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READING II for Religious Life: A Deep down Impulse to Care and Make Creation Whole

Week One: Watering the Roots at the Wellspring of Mercy, June 2-7, 2013
Presenter: Marie Chin rsm (Americas)

(Excerpts from Sallie McFague's MODELS OF GOD, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987)

When I consider what I ... might offer to the planetary conversation, ... I return again and again to the puzzling importance of a common thread to my own journey. That common thread is the body and all its cognate forms and associations: embodiment, incarnation, flesh, matter, death, life, sex, temptation, nature, creation energy, and so .

Christianity is the religion of the incarnation *par excellence*. Its earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment from the incarnation (the Word made flesh) and Christology (Christ was fully human) to the eucharist (this is my body, this is my blood), the resurrection of the body, and the church (the body of Christ who is its head), Christianity has been a religion of the body....and yet, the earliest Christian texts and doctrines contain the seeds that, throughout history, have germinated into full-blown distrust of the body as well as deprecation of nature ...

The ambivalence and at times abhorrence that we see in christianity ... in regard to the body - in all its manifestations – indicates a deep sickness in our culture: self-hatred. To the extent we do not like bodies, we do not like ourselves. Whatever more or other we may be, we *are* bodies, made of the same stuff as all other life-forms on our planet, including our brains, which are on a chemical continuum with our physical bodies.... We *are* bodies, “body and soul.” One of the most important revelations from postmodern science is the continuum between matter and energy (or, more precisely, the unified matter/energy field); which overturns traditional hierarchical dualisms such as nonliving/living, flesh/spirit,nature/human being. Whatever we say about that part of ourselves we call brain, mind or spirit, it evolve from and is continuous with our bodies. If we like the part of ourselves we call “mind” or “spirit” then we ought to honor that part which is its base or root – the body – for they belong together. The body is not a discardable garment cloaking the real self or essence of a person (or a pine tree or a chimpanzee); rather, it is the shape or form of who we are. It is how each of us is recognized, responded to, loved, touched, and cared for – as well as oppressed, beaten, raped, mutilated, discarded, killed. The body is not a minor matter; it is the main attraction. It is what pulls us toward (and pushes us away from) each other; it is erotic in the most profound sense, for it is what attracts or repels. It is bedrock, and, therefore, we ought to pay attention to it before all else.



...Often we think of human bodies and, in descending order, the bodies of animals beginning with mammals. We seldom think of trees or plants as bodies, but as physical structures. They are also bodies, matter, what all things are made of. The body of the earth, teeming with variety, is but a tiny cell in the “body” of the universe, which includes all matter in all its forms over 15 billion years of evolutionary history. Body, then, is the model I suggest we investigate ... if what we need is a planetary rather than a parochial perspective since the model of body includes all life-forms, all matter on our planet as well as in the entire universe. While body usually refers to living forms of matter, one can extend it analogously to whatever occupies space and is perceptible to the sense. Thus we speak of the body of a mountain, heavenly bodies, or oceanic bodies. When cosmologists tell us that the atoms in our bodies were born in the supernova explosions of early stars, they are confirming the continuity of the material base of all that exists: body is a model that links us with everything in the most intimate way.

We must, however, remember that it, like all models, is only one partial and inadequate way to interpret reality. With that qualification in mind, we would nonetheless insist that the model of the body is a rich, provocative, illuminating one. Body is the closest bit of matter to us (it *is* us); it is important to us beyond all telling; it gives us the greatest pleasure as well as the greatest pain we experience; it knits us together with all life-forms in networks of shared suffering and joy. In other words, it may be both the most intimate and the most universal way to understand reality.

But let us press this model further – to radicalize it to its roots. If we and everything else that exists in the universe are matter, are body, then can we also speak of “the body of God”? In fact, must we not do so? What would it mean to extend the model to God, the creator and redeemer of the universe?

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WHAT IF WE DARED TO THINK OF OUR PLANET AND INDEED THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE AS THE BODY OF GOD?

At this point, we are only trying to free our western, spiritualized, body-hating minds to consider the possibility. Is it an impossible, abhorrent, or obscene thought? Should it be discarded out of hand? Or is it an interesting, inviting, provocative thought and one that has at least ambivalent credentials in Christianity? Could it not, because it is so central to us (what *are* we without our bodies?), be a way, a lens, a glass, by which we might see ourselves more clearly, see where we belong in the scheme of things, not as a spirit among bodies, but as a spirited body among other spirited bodies on our planet?

There is one obvious advantage to this model: it allows us to think of God as immanent in our world while retaining, indeed magnifying God’s transcendence...At once a powerful image of divine immanence, for everyone and everything becomes potentially a sacrament of God, it is also, though perhaps not as obviously, an image of divine transcendence. The usual ways of speaking of divine transcendence in the Christian tradition have either been by means of political models (God is king, lord, patriarch) or through negative abstractions (God is eternal, *not* temporal; infinite, *not* finite;

omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, *not* limited spatially, or in power or knowledge). Political models describe “domesticated transcendence,” for they are narrowly concerned with human beings and neglect not only all other life-forms but also the well-being of the planet as a whole and give no mention to the rest of the universe. Negative abstractions merely say what God is *not* (the *via negativa*) and are, as abstractions, far removed from the life and experience of believers.

On the other hand, the model of the universe as God’s body is ...a way to think about, reflect upon, divine transcendence – a way to deepen its significance to us. It is a form of meditation: the more we contemplate *any* aspect of our universe and especially our own planet, the more we know about it, delve into it, the more mysterious and wondrous it appears. The cosmos is the picture we turn to when we try to imagine what divine transcendence is.

Immanental transcendence or transcendent immanence is what the model of the universe as God’s body implies, and it is ... what Christian incarnationalism implies as well.

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Sallie McFague, *The Body of God*, p 13-21