of Jesus, early Christians outperformed “the reciprocal hospitality that had prevailed in ancient Greece and the family-orientated obligations of the Romans”; in doing so, they catered to “particular groups marginalized by poverty, sickness and age” (22). Christian monks pioneered systematic charity in the West; no wonder that the Greek word *karitas* means love (of God) and that *Caritas Internationalis* is a Catholic institution (23). According to the Medical Historian Fielding Garrison, before the time of Christ, “the spirit towards sickness and misfortune was not one of compassion, and the credit of ministering to human suffering on an extended scale belongs to Christianity” (24).

As we have already seen, Technology made headway within Western society thanks to the monks and the very Christian mentality; the same can be said for Science, which is the base of Technology itself. Both technical devices and scientific speculation have predictability as their sine qua non condition: the laws of Science mirror the laws of Nature, which must be regular so that they can be called laws. The point is: among all cultures, the only one that has always defended this regularity of the natural laws is the Judeo-Christian culture. Throughout the Bible, the regularity of natural phenomena is described as a reflection of God’s goodness, beauty, and order. For if the Lord “has imposed an order on the magnificent works of his wisdom”, that is only because “He is from everlasting to everlasting” (Sir. 42: 21) (25). In the view of the Hungarian prizewinning Historian of Science Father Stanley Jaki (1924-2009), “The world, summing up the handiwork of a supremely reasonable Person, is endowed with lawfulness and purpose”. Such a lawfulness could not be more evident, since it is around us during every single moment of our lives in this same world: “The regular return of seasons, the unflinching course of stars, the music of the spheres, the movement of the forces of nature according to fixed ordinances, are all results of the One who alone can be trusted unconditionally” (26). The same kind of statements hold for Jeremiah’s passage in which he describes the recurrence of proof of God’s generosity, as well as the parallel drawn by him “between Yahweh’s unflinching love and the eternal ordinances by which Yahweh set the course of stars and the tides of the sea” (27). God, Architect of the Universe, must also be called the Patron of Science.

FOCUS ON INDIA



Northern India: Sarnath, where Buddha first taught the Dharma.

As for the origin of Western monasticism, the debt with the Oriental Church is undeniable; it is “one among so many other things that came from the east”, claim the authors of *The Pelican History of Music. Ancient Forms to Polyphony*, concerning polyphonic music (28). Nonetheless, if we want to trace back the very idea of monasticism – “from Greek μοναχός, *monachos*, derived from μόνος, *monos*, ‘alone’, a way of life in which one

renounces worldly pursuits to devote oneself fully to spiritual work” (29) –, we need to travel further not only in space but also in time. We need to come to India and the time Siddhārtha Gautama (c. 2500 years ago), founder of Buddhism – from an anthropological point of view, “India’s most important contribution to civilization” (30).

India – evangelized from the south, namely Kerala, by Saint Thomas Apostle in the 1st century (31) – is a country that seems to be as old as time itself and “Few countries can claim of such a rich and complex history as India” (32). In fact,

Throughout the historic period there has been no other region of equal size occupied by as great a variety of races, languages, and cultures, and this situation continues even today. Tribes of genuinely primitive hunters and food-gatherers are to be found within two or three hundred miles of great modern cities, and the largest steel mills in the world match their assembly lines against village artisans carrying on hereditary occupations by techniques which were old when Alexander of Macedon made his raid into the Punjab (33).

Etymology says that “Malayalis” are the “people from the mountains who live beyond the Western Gaths” (34), and in his preference for Kerala, Saint Thomas appears to have taken in both geographically and metaphorical sense the recommendation of his colleague Saint Paul: “set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (35). Saint Thomas chose you Malayis (since many centuries speakers of this language called Malayalam, which I unfortunately failed to learn) maybe because he considered that, within this whole constellation of different peoples and cultures called “India”, you were the nearest to God in those both senses.

Undeniable sources claim that the Mauryan king Ashoka (304-232 B. C.), after becoming himself a Buddhist (c. 250 B. C.), spared no efforts to expand Buddhism within the Mauryan Empire and worldwide – and that included the Hellenistic Kingdoms of Central Asia and the Middle East, notably the region of Syria and Israel, in which Christianity was destined to thrive soon after the Crucifixion of Jesus. It is not surprising that Ashoka, who cared a lot for the disabled and the weakest in general, became known as the “Constantine of Buddhism” (36). Did Ashoka’s monks pave the way for Jesus’ disciples and apostles, regarding the good acceptance of His message? Who are we to know which are the plans of God? A genius and a giant of Christianity like John Chrysostom (c. 349-407), honored as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches (as in some others as well), and author of some of the most beautiful ever written sermons (Augustin in Africa, Vieira in Brazil, Bossuet in France and Fulton Sheen in the USA are among the few that can equate him), has spent a whole year of his highly fruitful life insisting on the incomprehensibility of God. As Chrysostom himself asserts,

I, too, know many things but I do not know how to explain them. I know that God is everywhere and I know that He is everywhere in His whole being. But I do not know how He is everywhere. I know that He is eternal and has no beginning. But I do not know how. My reason fails to grasp how it is possible for an essence to exist when that essence had received Its existence neither from Itself nor from another. I know that He begot the Son. But I do not know how. I know that the Spirit is from Him. But I do not know how the Spirit is from Him (37).

Still, many other issues remain opened, such as the possibility of Buddhist influence in some Christian practices, such as asceticism, monastic life, worship of relics and the use of the Rosary (38).

Similarities in terms of mentality between Christianity and Buddhism are many; among them, the principle according to which the weakest must be helped by the strongest (39). This is precisely the “law of the jungle” the other way around; as we know,

The Law of the Jungle” is an expression that means “every man for himself,” “anything goes,” “survival of the strongest,” “survival of the fittest,” “kill or be killed,” “dog eat dog” and “eat or be eaten.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines the Law of the Jungle as “the code of survival in jungle life, now usually with reference to the superiority of brute force or self-interest in the struggle for survival.” It is also known as jungle law or frontier justice. The phrase was used in a poem by Rudyard Kipling to describe the obligations and

behavior of a wolf in a pack. However, this use of the term has been overtaken in popularity by the other interpretations above (40).

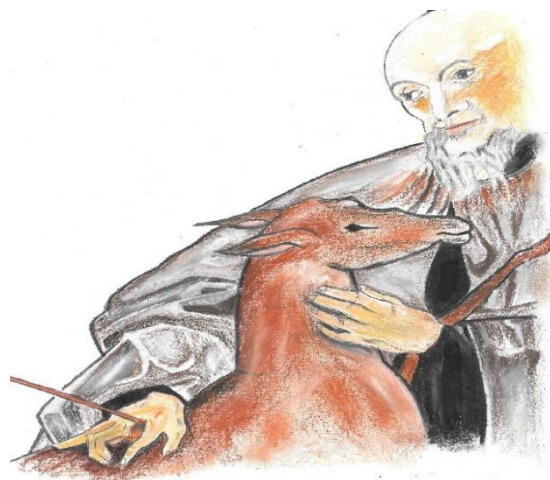
In practice, this is the same law adopted by quite a lot of famous personalities, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (father of the French Revolution, never forgetting that “revolutions are always easier to admire from across the border” [41]), Friedrich Nietzsche and Peter Singer – let alone Adolf Hitler and Nazis in general, as well as more than one societies as a whole, such as that of the Indonesians, where shackling mental disabled people has become a common practice (42).

As for King Ashoka, he was not alone in his defense of the disabled and disadvantaged groups in general. In India, a country where disabled people nowadays has been estimated at around 65 million,

The public concern for vocational-rehabilitation of the disabled was articulated more forcefully and pragmatically in the doctrines of Buddhism and Jainism. From this perspective, the “Golden Age of the Mauryas”, especially during the reign of Chandragupta [who ruled from c. 324 until 297 D. C.], stands unique during this phase of Indian history. Plethora of workshops were set up during his reign for the vocational rehabilitation of the disabled and other under privileged strata of society (43).

Ashoka was the predecessor of modern defenders of Indian disabled, such as the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) – according to whom “Caring for the disabled is a religion, serving them is like serving God” (44) –, the Albanian Saint Mother Therese of Calcutta (1910-1997) (45) and the Keralan Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), let alone Saint Alphonsa from Arpookara (1910-1946), “the first woman of Indian origin to be canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church, and the first canonized saint of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, an Eastern Catholic Church of the Saint Thomas Christian community”, who was herself disabled and was endowed with the miraculous power of curing certain kinds of disability: “Hundreds of miraculous cures are claimed for her intervention, many of them involving straightening of clubbed feet, possibly because of her having lived with deformed feet herself” (46). As for Saint Chavara, it must be said that

Apart from education and the spread of literacy, Fr Chavara also firmly believed that the health and strength of the society depended not only on the growth of the people but also on the caring for the weak, disabled, sick and the aged. With this objective in mind, he started the first charitable institution in Kerala at Kainakari in 1869 (47).



Saint Giles, one of the patrons of the disabled

DISABILITY IS A CHALLENGE


New Delhi Metro: Assistive Technology in action

Plenty of disabled people are victorious due to their own efforts, whereas others are losers due their self-victimization; disability must be accepted as a challenge – not only in the secondary meaning of “a questioning of truth or value”, but much more in the original meaning of “something which requires great effort and determination” from the one who is challenged (48). This is an irrefutable truth in the field of Disability Studies as well in that of Assistive Technology, therefore valid in Brazil (the country I live), as well as in India, the country of yours.

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João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira is professor and researcher in Disability Studies, and works at the Center of Reference in Assistive Technology of the Tércio Pacitti Institute of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (CRTA-NCE/UFRJ), Brazil. He is the author of books and articles on Disability Studies, History of Culture, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art.

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3. Robert Spencer. *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, New York, Regnery, 2005, p. 167.
4. Mark Kurlansky. *The Basque History of the World*, London, Vintage Books, 2000, p. 78.
5. *Historiarum*, III, 4, 13.
6. Robert Spencer. *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, op. cit., p. 167.
7. *Ibidem*.
8. See, in the *Qur'an*, Sura 9: 5, 29 et passim.
9. See, for instance, Bat Ye'Or. *Eurabia: l'axe euro-arabe*, Paris, Jean-Cyrille Godefroy, 2014, p. 168 et passim; Udo Uljkotte. *Mekka Deutschland. Die stille Islamisierung*, Rottenburg, Kopp Verlag, 2015, p.

- 41-43 et passim. Rabban Sawma's *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China* (available online at <http://www.aina.org/books/mokk/mokk.htm#72>) is a must-read book for those interested in „the whole story of the rise and glory of the Nestorians and the monstrous Islamic persecutions that destroyed Christianity in Central Asia” (Robert Spencer. *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, op. cit., p. 160). Members of the Assyrian diaspora are scattered around the world, looking for safety. A similar terrible situation has been faced by the Christian Copts and several other branches of Christianity. According to the specialist Raymond Ibrahim, in our current world, “a Christian is killed for his faith every five minutes” (*Crucified Again. Exposing Islam's New War on Christians*, New York/Washington, Gatestone Institute/Regnery, 2013, p. 7; see also <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/8-things-didnt-know-assyrian-christians/>).
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 20. *Ibidem*.
 21. *Ibidem*.
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 23. “Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 165 Catholic relief, development and social service organizations operating in over 200 countries and territories worldwide. Collectively and individually their claimed mission is to work to build a better world, especially for the poor and oppressed. The first Caritas organization was established by Lorenz Werthmann on 9 November 1897 in Germany. Other national Caritas organizations were soon formed in Switzerland (1901) and the United States (Catholic Charities, 1910)” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caritas_International#History).
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 27. Jer. 5: 24; 31: 35.
 28. Peter Crossley-Holland, Alec Robertson et alii. *The Pelican History of Music. Ancient Forms to Polyphony*, London, Penguin Books, 1966, v. I, p. 211.
 29. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monasticism>.
 30. Ralph Linton. *The Tree of Culture*, op. cit., p. 499.
 31. “Thomas is traditionally believed to have sailed to India in AD 52 to spread the Christian faith, and is believed to have landed at the port of Muziris, Tamilakam (modern-day North Paravur and Kodungallo or in modern-day Kerala state) where there was a Jewish community at the time” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle#Mission_in_India).
 32. Priya E. Pinto, M.S., M.S.W. and Nupur Sahur. *Working with People with Disabilities: An Indian Perspective* (in <http://cirrie.buffalo.edu/culture/monographs/india/#si1>).
 33. Ralph Linton. *The Tree of Culture*, op. cit., p. 467. “Long before Vasco da Gama led the Portuguese to India, its coast had been known to the Phoenicians, who came in search of spices, sandalwood and ivory. Kerala was not only a spice center in its own right, but also a trans-shipment point from the Moluccas. The Arabs and Chinese also made their mark on Kerala, and local fishermen use Chinese fishing nets to this day” (Geoff Crowther et alii. *India, Victoria [Australia]*, Lonely Planet, 1993, p. 780).

34. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayali>.
35. Col 3: 1
36. Henri Arvon. *Le bouddhisme*, Paris, P.U.F., 1951, p. 84.
37. Sermon I, 19.
38. See, for instance, Will Durant. *História da civilização. A Idade da Fé* (translated by Leônidas Gontijo de Carvalho et alii), 2^a ed., São Paulo, Companhia Editora Nacional, 1957, part 4, v. I, p. 83.
39. See María de los Ángeles Soler. *Seminario de Iniciación a la Tiflología. Curso por correspondencia del Servicio Español de la Ceguera como Carencia*, Madrid, ONCE, S/D, p. 26.
40. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_the_jungle.
41. Mark Kurlansky. *The Basque History of the World*, op. cit., p. 135.
42. See <http://www.aphorismen.de/zitat/15202>.; <http://www.insideindonesia.org/disability-data-and-the-development-agenda-in-indonesia-2>. Not by coincidence, Hitler and Nazis in general are idolized by Muslims in Indonesia (the most populous Muslim country, with approximately 260 million inhabitants, from which 37 million are disabled) and in the Islamic world as a whole (see <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/10/17/love-hitler-leads-nazi-revival-indonesia-276049.html>).
43. G. N. Karna. *United Nations and Rights of Disabled People. A Study in Indian Perspective*, New Delhi, Society for Disability and Rehabilitation Studies (SRDS)/A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 1999, p. 30; see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disability_in_India. With circa 1.25 billion inhabitants, India has the second highest population in the world; and is also second rank in terms of disabled people; first in both categories is China, where numbers between 75 and 85 million disable people are mentioned, among a total population of c. 1.350 billion (see <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats8.htm>).
44. Apud Armoogum Parsuramen. *Handbook of Right for Person With Disability in Mauritius: Bringing out the Ability in (dis)Ability*, Port Louis, Global Rainbow Foundation, n.d., p. 1.
45. For the Sisters of Mother Theresa, who run a center for physically and mentally disabled children in Mumbai, “The disabled are not “vegetables”, but people with “special needs” and a “blessing” for a world that imposes models based on “productivity” (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/For-Sisters-of-Mother-Teresa,-disabled-not-%E2%80%9Cvegetables%E2%80%9D-but-%E2%80%9Cwealth%E2%80%9D-for-humanity-14440.html>).
46. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Alphonsa. Far from being the only saint patron of the disabled, Saint Alphonsa is one among many others. Saint Giles (650-710), for instance, lived as a hermit in medieval France. Vegetarian, he had a deer as his sole companion. One day, an arrow shot by hunters at the deer wounded the saint instead, who afterwards became a patron of cripples (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Giles).
47. „Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Educacionist, Social Reformer”, in <http://indiancatholiconline.com/Info/SKC>.
48. Jane Bradbury et alii. *The Collins-Cobuild English Dictionary*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 260.