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A Labyrinth of Incarnations: The Social Materiality of Bodies

The title of this essay comes from an article by the postcolonial theorist Edward Said. Commenting on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Said observed, “Society [...] is a true labyrinth of incarnations.” A labyrinth, he adds, “because of a complexity that has no discernible end or beginning, and an ‘incarnation’ because implicit gestural language and outward expression are inseparable, united as man himself is in an indissoluble bond between body and soul.”¹ Said was referring specifically to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s attention to the body’s constitutive belonging to the world. The body is in and of the world, Merleau-Ponty would say. Yet Said’s elegant formulation invites a deeper exploration of the complex relationship between “society” and “incarnation”, and between the theological and social dimensions of corporeality. How can we envision those labyrinths, those networks without beginning or end through which discourses, cultures, and practices become flesh?

I suggest that an exploration of social-material incarnations should characterize a new phase in theologies of the body. I trace the development of this insight in theologies of the body of the past three decades and end with some suggestions for future directions.

Bodies in Christianity

The body appeared in religious studies in the second half of the twentieth century. Defiantly. At least that is how we scholars of religion like to tell the story of the scholarly turn to the body. We know it is hardly the first time that Christian thinkers have been puzzled and challenged by corporeal phenomena. Miraculous feedings and healings, the power of relics, the transformations produced by ascetic practices, and many other such phenomena have been the subject of formative debates throughout Christian history. But here I refer to the body in the twenty-first century. In this context, we tend to associate the

¹ Edward W. Said, “Labyrinth of Incarnations: The Essays of Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” in: *The Kenyon Review* 29.1 (1967), 54-68, here 67.

body with eroticism and sexuality. The large and growing corpus of literature on Christianity and the body includes a substantial number of works on the role of Christianity in occluding, forbidding and/or inciting sexual desires.² Still, there are other stories that have also shaped present-day visions of the body – accounts of multitudes bearing wounds inflicted in the name of the people, the nation, and the economy. Images of human bodies all but destroyed by concentration camps, the atomic bomb, or hunger represent the shattering of myths of human progress. If these bodies reveal anything, it is the likelihood of corporeal destruction.

Recognition of human vulnerability led early liberation thinkers to the Christian body. They sought to bring attention to its material needs – basic necessities such as food, health, and protection against violence. For Latin American liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel, this orientation required an ethics grounded in corporeality.³ Thus Dussel turned to Hebrew Scriptures, Greek literature, and the New Testament in search of models for a corporeal anthropology that avoided the separation between body and soul.⁴ As long as the essence of human life was assumed to reside in an immaterial principle such as the soul, he argued, material necessities would be deemed secondary or derivative, merely supporting something more lasting and true.

It was clear that theologies concerned with poverty and violence could not ignore the body; neither could those confronting sexism. But these problems required different strategies. Liberationists argued that the bodies of the poor were mostly absent from modern theological discussions of salvation. Thus they sought to bring attention to the cries of the hungry. In contrast, the bodies of women were written into the texts that subordinated them. Discourses about gender and sexuality – like those about race – deployed the body as a foundation of knowledge and a source of unquestionable truth. In order to unsettle that logic, feminists tried to liberate themselves from the body-as-foundation

² For example, Carter Heyward considered “the erotic [...] our most fully embodied experience of the love of God” (Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* [Harper: San Francisco 1989], 99).

³ The philosophical responses to the atrocities of the Shoah deeply influenced the development of Latin American liberation thought, particularly through Dussel’s engagement with Emmanuel Levinas.

⁴ See Enrique Dussel, *El Humanismo semita: Estructuras intencionales radicales del pueblo de Israel y otros semitas* (Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires: Buenos Aires 1969); Enrique Dussel, *El Humanismo helénico* (Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires: Buenos Aires 1975).

– from biological essentialisms. If genders are culturally constructed, then we can transform them. But would that mean abandoning the body?

Clearly not. Part of the theoretical task has been to question the idea of “nature” and “body” as passive or immutable and to question the dualisms on which the opposition between materiality and transcendence rests. The body/spirit dualism was one of the main targets of these projects, which would reach the heart of Christian doctrine. For, as Rosemary Radford Ruether memorably argued, “the disembodied nature of the [...] divine [...] has served as a linchpin of the Western masculinist symbolic.”⁵ Feminist theologians have tracked biological essentialisms and spirit/matter dualisms, in all their versions, to deconstruct them. They have also sought to provide alternative visions of the relationship between divinity and materiality, such as the influential metaphor of the universe as the body of God. The works of Sallie McFague and Ivone Gebara are examples of this effort to overcome the image of a distant God that would not come close to the messiness of our lives and our bodies.⁶ Developing the images of intimacy between the divine and the cosmos, feminists have offered other models that assert the fundamental “relational” (instead of dualistic) structure of the cosmos.⁷

Reclaiming the value of bodies further entailed attending to elements of human experience that had been dismissed as irrelevant because too carnal for theological reflection. Sexuality has been the preferred site for such reappraisals of corporeal experience, yet recent theologies of food, dance, and the like have had similar aims.⁸ These theologies imagine the body as created and embraced by the divine, its pains and desires inseparable from its spiritual longings. A vision of divinity as close and intimate is the basis for insisting that theology take seriously not just the body in general, but also the specific experiences of feeling hungry, relishing the sun, tasting food, enjoying sexuality.

Yet this path now presents us with new challenges. Some of these challenges have to do with the limits of the ways we have sought to theologize the

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon Press: Boston 1983), 269.

⁶ See Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1993); Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1999).

⁷ See, for example, Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (Routledge: London 2008).

⁸ See, for example, Angel F. Méndez-Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford 2009); Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2011).

body. Others emerge from broader cultural changes in understandings and experiences of corporality.

Approaches in Theologies of the Body

The goal of the feminist theologies that I mentioned before could be described as liberating bodily experience and knowledge from forms of Christianity that suppress it. This is a common way of representing works about eroticism and sexuality, for instance; affirming forms of carnal desire is seen as inherently liberative. Who would complain? I won't. But I am interested in careful analyses of our visions of liberation and the role we give to theology in articulating those visions. For instance, I worry that speaking about Christianity as simply repressing sexuality or the body may lead to construing secular views of corporeality as *de facto* liberative. Therefore we need to take a critical look not only at *negative* views of the body in Christian theology, but also at *celebratory* views of the body in secular culture – especially those that present themselves as liberative.

Mark Jordan's work on Michel Foucault analyzes the complex relationship between Christian and secular views of sexuality and it turns a critical eye toward theology. Foucault noted that we tell ourselves that we talk of sex because we have overcome previous repressions. But we shall be suspicious of this narrative. Power does not always repress speech; it often demands or incites it. The story of a previous repression conveniently makes "the mere fact that one is speaking about it" appear as "a deliberate transgression."⁹ For Foucault, this self-serving narrative is not a clear break from theology, but rather its adaptation. Foucault argues, with irony, "[w]hat sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures."¹⁰ That is, we enjoy describing pleasure as enlightenment and liberation. Our discourses bring together "the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights."¹¹ Sex-talk is thus couched as liberation and takes the place of redemption – as a garden of delights. Commenting on these and other passages, Jordan observes that here Foucault

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon: New York 1978), vol. 1: *An Introduction*, 6.

¹⁰ Foucault, *An Introduction*, 7.

¹¹ Foucault, *An Introduction*, 7.

alludes to the “religious images or concepts that might survive into secular speech about sex.”¹² But Foucault is much more interested “in the continuity of the energies of religious rhetoric. The idea that speech about sex tells its truth in order to overturn unjust oppression and open a new future is not just a prophetic idea, it reactivates the rhetoric of prophecy,” Jordan writes.¹³

Perhaps theologians would not be troubled by the suggestion that “sexuality” bears the marks of Christianity. But even where Christian influence is not considered as a contamination to be avoided, the continuity of discourses about sexuality with the religious prophetic ideas should at least problematize narratives that portray talk of sex as a sign of liberation. To what extent is the very category of sexuality part of a modern project that approaches bodies as objects from which we are to extract information: male or female, white or colored, heterosexual or homosexual, and so on? The logic that undergirds such an approach to corporeality is not disrupted by multiplying the categories of sexuality – layered with gender and racial labels – and/or by treating such categories as positive attributes, Jordan argues. “What is needed is an epistemic shift [...] treating [bodies] as something other than objects of [...] knowledge.”¹⁴ The challenge is to think differently about corporeality itself.

The need for caution regarding cultural presuppositions about the body and liberation extends beyond categories of sexuality to include celebrations of bodily forms. We are now accustomed to the proliferation of body images around us – not only representations of bodies as objects of scientific knowledge, but also as objects of desire. These images are instrumental in teaching us what is regarded as a normal and therefore a desirable and desired body. Those are the bodies we cannot *not* want. Depictions of bodies that deviate from the norm are most often used to induce an urge to correct them, to eliminate divergences in others or in ourselves. And the more we believe in the perfectability of bodies, the narrower the standards for normalcy become. The representation of bodily splendor may appear to be the opposite of the devaluation of corporeality. But those glorified bodies merely displace the devaluation – to particular people and to specific elements of corporeality.

¹² Mark Jordan, “Sexuality and the After-life of Christianity,” in: Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, forthcoming).

¹³ Jordan, “Sexuality and the After-life of Christianity,” (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Mark Jordan, “Foucault’s Ironies and the Important Earnestness of Theory,” in: *Foucault Studies* 14 (2012), 7-19, here 17.

Theologian Sharon Betcher analyzes the problem of the idealization of bodies drawing from postcolonial and disability studies.¹⁵ She observes that the celebration of idealized, perfect bodies and the desire to be re-created in their image implies imagining bodies unaffected by transience, weakness, and vulnerability. These rejected aspects of human corporeality tend to be projected onto others – particularly people with disabilities – as if their bodies were the only vulnerable ones! Betcher further argues that feminist theology has not effectively challenged these patterns of corporeal idealization, thus failing to disrupt “disability abjection”.¹⁶

For Betcher the problem is “*the* body”. As a theoretical category “the body” fosters an illusion of completeness and wholeness easily naturalized, objectified, and normalized. “The body” evokes the unattainable stability that norms demand but that corporeality cannot mirror. Retrievals of “the body” can even exacerbate racialization and ableism, for instance. Betcher suggests, “Whereas ‘body’ can invite the hallucinatory delusion of wholeness, and thus the temptation to believe in agential mastery and control, flesh [...] admits our exposure, our vulnerability one to another, if also to bios.”¹⁷ I will return to the flesh at the end of the article. For now let’s take to heart Jordan’s and Betcher’s words of caution about the ambivalence of both “sexuality” and “the body”.

Postcolonial theory proves helpful in diagnosing ambivalence, and its analyses of the ideological weight of representations of bodies are crucial. We have become familiar, for example, with comparisons of the measurements of people’s skulls, the size of which were construed as evidence for the evolutionary progress of each race. Bodies were organized by “race” and each race was characterized according to its purported distance from the animal. Modern/colonial categorizations of bodies based on physical data were clearly an exercise of power. Postcolonial theory helped us understand that those images did not represent, but rather produced the idea of race, and that constructions of race relied on views about gender. The markers of a properly evolved race included abiding by the categories of gender and sexuality assumed as appropriate by the colonial system. Discourses about bodies naturalized and thus justified hierarchies of power, tying social categories such as

¹⁵ Cf. Sharon V. Betcher, “Becoming Flesh of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse,” in: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26.2 (2010), 107-118.

¹⁶ Betcher, “Becoming Flesh of My Flesh,” 107.

¹⁷ Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2007), 108.

gender, race, and class to visible bodily traits.¹⁸ The contribution of post-colonial theory to the study of corporeality lies in uncovering how discursive practices define and position people in society. Important as this project has been for understanding mechanisms of power, its focus on representation has come at the expense of engagements with other dimensions of corporeality.

Scholars are increasingly seeking approaches to corporeality that allow them to move beyond the focus on discourse to materiality – to elements of corporeality that are not reducible to signification. What concepts do we use to think about how ideologies become policies and practices that produce social-material environments, that become flesh? What theories might help us see, for example, how nationalist and racial ideologies motivate and shape the displacement of manufacturing processes or military bases to the global south, which produce occupational hazards and toxic environments, which in turn transform the bodies of those affected sometimes for two or three generations? Or how practices of racialization restrict access to economic resources, increase levels of stress, which in turn affect bodily processes and thus susceptibility to illnesses?

A turn to materiality would not mean abandoning attention to the social, but rather deepening our understanding of the reach of social relations. For even when the body is invoked to create and justify social hierarchies, social constructions do not remain immaterial. Constructions of gender, sexuality, and race shape social structures that shape environments and thus our bodies. Re-thinking corporeal materiality entails building on the insights of poststructuralist approaches, particularly about the constitutive relationship between corporeality and discourse. These analyses are grounded in the conviction that words do not mirror what is, or express the thoughts and desires of a person, but rather shape reality and subjectivity. Discursive practices incite passions, create and negate identities, entice our interest in theologizing the body. In this sense, poststructuralist approaches already consider words as intricately connected to the experiences of bodies. As Judith Butler has argued, even the claims that bodies exceed language must be understood as linguistic statements, as discursive.¹⁹ To assume otherwise would imply claiming an extra-cultural, universal,

¹⁸ Postcolonial theory also helps us analyze the formation of new race-gender identities through the notions of hybridity and mimicry, how the colonized are compelled to perform given identities with unexpected results. But those analyses of identities tend to focus on cultures and behaviors, not on bodies. Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge: London 1994).

¹⁹ See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Routledge: New York 1993).

absolute foundation for a particular view of reality, a type of argument that feminists have challenged in their efforts to de-naturalize gender assumptions. Scholars calling for a renewed attention to materiality – many of whom are feminist theorists – do not abandon these insights about the role of discourse. Yet they explore not only the efficacy of words to shape materiality, but also the productivity of materiality.²⁰

Cultural Changes

The recent scholarly interest in materiality as a dynamic element of our environment and our bodies is much more than the result of our having exhausted the prevalent methodologies. Rather, this interest responds to broader cultural changes prompted by developments in science and technology. New scientific notions of materiality are transforming theories in the humanities and beyond. Instead of passive matter characterized by inertia, on which humans act unilaterally, materiality is described in terms of forces and energies in complex networks of relations. Theories focus on *processes* of materialization – not just on a stuff called *matter*.²¹

We understand materiality differently. And we are experiencing new material phenomena as technological advances become part of our everyday engagements with the world. Even though biological essentialisms have not disappeared, we are believers in the transformability of the body, in the power of fitness regimes or meditation practices, drug enhancement or genetic modification. Organ transplants and stem cell experiments have captured the imagination of writers, producers, and philosophers who wrestle with the significance of such exchanges of bodily matter, where part of one body becomes part of another. But new technologies force us to think beyond the exchange between humans to include the participation of the non-human – animals, bacteria, and inorganic matter – in

²⁰ See, for instance, Diana Coole / Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press: Durham 2010); Stacy Alaimo / Susan Hekman (eds.), *Material Feminisms* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington 2008).

²¹ We see research focusing on how the everyday practices of raising children may lower testosterone in men, for instance; how meditation transforms a body to produce a relaxation response; how particular bodily positions increase testosterone levels. These examples focus on the influence of practices in bodily changes rather than the stability associated with genetic traits. This implies an understanding that material processes respond to human agency, but this does not imply that human agency can determine the results unilaterally. The complex transformations produced by global warming are a frightening reminder that humans cannot fully control the outcome of the material practices in which we engage.

the production and reproduction of corporeal matter. The boundaries between human and non-human flesh are porous and provisional.

So are the divisions between socio-economic and biological processes. The use of new reproductive technologies, the proliferation of genetic testing and treatments, the debates about cloning, etc. are all foregrounding not only the productivity and malleability of materiality, but also how the potentialities opened by these technologies are enmeshed in social and economic relations. Social factors influence what technologies are developed and who has access to them. Money, as much as biology and technology, influences who can reproduce or live longer. At the same time, technological practices and discourses reshape understandings of subjectivity and communal relations.²² The processes of material transformation and becoming are deeply, if ambiguously relational. The emerging vision is one where bodies are not simply *located* in society – as suggested by the common phrase “social location” – but *constituted* in relation to the world.

Theories of corporeality for the twenty-first century must be attentive to those changes in understandings and practices of materiality. As Judith Butler argues,

if we are to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a *new bodily ontology*, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence and desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging.²³

What can theology contribute to this task of developing a new bodily ontology to ground broader social and political claims about human flourishing?

Flesh

In my current research, I have turned toward Christian understandings of “flesh” to suggest new visions of our bodily materiality.²⁴ “Flesh” helps me

²² Nicolas Rose describes, for example, the impact of genetic testing on conceptions of communities. By changing the criteria for identity from collective histories and shared cultural practices to biological indicators, the bases for claiming to be part of a community are significantly transformed. Nicolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton University Press: Princeton 2007).

²³ Judith Butler, “On This Occasion...,” in: Roland Faber / Michael Halewood / Deena Lin (eds.), *Butler on Whitehead: On the Occasion* (Lexington Books: Lanham 2012), 3-18, here 12 (italics mine).

²⁴ See Mayra Rivera, “Unsettling Flesh,” in: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26.2 (2010), 119-123; Mayra Rivera, “Flesh of the World: Corporeality in Relation,” in: *Concilium* (2/2013), 51-60.

focus on the material elements of corporeality more consistently than the term “body” does. The difference between body and flesh reflects the terms’ distinct semantic histories and affective charges and is detectable even in the common usage of the terms. “Body” tends to denote an entity complete in itself, formed and visible to those around it, whereas “flesh” evokes the materiality of bodies. Of the two terms, it is “flesh” that carries the most ambiguous connotations: of lust, instinct, sinfulness, disease, and death. Tellingly, flesh is also feminized. It is no accident that the most material term is also the most devalued. It is our materiality we fear, even while we are enchanted by star-like bodies, by bodies without flesh.

This turn to flesh is consonant with Dussel’s argument, which I mentioned at the beginning, that a liberationist ethics should be grounded in a carnal anthropology. From his exploration of ancient sources, Dussel concluded that only a model based on the relationship between flesh and spirit – rather than body and soul – could lead to an integral anthropology and thus ground an ethics of liberation. Dussel wrote: “John said: ‘the word became flesh’. A Greek would have said: ‘the word took a body’ – which is radically different.”²⁵ I too return to John in search for Christian metaphors of carnal corporeality. Dussel’s goal was to keep spirit and flesh closely together by challenging the idea of an autonomous soul, which was only loosely connected to the body. My main purpose is to keep corporeality close to the materiality of the world.

Flesh helps me focus on materiality, but both flesh and materiality must be rethought. The materiality to which I am alluding is not something given and unchangeable, belonging to nature and protected from culture. Nor is it passive stuff neatly contained within the skin. It is an element connecting bodies to one another, connecting human bodies to the elements and the earth. As Rubem Alves says, “My flesh overflows and fertilizes the world; the world overflows and my body receives it.”²⁶ While experienced intimately, this flesh is not inherently turned into itself. It is exposed, constituted through relationships, materially weaving you in me and me in you.

These relational traits of carnality may ground theories of corporality that unsettle the desire to conform to objectifying standards for individual bodies.

²⁵ Dussel, *El Humanismo semita*, 28 (my translation). Dussel returns to this anthropological issue in more recent works, arguing that a critical ethics derived from the experience of victims would be based on a “carnal corporeality” and not on the soul (Enrique Dussel, *Ética de la liberación: En la edad de la Globalización y de la exclusión* [Trotta: Madrid 2002]).

²⁶ Rubem Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body* (Wipf & Stock: Eugene 1986), 8.

Instead they can foster more dynamic visions for the flourishing of diverse forms and capacities of human embodiment. That is why Betcher counsels scholars to “learn to think flesh without ‘the body’.”²⁷ A view of carnal corporeality would emphasize becoming, and the need for societies to provide the conditions to sustain the vitality of flesh.

Exposure to others is also a source of vulnerability – clearly biological, but also social. Indeed, the becoming of flesh is always already social. Our materiality is woven by the elements that surround us, but also of words. Words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies; gender norms “surface as [...] styles of flesh.”²⁸ Laws prohibit or authorize practices that infect bodies, produce illness and death. Literally.

At its best, a theology of the flesh would avoid separating vulnerability from the life-giving qualities of carnality. Christian flesh is both the clay of creation and the matter of incarnation. Neither rotten nor invulnerable, Christian flesh may ground theologies attuned to the human capacity to endure pain as part of life, as the very possibility of experiencing passion with other fleshly beings.

Society is a labyrinth of incarnations. Theologizing flesh requires wrestling with the changing social-material processes that constitute bodies and our discourses about them. We will need to be mindful of the term’s ambiguous history and be critical of the cultural ideals that inform our theologies and still strive to respond to the ethical challenges of our times.

Este ensayo hace un llamado a las teologías del cuerpo a examinar encarnaciones socio- materiales. Primero explora la contribución de las teologías de liberación y feministas en la “vuelta al cuerpo” en los estudios religiosos. En estas teologías, el cuerpo se convierte en el concepto central desde el cual analizan la desigualdad social, la vulnerabilidad humana, la relacionalidad, el dolor y el deseo. Este artículo presenta las limitaciones de representaciones simplistas del cristianismo como represivo y las visiones seculares como intrínsecamente liberadoras, señala la necesidad de pensar la corporeidad evitando tanto la reducción de los cuerpos a objetos como su idealización. Con este propósito es necesario moverse del énfasis teológico en el discurso hacia la materialidad. El pensamiento postcolonial analiza las construcciones sociales e ideológicas de los cuerpos, pero no sus procesos de materialización donde los factores biológicos, sociales y económicos se entrelazan. Repensar la carne y la materialidad como metáforas de desbordamiento, entretejido, y exposición

²⁷ Betcher, “Becoming Flesh of My Flesh,” 110.

²⁸ Judith Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” in: *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986), 35-49, here 48.

contribuyen a desarrollar visiones más abarcadoras de la relaciones que constituyen la vida.

This essay calls for theologies of the body to examine social-material incarnations. It explores the “turn to the body” in religious studies, beginning with the ways that it builds upon liberationist and feminist theological movements. The body becomes a site for thinking through social inequality, human vulnerability, relationality, pain, and desire. This paper argues that something is missed when Christianity is simplistically construed as sexually repressive, and non-religious views of the body as intrinsically liberative. The challenge, this essay argues, is to think corporeality in a mode that refuses both objectifying knowledge, and idealizations that deny vulnerability. For these purposes, it is necessary to shift theological emphasis from discourse to materiality. Postcolonial theory analyzes the social and ideological constructions of bodies, but not the processes of materialization where biological, social, and economic factors interlace. Flesh and materiality rethought in this way – as overflowing, interweaving, and exposed – deepen the accounts of the relationships that constitute life.

Dieser Beitrag fordert Körper-Theologien dazu auf, sozio-materielle Inkarnationen zu analysieren. Er untersucht die “Wende zum Körper” in den Religionswissenschaften, angefangen davon, wie sie auf befreiungstheologische und feministisch-theologische Bewegungen aufbaut. Der Körper wird der Ort des Nachdenkens über soziale Ungerechtigkeit, menschliche Verletzlichkeit, Beziehungshaftigkeit, Schmerz und Begehren. Dieser Beitrag argumentiert, dass etwas nicht wahrgenommen wird, wenn das Christentum vereinfacht als sexuell repressiv und nicht-religiöse Perspektiven auf den Körper als inhärent befreiend dargestellt werden. Die Herausforderung, so die These dieses Artikels, ist, Körperlichkeit so zu denken, dass sowohl objektivierendes Wissen als auch Idealisierungen, die Verletzlichkeit verleugnen, zurückgewiesen werden. Deshalb ist es notwendig, den theologischen Schwerpunkt von Diskurs zu Materialität zu verschieben. Postkoloniale Theorie analysiert die soziale und ideologische Konstruktion von Körpern, aber nicht die Prozesse von Materialisierung, in denen biologische, soziale und ökonomische Faktoren verknüpft sind. Wenn Fleisch und Materialität so neu gedacht werden – als überfließend, verknüpft und bloß gestellt –, vertieft das unser Verständnis von Beziehungen, die Leben begründen.

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