



Christianity and the Human Body

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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Christianity and the Human Body

Abstract:

In planning this conference, we were quite specific in emphasizing “A” Theology of the Human Body. While there are various “theologies” available for study, the ITEST Board of Directors wanted to focus on the role of the human body in the plan of salvation, giving special attention to the growth of research in the bio-sciences. We know in faith that we shall rise physically, recognizably ourselves. We need a contemporary theology, as well as a true science to understand as many of the ramifications of our resurrection as possible. Always involved in any development on this level is the relationship between science and faith. But first we must do the critical work of understanding a Christian theology of the human body. The essays and discussion contained in this volume contribute to that understanding.

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Foreword:

What is the fleshly human body? What is the corporeal human body? What is the relationship between them? These and other questions were treated at a Workshop held at Mercy Center in Saint Louis county in October, 2000. Twenty-seven members of The Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology (ITEST) met to discuss *A Theology of the Human Body*. This was a rare meeting in that there was only a theological theme running through the meeting. However, the science and technology aspects of the topic were lying just beneath the surface.

The discussion, it must be admitted, ranged rather widely through many areas of theology – from a long discussion of Subordinationism through long arguments about the Fall and Original Sin and the body/soul distinction to the place of science, technology and philosophy. The result was not so much a discussion of “the” theology of the human body as hints at building such a theology. These suggestions include the necessary elements from which such a theology can (and maybe should) be constructed. In other words, the meeting reported in this volume gives bits and pieces of a theology, not a finished picture of that theology. It is preliminary, but necessary, to a fully evolved sense of the body in Christian thought and practice.

In dealing with a theology of the human body (or the human anything) some sense must be made of the Fall and Original Sin. This will highly color any statements about the human. For instance, can we say anything about the Fall without starting with the Incarnation and Resurrection/Ascension of Jesus the Christ and working our way backwards? Would we even know we were fallen without the Incarnation? Would we know our original

destination and our resurrected direction if Christ had not come? Or could it be revealed independently of the mission of the Christ? If so, how? The Genesis story was (and is) applicable here, but can it really be “understood” apart from the *posterity* promised in Genesis 3?

Pastor Steven Kuhl at one point raised an extremely interesting idea: the whole purpose of the Incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ is our re-embodiment. Is our salvation precisely our re-embodiment? Are they in reality co-terminus? Does one really mean (or at least imply) the other? Is Revelation itself directed to this end? For a long, long time the Church has proclaimed as doctrine that we shall rise, identifiably ourselves, to heaven or hell. I could not identify myself if I rose as a fourth century BC Asian woman. Will I not be raised as an American male of the 20th-21st century? Otherwise, how will I know myself?

We examined the body/soul distinction. One of the essayists suggested that the notion of “soul” needs a lot more work. Neuroscience, for one, has located in the body many of the functions that were once ascribed to soul. The brain is far better understood now than it was in the twelfth or thirteenth century and more work is being done on it. The body has been seen (and will be seen) as more and more important in our salvation, or in our re-embodiment.

After all, everything about our actions, on which we shall be judged, originates in the body. It is certainly partly in the body that we are angry and hateful or patient and loving. This in turn leads into the question of corporeality and *fleshliness*. Is there anything corporeal (*soma*) that does not partake in the fleshly (*sarx*)? Are not even our thoughts and desires “fleshly”? Even our service of the Lord is at least in part fleshly. As Saint Paul writes: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” We should in passing note the passage immediately following: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” But, whenever we deal with the body on an intellectual level, we must realize the part that *flesh* plays in our being. It cannot be ignored -- simply because we are fallen creatures living in a fallen world. The darkening of the mind is an ongoing phenomenon. For instance, philosophers still contend with the mind/body split, even though we know that we are one. Could this inability to approach unity be a sign of our fallenness?

Another theme dealt with the “separated soul” on death. “Soul” can and will be separated from “body (*sarx*).” Inasmuch as a personal judgment is ours immediately (*mox*) after death, it must be inferred that our death cannot be understood as that separation of the soul from the body which would transform us into “separated souls” in that impersonal Thomist sense commonly taken for granted, without annulling the immediacy of that judgment. (To describe the Thomistic separation of soul and body, I generally think of a cosmic file cabinet filled with “immaterial separated souls” waiting until the end to be united somehow with some form of body, the more immaterial the better.) This is not at all the case. “Spiritual” for a Christian does not mean “immaterial”; it means immortal. We don’t know what happens when we die, but we know that we will rise again, body and soul, identifiably ourselves.

Another theme was our interconnectedness with all other living beings. The knowledge of this was often connected with the discovery and subsequent elucidation of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). But we have known for a long time that we are related to all living things; we depend on at least some of them for sustenance and life. If only implicitly we were aware of that dependency and that relationship. DNA merely tells us how we are related, what the physical situation is. Even God, without the “benefit” of DNA, is relational. The Father sent the Son to reveal the Spirit. God could not have done this if Father were not related to Son and Holy Spirit. We are monotheists; we believe in one God. But that God is Trinitarian. Christianity is a “relational religion.” We are not somehow divine freelancers. Nonetheless, the consciousness of our interconnectedness is a very necessary part of our humanity. It is an idea which cannot be overstressed. We live in the body for each other. Jesus Christ meant it when he told us to “love one another.” The example of the vine and the branches, an example he used at the Last Supper (John 15) leaves no doubt of our relationality with Christ and with each other.

As Sister Carla Mae Streeter pointed out in the discussion, those at the meeting were all Westerners. The East has insights into the meaning of the body that we might well learn from. Maybe we won't get much of value from such a discussion, but we should still try to learn what might be helpful. It is a different tradition.

Dr. Jitse van der Meer's paper is different from the rest. He is trying in his essay to present a model for bridging the gap between science and theology. This is especially urgent in dealing with the human body. That's where we live. That is the area of massive work in the life sciences. He builds two pillars (represented by Theodosius Dobzhansky and Rudolph Bultmann) to show various hermeneutical levels. Then he constructs a bridge between them. He concludes that each science demands its own methodology – and Biblical revelation is an essential source for Christian theology.

Finally, the essays and discussion do not constitute a definite theology of the body. They do contain many of the elements thereof. Much of this requires greater reflection and inflection. This volume, however, does contain many occasions for meditation, many items that need further thought. It is not the end of the search; it is a mere continuance of the quest. It is offered in this spirit.

Robert Brungs, SJ

Director: ITEST

April 2, 2001



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