

COSMIC BODY, RITUAL JUSTICE—SELECTED SESSION

Topic:	Cosmic Body, Ritual Justice
Convener:	Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University
Moderator:	Christian Krokus, University of Scranton
Presenters:	Bede Benjamin Bidlack, Saint Anselm College Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University
Respondent:	SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, University of Portland

Bede Bidlack's presentation, "Cosmic Body, Blessed Body," juxtaposes the *Huahu jing* (medieval account of the birth of Lord Lao, embodiment of the Dao) with the birth narrative of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Both texts make political and universal claims through their birth narratives; however, their different takes on salvation are instructive. For Christians, Christ's life, death, and resurrection heal the cosmic wound that separated humanity from God, but in the *Huahu jing*, Lord Lao saves from disharmony with the Dao. The Dao is never really separate from Earth, and its re-harmonizing (saving) activity through Lord Lao is ongoing. Thus, the Christian looking at Lord Lao's birth in the *Huahu jing* may be reminded that God's saving activity is ongoing in this world, and sacramentally present through people, events, and the cosmos here and now. Unlike the embodiment of the Dao as Lord Lao (who regularly comes to act from one dynasty to the next), Christ's embodiment means that we must actively be involved in God's divinizing work. Finally, Daoism reminds Christians of what they already know: people are "bodypersons." A Human-Earth dichotomy is an illusion.

In "Ritual Power in a Fluid Cosmos: Beyond the Binaries," Tracy Tiemeier focuses on the power of male-female and Human-Earth binaries, and explores how Tamil (South Indian) Jain understandings of women's ritual power can suggest new ways for Catholic theology to imagine gender and the cosmos. She compares the fifth century Tamil epic, the *Cilappatikaram*, and Catholic magisterial teachings on Mary and gender complementarity. Although both Catholic and Tamil Jain traditions assume binaries of gender and being, Tamil constructions refuse to universalize one discourse of women's virtue, situating bodily power in a cosmic context recognizing no real separation between past lives and present ones, karmic fate and personal choice, and plant, animal, human, and universe. In the end, the *Cilappatikaram* both affirms and subverts male-female and human-Earth binaries in order to highlight an embodied ritual power that operates on personal, social, and universal levels in the context of a diverse and fluid cosmos. This cosmic and ritual anthropology sees flourishing as something individual and yet radically interlinked with all life and reality.

In his response (read by Bienvenu Mayemba), SimonMary Ahiokhai points to Bidlack and Tiemeier's shared emphasis on embodiment. He affirms Bidlack's call for a more holistic soteriology and connects it to insights from liberation theology. In addressing Tiemeier's paper, Ahiokhai cites African indigenous religions for similarly holding together, body, gender, and cosmos. In particular, he explores women's leadership in Yoruba religion, Bini creation narratives, and Tiv women's practices. For Ahiokhai, the session's Daoist, Tamil, and African examples all highlight the sacred power of the body and the fluidity between human, society, Earth, cosmos, and the divine. Never isolated, but uniquely and ritually powerful, the body is the medium for social and cosmic justice.

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Discussion centered on how comparative theology could and should communicate beyond specialist circles. One comment stressed the need to be acutely attentive to audience. The session's presentations had originated with Michelle Voss Roberts' edited volume, *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection* (Fordham University Press, 2016), a project targeting non-specialist theology students. Participants asked how to accomplish something similar in the Catholic academy. Several questions probed the conclusions and viability of a comparative feminist theology that retrieved seemingly problematic texts with the double challenge of reading both as a feminist and as an outsider to the tradition. Tiemeier stressed the importance of attending to subtle nuances and the ways female characters subvert the expectations of the text's time. Bidlack noted how comparative analysis of gender yields productive (even if contradictory) insights; while Tiemeier's comparison played with gender as both reinforcing and subverting its significance, Bidlack's comparison highlighted the extent to which gender as well as other binaries are overcome.

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