

Theology and the Body

edited by

Stephen Garner

Theology and the Body

Reflections on Being Flesh
and Blood

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Table of Contents

Editorial	vii
A Theology of the Body: Pope John Paul II's Catechetical Lectures <i>Adam G Cooper</i>	1
Blood, Tears and Race: Moravian Missionaries and Indigenous Bodies in Colonial Australia <i>Joanna Cruickshank</i>	15
Image-bearing cyborgs? <i>Stephen Garner</i>	33
Torn between Body and Soul: the Evolved Body in Theological Perspective <i>Nicola Hoggard Creegan</i>	55
Young People, Technoculture and Embodied Spirituality <i>Craig Mitchell</i>	73
List of Contributors	97

Editorial

Stephen Garner

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Several years ago a chain of fitness clubs in New Zealand ran an advertising campaign challenging people to sign up and ‘be somebody’. The identification of body image with self worth is just one of many messages about the human body that we receive each day whether we’re aware of them or not, and the slogan plays on the notion that all human beings are ‘some body’ regardless of what fitness programme they might choose to participate in. Indeed, embodiment is the primary lens through which all human beings view and encounter the world around them. As such, theological reflection upon the subject of the human body intersects with all manner of things that fall within human beings’ lived experience.

The sheer breadth of this embodied engagement with life means that it is impossible to talk about a single theology of the body. One has only to look back through the history of the Christian tradition to find a plethora of competing interpretations related to the human body. Some theologies affirmed the human body as something good, while others took more negative views of the body seeing it as something to be marginalised or escaped from. Other theologies compete with different interpretations of the relationships between body and soul; body and mind; male and female; the eschatological destinies for the human body; race and culture; sexuality; marriage and family; birth and death; and how human beings bear the image and likeness of God. Significantly, theologies of the human

body intersect with Christological ruminations on the exact nature of Jesus Christ's humanity, seen particularly in contending conceptions of the incarnation, the resurrection and salvation.

These historical reflections have also carried on into contemporary theological discussions about sexuality, gender, commercialisation and objectification of the body within various forms of media and advertising, disability, cosmetic or aesthetic surgery, medical and biotechnological developments, scientific descriptions of the human being, the role of the social sciences, and the nature of mediated communication. The human body itself serves as both a metaphorical and literal canvas for the exploration of what it means to be human beings in relationship with each other, with the wider world, and with God. Feminist theological critiques have highlighted how portrayals of the human body, and of sexuality and gender are caught up in complicated, and often oppressive, hierarchies of power between male and female in a variety of contexts and communities. Similarly, liberation theologians have explored how dominant notions of the human body have shaped political and economic landscapes, while the voices of indigenous theologians point to the need to reclaim local framings of the human body lost in the impact of colonisation.

Adam Cooper's introduction to the late Pope John Paul II's reflections on a theology of the body provides a useful starting point for this collection of essays. These reflections comprise a five-year series of catechetical lectures that aimed to develop an 'evangelical, Christian pedagogy of the body'. Taking Scripture, rather than physiology and psychology, as its starting point it constructs a threefold framework of original 'solitude', original 'unity' and original 'nakedness' that can then be used to interpret themes and questions relating to things such as human physicality, sexuality, marriage, procreation and contraception. Cooper's essay shows how this framework relates the uniqueness of the embodied human being within the creation, the universality of all human beings being bearers of God's image within their diversity, and the vulnerability found in the encounter with others to insights into an Incarnation that points to the salvation and redemption of embodied human beings and also to wisdom to live as embodied human beings. Cooper rightly notes that this serves as an example of 'a' theology of the body, rather than 'the' definitive theology, and as such it stands in dialogue with other interpretations within Catholicism and outside of that tradition.

Moving from a discussion related to Scripture serving as the primary source for engaging with the body theologically, Nicola Hoggard Creegan approaches her reflection upon the evolved embodied human being from the perspective of a dialogue between science and theology. Introducing her topic with Reinhold Niebuhr's paradoxical ambivalence of a humanity that is continually wrestling with its finitude and capacity for self-transcendence, she argues that characteristics that people might consider transcendent, such as the soul, or intelligence, or rationality emerge within an evolutionary process. This process places embodied human beings in the natural world, where we are part of the animal kingdom, yet also possessing the capacity to speak of the spiritual. This ability to bridge two worlds allows human beings to explore the concepts of dominion in and over creation in a way that guides ethical insight into wise living. In particular, Hoggard Creegan stresses that human knowing is linked inevitably to other forms of knowing through the body which are shared by others within the animal kingdom, and that this then opens up the possibility for the biblical mandate to dominion being made a relationship of mutual dependency and appreciation. The Incarnation again makes an appearance in this essay, highlighting the love of God for the whole embodied world and being linked to ethical behaviour.

While the most obvious connections between theology and body are commonly seen in terms of incarnation, sexuality and gender, Craig Mitchell highlights the subjects of age and mediated communication as related topics for discussion. In particular, Mitchell picks up on the tension introduced by new technologies and media that challenge traditional perceptions of embodied spirituality in young people. He argues that young persons' innate desires for intimacy and self-transcendence are bound up in their daily use of technology, leading to spiritual yearnings and practices that become 'embodied' in personal media practices. This challenges religious and theological commentaries on the bodily wellbeing of young people because those, he insists, have traditionally been connected to perceptions of sexuality as the lens through which adolescent development is measured. The promises and perils offered by mediating technology mirrors some similar concerns about adolescent development through that lens, and may in fact subsume adolescent sexuality. He concludes with the challenge that:

If young people seek and find spiritual experiences through mediated self-transcendence, then it is critical that churches and their youth ministries investigate whether this requires a shift from the view that authenticity in relationships is limited to physical presence or real-time communication.

We noted earlier that one of the areas where theology and the body were being explored was in the recovery of local accounts of the human body in a post-colonial context by indigenous theologians. Parallel to this is the work offered here by Joanna Cruickshank, exploring historically the way in which perceptions of the human body amongst Moravian missionaries working in 19th century Australia shaped their form of Christian mission and also served as criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of that mission. She notes that across missionary communities the body served as marker of both conversion and the movement from 'savage' to civilised, capturing the notion that there is no 'gospel' free of culture. In her analysis of missionary-authored texts, Cruickshank examines how the theological heritage of Moravian missionaries from mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century interacted with reference to Aboriginal corporeality. In particular, the connections between the Moravian emphasis on the blood of Christ and sacrifice connected with the reverence for blood as sacred and powerful in many Aboriginal spiritual traditions provided avenues for dialogue and evangelism. Moreover, the way in which people comported themselves bodily after conversion served as a measure of the degree to which the Christian life had been embraced. Cruickshank highlights that this kind of approach was more complex than just looking to middle-class respectability, and that the Moravian missionary endeavour incorporated wide range of assumptions about human nature and progress. At times this meant significantly counter-cultural attitudes to the wider settler society in defending Aboriginal humanity, and at other times more narrow cultural perspectives that clashed with indigenous understandings of the body as a site of emotional expression.

Shifting from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, Stephen Garner argues that human technological agency generates anxieties concerning traditional concepts of the human body and the wider natural world. In particular, boundaries between organic and inorganic; human and machine; male and female are seen to shift and blur under

the pressure of technological development. In this world, the figure of the 'cyborg'—the 'cybernetic organism'—becomes an increasingly common metaphor used to describe bodies being colonised by technology. These tensions generate what might be called 'narratives of apprehension' about human technological proclivity: on one hand there is anxiety about the potential of technology to do harm or to dehumanise, while on the other there is a simultaneous awe at the kinds of things that technology might achieve in improving the human condition. In his essay, Garner looks at what resources might be found within the Christian tradition to engage with the figure of the 'cyborg', arguing that contemporary explorations of a functional understanding of the doctrine of the image of God and human beings as 'created co-creators' are helpful here. That theological perspective combined with a vision of the embodied human being interconnected and interdependent with the wider natural world, and coupled with notions of social justice and the call to somehow exercise dominion wisely and justly, can open avenues, he argues, for wise living as 'image-bearing cyborgs'.

Each of the essays in this collection picks up the theme of embodiment as the lens through which they look at issues of theology and body, highlighting a rich vein to be mined in this area. As noted earlier though, reflection on the human body and theology is connected with the lived experience of individuals and communities, and as such, represents a broad and diverse field of study. These essays provide an engaging window onto this field, recognising though that there many further conversations to be had around the theme of the body and theology.

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A Forum for Theology in the World

The human body is the primary lens through which we view, encounter and engage the world around us. It is no surprise then to find a wide range of theological reflection upon the human body, from those that affirm the human body as something very good, through to other more negative views where the body is something to be marginalised or escaped from. The body and theology also meet in conversations over body, mind and soul; gender; disability; eschatology; race and culture; sexuality; Christology; and medicine and technology to name but a few. Each of the authors in this volume pick up the theme of embodiment as the lens through which they look at an aspect of theology and body, providing an engaging window onto some of these discussions.

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