

SACRAMENTALITY OF THE BODY—SELECTED SESSION

Topic:	The <i>Really</i> Global in the <i>Really</i> Local: Ritualized Bodies in Comparative Theological Perspective
Convener:	Reid B. Locklin, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto
Moderator:	Jonathan Y. Tan, Australian Catholic University School of Theology
Presenters:	Bede Bidlack, Saint Anselm College Reid B. Locklin, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto
Respondent:	Tracy Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University

Bede Bidlack opened the session with his paper entitled “The Body in the Body of Christ.” Catholic sacramental theology, he noted, recognizes that God can communicate to humankind through the created order (e.g. events, people, Earth). What is often overlooked is the potential for the human body—that part of creation most intimate to everyone—for communicating divine grace. The Daoist Xiao Yingsou understands the body as an essential means of divine communication. For Xiao, the body not only summarizes the cosmos, but also forms a bridge to Heaven for petitioning the gods. Reading the theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., after his encounter with Daoist tradition, one can see a body analogous to that of Xiao’s in his work. While Teilhard lucidly argues for the “cosmos as body”—the Body of Christ—the comparison with the Daoist tradition reveals that each person is also a “body as cosmos.” As such, the body not only mediates sacramental experience, but can be itself a reflection of sacramental grace. In particular, people can experience the grace of existence through the concreteness of their bodies and in the relationship with other “bodyselves.” This sacramental view of the body, Bidlack concluded, challenges Catholics to be mindful of the gift of their bodily participation in the Body of Christ.

The second presenter, Reid Locklin, brought the teaching of the eighth-century Advaita teacher Ādi Śaṅkarācārya into dialogue with feminist sacramental theology in a paper entitled “Sacramental Scripts: Ritualized Dialogue and the (Dis)Placement of the Body in Hindu Non-Dualism.” No less than the contemporary feminist Susan Ross, Locklin suggested, Śaṅkara resists any notion of “generic” human embodiment. In several scripted dialogues of his *Thousand Teachings*, he portrays human embodiment as a cumulative, cosmic process of naming and delimitation, in which biological, ritual, and social factors converge to produce the individual, particular body of the Advaitin disciple. It is important to note that Śaṅkara denies the final reality of this body in favor of the disciple’s ultimate identity as the divine self of all beings. In these same scripts, he nevertheless affirms the revelatory character of embodied life, at least as this life is brought into ever clearer light by the progressive teaching of the Vedic Scriptures. In this vision, the sacramental character of the body rests exclusively upon its intrinsic capacity for liberating self-disclosure. Ambiguity is central to this mediating function, rendering the particular experiences of embodied life transparent to the immediate, self-revealing presence of the divine self. We are not, therefore, saved despite the complexity and ambiguity of embodied existence; we are saved *by* it.

In her response, Tracy Tiemeier observed that, despite offering very different ways of approaching ritual, embodiment, and creation, both presentations emphasize the material body as both relative reality and necessary means, continuous with and mediating Ultimate Reality. Both reclaim the body as site of (individual and cosmic) mediation and liberation, yet both also point to the complexities of understanding body as sacrament. This yes-and-no dynamic allows for a

“sacramental principle” that brings together individual, communal, and cosmic bodies with Ultimate Reality without reducing any one to the other. She noted, however, that the high-church ecclesial framework of Catholic sacraments and sacramentality may be both problem and possibility for a renewed Catholic sacramental theology after Xiao and Śaṅkara. She wondered whether there is any sense, in either tradition, of an authority by virtue of one’s office that might be in tension with the authority of practical expertise, knowledge, and liberation. How is this dealt with, particularly in relation to the notion of body as mediating “sacrament”? In the end, both Locklin and Bidlack universalize theologies and practices that arise out of theological reflection by and for a select few adepts. Nevertheless, there is great promise for a eucharistic theology that articulates the body as primary site of the divine-human communion and for a sacramental theology that emphasizes both the centrality and ambiguity of the body.

The subsequent discussion took up questions of elitism and communitarianism in sacramental theology, as well as the evolving views of Teilhard himself, across his lifetime, to the particular traditions discussed in the presentations. Several questions were posed about the status of non-human and/or non-conscious beings in these different traditions—do they, too, represent the cosmos in their bodies? Finally, the group considered several points of incomparability between these visions and core aspects of sacramentality in Catholic traditions, such as the hope of bodily resurrection and the eschatological transformation of history. While both of the traditions treated in this session offer nonreductive visions of human embodiment, inclusive of mind and senses, in one case and experiencing body and cosmic body in the other, both also concede that the material body as such is ultimately transcended.

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