

PROGRAM GROUPS

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

Topic: Theologies of the Body throughout the World:
Women Broken, Bleeding and Rising to New Life
Convener: Elaine Catherine MacMillan, University of San Diego
Moderator: Dawn Nothwehr, Chicago Theological Union
Presenter: Margaret Farley, Yale University
Respondents: Maria Cimperman, Oblate School of Theology
Gemma Tulud Cruz, Radboud University, Nijmegen

Margaret Farley offered her paper, entitled *Transcendent Embodiment*, as a contribution to the construction of “a more adequate theory of the unity of the body and the soul (or spirit) within the human person.” Because humans are embodied spirits and inspirited bodies, she argues, we are vulnerable beings and the most vulnerable in our world, especially women, have, throughout the ages, suffered “violence to their bodies and spirits.” Inadequate theories of embodiment have contributed to this violence and feminists, in their critiques of these theories, have sought “not only to enhance understanding of the human body but to correct the exclusionary results of past theories whereby some bodies have counted, and some have not.” Researchers from many disciplines and cultures are also critiquing these theories and, together with feminist scholars, are reshaping the discourse on the human body.

Farley's thesis in this paper is that even in experiences of apparent body-spirit disunity there is often a presumption of a body-spirit unity. Thus she spends the bulk of her paper “[searching] for clues of unity in our experiences of *disunity*—that is, experiences of lack of unity between body and spirit that appear to challenge the possibility of genuine spirit-embodiment.” She examines four such experiences: (a) pain and profound suffering; (b) objectification and domination; (c) aging, illness and dying; and (d) experiences of a ‘divided self’ in the moral sphere. Even in experiences of the greatest disunity such as these, where “bodies are destroyed, minds ravaged and spirits broken,” she argues, we, nonetheless, find a presupposition of a body-spirit unity.

Drawing upon the work of Elaine Scarry, Farley uses torture as one example of objectification and domination to illustrate her point. Torture, according to Scarry, is unsuccessful if the torturer does not gain the tortured person's spirit and body. This presumes that the one being tortured is an inspirited body/embodied spirit and hence presumes that there is a unity between the body and the spirit. This presumption of unity is found in other experiences of disunity as well. Farley observes, with respect to profound suffering, for example, “in the very threat to the whole self, on the brink of ultimate disunity, comes a glimpse of its unity in the very possibility of its destruction.”

Farley also examines experiences of body-spirit unity for similar clues. Here she mentions “those experiences of *unity* (of body and spirit)—those experiences where we understand more clearly that we are one in ourselves and one in relation

to each other.” She offers the following as an example. “[S]ometimes we do experience a kind of total unity of body and spirit, as when our skill in dancing and our immersion in music bring our whole self together in one glorious activity.” These explorations of human experiences of both disunity and unity are Farley’s contribution to “a way of self-understanding that yields a theory of transcendent embodiment.”

What would happen if we took seriously that we are embodied spirits and inspirited bodies asked Maria Cimperman as she began her response to Farley’s paper. What does being a people of the resurrection mean in all of this? Cimperman’s further questions and observations were framed against the backdrop of the HIV/AIDS pandemic as it is affecting women globally. Using HIV/AIDS statistics from a variety of sources, Cimperman demonstrated how threatened women’s bodies and spirits are throughout the world. In the face of this, how then do we actualize ourselves as embodied spirits/inspirited bodies, she asks. Global communities of hope are one avenue she suggests.

Gemma Tulud Cruz describes the origins of the body-spirit disunity that so many Asian women experience as the result of “state repression, militarism, religious and ethnic strife, and capitalism.” The bodies of Asian women are “economic globalization’s greatest capital,” she argues. Furthermore, “Asian women’s dehumanization [is] born out of disembodiment.” While affirming Farley’s project as a future direction for Asian women, Tulud Cruz suggests that this is really a second moment for Asian women. She contends that the first moment for Asian women is “the re-valuing of the body in a feminist theological reflection on the body that takes into account the Christian memory and women’s lived realities in a contextual way.”

A spirited discussion followed the presentation and responses.

The 2005 Ann O’Hara Graff Memorial Award was then presented to Gaile M. Pohlhaus of Villanova University, and a business meeting concluded the seminar.

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