

THE BODY AT DEVOTION: A REVIEW OF
SARAH COAKLEY'S *RELIGION AND THE BODY*

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Sarah Coakley, ed. *Religion and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

THE BODY HAS BEEN AT THE CORE OF THE STUDY of religion since its inception. While many old bromides about religion and the body have lapsed over time, the enduring fascination with corporeality has continued to prop up others. One example, still invoked even by scholars who should know better, is the alleged dichotomy between Catholicism and Protestantism: Catholicism, it would seem, is an embodied tradition, while Protestantism is decidedly not. Catholics have liturgy, a wealth of corporeal devotional practices, and the doctrine of the “real presence” in the Eucharist; while traditional Protestants, at least of the Reformed and evangelical variety, supposedly detest ritual and worship austere in spaces devoid of sensualism. Catholics drink alcohol and celebrate food in abundance; Protestants—ever neo-Puritans—snarl at the excesses of the flesh. Other shopworn clichés invoked with greater or lesser frequency pertain to Judaism (whose bodily practices include ritual circumcision, purification rituals

such as *mikvah*, and kosher dietary laws), Islam (which demands fasting, daily prostrations, and various cleansing rituals), Native American traditions (in which bodies supposedly lie close to nature while also enjoying intense out-of-body experiences), Buddhism (advocating bodily transcendence), and Hinduism (whose veneration of sexuality scandalized early critics).

The essays in *Religion and the Body* provide, among other things, a sophisticated overhaul of persistent clichés and a set of markers pointing to more fertile analytic models. This is a collection that rigorously adheres to historical particularity while quietly aiming, with admirable caution, at comparisons among traditions. To readers familiar with postcolonial criticism, the tripartite division may first read as disappointingly conventional: Part I, “Contemporary Western Perspectives,” analyzes contemporary Western obsessions with the body; Part II, “The Western Religious Inheritance,” explores the Jewish and Christian traditions on the body; and Part III, “Beyond the West,” turns to “Eastern religious traditions” and the body. What could be more Eurocentric, more “us versus the exotic other,” than this paradigm? Yet, as the collection’s editor, Sarah Coakley, notes in her introduction,

It is precisely the further intent of this book to throw these demarcations into question—to raise implicit questions about the spiritual and philosophical impoverishment of our current “body” obsessions, and yet also about the superficiality of consumerist “magpie” raids on Eastern religious bodily practice. (2)

Indeed, while delivering a set of topics that in less adept hands could easily fold in caricature—the carnivalesque Catholic, the dour Puritan, the stern Buddhist monk, the anxious postmodern gym rat—these mostly British authors are wonderfully prepared to forsake the usual pottage in favor of patterns that highlight historical and geographic distinctiveness, as well as continuity, and enable observers to analyze religion, culture, and society from some surprisingly underexplored angles.

As modern social institutions have become progressively divested of explicit Christian content, bodily preoccupations have risen to the fore,

infiltrating individual consciousness as well as penetrating and immeasurably transforming the activities of everyday life. The ritualization of these fixations is evident in such popular forms as athletics; proliferating dietary regimens; increasingly systematized exercise routines; obsessive worry about the health consequences of practices such as smoking; and the dramatic rise of plastic surgery, bodybuilding, and various sex therapies (pharmacological and psychological, as well as surgical). Their more acute expression resides in such pathologies as bulimia and anorexia nervosa, as well as the deep anxieties about physical health and extension of life that seem to have multiplied in our time. All of these varied yet interrelated practices hint, whether explicitly or subtly, at the religious pursuits of earlier eras, and even avowedly secular persons often speak in terms of transgression and atonement to describe their effects. Coakley is highly attuned to this context, which many well-meaning authors have attempted (none too successfully) to historicize. This collection offers the most comprehensive and original exploration of this problematic to date, juxtaposing—for an audience presumed largely to be Western scholars—the familiar with the unfamiliar: the Western traditions closest to our own historical formations set in bold relief by the diverse religious traditions whose historical practices and attitudes toward the body contrast sharply with those in the West.

Originating in a conference at Lancaster University, the essays are generally uniform and complementary, suggesting a dedicated editorial hand from Coakley. All except one (Annemarie Schimmel's piece on eros in Sufi literature) were written explicitly for this collection. The introduction by Coakley, who is the Mallinckrodt Professor of Divinity at Harvard University's Divinity School, provides a superb orientation, in broad contours, to questions about current scholarly fixations with the body. A pressing issue in a postmodern age, when the Enlightenment "mind" has seemingly shuffled off into obscurity, writes Coakley, is the problem of how to understand exactly what the body is and what forces are controlling it:

Devoid now of religious meaning or of the capacity for any fluidity into the divine, shorn of any expectation of new life beyond the grave, it has shrunk to the limits of individ-

ual fleshliness; hence our only hope seems to reside in keeping it alive, youthful, consuming, sexually active, and jogging on (literally), for as long as possible. (3-4)

The many notions of “body” that float about in academic, as well as popular, culture are ideologically freighted and profoundly ambivalent about what forms of embodiment, or embodied community, may best succeed those of the past. Striving for a more subtle reading of religious attitudes and practices relating to the body will aid us, Coakley indicates, in thinking through the current quest for a “point of reference that will give mortal flesh final significance” (7). Though the contention is more implicit than explicit in her essay, the position is persuasively advanced that serious questions about the body—its care, its uses in relationships, its role in human selfhood—are, whatever else they are, profoundly religious in nature.

Sociologist Bryan S. Turner’s broad essay theorizing historical developments in Western forms of embodiment offers a fruitful schematization of the Western emphasis on moral virtue and self-mastery and the impact of these values—particularly the “modern ethic of control”—upon religious and cultural attitudes toward the body. Contemporary Western societies exhibit what British sociologists Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, in *Re-Forming the Body*, have expressively described as a “baroque modern” form of embodiment: a form that combines the orientation toward discipline and rationality typical of Enlightenment Protestantism with a resurgent sensuality more closely associated with postmodernism. In Turner’s own highly influential contribution to this diagnostic model, bodies now are differentiated from their predecessors by an ascetic severity that subjects the body to cognitive control amid a chaotic world, one characterized by a plethora of technologized body options; a consumer culture furnishing a high degree of pluralization, contradiction, and fragmentation; and, in general, a situation of unprecedented anxiety about physicality. While his essay for this collection provides more summary than analysis of “religion” in postmodernism—readers in search of Turner’s richer analytic pieces may begin with his superb *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*—it lays vital groundwork for framing the relationships among religion and the body in the modern West.

Two other foundational essays follow Turner's historical sociology of the body: anthropologist Talal Asad offers a kind of typology of the body or, more precisely, a catalogue of anthropological uses of categories pertaining to the body; while philosopher Mary Midgley ponders the trajectory of modern thought about the relationship between mind and body. Both are richly informed, analytically sensitive introductions to past and present disputes in academic circles about the usefulness of the body as a conceptual category for exploring such subjects as power relations, social representations and cultural symbols, gender ideals, and even the winding trails of intellectual history. Asad draws upon Marcel Mauss's early formulations of the concept of *habitus* (not to be confused with Bourdieu's later, and different, use of the term) as providing a method for inquiring more deeply into the capacity for having religious experiences, a learned capacity that is (whatever else it may be) a product of bodily training and discipline. Midgley, by contrast, traces the lineage of the "cult of the cerebral," arguing that even recent philosophers who have sought to undo the reign of Enlightenment rationalism have grappled more with the mind than the flesh; "philosophy of body" remains an unknown entity. These essays open up fascinating questions that persist within the domains of anthropology and philosophy and that are, of course, broadly applicable to other fields of inquiry as well.

The substantive essays in this collection treat the following themes, in order of appearance: the body in Jewish worship (Louis Jacobs), the body in Greek Christianity (Kallistos Ware), the body in Western Catholic Christianity (Andrew Louth), the body as viewed by early Protestant Reformed theologians (David Tripp), Zoroastrianism (Alan Williams), Hinduism (Wendy Doniger), Theravada Buddhism (Steven Collins), Mahayana Buddhism (Paul Williams), Taoism (Michael Saso), Shinto and Japanese Buddhism (Michael Pye), Sufism (Annemarie Schimmel), and Sikhism (Eleanor Nesbitt). Specialists in each area may find this or that treatment too general, but the overview approach taken by most of the authors is quite edifying for interlopers. To be certain, a few writers depart from this approach, highlighting the methodological or theoretical stakes of their investigation: Doniger's piece on medical and mythical constructions of the Hindu body, for instance, is particularly adept at evoking the intellectual tension between the human

body's apparent universality and its constructed, symbolic nature in individual cultures. Those essays that stick more closely to analysis of texts, precepts, postures, gestures, or prohibitions in specific traditions are, nonetheless, broadly informed by similar inquiries such as the constitution of purity, varied means of discipline and punishment, and the treatment of birth and death.

Although reviewers of essay collections customarily note that the pieces vary in quality, these compositions are of consistently high quality. Artful and erudite in tracing out complex themes, they work well as classroom texts in introductory as well as advanced courses (I've used different pieces in both). Bibliographies, many characterized by impressive thoroughness, follow each essay, and the footnotes are instructive without being burdensome or pedantic. The only structural flaw that may garner quibbles across the board is the lack of a concluding essay at the volume's close, an absence which perhaps indicates how gingerly the scholarly world now treats the possibility of concluding remarks, however guarded. Coakley, a meticulously prudent scholar, would likely never presume to give final word to this subject in untimely fashion, and rightly so; still, readers in search of bold suggestions for future lines of inquiry may be frustrated by the silence that follows the particular case studies. This abrupt finish is shared by the other collection to which Coakley's is most easily compared, Jane Marie Law's more uneven yet also mesmerizing edited collection, *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*.

Readers will have their own bones to pick with the individual essays vetted by Coakley. There are broader ranging works in many of these subfields, from Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's marvelous collection, *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, to Yasuo Yuasa's *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, to Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, among others, many of which are mentioned by the authors in this collection or included in their bibliographies. In every way, the book is cautious not to make large claims that it cannot fulfill, and it is unabashedly limited in scope. Perhaps the book's worthiest contribution is the contention reappearing throughout the collection that religious traditions, rituals, practices, and beliefs represent a wealth of material for rethinking the body across space and

time, opening the barriers of geography and generation to new possibilities, including comparative ones now so out of fashion. Religions do not merely reform the beliefs and practices of the cultures in which they arise and survive; far more, they represent actual re-formations, even upheavals, of embodiment. While simple, this assertion has never been so well argued, nor given such thoroughgoing documentary support, as here. By taking care to qualify their own historical assertions about forms of religious embodiment—making no claims for the universality, totality, or implacability of these forms—the chiaroscuro depictions that emerge from these essays are persuasive beyond their sometimes bland titles. The rich world of embodied religion—Protestant and Buddhist no less than Catholic or Hindu—is surely ripe for further exploration.

One might ask, nonetheless, about the comparative stakes in volumes such as this one. That specific traditions can be fruitfully investigated through the lens of the body will surely receive no argument from scholars whose absorption with embodiment is ongoing. Still, the analytic limitations and hazards of a comparative approach that reifies particular sets of beliefs and practices as “religions” demand further commentary. Ironically, while at the time Coakley put the collection together there was a perceived need to explain and defend the category of *body*, the far more vulnerable category today is *religion* itself. From Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald to Robert Orsi and Kathleen Sands, growing numbers of scholars are critically dissecting this problematic paradigm, some vilifying and even aiming to eradicate “religion” as altogether devoid of content. It is worth noting, moreover, that the genealogy of this dissection, built largely on the work of post-colonial and feminist scholars as well as partisans of particular faiths, is profoundly intertwined with the turn to the body. Paradoxically, then, just as the turn to the body as a conceptual category has led to scrutiny of all other categories of analysis, not least the fundamental disciplinary specializations that define postmodern academia, the subject of “religion and the body” as a comparative project may seem outmoded even in its infancy. Under these circumstances, Coakley might have been wise to defend not the “body” but the “religion” in her title.

Like every other piece of academic writing to emerge on the body in recent years, *Religion and the Body* is a fragment, not a whole. As a trace that enriches our understanding of the body at devotion in disparate traditions and cultures, it performs a vital service by bringing together a highly diverse, ever charged assortment of bodily fixations, rituals, and denials. It is an outstanding presentation of an ever-increasing field of inquiry while standing as a reminder of the subject's boundless and as yet unreached prospects.

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