

Faith Embodied:  
A Comparative Analysis of the Body's Connection to  
Religion Through Ritual in the Hindu and Christian Context

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August, 2010

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## Abstract

Academic discourse on comparative religion is compelled to explore the body. The body is the site of personal and spiritual communication and experience. This paper seeks to examine the body in context of identity and religion. By challenging traditional assumptions of dualism and religious dismissal of embodied reality, scholars can engage with the lived experience of religion. Religious rituals, such as *darsan* the eucharist, *puja*, and pilgrimage point to the centrality of the body in religious experiences. A closer look at religious ritual and its relationship to faith and theology, as well as to the body, will provide a clearer understanding of the material element of this-worldly expressions of faith. Using the concepts of the mindful body, and integral bodies, this paper will look at the way religious ritual interacts with elements of identity and social interaction. Through ritual the body emerges as a tool that is used as means of communion with the divine, and as such must be awarded value and meaning in a religious and academic sense. A re-examining and re-valuing of corporal religious experiences opens the door for a more genuine dialogue about religion and in an inter-religious sense. This paper will explore several key rituals in the Hindu and Christian faith in order to provide a comparative analysis. Although this is not an exhaustive study, it provides a foundation from which body can be approached from a comparative religious studies perspective. By locating the discussion within the rituals of the traditions we can connect theories and ideas to genuine behaviours and social practices.

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## **Introduction**

### **The Significance of Embodiment for the Study of Religion**

The human body, in its various forms and stages, is a site of much discussion, amazement, and inquiry. Our bodies allow us to interact with the world and to connect to, and communicate with, each other. All human beings, regardless of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, share the experience of corporal reality. Although each experience of embodiment is unique and personal, the shared reality of physical existence provides a common platform for discussion and interaction. All human beings are born, and all will die having a unique cognitive capacity to not only be aware of this embodied reality, but to pose to it questions of *meaning*. The shared experience of embodied life and the reality of impending death, are often at the crux of religious worldviews and heated debate.

Alexandra Howson (2004) states, “the body is absolutely crucial to the way we engage with the world and with the people around us” (p.12). I propose, the body is also intrinsic to the way people engage with religion, and the divine. Our religious experiences are necessarily mediated by our physical presence and our bodily senses and religious rituals serve as a means to provide individuals with sensory experiences of their faith and a physical means of interacting with their religious community. Religious actions that are performed in public or private allow believers to express their spirituality in an external and physical way. Public ritual performances and private expressions of worship are often also means of connecting the religious layperson with the spiritual authorities of his or her perspective tradition. Embodied ritual is a point of access for the average believer and is consequently an important avenue for religious study. By

examining the physical expressions of faith and religion in the Hindu and Christian context I aim to connect the body and faith.

### **Challenges or Limitations**

Discussions of ‘religion’ or of the ‘body’ quickly reveal the malleability of the terms, and the difficulties that exist in creating clear and concrete definitions<sup>1</sup>.

Nonetheless, the body has emerged as an important area of study, drawing the attention of scholars in a variety of academic disciplines. The body can be conceptualized in several ways: as a product of society, as an instrument of power and domination, as a symbolic system, or as a lived reality (Turner 1997).

Although there are many ways of approaching the study of the body, the universal experience of embodiment presents a temptation to attempt to discuss experiences of body and religion in terms of universalism. Sarah Coakley (1997) acknowledges such difficulties and ambiguities. She suggests that a naïve approach to the comparative study of religion might persuade some to “imagine that bodies provide us with an Archimedean point, a ‘natural’ datum of uncontentional physicality upon which religious traditions have spun their various interpretations” (ibid, p.3). Searching for parallel or identical embodied experiences of religion limits the scope of understanding and restricts the potential for religious and spiritual experiences to be effectively expressed and understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Creating a definition of religion that is neither too narrow, nor too broad can be a difficult task. While it is not the business of this paper to distinguish between the various definitions and the different meanings of the term “religion”, it is prudent that I outline the basic meaning for the context of this paper. This paper will refer to religion broadly, as a tradition that is shared among a group of people that seeks to establish a greater understanding and experience of the divine. Because I am limiting my scope to Christianity and Hinduism, which have already been widely established as world religions, I need not be overly concerned with being either too inclusive or exclusive in my definition of religion.

Discussions of the body need to utilize the universal reality of embodiment without expecting or contriving a notion of sameness of experience.<sup>2</sup>

Examining the body in two very different religious systems creates an academic approach that is not limited to the logic or thinking of one particular academic or religious tradition. This approach does not attempt to corner the body into one specific mode of analysis. Rather we can examine the religious utility of the body in light of individual examples and ideas, which stand on their own merit and contribute individually to a more nuanced and global understanding of religious physicality.

Just as it can be difficult to adequately express and understand the experiences of embodiment, when discussing a devoted connection to the divine it can often be difficult, or even impossible to express the nature, or reality, of “the divine” or of “God”. The intent of this paper is not to determine the validity of a particular religious tradition, nor to interpret or explain the nature of the divine or of Ultimate Truth. Rather, I contend, that for those who believe in it, religion, or faith, is very real. As Ninian Smart (1973) points out, we can “distinguish between objects which are *real* and objects which *exist*” (p.54). My concern is not about the *existence* of God. I will assume that for the believer “God”, or “the divine”, is real. Thus, my focus will be how the theology and religious practices of believers influences identity and the understanding and value of the body. I will also examine the how physical aspects of religion effect the perceived relationship

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<sup>2</sup> This echoes, to some extent, Francis X. Clooney’s (2005) methodology in his comparative study of hymns to Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary. He states, “It remains the case, however, that reading the hymns [to the Virgin Mary and to the Hindu goddesses] together creates familiarity without ruling out differences. It would be neither interesting nor desirable to equate the theologies of Sri, Devi, Apirami, and Mary, since reading does not naturally favor or expect sameness” (ibid). By the same token, it is not interesting or useful to equate or conflate religious rituals or ideas regarding the body in Christian and Hindu traditions. Rather, it is worthwhile to consider elements of both traditions in their own context allowing functional or theological similarities and differences to contribute to the larger discussion of the religious body and its role in communion with the divine.

and interaction with the divine. When speaking about religion generally I will use the term the “divine” rather than “God” as it serves as a broader, more inclusive term.

By limiting my focus to Christianity and Hinduism I am allowing for a more focused and specific discussion of the topic. While this type of study would ideally include examples from any and all world religious traditions, the limitations of time and space must be considered. Christianity and Hinduism emerge as useful starting points for analysis as they are often understood to be disparate traditions. There is a monotheistic focus on redemption and resurrection in Christian theology, while the Hindu worldview allows for countless deities and includes notions of karmic rebirth and liberation.

The notion of body, and its spiritual value, is intimately tied to religious beliefs and practices. The differences between the Christian and Hindu traditions allow us to explore the body in the context of nuanced experiences of distinct Eastern and Western worldviews.

### **The Comparative Method**

A comparative approach allows the theological notions and rituals of Hindus and Christians to stand independently and to be analysed on its own merits rather than to be forced into narrow preconceived categories of comparison. The goal of this paper is not to set up restrictive and absolute categories, but rather to present the material in a post-modern type of approach, which establishes a broader understanding of the religious body without creating problematic categorizations and conclusions.

A new set of difficulties, then, emerges. As Coakley perceptively points out:

“if we can no longer count on a universal ‘grand narrative’ to undergrid the enterprises of religious and cultural studies, then does not the ‘body’, too, become subject to infinitely variable social constructions? Indeed the body comes to bear huge, and paradoxical, philosophical weight in post-modern

thought: just as its Enlightenment partner, the ‘mind/soul’ of Cartesianism, is seen off with almost unexamined vehemence, so, simultaneously, what is left (the ‘body’) becomes infinitely problematized and elusive” (ibid).

It is precisely this elusive element of the study of the body that inspires a comparative analysis. While the body is indeed subject to endless social constructions and deconstructions, placing the focus within worldly religious traditions allows us to explore the body within in a real and experiential context rather than leaving it entirely in the hands of theory and intellectual thought. The utilization of comparison prevents the temptation to assume that one culture’s experience of embodiment is normative.

In order to utilize a comparative methodology effectively it is necessary to be transparent in my objective and methodological intentions. Hugh Nicholson (2009) attempts to understand “New Comparative Theology” and its place in theology and the study of religions. He highlights the ambiguities and the inevitable agendas that accompany a comparative approach to theology or religious studies. Nicholson (2009) states, “[t]he tendency in the academic study of religion to project a theological other arguably impedes the task, at once critical and constructive, of recognizing, clarifying and defining presuppositions and commitments of the discipline” (p.610).<sup>3</sup> As a scholar of religion, I am in the opportune position of having no strong, or official, religious affiliations, which allows me to examine both Hinduism and Christianity without attempting to assert the superiority of either. This is not to say I have no bias, but rather

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<sup>3</sup> The relationship between confessional theology and the academic study of religion should not be underestimated as both fields have the potential to enrich and influence the other. Although the intentions of this paper are entirely academic, the ideas and subjects are intimately connected to theological discourse, and consequently the conclusions and views expressed may have potential theological reverberations.

that I am not attempting to make religious claims or strong comments about absolute truth.

### **Chapter Synopsis**

By examining Eastern and Western religions comparatively and dialogically, using Hinduism and Christianity as East/West focal points, I will illustrate ways in which the embodied aspects of religion provides opportunities for religious communion, as well as a platform for religious discussion and a medium through which to develop understanding of identity in terms of the self, the 'other', and the divine.

Religious and philosophical discussion of the body has often presented the material and fleshly reality of embodiment as an impediment to spirituality and religiosity and as Meredith B. McGuire states “[p]resent social science conceptions of our subjects are peculiarly disembodied,” adding that the social sciences have heavily depended on epistemological traditions which have understood the mind [or spirit] as being separate from the material or the body (1990, p.283-284). While Western academic traditions have tended to emphasize dualities of mind and body, Holdrege (1998) points out that, “Hindu discourses generally represent the human body as a psychophysical continuum encompassing both gross physical constituents and subtle psychic faculties” (p.346). The lived reality, however, often diverges from discourse and embodiment is understood, by many, as an impediment to spiritual progress and the attainment of moksa. Gender and birth and are even used as a means of creating a rigid hierarchical system that disenfranchises significant segments of the Indian population.

Despite the theological and philosophical tendency to undermine the value of the body, I contend that the body is also a religious asset and that it can be understood as an

instrument through which one can access their faith, their religious community, and the divine.

Elements of worship and ritual will serve in this paper as the general focus of embodied religion to be compared in Hinduism and Christianity. Ritual action and performance connect the body to religious experience. It allows theological ideas and beliefs to be externalized in a performance and contributes to a sense of community and kinship. By examining worship and rituals such as: Eucharist, *Darsan*, and *Puja*, as well as theological notions such as: purity, caste, and religious authority, elements of bodily connection to religion emerge.

A comparative study is intrinsic to demonstrating the significance of the body across cultural and religious boundaries, while allowing for differences and inconsistencies between them. While I am not looking for sameness of experience I am exploring the ways in which the body is used in a similar function despite different understandings of absolute truth. While the experience of religion and embodiment may vary from tradition to tradition, or even person to person, I am exploring the way the body is used functionally as a tool, or instrument, of communion with the religious community, their history, and the divine.

I suggest that getting ‘in touch’ with our bodies and providing for an unhampered embodied experience of religion (even if the physical body is ultimately rejected in favour of some kind of spiritual transcendence) is integral to a comprehensive understanding, and complete human experience of religion; as McGuire (1990) states “[a]s social scientists of religion, we could greatly expand the depth of our understanding of society if we were to “re-materialize” the human body” (p.284). Just as human beings

use their bodies to relate to their surroundings and to each other, religious devotees also use their bodies, as members of their tradition, to participate in religious rituals and theologies. I will examine issues of identity and purity as they relate to the religious body in the broader context of ritual and its connection to theology and community. Physical elements of religious practices are necessary and invaluable to religious life. Dualistic thinking severs the mind and spirit from the body, leaving two elements, mind and body, of this-worldly existence floating regrettably independent of each other, eliminating the potential for a comprehensive understanding of human existence.

By revaluing and embracing the relationship between body and religion, we open up a new channel for communion, inter-religious dialogue and understanding, and provide all members of a religious community a space in which they are able to meaningfully engage with their faith, regardless of their social class or educational background. Acknowledging the universal reality of embodiment without expecting universal experiences allows people to express and experience their religious beliefs in and through their bodies, and to share ideas about faith with members of their own religious communities and people outside of them.

Scholars such as McGuire, Mauss, Holdrege, and Walker-Bynum, have suggested that it is essential to pay significant attention to the body in the fields of social sciences and religious studies. This paper attempts to constructively apply this line of theory and thinking to historical religious traditions within the framework of a comparative study. The over intellectualization of religion can diminish the vibrancy of lived religious traditions. Dualistic thinking has severed the body from the mind and spirit and in doing so has jeopardized the experiential element of religion. By re-examining and re-

evaluating the physical and embodied components of religious practices and belief we can pave the way for a potentially distinct reconnection between the corporal experience and religious tradition, allowing the body to emerge an important element of religious communion.

## **Chapter One - Body and Bodies: Evaluating Terminology and Methods of Understanding Corporality**

Sarah Coakley (1997) poses the question “why are bodies so ubiquitous and yet so hard to get our ‘hands’ around?” (p.3). The universal reality of embodiment and the various perspectives and methods used for studying the body can lead to an incoherent and overwhelming set of information. Bodies are discussed in terms of purity, pollution, power, social control, symbolism; they are made the focus of anthropological, sociological, feminist, psychological, political, and philosophical studies, to name a few. The enormity of the scope of body studies can make it a daunting and complicated field of inquiry; however, the complex relationship between body and identity, community and faith compels us to consider the body’s meaning and its value in a variety of contexts and situations. Religion and religious studies need to consider the body, and address its significance in the context of tradition and theology. In the religious context, is the body an asset or an impediment? It is not surprising that people often turn to religion and cultural traditions to try to make sense of their place in the world and their experience of embodiment. In order to situate the body in the religious context, we first must consider the terms and methods that will facilitate relevant and coherent analysis.

### **A Theological Approach: What we Can Learn From Tradition and Scripture**

We can begin to examine the religious significance of the body by looking at what the theologians and scriptures themselves have to say. In the Christian tradition the notion of the humanation of Christ, as well as of the stories of creation in Genesis highlight the theological significance of the human body, which provide certain parameters for a

Christian believer's relationship with their own body. The book of Genesis, in the Old Testament, outlines the Christian version of creation. Christian theology suggests that the human body derives its significance and meaning from the Creator (Prokes 1996), that is to say that because God created humans, and fashioned their bodies, the human body has value. According to Mary Prokes, a Christian theologian, human embodiment should be understood as a gift from God, who created humanity out of love (ibid, p.57). It is significant to this message that God Himself, forms the bodies of Adam and Eve. The inclusion of the fact that God intentionally formed humankind in the story of creation highlights the significance of humanity, and its physical creation to the Christian faith: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27). The creation accounts in Genesis place humanity at the pinnacle of creation which points to a sense of importance and value that many Christian theologians have claimed for the human species. That God chose to create physical human beings in his image also highlights the significance of the human form in a Christian context and has significant bearing on ideas about the body. The creation of mankind in God's image has often been understood as possessing some of the qualities of God, particularly the quality of having the capacity for communicative action (Vanhoozer 1997, p. 177). The accounts of creation in Genesis allude to the goodness of all God's creation, and suggest that prior to eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve, in their embodied state, were good. Similarly, in his human incarnation, Christ, who was without sin, was both embodied and good. A material body, then, if free from sin, is in and of itself, good as it is the intentional creation of God. Prokes points out that in the Old Testament, there is no distinction made between the physical and spiritual nature of

mankind (ibid, p.58). Furthermore in the New Testament it becomes clear that despite Christ's divinity, he lived with a fully human and physical body; "He lived out a genuinely physical existence, involving hunger, thirst and exhaustion" (Ware 1997, p.93). The gospel writers took care to emphasize the corporality of Christ and his physical experiences of life and suffering (Matthew 21:18, Mark 4:38, John 4:6). The human birth of Christ is at the core of Christian theology; it is the "central event on which the faith is founded: God's flesh-taking or incarnation" (Ware 1997, p.93). In this sense, even God participated in human spirituality in an embodied way. Prokes (1996) states "from the beginning it is clear that human persons participate in the mystery of Revelation in and through their bodiliness" (p.78). Just as Jesus took human form to share the experience of truth, Christians experience faith and religion in and through their bodies, yet this has not prevented the body from being heavily criticized and problematized in Christian theology.

Just as the body has been an important site of discussion and debate in Christian theology, so too, has it occupied a prominent place in the religious world of the Hindu people. While there is no exact parallel to the Christian canon in Hinduism, the issues of body are nonetheless addressed in Hindu mythology and scriptures. Much like Genesis provides an account of creation, of the material world and embodied man, Hindu scriptures, such as the Upaniṣads, offer a variety of explanations regarding the origin of the material universe and cosmos, as well as embodied human and animal life. Klaus Klostermaier (1994) recounts one such account:

"According to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, in the beginning the *ātman*, the Self, was alone, in the form of a *puruṣa*, a male being. He looked around and saw nothing except himself. He said: "I am." He was afraid and he had no joy; he longed for another being. He was as large as a man and a woman embracing.

He divided himself into two: Husband and wife. Thus human beings were created. She turned into a cow, and he became a bull. She turned into a mare, and he became a stallion. And thus the various kinds of animals came into existence” (p.115).

This story serves as an example of an account of the creation of humans and animals. In this myth human life is created first, and the creation of other animals follows from that; as with the creation account in Genesis, human creation is highlighted by its placement at an important point of the story.

The variety of sources and traditions in the Hindu world, provide for a less unified view and a more diverse understanding of creation and, consequently, the body. Barbara A. Holdrege (2008) states,

“[t]he body has been represented, disciplined, regulated, and cultivated from a variety of perspectives in Hindu ritual traditions, ascetic movements, medical traditions, legal codes, philosophical systems, *bhakti* (devotional) movements, Tantric traditions, the science of erotics, martial arts, drama, dance, music, and the visual arts” (p.19).

The immense diversity in Hindu religious traditions creates the potential for many different ways of thinking about and understanding the body. In fact, the term Hinduism itself is a contentious one and it has been suggested that *Hinduism* is, in reality, a Western invention (Lipner 2004). Religious life and expression in India is very diverse and often the similarities between different religious beliefs and practices blanketed under the umbrella term *Hinduism* can be difficult to discern. Hinduism is not a monolithic tradition, but rather an assemblage of a vast number of Indian philosophies, traditions and beliefs. There is no singular Hindu creed, or cannon, and there is no central authority or organization and it has been suggested that Hinduism is better addressed in terms of

*Hinduisms* (ibid). However, given the regular usage of the term and the fact that it is used by devotees themselves as a marker of identity, it has value for the analysis of religious practices in India. Furthermore, although the diversity of traditions within Hinduism is great, there are some common threads that are prevalent and popular throughout most Indian religious expressions. In order to provide a coherent analysis, then, of the Hindu perspective on the body, it is necessary to be specific, when possible, in discussing various traditions, and to be aware of some common theological or religious beliefs, such as the notions of *dharma*, *karma*, *moksa*, and *samsara*. While these ideas are not unique to Hinduism – they are also present, for example, in Jain and Buddhist culture – they provide a basic platform from which to begin to discuss the Hindu perspective.

The theology and structure of the Hindu and Christian religious traditions and worldviews are exceptionally different. The topic of the body in particular requires careful attention in order to avoid simplistic and irrelevant comparisons and parallels. Appropriate terminology and nuance is necessary to create thoughtful analysis of the body and its relationship to the other bodies and the world around it. Consideration of different disciplinary approaches and a variety of aspects of bodily analysis provides a strong platform from which to develop a more complete and coherent understanding of corporality. Religion is an abiding element of human life and an important part of human interaction and the relationship between religion and the body requires consideration. An interdisciplinary approach and coherent set of terminology is integral to the discussion of body and religion.

## **The Mindful Body: Challenging Conventional Dichotomies**

Much like the term “religion”, the word “body” has a variety of connotations and applications. It means different things depending on the context and the disciplinary approach. Discussion of the body, then, requires a focused methodology and a set of clear and concise terms. In their article *The Mindful Body*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margret M. Lock (1987) distinguish what they call the “three bodies”: the individual body, the social body, and the body politic. Although Scheper-Hughes and Lock are writing from the perspective of medical anthropology, these categories are useful when thinking about the body in a variety of contexts and provide a helpful set of terms to begin discussion and analysis. The use of medical anthropological terms in a paper about religion and the body, points to the value in an interdisciplinary approach to body analysis. In order to create a coherent and sufficiently inclusive study of the human body, scholars must be willing to think outside their own academic traditions and to dialogue with different disciplines. A comparative study of religions allows for different religious practices to shed light on the way the body works functions in society and in a religious context. By establishing a collection of three bodies, which interact and co-exist, Scheper-Hughes and Lock are attempting to posit a new way of thinking about and treating the body and its relationship to the mind. This new epistemology is intended to address medical treatment of the body, but is also valuable when considering social or religious treatment of the body because the categories they set up are also relevant to religion.

The individual body is presented as the “lived in body” (ibid, p.7). It is in the individual body that the people have personal, or phenomenological, experiences. It is at this level of analysis, the individual body, that individuals are aware of their existence as

separate from all other bodies. Each person, as an individual, has personal experiences, memories, associations and connections. Meredith McGuire (1990) refers to “the body’s importance in *self-experience* and self’s experience of the others” (p.285) as an important theme, which can be used to better appreciate the mindful body. Self-experience is that the heart of identity. Communication of these experiences and memories can be complicated as phenomenological experiences are difficult to translate into adequately expressive words. Elaine Scarry (1985) notes, that persons in pain often find themselves “bereft of the resources of speech” (p.6). Much like the experience of pain can be difficult to put into precise words, so too can experiences euphoric or emotional religious encounters. The restrictions of language and each person’s limited capacity for empathy and understanding make the communication of personal phenomenological experiences difficult. Consideration of the individual body requires careful attention and a flexible approach. The individual body is at the core of body analysis and at the centre of religious experience and belief, and as such cannot be ignored or overlooked. Individual bodies and phenomenological experiences must be considered, however carefully, as an intrinsic part of body analysis and as part of the narrative about body and religion. Personal and individual religious revelations and spiritual experiences have been of central importance to the inspiration of great theologians and saints and the development of religious traditions. The experiences of religious figures such as Jesus, or the Buddha, as well as of devotees and believers have shaped faith and theology. While it is important to remain critical, in order to understand the individual experiences of human beings we, as scholars of religion, must be willing to accept their stories and accounts as real, or at least as being real to them. While theological discussions of religion and religious

experiences often focus on issues of absolute truth, the purpose of this paper is rather to understand the way the physical body interacts with religious belief in this life and the material world. In this sense, the literal validity of an experience is secondary to the perceived reality, and bodily or theological consequences. For example, a discussion of transubstantiation<sup>4</sup> need not focus on whether or not the change in substance genuinely occurs, but rather on the fact that for those who believe in it, it has religious and experiential meaning.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock's (1987) second level of analysis refers to the way the body is used symbolically to think about and express elements of society and culture; this is referred to as the "social body" (p.7). The social body externalizes societal codes and structures, which are related to our experience of others. The body can be used to symbolize societal norms and constructions and sanctions placed on embodied behaviour often echo social boundaries and taboos. Concerns about the body and its function are often symbolised in material social structures;

“[c]oncern with the penetration and violation of bodily exits , entrances and boundaries expended to material symbols of the body – the home, with its doors, gates, fences, and stone boundaries, around which many protective rituals, prayers, and social customs served to create social distance and a sense of personal control and security” (ibid, pp.24-25).

The body is the primary means of communication; through our actions and behaviours we use our bodies as the medium through which our social codes and values are expressed. In this way our bodies act as symbols of broader ideas and concepts. It is through the material body that the social interactions of everyday life are enacted.

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<sup>4</sup> Transubstantiation is the transformation of the communion wafer and wine into the body and blood of Christ, as it is understood in Catholic theology. It is believed to be a literal and substantial change, although there is no perceptible differences in the elements themselves.

The third category, or level of analysis, is the “body politic”. This refers to the “regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies” (ibid, p.7). The body politic examines the ways in which elements of human embodiment such as sexuality, work, illness and other forms of action, or aspects of being, can be monitored and sanctioned as a means of societal control and influence. The ability of governing bodies to both regulate and discipline individuals and populations is integral to the stability of the body politic. Human beings live in groups and communities and the regulation of bodies is vital to the maintenance of social order and efficiency. Control and influence over physical bodies is exerted in every society and on every level of the political spectrum. This is true in instances of interpersonal or governmental politics. The body politic can manifest itself through subtle social pressures, or through overt force and violence. Religious institutions are not free from internal politics and pressures and influence of major religious groups is even often felt in government. Consequently, the element of the body politic is important to the religious perspective on embodied reality.

In addition to the three categories of body presented by Scheper-Hughes and Lock, I would suggest that a fourth category, the collective body, be considered. This category is treated by Scheper-Hughes and Lock as an element of the social body; however, it seems prudent to allow it to stand as a separate category of analysis. The collective body would refer to a group or association of people that form a unified and cohesive voice; this would be a *body of people*. The collective body is comprised of individual bodies, which share a sense of belonging and community. The collective body would be closely related to but not the same as the body politic and the social body. It is clear that the four categories exist in constant relation to one another, and they

consistently overlap and interact. Each level of bodily analysis is intimately tied to the other levels, but by creating a means of discussing the separate elements of body we have a clearer understanding of the otherwise ambiguous terms. The terms presented by Scheper-Hughes and Lock, are not exhaustive, but they provide a means for a clearer examination of the body, and also for a new method of thinking about the way different realities of embodiment, and their relationship with the mind or spirit, are connected to the social and religious environment.

### **Integral Bodies: Bringing Religious Studies to the Body**

Despite the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach, Barbra Holdrege (2008) suggests that scholars of religious studies depend too strongly on categories of the body created in the context of different disciplines:

“Although scholarship on the body in religion has made significant advances in recent years, the dominant trends of analysis are problematic in that scholars of religion have tended to adopt categories theorized by scholars in other disciplines and have consequently not given enough attention to generating analytical categories and models that are grounded in the distinctive idioms of religious traditions” (p.19).

Holdrege, then, approaches the Hindu body, using the categories: divine body, cosmos body, social body, and human body as the four “integral bodies” (ibid, p.20). Each integral body, which exists in correlation to the others, is a whole and inherent piece of the structure of reality.

The integral bodies can be understood as four categories that encompass all that exists. The divine body refers to “the all encompassing primordial totality, which replicates itself in the structures of the cosmos body, the social body, and the human body” (ibid p.348). In the Hindu context then we can think about the Divine body in

terms of *Brahman*.<sup>5</sup> The divine body is the ultimate reality within which the other bodies reside. This category also proves useful in Christian analysis. The divine body can be understood as God, from which all creation originates. In Trinitarian theology we could use the term Divine body to refer to the whole that is made up of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The cosmos body refers to the manifestation of the divine body in the form of the universe. In the Hindu tradition the ritual body is thought to be related to the cosmic body, or cosmic man, *Purusa*; “[t]he divine body of Purusa is thus represented as the paradigmatic ritual body, the body of the sacrifice itself, which serves as the means of manifesting the cosmos body, the social body and the human body” (ibid, p.22). The *purusa* serves as a model of the body, and different elements of creation are thought to relate to different body parts of this primordial man. Christian theology presents a different understanding of the universe and its origins. Nonetheless the cosmos body can be understood in relation to Christian theology as the totality of God’s creation of light and dark, Heavens and Earth.

Within the cosmos body sits the social body, which, according to Holdrege (1998), can be understood as “the system of social classes (varnas) [that are] inherent in the structure of the divine body” (p.348). Although Christian theology does not have a caste or varna system like that of the Hindu tradition there are certainly hierarchical differences which emerge in Christian communities that are influenced or rationalized

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<sup>5</sup> *Brahman* is the highest spiritual reality in the Hindu context. *Brahman* can be understood in the personal *Saguna* form, which consists of endless possibilities of personal characteristics and encompasses the traditional Hindi pantheon, or in impersonal *Nirguna* terms, which considers true *Brahman* to be beyond the scope of human comprehension.

through the use of theology and reference to holy scriptures and traditions. The historical inequality between men and women serve as an example of social inequity that has been justified with religious texts. The social body, as it is described by Holdrege and by Scheper-Hughes and Lock, relates to the way elements of culture and religion are externalized through codes of behavior and association. Both depictions of the social body are intimately linked to Scheper-Hughes and Lock's category of the body politic.

The final integral body, the human body, exists at the center of the preceding three. Holdrege (1998) describes it as "the microcosmic manifestation of the divine body, which is ranked according to class and gender in the social body" (p.348). That is to say that the human body exists as the smallest representation of the divine body. The human body has ecumenical value in that it is an omnipresent reality of human life; all people regardless of race religion or creed share the experience of embodiment. It is through the human body that the other integral bodies are connected; "the human body assumes various modalities in order to mediate transactions among the divine body, the cosmos body and the social body" (ibid, p.349). The current incarnations of human bodies are linked to the original *Parusa*, which means the ritual body is intimately connected to religious belief and history, and as such has a valuable place in the Hindu religious world.

The human body is then broken down into five further categories: the ritual, ascetic, devotional, tantric, and purity bodies, referred to as processual bodies (ibid). Holdrege suggests the integral bodies are mediated and connected by the processual modalities of the human body, or individual, body (ibid, p. 346). The ritual body is the "processual body that mediates the connections among the fourfold hierarchy of integral

bodies” (Holdrege 2008, p.21). That is to say that the ritual body serves to stimulate the connection between the four integral bodies. The ascetic body, however, serves a different function; “the cultivation of the ascetic body involves minimizing relations with all forms of embodiment in order to attain liberation from the bondage of *samsara*” (Holdrege 1998, p.349).

While the ritual body places emphasis on action (*karman*) the ascetic body values knowledge as a path to the divine; “the forest dwelling sages of the Upanisads give priority to knowledge (*jnana*) – in the sense of both intellectual understanding and direct experience – of ultimate reality as a means of achieving liberation (*moksa*) from the bondage of *samsara* and its endless cycles of embodiment” (ibid, p. 24). It is significant that the ultimate goal is the avoidance of continued embodiment. However, in the present corporal state, direct embodied experience serves as a means of spiritual progression for the ascetic body. In this sense the body, despite its ultimate insignificance, has value and is functional in this-worldly spiritual activity. By developing control over the body and its senses and desires and ascetic is able to renounce worldly pleasures and attachments in order to work towards *moksa*. The construction, or development of the ascetic body, which begins to understand itself not in terms of the this-worldly mind body complex, but rather in terms of its true self, as Brahman-Atman, “involves the “deconstruction” of the social body” (ibid, p.26). This means that in the ascetic Hindu context, the meaning of the body shifts as one’s relationship to the divine, and to one’s own corporal reality evolves. Although this process seems to negate the value or indispensability of the material body, the experience of human birth, in a physical sense, is necessary for this process, which occurs in a this worldly space, in order to achieve spiritual, or other worldly, progress and

realization. The human body thus becomes an important site of inquiry in religious and academic circles.

In many ways the ritual and ascetic bodies are closely linked. Ritual activities such as chants, or repetitive devotional activities performed as groups or individuals in churches or temples involve bodily presence and awareness as well as a focus on the divine. Similarly ascetic activities such as meditation or prayer also involve bodily awareness and control as well as a focus on the ultimate truth, or the divine.

The devotional body, however, is indicative of a more emotional and ecstatic connection. Holdrege (1998) frames the Hindu devotional body in terms of the *bhakti* tradition. In the Christian context the devotional body may be associated with an evangelical movement. Although this community may utilize some of ritual or ascetic practices, the highly emotional connection, or a feeling of love and acceptance, is understood as the most important or ultimate connection with the divine.

Holdrege (1998) relates the tantric body to the tantric tradition in Hinduism. As such it is difficult to fully conceptualize in terms of other world religions. Gavin Flood (2006) suggests that the Tantric traditions “involve the divinization of the body, which is a way of saying the body is inscribed by the text” (p.10). If we appropriate the term “tantric body” and use it to refer to highly intimate physical expressions of religiosity that involve the divinization of the body it may have more utility in the broader context of world religions.

Holdrege’s (1998) final category of purity body is at the center of the *Dharmasastras* and the Hindu Caste system. The purity body is intimately related to the broader concept of the social body. Purity and social perceptions of purity have an effect

on the way individuals are perceived and treated within their community. Although purity and impurity are defined differently among world religious traditions, ideas about what is or is not pure, and means of sanctioning impure behavior and protecting collective or individual purity are significant to all social and religious orders. The five processual bodies are related and interconnected. By creating these categories Holdrege has provided a framework from which to clearly discuss the body and analyze its role within a specifically religious context.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Having established terminology required for clear concise discussion of the religious body, we can begin to examine different methodologies. The categories created by Scheper-Hughes and Locke, and Holdrege function adeptly with a variety of methodologies. The social body, for example, is well suited to a sociological exploration and tools of theology, religious studies, and anthropology lend themselves clearly to the exploration of the ritual body. The comparative methodology, as discussed earlier, will create a foundation for the entirety of this paper. A variety of other methodological approaches, and contributions from scholars in diverse fields are employed in this paper as they pertain to the subject or ritual being discussed.

### **The Feminist Approach**

When discussing the human body issues of gender and sexual difference are impossible to ignore. Male and female quickly emerge as the two primary categories of classification for bodies.<sup>6</sup> Naomi Goldenberg (1990) insists that, “contemporary theory,

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<sup>6</sup> It is important, however, to assert that attempting to establish a position that assumes or encourages gender equality does not result in the assumption of gender neutrality. The experiences of men and women have historically been, and often continue to be, very different and must be considered and described

in particular feminist theory, should shrink away from all systems which preserve the mind/body dichotomy” (p.76). Human bodies tend to be divided into two categories, male and female, based on sex organs. These categories serve not only as descriptive groupings based on physical properties, but also as instructive groupings that teach and encourage gender-specific behaviors. The division of gender is a common theme in religious practices and institutions and there consequently are roles reserved for or denied to men and women based on their physical sexual attributes; “[o]ne of the most important filters through which people see themselves and others is gender, which, like vision, is both biological and cultural” (Morgan 2005, 191). The debate over whether gender differences are primarily natural and biological or socially constructed is ongoing. Differences in gendered behaviors in different cultures, and throughout history, point to the fact that gender construction is on some level socially influenced. While there may be inherent differences between men and women, the way they are expressed, and the notion of the male or female ideal is socially created. This type of gender learning provides another example of taught bodies. Women have tended to be associated with emotional and irrational behaviors. They have been thought to be intimately tied to their bodies and to the material world, while men have enjoyed a reputation of logicality and rationality associated with a more intellectual and cerebral existence.<sup>7</sup> Throughout history men’s bodies and stories have been considered normative and it is imperative that women’s experiences move from the periphery to the centre, alongside male experiences, in order

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faithfully. While it is not necessary to insist upon gender *sameness* in contemporary scholarship, we must be aware of the fluidity of gender and allow for self determination and non-traditional gender experiences.<sup>7</sup> Goldenberg suggests that we often conflate the material body with femininity, “[o]ur hatred of the body is expressed in our hatred of women. In fact, it is the oppression of women that permits us to make women the scapegoats of our fear of aging and mortality” (ibid, p.81). This notion can be illustrated by the use of Eve as the scapegoat for the fall of.

to achieve a greater understanding of embodiment as a both unique and universal experience.

Caroline Walker Bynum (1991) suggests that we need to be careful when we make conclusions and assumptions based on gender; “assertions about women’s emotionality or sentimentality often simply reflect the sexual stereotypes common in the Western tradition” (p.55). However, she also points out that “it is true that anthropologists have documented the greater prominence of ecstasy and possession in women’s religiosity all over the world” (ibid). This illustrates the necessity of considering gender, while keeping in mind the historical and cultural context. Physical and mystical experiences of religiosity tend to take place in the female realm. The miraculous experience of stigmata provides an interesting example, “[a]ll but two documented cases of full and visible stigmata are female” (ibid, p.56). Nonetheless, the most famous example of stigmata, and the object of many religious pieces of art, is a male example, that of St. Francis. This illustrates the way the male body has often been the normative point of reference.

A re-envisioning and a revaluing of physical expressions and experiences of religion have the potential to enrich the overly intellectualized experiences attributed to men, and to give the physical and historical experiences of women a place in the structural context of religion. This has the potential to create a more egalitarian experience, and expression, of religion. By consistently allowing physical expressions to have meaning, this re-values women’s roles in religious society, makes this form of religious experience more acceptable for both genders.

Rejecting the mind/body dichotomy is instrumental to gaining a fuller understanding of world religions. Rather than attempting to prove the superiority of one type of religious experience, believers and clergy members would be able to explore the ways that different expressions and demonstrations of religiosity reinforce and influence each other. Furthermore, as we attempt to understand how the gendering of bodies has affected religious interaction, we begin to better understand religion as a broader concept. In this sense, I contend that we can use Scheper-Hughes and Lock's term, the *mindful body*, as a more accurate term for the complete individual and the inherent relationship between mind, or spirit, and the material body, and that this position allows for a more equal and comprehensive approach to issues of sex and gender in the religious context. The notion of a *mindful body* allows physical experiences to be connected to the mind or spirit, and also for intellectual or transcendent experiences to be felt and expressed physically. The study of religious ritual and the body highlights this inherent union of body and spirit and consequently compels us to consider the ways in which the body is categorized.

### **Chapter Synopsis**

Relevant terminology and appropriate methods of thinking about the body are important for its discussion in religious and academic contexts. In setting up levels of analysis Scheper-Hughes and Lock are attempting to create a new platform from which to discuss the body. They are hoping for "the development of a new epistemology and metaphysics of the mindful body and the emotional, social, and political sources of illness and healing" (ibid, p.30). Although their focus is medical and on the relationship between mind and body in terms of illness and healing, Scheper-Hughes and Lock's cry for new ways of thinking about the mindful body extends into other disciplines, including

religious studies. The connection that they are looking for between body and mind during medical procedures can be likened to the connection that I strive to establish between the body and mind/spirit during religious rituals, and the terminology they provide can be used to create a clear and lucid discussion of that relationship. As Holdrege asserts the use of terms that are more specific to the field of religious studies, in conjunction with broader categories for the body and its societal impact, allows the field of religious studies to consider the body in such a way that situates it within a religious context while not alienating the ideas from the broader social and political contexts. In order to establish a new epistemology and metaphysics about the body we need to reconsider what we know about the body and its relationship to identity, spirituality, life, and death.

A variety of methodologies including sociological, psychological, anthropological, and theological contribute to a fuller understanding of the topic. Although it is not possible to discuss each approach at length, the use of relevant contributions to the fields of body and religious studies by scholars in a variety of academic fields reinforces the discussion. Because of the prominence of gendered understandings and treatments of the body the feminist approach becomes both a methodological approach to discussing the body, and element of body in need of exploration. As a methodology the feminist approach is not more significant, however; the gender and sex difference will necessarily be an element of body studies.

While creating one single unified and comprehensive theory of the body is unrealistic, the examination of ritual in a comparative religious context can highlight the corporal element of religiosity and provide insight into the spiritual and phenomenological meaning of physical and material embodiment

## **Chapter Two- Ritual and Belonging: Identifying the Connection Between Religion and The Self**

As much as religion rests on scriptures, theology, and philosophy, the elements of worship and ritual are indispensable. The lived religious tradition involves the participation of devotees and provides a means of accessing religious truths and expressions. Rituals are coded sets of actions that are performed, by an individual or a group, usually in a specific order. This type of stylized behavior involves a body, or community of bodies, enacting a performance that has meaning and is learned. Meredith B. McGuire (2002) states that “[w]hereas beliefs represent the cognitive aspect of religion, ritual is the *enactment* of religious meaning” (p.17, my emphasis). Ritual also serves to promote both belonging and belief. It is clear that ritual and worship are invaluable elements of religious life. Both ritual and theological, or philosophical, elements are intrinsic to religious systems and functions and they often intertwine and reinforce each other.

Winzeler (2008) states, “[m]ost anthropologists who work on religion in broad, comparative terms would probably agree that belief and ritual go together and that neither can be well understood without the other” (p.145). The relationship between these two elements of faith is strong. Rituals both serve to exemplify beliefs and values and to foster and nurture them. There are many different types of religious rituals, including prayers, offerings, sacrifice, communion, trance and other forms of worship (ibid, pp.149-150). Ritual, however, is not confined to the religious world and secular rituals also serve as an important means of interacting with society. In cases of secular ritual, belief and values still play an important role. Graduation from an academic institution,

for example, often involves several ceremonies and rituals to mark the passing from student to graduate. Although this does not relate directly to a religious framework, these ceremonies reflect the beliefs and values held by society regarding education and as such are embodiments of these values. In this way the body acts an instrument of community, or a tool for secular communication and expression. In both secular and religious contexts the body is an instrument for communication of beliefs and values in a physical realm.

### **Scripture and Ritual: Reading the Body in the Context of Scripture**

Scholars of religion, and religious devotees alike, particularly in a Western context, often ascribe significant value to religious texts as a means of understanding and connecting to religion. The lived reality for many religious believers, however, is such that scripture is unavailable, inaccessible, or seemingly unimportant. Ralph Keen (2004) states that, “[e]vidence of spiritual life among people of medieval Europe has tended to come from two sources: liturgical texts left by the literate elite, and the *material culture* of everyday life” (p.139, my emphasis). While advances in literacy and education have changed the structure of social hierarchies in Western Christian societies there is still a divide between the elite members of the Church, the clergy and religious leaders, and the laity. Although most modern Christians can read the Bible and participate in some theological wondering, many people still find the language and the stories inaccessible and difficult to understand. Furthermore, societal pressures to earn a living, participate in family, political and social activities, do not afford everyone enough time to completely and thoroughly devote himself or herself to extensive theological study. For many contemporary Christians, religious life involves weekly church services, holiday services and the occasional church social activity. Much like material culture was important in

medieval Christianity it remains so today. Keen points out, that rituals such as Baptism and the Eucharist are “ways of making tangible contact with divine power” (ibid). This type of religious interaction points to a living God. To restrict spirituality to liturgical texts, theological study, and belief alone would point to a God beyond human experience and consequently limit human faith and participation in religion. It is in these ideas that the intrinsic value of material and embodied religious culture is found.

Similarly, most Hindu scriptures were written in Sanskrit, “a language that remained in the possession of the Hindu elite and that was less understood by the people at large” (Klostermaier 2000, p.3). Although some texts were eventually written in local vernaculars, many of the texts that are still considered authoritative by many Hindus remain in Sanskrit. This creates a similar division between those who have access to the written literature, and those who access the Hindu religion through ritual and physical manifestations of the traditions. While religion is seemingly omnipresent in Indian daily life, religious expressions tend, for many devotees, to come in the form of a lived reality rather than a disciplined study. Furthermore, the diversity of religious texts and the varied confidence in them creates a religious situation in the Hindu context that does not allow for one unified understanding of a scriptural tradition, but rather a vibrant and varied religious tradition.

The problems associated with literacy and access to scripture impact the way in which religion is lived and shared by the average believer. This is historically true, and remains true today even in highly literate countries. For many people, scripture is difficult to read and understand on its own, and as such requires explanation and supplementation with ritual and religious sermons and services. This reality emphasizes

the unchanging centrality of the human material body as a tool of religious communication, interaction and worship. The inaccessibility of the intellectual and philosophical elements of theology requires that ritual provide a means for the average person to connect to and understand their faith and community.

### **The Ritual Body: Evaluating the Body's Role in Worship**

In ritual actions our bodies are the actors; “[t]he body participates in worship first of all through a wide range of actions” (Ware 1997, p.102). In this sense devotees use their bodies as a means of, or a tool for, performing ritual actions and interacting with their religious tradition and community. In his article *Techniques of the Body* Marcel Mauss (1979) suggests the human body is “man’s first and most natural technical object” (p.104). That is to say that our bodies can be likened to other tools or objects that human beings utilize to do work. Much like we learn actions such as swimming or digging, that “the same is true for every attitude of the body. Each society has its own special habits” (ibid, p.99). Our physical actions, then, are largely learned and culturally determined. Mauss contends that we can use the Latin term *habitus* as a concept, which invites us to consider the body as “an assemblage of embodied aptitudes not as systems of symbolic meanings” (Asad 1997, p.47). This discussion illustrates the way the social body is projected onto the individual body, which then internalizes social norms and projects them back to the group. In a discussion of Mauss’ essay, Talal Asad (1997) suggests that this notion of teaching the body how to perform certain actions extends to teaching the body how to communicate with the divine. He points out that the body is not merely a receptacle for cultural information but, rather, that it is a “*self-developable* means for achieving a range of human objects – from styles of physical movement (for example

walking), through modes of emotional being (for example composure), to kinds of spiritual experience (for example mystical states)” (ibid, pp.47-48).<sup>8</sup> This premise describes the possibility of how learning to physically engage with the material world can contribute to learning to engage with the spiritual world.

Talal Asad (1997) quotes Mauss (1979) stating

“I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques which we have not studied but which were studied fully in China and India, even in very remote periods. This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into “communion with God”” (Asad 1997 p.48).

The notion of the body as a tool that can be used for spiritual progress brings to mind Eastern religious practices such as yoga and meditation, which require a focus on the body and body movements in order to achieve spiritual goals. Mauss’ assertion that communion with the divine can necessarily be achieved through biological, or physical, means is at the heart of the idea that the body can be used as a tool to heighten the experiential element of religion. The separation of body and soul limits religious experience, much like the separation of mind and body limits the field of medicine (Scheper-Hughes, 1987). It is necessary to consider the mind, or spirit, and body as inherently connected, existing in a state of constant interaction and relation. Many religious rituals and practices already point to this relationship. In that they are learned and repeated actions and expressions, religious rituals also point to Mauss’ ideas about taught bodies. The use of specific postures, verbalizations and objects in a significant

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<sup>8</sup> This indicates that through embodied cultural learning of rituals and physical modes of worship one could learn to be a mystic; learn to have embodied spiritual experiences.

order, taught to the performer, externalizes theology in a codified and learned way. This externalization takes place in and through the ritual body.

Ritual actions are prescribed, learned, performed and constantly replicated. The fact that an individual, or collective, body learns the ritual actions and then executes them provides an example of the way the human body acts as, a kind of mediator, or an instrument of religious activity. As Asad (1997) again points out, by understanding our actions and behaviors as learned bodily experiences we are encouraged “to think of [a primordial body experience] not as an autogenic impulse, but as a mutually constituting relationship between body-sense and body-learning” (p.48). This can be considered in terms of rituals such as *Darsan* or the Eucharist, which involve very different actions and behaviors that are learned and repeated. While the expression of spiritual longings and wonderings may be an instinctual element of the human condition, such stylized, ritualized behavior is not an instinctual impulse, but rather the result of socialization and the sharing and teaching of tradition by older members of the community. In this sense, believers learn to use their bodies as a tool, or a means, of religious expression and worship, within their historical and cultural context. In doing so, believers mimic the behaviors of others in the community and establish themselves as a members.

People are able to learn their religious tradition in an embodied and externalized way. Participating as a processual body grants religious access to the average person. This notion is exemplified in the Hindu belief in three different paths to *mokṣa*, or the *tri-mārga* system (Klostermaier 1994, p.49). The three paths, or *mārgas*, are *karma- mārga*, *bhakti- mārga*, and *jnana- mārga*, which refer to the paths of works, devotion, and knowledge, respectively. This system implies that there are a many types of legitimate

worship, and that each has comparable spiritual significance. The ritual use of images and sensory elements in Hindu worship highlights its connection to the physical experience; “Hindu worship reveals not only an attitude of honor but also an attitude of affection in the range of ritual act and gesture utilized in the treatment of the image” (Eck 1998, p.47). The *tri- mārga* system allows for the importance of ritual and physical means of interacting with religion and the divine, without diminishing or negating the value of scripture. It is important to understand that, much like individuals interact differently with each other, the individual body will have its own method of interacting with the social and collective bodies, and each believer will have personal ideas about, and ways of, interacting with the divine.

### **Constructing and Deconstructing Identity: The Body as Who We Are**

A person’s sense of self and of identity is constructed within the confines of an embodied state. While a position of dualism may encourage the notion that the individual is somehow a unique entity, separate from his or her body, it is not possible to divorce oneself from the body entirely. We need our bodies to express ideas and communicate our thoughts; the physical body is the primary means one has to communicate one’s intellectual, philosophical or religious identity. We use our bodies to do this in several ways including: dress, posture, verbal communication and gestures, or body language. In addition to being a means of expression of identity, the body also plays a part in determining aspects of an individual’s identity. Skin color, height, sex, weight, and other physical features will have some bearing on identity.

The Human body is the medium through which the everyday dramas of life are expressed. Our outward expressions of self and of community are perceived and interpreted by others. The locations and places that we take our bodies also reveal a great

deal about our identity and associations. For example, the act of sitting in the Judge's seat in a courtroom identifies one as a person with legal authority; similarly the act of standing at the pulpit in a church identifies one as a person with a certain spiritual authority. In both cases this identity is further expressed through specific types of clothing and relevant verbal communication with others in the room. The same is true for each individual. Identity is a fluid and layered concept; one can be both an athlete and a minister, a daughter and a mother. While identity is largely a psychological construct, it is certainly intimately connected to, and frequently expressed through, the individual and the social body. Identity also works at the level of community or collective body. Groups of people with a shared sense of meaning or association also have a shared identity. This collective identity is in a state of constant interaction with individual and personal identities. The connection between body and identity, then, needs to be considered in terms of social associations, such as religious communities, which serve as important collective bodies who exercise significant amounts of social and political influence.

Religion and ritual are important contributors of identity as they connect the individual person, or the individual body, to the community, or the collective body. Religious affiliation helps people to decide what they believe, and also to understand their role in their community and in the world. Religion is often a major factor in determining personal beliefs, and social and political associations, which contribute to a person's overall sense of self. Ritual is central to both the promotion and expression of belief and to the creation of a sense of community or belonging. Douglas A. Marshal (2002) insists that the promotion of belief through ritual is demonstrated by the "capacity [of ritual] to resolve paradox and inconsistency and by their timing, occurring as they do

in the wake of epistemically threatening events such as death, defeat, and aberration” (p.360). Rituals provide not only an enactment of religious ideas, but also a means of coping with real world events. Ritual is used to enact or externalize beliefs and ideas and to foster and promote them. The unifying capacity of ritual, then, cannot be ignored. Ritual serves as a public confirmation, expression and promotion of beliefs through physical actions and embodied contact, and in doing so creates a sense of community and connectedness that contributes to both collective group identity and personal individual identity.

### **Communities and Communion: Engaging the Body and Faith**

The Christian church is often referred to as the *body of Christ*, and as such it can be thought of as a collective body. As a collective body, the church has significant bearing on the identity and associations of its individual members. Inasmuch as a church is created around a traditional common set of beliefs, values and experiences, it allows people to come together as individual bodies and act, in some cases, as a collective whole to create and participate in a living tradition. The notion of the church as the body of Christ is important for the collective Christian identity; “the teaching that the church herself is a sort of sacrament has become a centre not merely of Catholic ecclesiology but of ecumenical discussion” (Jenson 1997, p.207). This notion creates a communal link between different contemporary and historical congregations of Christians, who are all participating in a kind of shared faith experience. That collective body of the church is also the body of Christ, means beliefs regarding Christ’s corporality and His continued physical presence in the lives of believers are expressed corporally in this world, as a social and collective body. In this sense the link between the divine body and the human

body is direct. This theological talking point for Christian churches highlights the relevance of embodiment, at the individual, social and collective levels, for religious expression and communion.

Victor and Edith Turner (1978) present the term *communitas* to express the feeling of connectedness to a community. *Communitas* is particularly cogent during liminal periods of ritual. Liminality refers to a state of ambiguity experienced during transition. Rituals often involve a change, whether it be a rite of passage or a spiritual process, the participant is thought to be somehow different at the conclusion of the ritual. The liminal period is the time during the ritual when you are neither the same as you were prior, nor quite yet fully changed. We can use the example of a wedding; during the ceremony itself, and the exchange of vows, the bride and groom are no longer the single people they were the day before, nor are they yet married. This experience of liminality is shared only by the participants and continues until they are officially declared husband and wife. This idea can be useful when considering the collective body. An experience of unity within a group or community of individuals compels a collective body to identify as a cohesive whole. Such an experience of connectedness allows the community to feel like, and act, as a single entity, or as one body. The notion of a collective body can refer to groups of different sizes and organizational levels: from a married couple, to an entire nation. The ability of ritual to use the body as a vehicle in order to provide a group of people with a sense of *communitas* is intrinsic to the creation and maintenance of a group identity. Important religious rituals serve as physical gatherings and performances that create an experience of liminality and *communitas*, strengthening the bond between believers and creating a connection not only between individual members of the group,

but also to the group's shared history and believers past and future. Rituals promote, reinforce and connect the individual and collective bodies to theology and religious doctrine.

The action of making the sign of the cross in many Christian denominations provides a good example of the way a ritualized action connects the body to theology. Making the sign of the cross involves tracing the shape of a cross on one's own body. By crossing themselves devotees are performing an action that can be understood as connecting their physical body with the crucifixion of Christ's physical body. In this sense the individual believer can in some way relate his or her physical embodiment to the embodiment and crucifixion of Christ. The sign of the cross is related to Trinitarian Christian theology. It serves as a symbolic action that externalizes theological beliefs and is believed to have positive spiritual repercussions as a "para-sacramental" action that accumulates merit (Keen 2004, p.184). Although it is a common and recognisable Christian gesture, the act of making the sign of the cross, however, is rarely used in protestant or evangelical groups. In this sense we can also see how performing, or not performing, this action at a specific time can provide a means of expressing group identity. A seemingly small and familiar act can have relevance for and roots in the social body and body politic.

The act of ringing a large overhead bell upon entering a temple in Hindu culture also provides a physical expression of identity. This action creates an auditory externalization of belonging and intention; "[e]ntering the temple, a worshiper clangs a big overhead bell. The energy of the senses is harnessed to the apprehension of God" (Eck. 1998 p.49). This expression, in a sense, is a preparation for religious communion

and announces the worshipers' intent to worship and experience the spirituality of the temple. Small, ritualized actions both externalize theological convictions, and provide sensory expressions and experiences of religious life. Rituals that are more structured and elaborate serve the same functions. They provide a medium through which identity, belief and faith, and the body can interact.

### **Eucharist: Evaluating Ritual Access**

The notion of the Church as one body, the body of Christ, can be connected to the ritual of the Eucharist. As such, the sense of community, or the feeling of *communitas* can be seen in the joint participation of the consumption of the communion wafer and wine. The consumption of these substances creates a liminal experience in that the participants are at once both themselves, the individual body, and part of the body of Christ, or the church as a single collective body. The ritual of the Eucharist serves the social function of creating a sense of community; “although the eucharist is not in any simple sense either a calendrical or life-crisis ritual, the imagery of this liminal moment is obviously imagery of reversal: omnipotent God becomes dying man; the receiving Christian gains eternal life by eating and becoming the moment of death” (Bynum 1991, p.32). The Eucharistic experience of liminality and *communitas* are externalizations of scripture and theology. In Paul's letter to Corinthians he states, “For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). Through the taking of the Eucharist in the ritual body, members of the Christian Church create a shared experience, which helps to solidify their participation in the collective body of Christ.

The Eucharist creates a common experience for participants who are present, as well as by recreating an experience that is common to believers throughout history and that originated with the Last Supper and Christ Himself. The ritual of the Eucharist, in a sense, recreates the story of the Last Supper, and allows those who partake to experience the living Christ in their time. The consumption of the host makes this an *embodied* experience of the living Christ. Various Christian denominations understand and create this ritual differently. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation insists that during the ritual of the Eucharist the bread and wine transforms into the literal body and blood of Christ. Through the consumption of Christ's body and blood the recipient then becomes the body of Christ (Ware 1997, p.103). During the consecration of the host, it is believed that as the words "this is my body" and "this is my blood" are spoken the bread and wine become the literal body and blood of Christ, despite no perceptible change in the taste or appearance of the substances themselves. This change allows for all of Christ to be substantially present during the ritual. The doctrine of transubstantiation is closely related to the notion of the resurrection and the humanation of Christ. The resurrection of Christ is an important element of the physicality of the tradition; Christ states "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have" (Luke 24:39). Luke further emphasises that in his resurrected state, Christ ate a fish, thus reinforcing the genuine physicality of the resurrected Christ (Luke 24:43). That Christ had a genuine, human body, capable of suffering is central to the doctrine of salvation; Jesus died in a painful and degrading manner in order to redeem the sins of mankind. His corporal reality was necessary for his death, and that he was physically resurrected confirms his divinity while maintaining the significance of his

corporality. The belief that the communion wafer and wine become the literal physical body and blood of Christ echoes that necessary element of humanity and corporality and makes the physical Christ present for Catholic devotees.

The physical death of Christ is crucial not only to the doctrine of transubstantiation, but also to the beliefs and practices of Christians in all denominations. N.T. Wright (1999) emphasizes the importance of these theological elements in many aspects of Christian religion and practice; “[t]hese things – suffering, prayer, martyrdom, church unity, the eucharist – all derive their meaning from the death of Jesus, and all make that death effective in strange ways in the world around, beyond what may be calculated in terms of individual humans coming to faith” (p.106). This again highlights the significance of Jesus’ mortality, and his humanity, which is most effectively expressed through his bodily or corporal reality. One cannot be human without occupying a human body and Christ’s humanity was manifest in his body and his bodily experiences. The physical embodiment of the divine points to the utility of the human body as a means of meeting spiritual needs. In order to address the human need for salvation Christ had to become human and embodied; through the crucifixion Christ’s body then became the instrument of human salvation.

Protestant denominations deny the idea of transubstantiation and perform the communion ritual rather as an act of remembrance. By accepting the communion wafer and wine in most protestant churches devotees are participating in what they believe is a symbolic gesture that acknowledges the bodily sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sake of all human kind. The Eucharist commemorates the death and resurrection of Christ. Marcus Borg (1999) presents a metaphorical understanding of the body and blood of Christ as

they are presented in the Last Supper and consequently as elements of the Eucharist. He states that it is unlikely that Jesus actually declared “This is my Body” and “This is my blood”, but rather, that these statements were “an early Christian ritualization of the death of Jesus, in which the bread and wine of the common meals that marked Jesus’ public activity were invested with symbolic meaning” (Borg 1999, p.87). Christ gave his body and shed his blood on the cross. This sacrifice is connected to the body of the devotee through the ritual action of consuming bread and wine in the context of the Church.

The debate over transubstantiation highlights the political potency of rituals that are so intimately related to core issues in the Christian faith. The divide between protestant and catholic believers highlights the political relevance of ritual. This type of theological and ritual belief serves as a marker of identity and difference and as such creates a distinction of “us” and “them” within the Christian faith itself.

Robert L. Winzeler (2008) states the general meaning of communion: “[t]he sharing of food or drink (or in some cases sex) by a group people, in part at least for a mystical or religious purpose” (p.150). Communion, however, extends to the experience of kinship or an affinity between two or more parties. The notion of commensality is an important expression of the body politic. Sanctions and taboos about sharing food and drink are common means of expressing identity and differentiation. That communion, is universally available to all Christians through the Eucharist, regardless of sex, race or socioeconomic status, then, has important significance for the body politic. It emphasizes a certain sense of spiritual equality common to all Christians. While there is certainly a hierarchy within the church, the experience of the living Christ, and the membership in “His body” is available to everyone and is therefore in a sense an equalizing ritual.

Different means of administering the Eucharist and the exclusion of non-Christians, or those who have been excommunicated<sup>9</sup>, from the ritual also emphasizes the social and political implications of this type of highly structured and regulated ritual. That the Eucharist is available to all Christians in some form, which allows for the average Christian, regardless of education, gender, or hierarchical status to participate in a physical exchange that fosters communion with the divine. In this way this ritual serves as a means for the average Christian to access his or her religion and commune with the divine.

Caroline Walker Bynum (1991) highlights 13<sup>th</sup> century women's experiences of the Eucharist. She suggests that the ritual of communion offered a way for women, who were excluded from ecclesiastical activities, to become one with Christ (p.124). The individual body of the disenfranchised woman then becomes the vehicle with which she can access the divine. Bynum points out that Eucharistic miracles were almost exclusively female and she suggests that for some of these women, Christ, through the rite of communion, became a replacement for other male influences in their lives (ibid, pp.124-125). The ritual of Eucharist offered women access to a spirituality that was largely confined to men. Women did not occupy the same place as men in the spiritual hierarchy of the church, but Eucharistic miracles provided these women with a kind of spiritual significance or importance (ibid, p.135). Communion, and the mystical experiences associated with it, were a way for women, kept on the peripheral of many aspects of religious life, to reclaim some power and spiritual authority. The embodied and

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<sup>9</sup> Excommunication is the suspension of membership in the Christian community for a believer who is thought to have committed a serious transgression that makes him/her unworthy of the sacrament of the Eucharist. This punishment highlights the significance that is placed on the ability to participate in important ritualized actions for believers, and the potential that these actions have as a tool of the social body and the body politic.

ecstatic experiences of Eucharistic miracles allowed women who had traditionally been excluded from the intellectual and philosophical elements of religious life to participate in their faith through the bodies they had been so heavily associated with.<sup>10</sup> The control women were able to exert on their own bodies provided a kind of spiritual control and participation. Bynum (1991) refers to “holy anorexia”, the inability to eat anything except the Eucharistic host, which was reported only in women for most of the Middle Ages (p.186). Bynum also states that “[t]hese reports often included other forms of miraculous bodily closure as well: women who do not eat are reputed neither to excrete nor to menstruate” (ibid). In this sense we can see the physical expression of the Eucharist as a means through which marginalized members of a religious tradition can reclaim an element of religious power, or authority by means of embodied experience and body control.<sup>11</sup> While women were generally denied a voice in religious hierarchy, they were able to exercise control over their own bodies, what they ate, and what they felt, and in turn were able to use their bodies as tools of religious experience and expression, thus, gaining a distinctive access to Christ and the Christian experience.

Women’s physical reactions and experiences often came out of ritual experiences such as during the Eucharist (Bynum, 1992). Physical manifestations of spirituality were varied and diverse, but almost exclusively relegated to women; “[m]ysticism was more prominent in women’s religiosity and claims to sanctity; and paramystical phenomena

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<sup>10</sup> “I will therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly array; but (which becometh women professing goodliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding *she will be saved in childbearing*, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness, with sobriety” (1 Timothy 2:8-15, my emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> This notion can be applied outside the category of gender to other marginalized groups such as the lower castes in the Indian spiritual hierarchy.

(such as trances, levitations, stigmata, miraculous fasting) were far more common among women” (ibid, p.60). The fact that women were relegated into the realm of the physical is correlated by their physical experiences of religion. The physical experience and expression of religion by women is not surprising given the association of the female body with procreation and the material. By reinforcing gender stereotypes, religious leaders and theologians have restricted and stratified religious experiences, and in a spiritual sense this has negative ramifications for men as well as women. In an article about philosophy and the body, Mary Midgley (1997) states, “[t]he official wholly separate, ideal of manhood as disembodied will is a distorted one. It damages men’s lives as well as women’s” (p.58).

The Eucharistic ritual provides participants with location, action, a sensory experience, and the theological rationale that underlies the actions and binds them to faith. Participants are able to utilize their earthly bodies as a means to participate in their religious communities and to achieve personal and experiential communication with the divine.

### **Darsan: Connecting Ritual to Faith**

Inasmuch as the Eucharist can be understood as a central and embodied ritual that is accessible to all believers, and that serves as a liminal experience creating a sense of *communitas*, so too can the Hindu practice of *Darsan*. *Darsan* is based on the devotional belief, for those Hindus who wish to worship *Saguna Brahman*, or *Brahman* with attributes, that when performing acts of worship before a *murti* there is an exchange of auspicious glances. A *murti* is an image of a god or goddess, usually carved in stone, in which the divine dwells; “a *murti* is more than a likeness; it is the deity itself taken form”

(Eck 1998, p.38). This means that, in a *saguna* tradition, the *murti* not only represents the divine, but *is* divine; “the *murti* is a body-taking, a manifestation, and is not different from the reality itself” (ibid). Through the ritualized creation and consecration of a *murti* it becomes more than an image, it becomes a body within which the divine spirit can reside. As a result, when devotees interact with a *murti* they are coming into contact with the divine, rather than with a mere representation of it. Thus in the performance of *Darsan*, the devotee not only sees the deity, but the deity also sees or views the worshiper. There is an exchange of auspicious glances through which the devotee and the divine connect.

The reality of this exchange is evident in the prominence of the eyes on Hindu images of gods and goddesses; “[i]t is said that one of the ways the gods can be recognized when they move among people on this earth is by their unblinking eyes” (ibid, p.7). The *murti*’s prominent eyes are a visual representation of the spiritual significance of *Darsan*. Hindu depictions of gods and goddesses often possess striking and large eyes, which are the last element of the image to be finished. Anthropomorphic images of the divine are consecrated during a special ritual, *prana pratishtha*, in which the eyes are ritually opened. This can be done by piercing them with a special needle or with the final stroke of a paintbrush. During the very first moment after the eyes are opened, it is believed that the gaze from the *murti* is so powerful that it must fall upon something pleasing, such as an offering, or a reflection of its own image. Should such a powerful gaze fall upon an individual person, it is believed that they would die instantly. This highlights the real physical presence of the divine in *Darsan*; the *murti*’s capacity for sight is real for Hindus, so much so that its power can even be dangerous.

Diana L. Eck notes that, “[i]n the Indian context, seeing is a kind of touching” (ibid, p.9). The ritual act of *Darsan*, then, can be seen as a means of physically connecting with the divine. In this sense, *Darsan* and the Eucharist have some functional similarities, in that both rituals provide a *physical point of access*, through the consumption of a symbolic or holy substance, or the exchange of an auspicious gaze. Both devotional activities involve a bodily presence and communication with the divine. Eck states that “[n]ot only is seeing a form of “touching,” it is a form of knowing” (ibid). This knowledge of the divine is not unlike the notion that through Eucharistic devotion the devotee becomes the body of Christ; they know Christ in an intimate and physical way.

The practice of *Darsan* highlights the significance that material religious images can have for believers and communities. The reliance of some Hindu tradition on images, iconic and an-iconic alike allows for members of the tradition who are illiterate or have limited access to texts a means of accessing religious experience and theology. In this sense religious images help to sustain the lived tradition. Eck quotes Pope Gregory I to make this point: he stated “For that which a written document is to those who can read, that a picture is to the unlettered who look at it” (quoted in Eck 1998, p.43). *Darsan* provides a method of religious access for the illiterate, however its spiritual significance is not lost on learned practitioners of the Hindu faith who also actively seek *Darsan*. Hindu devotees will also seek *Darsan* with holy people such as saints or ascetics (Eck 1998, p.5). The physical exchange of sight, then, allows people to interact, to touch each other, even if there are barriers to thoughtful intellectual communication, *Darsan* allows for a genuine communication of spirituality.

The act of *Darsan* calls for both the deity, dwelling in a mediating image, and the devotee to be *physically* present. Devotees will go to temples or pilgrimage sites to see important consecrated images of divinities to which they feel a special devotion. Often a Hindu believer will have an *ista deva* or a preferred divinity; this will be the god or goddess to whom the devotee feels the strongest connection, but does not preclude the worship of other deities. One's *ista deva* may be based on familial tradition, or a particular personal affinity for a particular deity or incarnation. The devotee, then, needs to be physically present to seek *Darsan* from a deity in order to have communion with it. This usually involves the devotee travelling to the temple, however, during important religious festivals the consecrated images, or *murtis*, are often paraded through the streets in a public procession; “[h]ere the roles are reversed: the deities come to the people and give them *darsan* in the streets. The images are brought out of the temple and, in a manner not unlike that of royalty, they travel by chariot or palanquin through the streets of the town” (ibid, p.57). In this case, the location changes yet there is still an exchange, or a communication, between the divine and the devotee.

Physical communion with the divine highlights the significance of the human form as a tool to mediate the relationship between the mundane and divine. *Darsan* and the Eucharist involve a physical exchange and provide an embodied means of divine communion. The ritual element of spiritual interaction emphasizes the reality that, in the context of established religious traditions, the body cannot be overlooked as an essential resource for spiritual communion.

### Chapter Synopsis

Ritual and Scripture exist in relation to each other. The value of religious texts and theological contributions is undeniable, however, ritual serves to make religion

accessible to all social classes and education levels. The externalization of religious teachings and theological beliefs allows for devotees to connect personally with their religious tradition and to foster a sense of community. By creating an experience of *communitas* rituals such as the Eucharist or *Darsan* serve to strengthen the bonds of community. These physical expressions also serve as means of achieving personal communion with the divine and contribute to the understanding of Hinduism and Christianity as *living* faiths.

Through religious rituals and actions the body emerges as a tool of communication with the greater religious community and with the divine. Allowing for and seeking value in ritualized externalizations of theology and faith contributes to individual and collective religious identities. In order to fully understand a religious tradition it is necessary to consider ritual elements as they relate to the reality of the body.

## **Chapter Three - Pure Bodies and Polluting Influences: Addressing Discourses of Purity**

The body, and its physical experiences and desires, has frequently been considered an impure impediment to religious or spiritual advancement. Notions of purity and pollution have great bearing on the way the body is viewed and treated throughout the world, and concepts of purity and impurity have been at the centre of discussion about the body and its place in religion, in communities, and in the cosmos. Ideas about purity and pollution occupy a place in both Eastern and Western theologies. Bodily activities, such as sexual intercourse, defecation, giving birth and menstruation have been considered impure or polluting and are frequently at the centre of rituals and taboos. Many temples in India, for example, have signs requesting menstruating women to respect the purity of the location and remain outside the temple during menstruation. This highlights the extent to which the bodily reality of menstruation is taboo and thought to be polluting and potentially dangerous. Should a menstruating woman even enter the temple she risks contaminating the sacred space with her polluted body. Menstruation taboos are not unique to Hinduism, Simone de Beauvoir (1972) states “on the day she can reproduce, woman becomes impure; and rigorous taboos surround the menstruating female. Leviticus gives elaborate regulations, and many primitive societies have similar rules regarding isolation and purification” (p.180) The tendency to problematize the body and its natural functions from a religious concern of purity has significant consequences for the way the body is understood and handled.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The reality of menstruation taboos does not preclude physical and sexual taboos related to the male body and male sexuality, however, given the historical inferior position of women, they become an

Mary Douglas (1966) suggests that pollution is related to disorder. She proposes that dirt is avoided because it interrupts order. The ideas of purity and pollution, according to Douglas, work at both at an instrumental and an expressive level (ibid, p.3). That is to say that notions of purity and pollution are articulated through the body and that they actively contribute to social constructions and the body politic. At the most obvious level she suggests that pollution ideas serve to “reinforce social pressures” (ibid). The body is linked to faith through the social sanctions and taboos are reinforced by religious beliefs. The relationship, then, between polluting substances and morality is one of symbolic expression and desire to avoid disorder; “we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules are defined by beliefs in a dangerous contagion” (ibid). As systems of purity and pollution are intimately tied to social control they are related to the body politic. Social relationships are often about power and authority. Religious or cultural ideas about purity and pollution are used then as sanctions to ensure that individual bodies behave in a way that reinforces the existing social structure. This is evident in the Hindu Caste system, which is a system of social and labour division and a hierarchy grounded in the notions of purity and pollution.

### **Caste: Examining Embodied Hierarchies**

The Hindu caste system provides a spiritual hierarchy and a means of labour division that is justified by religious beliefs. The caste system is predicated on the belief in inherent levels of purity and impurity that individuals are born into, based on their accumulated karma from previous lives and incarnations. This system of *varnaashramadharma* divides people into four *varnas*: *Brahmin*, *Ksatriya*, *Vaisya* and

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interesting area of exploration in the context of using one’s body, despite its imperfect state and perceived pollution, as a means of spiritual interaction.

*Sudra*, which refer to the priestly, warrior, merchant and labourer castes respectively. One additional group, which exists outside the caste system is referred to as the *Dalits*, and has historically been known as the untouchables. This group of people had been thought to be so impure and polluted that members of all four *varnas* would stridently avoid contact with them, and they were required to do the jobs or tasks considered most polluting. In this context it was not the person's beliefs, values, or behaviours, which rendered them impure or potentially polluting, rather it was a consequence of their birth and the physical body they were born into serves as a polluting influence.

In addition to the category of *varna* there are *jatis*, which serve as traditionally endogamous caste groups; the “development of classes accompanied by frequent conquests paved the way for increased fragmentation of society and the rise of endogamous communities or castes in their new form of *jati*” (Natrajan, 2005, pp.230). The restrictions placed on marriage between different groups serves as a means of protection from polluting influences and highlights the physical reality of spiritual progress. One could risk polluting themselves by interacting with or marrying someone outside their own *jati*. It is significant that it is the current incarnation, the physical body, of a Hindu person that is associated with a *varna* or a level of purity. The inherent *atman*, or soul, despite being bound by karmic matter, is pure and outside the confines of caste<sup>13</sup>. This highlights the perceived difference between body and soul, however does not negate that fact that it is through embodied actions and *yogas* that the karmic matter is burned

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<sup>13</sup> While there are significant nuances to the ideas of caste as well as historical developments, limits of space and time necessitate general discussion, that while not ignoring the historical context and modern developments, avoids a labored focus on these degrees and nuances for the sake of the more general premise.

off, freeing the soul from the confines of *samsara*. Despite any final understanding of the soul after death, or *mokṣa*, in this life, the body is an essential tool for spiritual progress.

The notion of *dharma* is integral to the Hindu worldview and closely linked to caste. *Dharma* is frequently understood to mean one's duty or obligations. One's *dharma* is based on a variety of factors including characteristics like age, sex (gender), *varna* and family. It is widely believed that it is better to perform one's own *dharma* poorly than it is to perform the *dharma* of another skilfully and successfully. In order to rid oneself of *karmic* bondage, one must strive to follow his/her *dharma* diligently and dutifully. The notions of caste and *dharma* place a significant amount of emphasis on this-worldly behaviour and its karmic consequences, which has bearing on the way the physical body is used individually and the way it is socially sanctioned. Although the terminology and philosophy of *dharma*, *karma*, *mokṣa* and the system of caste are not expressed, as such, in the Western Christian context, many of the underlying notions about dirt, pollution and hierarchy are functionally similar.

### **Universal Dirt: Unpacking Contextual Elements of Pollution**

Douglas' (1966) assertion that "our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and that the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail" (p.35), has considerable relevance for a comparative study of religion. She is suggesting that the basic structures of purity and pollution are universal, but that specific details of the system vary from culture to culture. In order to consider this position in terms of Hindu and Christian religion we must first consider some of the specific elements of "pollution behaviour" in the two religious systems.

In the Hindu tradition, pollution is often transferred through bodily contact or contact with polluting objects, while in the Christian context pollution is thought to be

primarily of the spirit or the soul rather than of the physical body. What Douglas refers to as dirt, then, takes on a different form in each tradition, although it maintains a similar function. According to Douglas,

“[d]irt is the by-product of the systematic order and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity” (ibid).

In this sense pollution is not caused by literal dirt, but rather by the defiance of societal norms or rules. This definition of dirt, then, often has nothing to do with an actual material substance that is unclean, but rather the perceived notion of a pollutant that has significant social consequences. In the traditional Hindu context, physical contact between differing castes and *jatis* disrupts structured social order and hierarchies, and consequently results in pollution. However, in the Christian context, one’s state of purity relates to conduct and belief.

The notion of physical purity and impurity is not limited to the human body. When Mary Douglas points out that “[f]or us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement” (ibid, p.7), she is highlighting the reality that for humans physical places and objects often possess value and meaning. As a result, human beings wish to treat these particular places and objects with respect and reverence and this means ensuring that they are not polluted or defiled. This alludes to the physical, or material, element of religion and religious practice, and highlights the significance of interaction with objects and places that have religious meaning. Locations, such as cathedrals, churches, or temples, for example, are considered holy places and as such command a certain element of respect and expected behavioural norms. Emile Durkheim (1995)

created a distinction between the sacred and the profane. He suggests that objects obtain their sacredness by society's projection of ideas onto them. They then become expressions of morality (ibid, p.21). In this sense, objects that are sacred, or pure, are so because society considers them to be. As a result of this reality, according to Douglas, the "Sacred needs to be continually hedged in with prohibitions" (ibid, p.21). As the perceived sacredness of a location or object is accommodated into a culture's system of classification, rules and regulations for its protection from pollution are established.

This projection of sacredness onto an object or location reflects the human desire to understand divine truth in relation to the physical world. In order to navigate our own physical bodies on a spiritual path, gathering places, such as churches and temples, and holy objects, such as prayer beads or *mandalas*, help to focus our physical energies and attention onto spiritual concerns. For Durkheim the demarcation between the sacred and the profane was about the social conscience being projected onto something beyond the individual member of society (ibid, p.21). Here we can see the interaction of the individual body and the body politic. By projecting the social conscience onto something external, something believed to be powerful and sacred, social order and structure could be expressed in grander spiritual terms. These projections, or expressions of morality need to be guarded by prohibitions and regulations; "[t]he sacred must always be treated as contagious because relations with it are bound to be expressed by rituals of separation and demarcation and by beliefs in the danger of crossing forbidden boundaries" (ibid, p. 22).

The notion of sacred and profane, pure and impure, exist in all cultures. Although the details of what constitutes purity or pollution will be exceptionally different in a

Hindu or Christian context the function of the separation of these two categories remains similar.

### **Bodies of Saints: Understanding the Presence of Holy Persons**

Particularly holy or influential religious figures are often attributed a higher degree of physical purity. Catholic relics, for example, point to a strong connection between body and religion. Relics are objects that have been connected to a particular saint during his or her lifetime. They can include personal items or clothing, but are often pieces of the Saint's body. These items hold spiritual significance even after the death of the Saint. Often bones or pieces of a Saint's body will be held in reliquaries or used in the consecration of an altar. The authenticity of a relic is often a matter of debate, however many devout believers consider relics to have real spiritual meaning. There are even reports of people trying to break, or bite, off pieces of body or bone to take home with them. Relics are often believed to have mystical associations, and are venerated and revered, if not worshiped. The existence of relics and the prominent places they occupy in many cathedrals and churches further emphasize the potential for the human body to aid in communion with God. The existence of relics points to the importance of the bodies of holy people. The material remains continue to be important, and good, after death, and their presence is believed to be of benefit to believers; the bodies of saints continue to be instruments of divine communion even after death.

The notion of purity being attributed to the physical bodies of particularly holy people is also present, albeit in a different way, in the Hindu context. When a religious person renounces his or her worldly existence and embarks on the path of asceticism, this person attains a higher spiritual status. These holy men are referred to as *sannyasis*, and

their funeral rites are different from average Hindu believers. While most Hindus are cremated at death, *sannyasis* are buried; “[w]hen death overtakes him the *Sannyasi* is buried in a grave like a pit, with a side receptacle in which the body is made to sit up facing east or north-east with its arms supported on a wooden rest” (Oman 1903, p.156). There are no formal ceremonies that accompany the death and burial of *sannyasis* as these have already been performed upon his renunciation of worldly life, and his admittance into the ascetic order (ibid, p.156). John Campbell Oman provides a first hand account of a burial of a holy man:

“The dead *sadhu* was placed in a sitting position in his grave, a quantity of salt was piled up about him, and earth thrown in till the body was nearly covered up. Then upon the top of his shaven head, still exposed to view, a number of coconuts were broken in order to crack the skull and afford the imprisoned soul a means to exit from the now useless body. The fragments of coconuts which had been used for the liberation of the dead man’s soul were, I remember, eagerly sought for by the bystanders” (ibid, p.157).

Much like Catholic relics, the items that came into contact with this holy man’s body, at the time his soul was released, had value to the religious laity. The fact that the *sannyasi* is buried instead of cremated also underscores the purity of his body in comparison to the average Hindu believer; “the practice of burial, rather than cremation, in case of these and certain other *sadhus*, is due to the sentiment that bodies of such sainted personages do not need to be purified by fire” (ibid).

In both Christian and Hindu contexts the bodies of saints have special value and are thought to be more pure than the body of an average person. This suggests that when the body is used in a religious context in order to become more spiritual, and to come closer to the divine, the physical form itself, the religious instrument, becomes like a pure

and holy object, and consequently contact with it has auspicious value for the lay members of the faith.

### **Faith and Sexuality: Deconstructing the Sexualized Body**

Bodies of the average lay believer, however, tend to be considered impure, and lustful. The need to overcome the body and its primal urges is a significant religious theme in many world traditions. Although sexuality is often considered a taboo subject in religious circles, the experience of human sexuality has been significantly influenced by religion and theology:

“The sexual body is constituted by sexual norms and practices including models of sexual difference rules and techniques regulating sexual intercourse, codes of sexual difference, rules and techniques regulating sexual intercourse, codes of sexual restraint and decorum, traditions of celibacy and asceticism” (Holdrege 1998, p. 343).

Religion not only acknowledges gender division, it also has a relationship with sexuality and the physical interaction between men and women; “[r]eligion’s link with human sexuality is understandable because both are direct, personal experiences of *power*, which evokes a sense of chaos and need for control, pollution and need for purification, danger and need for protection” (McGuire 2002, p.67). In many religious traditions, including Christianity and Hinduism, sexuality is highly regulated and sanctioned. Sexuality is intimately tied to issues such as childbirth, marriage and community values and, as such, religion often presents rituals which address these issues; “[r]eligion, with its capacity to give meaning and order, offers control, purification, and protection for the chaotic power of sexuality” (ibid).

The apostle Paul states “Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God

forbid” (1 Corinthians 6:15). Paul is insisting that sexual activity needs to be moderated and sanctioned as Christians’ physical bodies are of Christ, and therefore must be treated with reverence and respect; [t]hat is exactly why sexual promiscuity is so deplorable – not because the body and sexuality are unclean but because they are potentially holy” (Ware 1997, p.94). According to Kallistos Ware, it is unfortunate that this distinction is overlooked by many preachers and moralists, who conflate the restrictions of the flesh with the body itself. He insists, “[t]he pastoral consequences have been depressing” (ibid).

While sexual and bodily control is common in both Hindu and Christian religious norms, the Tantric tradition in Hindu culture offers a slightly different approach; “[t]he Brahmanical control of the body was rejected in many cases by the Tantras and their followers, sometimes in a mild way through their subversion by overwriting the Vedic body with tantric rites, sometimes in an overt way by its complete transgression in ecstatic bodily experience” (Flood 2006, p.41). It is this use of the body that is described by Holdrege (1998, 2008) as the processual body called the Tantric Body. Loriliai Biernacki (2006) writes about the impact tantric teachings have on ideas about gender. She suggests that if asceticism is generally considered to require the denial of the other and of contact, tantric teachings reincorporate and make use of the body. Biernacki states, “[t]he body in many ways stands as the quintessential other; the body is often associated with the feminine in precisely this context” (p.194). The tantric practice then brings the body, particularly the female body, into an important spiritual role.

## **Virginity, Motherhood and Women's Bodies in the Religious Context**

David Morgan's (2005) chapter, *Engendering Vision*, highlights the way women are been depicted in visual representations of ideal Christian life. The categories of virginity and motherhood have dominated the ideal social behavior for women throughout history, and continue to serve as the two most socially accepted and encouraged ways of being female, which has been historically true in Christian and Hindu contexts. Although the feminist movement has contributed to new assertions of independence and sexuality by women, even in the most liberal societies virginity and motherhood continue to be highly valued, often above other lifestyle choices. The relationship between Christianity and the instructive female categories of virginity and motherhood is plain. Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring (1978) point out that women are closely linked to their bodies and their reproductive abilities. Although there are exceptions women are often presented as weaker, less intelligent and more bound by their physical bodies (ibid). This outdated assumption continues to have some cultural bearing on modern understandings of gender. Despite progress in the fight for gender equality, women are still tied to archetypal notions of temptress, and seductress, or virgin and mother. Women featured in Christian scriptures conform to these archetypes. Specifically we can consider Eve and the Virgin Mary, as they are the two women most closely related to themes of creation and as such material existence. Eve is the first female human, created by God, and Mary serves as the physical (and virginal) mother of Christ, the divine in human form.

In the Hindu context the reality of femaleness is nuanced and complicated. Goddesses make up an important part of the Hindu pantheon and are often prayed to with as much devotion and fervor as their male counterparts. Still, the number of male gods

and avatars far outweighs the number of female goddesses, and frequently goddesses are presented as the consorts of a male divinity. Nonetheless, Hindu goddesses are loved, respected, worshiped and revered. The lived reality for Hindu devotees however continues to produce a patriarchal inequality that keeps women subjugated to occupying a slightly inferior status to men (Derne, 1994), and “[g]enerally women are subject to male authority throughout dharmic literature” (Flood 2006, p.41).

The religious and textual understanding of women has a bearing on the way women are treated and the roles they occupy in a religious and cultural context. In reference to Christianity, Bynum (1991) highlights the fact that women tended to emphasize the corporal reality of Christ. The physical element of Christ’s existence was seen as deriving entirely from Mary as He did not have an earthly father. This notion places value in the physical female contributions to the Christian faith. Christ’s divinity, no doubt, came from his Father, from God. His corporality, however, is directly linked to His mother, His this-worldly parent; “But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, *made of a woman*, made under the law” (Galatians 4:4, my emphasis). As such, Mary acts as an example of a woman whose religious experiences and contributions were physical and material; through her body she provided Jesus with the material body He required in order to physically interact with this world and to die on the cross. More significantly, Mary provided Christ with the physical body that would later be resurrected.

The strongly gendered reality of religion creates an environment in which men and women tend to approach religiosity in slightly different ways. While physical mystical experiences of religion tend to afflict women, “recourse to and comfort by the

Virgin is a more common theme in visions of men than in visions of women” (Bynum 1991, p.35).<sup>14</sup>

Caroline Walker Bynum (1991) also emphasizes the experiential element of Christian female spirituality in the later Middle Ages; “Blood miracles proliferated. And they took place primarily in the bodies and the experiences of women” (p.102). Women’s religious experiences, then, often occurred in a corporal or bodily experience, rather than a cerebral meditational type experience. According to Bynum, “[t]he two most astonishing new miracles of the later Middle Ages are the miracle of the bleeding host, in which consecrated Eucharistic wafers turn into bleeding flesh, and the miracle of stigmata, in which the bodies of ordinary people suddenly receive and display the various wounds of Christ” (ibid, p.102). These religious experiences were relegated, almost exclusively, to the realm of women; “Holy women imitated Christ in their bodies and Christ’s similar bleeding and feeding body was understood as analogous to theirs” (ibid). Female realities related to childbirth and virginity were connected to Christianity and to Christ himself for devoted women who experienced such miracles.

### **Chapter Synopsis**

Purity and pollution are important elements of the religious structure. They help to create a code of behavior and a religious heirarchy. Organizational hierarchies such as the Indian Caste system are predicated on beliefs in purity and pollution. Although the details of such systems, or of the substances which are pure, or polluting, differ from

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<sup>14</sup> In Jungian thought, men and women were afflicted by the anima and animus respectively. The anima is the unconscious female element of a man’s psyche, and the animus is the corresponding male element of a woman’s unconscious. The tendency for the Virgin Mary to be an image of comfort for men may be reflective of the male need for identification with female elements of the psyche. It may also be related to the fact that the Virgin Mary conforms to both sets of desired states of being for women, as she is both a virgin and a mother.

culture to culture, the function of purity and pollution remains similar. Mary Douglas indicates that pollution is related not to literal dirt, but to perceived disorder and as such sanctions and social norms are created around the preservation of social order in the name of purity.

Issues of the impure and lustful body are directly related to purity, both of the body and the soul. Sexuality, and sexual behaviors, are heavily regulated by religious institutions and social codes. Women's bodies in particular are highly associated with the sexual and the potential children that may result. The notions of purity and pollution make up a significant part of the study of the body. The relationship between these ideas and religious structures again emphasizes how pivotal the body is in the religious context.

## **Chapter Four- Religious Objects, Bodily Presence and Sacred**

### **Spaces: Interpreting Religious Gaze**

Objects, images and places are often afforded a sacred quality by communities of believers. Religious devotees make pilgrimages to, or gather in, particular locations that have, for them, exceptional spiritual significance. Important objects or images are created or discovered and subsequently protected and revered. Visual images provide cultural cues and meditative focal points. They physical objects or spaces revered by a particular group reflect their beliefs and behaviors.

Inasmuch as an object becomes sacred because, as Durkheim suggests, of the projection of sacredness onto it, an object's religious and meaning value can be altered if it is relocated or appropriated by another group or culture. Richard Davis (1997) touches on this topic when he states,

“the later lives of Indian religious images and the ways in which these images come to be relocated and revalorized, I argue, also become intrinsic to their significance. Captured by new proprietors and relocated in new surroundings, their identities shifted significantly from what they had been” (p.54-55).

This statement highlights the way in which the significance of an object can be understood as deriving from the perspective with which it is viewed. If a holy object is relocated to a different culture, it may have little or no perceived religious value in its new context. Religious items are part of the faith experience that is constructed by a clergy or group of believers, meaning that they are related to the externalization and transmission of religious musings and social codes. The objects and physical interactions

initiated by a faith community create a tangible and experiential religion that can be transmitted to future generations.

In his book *The Sacred Gaze* David Morgan (2005) posits the significance of perspective;

“The concept of gaze offers to scholars of religion a way of studying the social and cultural embeddedness of seeing. Understanding how sacred images configure vision makes them important evidence for the study of religion, because the projection of rules and the arrangement of viewer and subject that constitute a gaze contribute to the social and historical construction of the sacred.... In each case, a sacred gaze applies itself directly to the task of belief” (p.260).

In the context of the study of embodied religion this means that understanding how people interpret what they see, and how they interact with objects they consider to be sacred or profane reflects and supplements theology. Gaze is also significant in terms of how we view our bodies, and the bodies of others. One can adopt a clinical gaze, a patriarchal gaze, a feminist gaze, a sacred gaze, etc. Much like religious objects or tools, our bodies then are subject to our socialized preconceptions of meaning and the physical experience of religion is related to the way a community or culture *views*, or understands, the concept of body. The sense of sight is a bodily function that relates to the eyes and physical organs and the brain as a receptor of information. What an individual gathers or processes from an image however is related to gaze, which involves the social coding of a physical process, and is related to the social body; “seeing puts believers in the presence of what they wish to see, what they wish to venerate or adore. The sacred gaze allows images to open iconically to the reality they portray or even to morph into the very thing they represent” (Morgan 2005, p.259). The physical process of seeing, and the cultural

process of viewing, intersect and as such influence culture. Through the physical sense of sight devotees are able to interact with their religious culture and community.

### **Ritual Images: Viewing Physical Expression of Faith**

The perceived presence of the divine is often articulated and emphasized with physical objects or representations of a god or goddess; “[o]ptical vision can be used to embolden and intensify inner or imaginative vision. Images can serve as a kind of external scaffolding for concentrated interior experiences such as meditation” (ibid, p.50). Visual images and material items provide foundations for a believer to use in prayer, meditation or ritual.

The cultural and personal lens through which we view images is mediated by our personal and group identities, and conversely the images we view have the potential to be extremely influential. The sense of sight is a particularly important element of human interaction and social organization.<sup>15</sup> For example, things are often colour coded: we use street signs and warning labels to instruct and warn each other, our sense of style and fashion, which relates to personal identity, is visibly displayed with our clothes and decorating choices. Religious ideas and affiliation are also often visually represented: people wear a cross or a *bindi*, manuscripts are decorated or have important lines highlighted, and often the interior of religious buildings are decorated, or left intentionally unadorned, to reflect the beliefs and mood of the particular group. Clothing and interior décor are examples of the use of visual culture to externalize our religious inclination.

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<sup>15</sup> Although visual culture is a significant element of human interaction it is important not to marginalize those living with sight challenges or blindness. This does not prevent one from physically engaging with their faith and tradition. The study of physical challenges in the religious context may prove to be an interesting avenue for further study.

Some religious images are also used in order to allow the devotee to connect to his or her notion of the divine. A physical representation can provide a point of focus and aid in concentrating; “[i]mages make the god or saint or spirit available for petition, praise, offering, and negotiation” (Morgan 2005, p.59). Religious images and objects provide an impetus for connection between the parishioner and his/her notion of ultimate reality. As Robert Orsi points out,

“[d]evotional images are media of presence and they are used to act upon the world, upon others and upon oneself. Such media include holy cards, prayer beads, relics, statues and images, blessed oils and waters, and the many different objects pilgrims bring home from distant shrines” (Orsi 2005, p.48).

Images can be used in individual prayer or meditation as well as in a more communal or group ritual setting and the use of visual culture can strengthen or foster a personal experience of the divine.

The visual element in Hindu worship is very strong. Images of the gods and goddesses are housed in temples and shrines throughout India and diaspora Hindu communities. *Darsan* involves sight and connection with a consecrated image of the divine. We have considered *Darsan* as a ritual process and we can also understand it as a process of sight and gaze. Other images such as *mandalas* or visual and physical prayer aids such as beads and artistic representations of the divine are common in Hindu worship. Images are used in the Hindu context both as an embodiment of the divine, and as a focal point for concentration or meditation. It can be difficult to conceptualize a god without form, so the use of images and representations allows for devotees to worship the divine more readily. Material visual expressions of religiosity are ubiquitous in Indian culture and can be found anywhere from temples, to homes, businesses and even small

public areas in the city streets. It is not uncommon to have a small shrine where worship is performed in a place of work or in a home.

Despite an appreciation for all types of representations of the divine, images to be consecrated and used in temples, however, are created under stricter guidelines; “[f]rom beginning to end the fashioning of an image is governed by ritual prescriptions” (ibid, p.52). This means that there are particular steps or precautions to take to ensure that the image is created in such a way that makes it suitable to be a body, or dwelling place, of the divine;

“[i]f the image is to be made of wood, for example, the image-maker is told which particular kind of trees are suitable for different images, which particular times are auspicious for felling the tree, and how to propitiate the spirits who already dwell in the tree to find the habitation elsewhere, so that the tree may be free for the fresh habitation of the divinity to be shaped from it” (ibid, p.52).

Upon the completion of an image there are rites of consecration which generally take place in a specially consecrated booth located outside the temple

“[f]irst, the image is purified with a variety of ritually pure substances, such as *darbha* grass, honey, and ghee. Then by a rite called *nyasa*, literally the “touching,” various deities are established in different parts of the image; Brahma in the chest, Indra in the hand, Surya in the eyes, the directional guardians in the ear, and so on” (ibid).

The process is both symbolic and spiritual. It is believed that the divine will dwell within the image and consequently will be accessible to devotees who come to worship. The otherwise mundane piece of wood is transformed into an object of worship and a sacred receptacle for the divine; “a particular image is symbolically inhabited by a number of deities, and the correspondences of the various parts of the iconic body to those deities is

reminiscent of the body of the *Prima Purusa* and the deities created from him” (ibid).<sup>16</sup>

The body serves as an important metaphor and spiritual intermediary in this type of ceremony. Present dwelling places and the bodies of worshipers are metaphorically and symbolically connected to the original *Prima Purusa*. In order to complete the consecration “*prana*, the “breathlife,” is infused into the images in the central rite called *pranapratishta*” (ibid). Afterwards the eyes are ritually opened. The level of attention given to the material culture of Hindu religion indicates a complex and important relationship between the religious and the physical.

The importance of ritual images should not be underestimated; “the study of visual culture promises to excavate the visually encoded social arrangements that help empower, disenfranchise, regulate, invent, inspire, and unite people” (Morgan 2005, p.258). The physical experiences of sight and touch can have significant bearing on a religious encounter and religious images can act as both supportive and as instructive influences. It is neither useful nor beneficial for scholars or clergy to ignore or deny the physical and material aspects of religious practice.

## **Puja: Investing Embodied Religious Exchange**

The Hindu ritual of *puja* exemplifies the potency of religious images. In Hinduism, “the simple lay rites of making offerings of flowers and water, and receiving both *darsan*, the sight of the deity, and *Prasad*, the sanctified food offerings, may be

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<sup>16</sup> The *Prima Purusa* is the primal being described in the *vedas* as that within which all creation existed. It is thought that this primeval being was divided up into pieces, which became the elements of creation we know today (Sharma 2000, Klostermaier 2000). The term *purusa* itself refers to the male human body and Scholars have suggested the *purusa-sukta*, a hymn in the *Rigveda*, may allude to genuine human sacrifices (Klostermaier 2000, p.20). Human sacrifices would serve as an overt example of doing theology with or to the body. The projection of the body into the theology of creation illustrates how indispensable it is to human existential understanding.

called *puja*.” (Eck 1998, p.47). *Puja* is an important element of Indian religious practice. This ritual is a highly stylized and established tradition in temples and homes throughout the Hindu world; “*puja* consists of elaborate forms of worship performed in the home by the householder and the temple by special priests called *pujaris* who are designated for that purpose” (ibid). The ritual of *puja* is performed by Hindus from all different backgrounds, as well as in other religious traditions such as Jainism or Buddhism. Performing *puja* is a way of venerating and worshiping gods and goddess by offering them items such as food and flowers; “[s]acrificial offerings, before (and often to) images are the material form of an economy of exchanges that allows believers to enter into a relationship with deities, which is intended to result in mutual satisfaction” (Morgan 2005, p.59). The offerings include such tangible items as food, water, sandalwood perfume, incense and cloth (Eck 1998, p.47). In addition to these material items the waving of a fan, or a flywhisk are believed to be pleasing to the deity and as such are also understood as a type of offering (ibid). The material element of *puja* and the concept of exchange and interaction with the divine emphasize the significance of material culture and a media of presence.<sup>17</sup>

In the Hindu context these physical offerings are essential to the maintenance of the deity; “one sees evidence of the theological notion expressed by the *Pillai Lockacarya* that people not only depend upon God, but God is willingly dependent on people, upon their nurturance and caretaking” (ibid, p.48). In this sense, for devotional movements in Hinduism, the physical connection to the divine is not only a means of achieving communion but also a kind of interdependence. The image incarnation of a

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<sup>17</sup> The act of lighting a candle in prayer at an altar in a Catholic context is structurally similar. The believer performs an action in front of a meaningful visual image and uses the physical act as a means of aiding their connection to the divine and a symbolization of their faith and theology.

*murti* is thought to be a divine guest, an indwelling spirit who resides in the *murti*. This spirit must then be cared for and revered; “[t]he image is wakened in the morning, honored with incense and song, dressed, and fed” (ibid, p.46). Eck suggests that the offerings made to image incarnations, “are the gestures of honor and devotion we know best” (ibid, p.49). The learned cultural behaviors and societal expectations are mirrored in religious practices. The physical actions that are used as forms of worship, allow human devotees to frame their devotion in a way that is understandable and easily accessible. Eck points to the broad availability of these ritual items; “we show honor with these fruits and flowers because they are the most beautiful offerings that all people, even the poor, can afford” (ibid, p.48). The accessibility of *puja* makes it an important ritual that has spiritual significance and serves as a area of religious access for the lower classes and uneducated. Furthermore, this process provides a means of genuine interaction with the divine; “[t]he image, which may be seen, bathed, adorned, touched, and honored does not stand *between* the worshiper and the Lord” (ibid, p.44). In this sense the image is not understood as an intermediary or a symbolic representation, but a point of direct communion between the believer and the divine.

The structure of the *puja* rituals is revealing of the nuanced understanding of the nature of the divine as present in the ritual image;

“[t]he rites of *avahana* (“bidding”) and *visarjana* (“dismissal”) which very often open and close the period of worship also illumine something of the meaning of the image. *Avahana* is the “calling,” the “bidding” of the deity at the commencement of worship.[...] Similarly, when the *puja* is over, the deity is given leave to depart, with a prayer of dismissal” (ibid, pp.49-50).

Despite the belief that the divine is continually present in consecrated images, these prayers, which invoke and dismiss the deity, serve to reinforce the idea that the divine is

not restricted by an image incarnation and that the divine is omnipresent and can dwell in many *murtis* throughout the Hindu world.

*Puja* is an important and widely practiced Indian ritual. In the context of *puja* Hindu worship takes a highly physical form. This practice is a method of interacting and relating to the divine in a uniquely human and embodied way.

### **Sacred Spaces: Location as Function of Religiosity**

The location of a temple, church, or shrine holds significant value for the religious community. Desecration or misuse of such locations is genuinely hurtful and distressing for the congregation that uses it, and the wider spiritual community. The construction and maintenance of a building or shrine provides an important element of shared community responsibility, and it also provides the group with a meeting place, which is intrinsic to the preservation of the collective and social body.

The construction of a Hindu temple, much like a *murti*, involves ritual processes and consecration. As with the careful selection of auspicious material for a religious image, “the ground on which the temple is to be constructed is carefully selected on the basis of its auspicious situation and seeded for the auspicious sign of germination” (ibid, p.59). Spirits who dwell in the space on which the temple will be built are asked to leave so that it may become the home of the divinities of the temple. The element of sight is also present in the construction of a temple; “at the very end of the construction process, the “eyes” of the temple are opened by the master architect and the priestly architect, who ascend to the top of the temple in the middle of the night and pierce open the eyes of the temple with a golden needle” (ibid, p.58). The notion of body is again evident in this part of the construction process. The temple itself is believed to have bodily characteristics,

eyes, that have spiritual significance. The construction process is also highly ritualized and premeditated; “[t]he building of a temple, like the shaping of an image, is not left to the creativity of the architect or craftsmen. It carefully follows canons of building and is, from beginning to end, a ritual activity” (ibid, p.60). The construction of a temple in the Hindu context illustrates the marriage between the physical and spiritual.

Location and space prove to be a very important aspect of Hindu worship. When Hindu devotees go to take *darsan*, they often seek *darsan* not only with an image of the divine, but also with a particular place or location (ibid, p.5). Hindu devotees seek communion with the divine through interaction with pilgrimage sites that are “said to be natural epiphanies of the divine: the peaks of the Himalayas, which are said to be the abode of the gods; the river Ganga, which is said to fall from heaven to earth; or the many places which are associated with the mythic deeds of gods and goddesses, heroes and saints” (ibid). Given the spiritual value of certain locations and buildings it is unsurprising then that devotees would be willing to travel to sites and locations that are believed to have particular spiritual significance.

## **Pilgrimage: Finding Faith Through Physical Journey**

Pilgrimage is an important element of Hindu and Christian religious practice. Pilgrimage can be defined as a “ritual journey to a sacred place in order to request supernatural aid, fulfill a vow, accumulate merit, meet a requirement, express devotion, or several or all of these” (Winzeler 2008, p.151). Devotees disrupt their daily lives and routines in order to physically travel to a site that has spiritual significance.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>18</sup> The internet has provided a new platform for virtual expressions of religiosity and has the capacity to create a new category of virtual pilgrimage, however, pilgrimage has existed historically as a physical journey that requires effort and physical expression.

location of the pilgrimage site is of major consequence; “[a]lmost by definition, a pilgrimage site is believed to be a place of miracles or mystical power” (ibid, p.153). During pilgrimage, the “entire journey is a ritual activity. Once the pilgrims begin, they are in a sacred *liminal* state” (ibid, p.154). In this sense the pilgrims experience *communitas* and a sense of community and connectedness. Pilgrimage, again, is an example of a way in which religious activity is carried out through the body. The element of travel and movement in pilgrimage requires actual presence and a certain level of physical awareness and capability. In his discussion of pilgrimage in Japanese religion Michael Pye points out that, “[t]he body still has to be moved around the pilgrimage route, even when recourse is made to motorized transport” (Pye 1997, p.258). The physical presence of the body, then, is essential and at the heart of the spiritual demonstration and experience. One cannot achieve the same intensity or spiritual experience through the use of photographs, or other modern technologies; they must be physically present and physically engaged with the journey. It is also significant that there is a particular destination or site with which the devotee must engage. This, again, highlights the physical realm of religion. The location, the space itself, has religious significance and spiritual value.

The sacredness of a pilgrimage site can also confer special meaning onto an image or object obtained at the site; “[t]aking [polychrome color images] home from a temple or a place of pilgrimage, the devout may place such images in the home shrine. Thus one may have *darsan* not only of the image, but of the picture as well!” (Eck 1998, p.44). In this sense, physical proximity and contact have the potential to confer or create enhanced spiritual meaning.

Pilgrimage helps connect believers to their shared history; “[p]ilgrimage to the Holy Land was an ancient practice, suggesting that the Christian during this life is only at home in Jerusalem, specifically at the tomb where Jesus was laid after his crucifixion” (Keen, p.126). By being physically present in a spiritually significant place a believer is thought to be able to accumulate merit. Making pilgrimages to important holy sites, or to venerate relics and saints was understood as a way “to supplement the sacrament program and gain merit outside the ritualized world of liturgy” (ibid, p.183). In the Hindu context, pilgrimage, or *Yatra*, are made to spiritual places from which the pilgrim can take *Darsan*. The Indian city of *Varanasi* or, *Benares*, is an important holy city for Hindu pilgrims; “Hindu belief is that every religious act done in [*Benares*] is multiplied karmically, meaning that the merit of giving, bathing, fasting even once there, is worth several lifetimes of the same acts done elsewhere” (Esposito, p.333). By physically visiting a holy place or object religious pilgrims are able to interact with their faith in a very real and tangible way. They are able to see and touch and feel what pilgrims have seen and touched and felt for generations previous. In this way they connect to their history. They are also then connected to fellow pilgrims and the theology that compelled them.

## **The Physical element of Religion, and the Potential and Problems for**

### **Interreligious Communication**

A revaluing of physical experiences of religion has significant potential to provide a religious voice to the believers who have occupied the lower echelons of a religious hierarchy. The ability to understand and read religious scriptures places certain requirements and expectations on the believers. One must be literate and have the

intellectual inclination for reading, analysing and thinking about scripture. Historically, access to education would have been stratified based on social classes and economic divisions, and certainly this stratification is still relevant in much of the developing world today. This takes what is believed to be universal and absolute truth and places it in the hands of an elite minority. Religious traditions provide frameworks of meaning and help people to understand their existential place in this world and beyond. Regardless of validity or exclusivity, religion is real for those who subscribe to it. In this sense religion serves an important functional role in the lives of individuals and communities.

However, inasmuch as the body can act as a point of religious access for the disenfranchised, it may also serve as a barrier. Despite the universal experiences of creation, or embodiment, the body allows for an “otherness” or the possibility of marking difference. In this sense the body, and bodily expressions, such as circumcision, or elements of dress can serve to create a sense of exclusivity or hierarchy. Similarly, social and religious hierarchies are often accompanied by bodily prohibitions and expressions that can serve to create stronger segmentation and inequality in a particular society. The Hindu caste system is an example of the way notions of purity and pollution relegated some people to marginal positions based on a notion of bodily pollution. The reality of sensory participation in religious activity also creates significant challenges for any person who faces a physical disability or challenge. The power of bodily expression and interaction is undeniable in the religious context.

### **Chapter Synopsis**

The relationship between a devotee and a location, or object, can have bearing on the physical experience of religion for that person. Particular objects, images or locations can bring faith into the physical realm aiding in the experience of religion and

belief. An understanding of the religious gaze can help to illustrate the way believers experience and live their faith. Interactions with religious objects, and locations, mirror and influence theological beliefs and ideas, providing a cultural lens through which we can view ourselves, others and religious traditions. By engaging physically with religion and interacting with holy objects or sacred spaces devotees externalize their beliefs, which allows them to interact and communicate with other believers, and with the divine. Religious rituals such as Hindu *Puja* and pilgrimage are examples of physical manifestations religious expression. They contribute to the connection of believers to each other and to their faith.

This externalized expression has both the potential to create meaningful religious experiences for able-bodied worshipers, and to be exclusive and problematic for believers suffering from mobility or sensory challenges. It is important to keep in mind that there is not *one* correct way of approaching religion and worship, rather that as scholars we must consider all methods of accessing faith.

## **Conclusion: Moving Bodies into the Religious Discussion**

Catherine Bell (1992) points out that, “a consensus of sorts has emerged granting the body a critical place in the social construction of reality” (p.95). The rituals highlighted in Christian and Hindu traditions serve to reinforce the idea of the body as a tool of social and religious interaction. In the religious context, concern for the divine and for spiritual goals is necessarily mediated by corporal existence; “[i]t is counterproductive for us, individually and professionally, to continue to accept uncritically the assumptions of [...] mind / body dualism” (McGuire 1990, p.285). Ritual actions connect the body to religious and spiritual practices and beliefs. The material and physical elements of ritual engages the believer in a sensory experience of religion. This physical interaction points to the body as a this-worldly tool, or aid, to communion with the divine. Rituals are enacted and repeated with purpose and meaning. While it is conceivable that an element of a person, such as the mind or spirit, survives the material body, that nonetheless does not eliminate the important relationship that exists between body and mind in this life; nor does such a possibility alter the significant role the body plays in this-worldly religious worship.

The aim of this paper has not been to prove the validity or the truth about God or gods, or any particular religion or religions, but to implicate the biological functions of the body in religious practice and to place the body squarely within the framework of religious understanding and spiritual life. As Marcel Mauss (1979) suggested, there are embodied biological means of entering into communion with the divine. In fact, I suggest

that in this life, they are, for many believers, the primary ways of connecting not only with the divine, but also the greater religious community.

Through an exploration of identity and ritual in a religious context the value of the body becomes apparent. The task then is to understand the role of the body in religious use in terms of meaning and value. I suggest that the body is at the centre of this-worldly religious life, and that as such it must be afforded a place in religious culture and academic discussions, and that physical experiences of religion must be given consideration in a theological context. Regardless of what happens after death, in this lifetime, the human body is paramount to the realization of spiritual and religious goals. Ritual actions and physical means of worship, such as Eucharist devotion, *puja*, *darsan*, marriage, etc., and the use of physical elements and locations in these practices highlight the necessity of the body in religious practices. Theories such as those presented by Mauss and terminology such as that presented by Holdrege hold great value for the further exploration of this topic. I have chosen to frame this discussion within the context of two lived traditions. This comparative approach has allowed the role of the body in each faith to emerge organically, and to contribute to the larger theoretical discussion.

The embodied element of religion, however, in no way detracts from the long-standing tradition of study and devotion through the use of theological texts and prayer. It is just as detrimental to suggest that religious practice is *entirely* physical as it is to suggest that it is *entirely* intellectual and extrasensory. The spirit/mind and body are best understood as existing in relation to one another. Thoughts and feelings that occur in the mind or spirit are experienced and communicated through the body; similarly the internal beliefs and values of a communal body are expressed and communicated through rituals

and physical interactions. While many religious doctrines teach that physical this-worldly body will ultimately be forsaken and abandoned in favour of a purer, more spiritual existence in the next other-worldly life, the body cannot be trivialized and must still be understood as a valuable tool and indispensable element of spirituality in this life.

Ritual is merely one element of the body's complex relationship with religion; the religious value of the body could be studied in a variety of contexts. For example it could be looked at in terms of creation and eschatology, or in terms of the physical apparitions of the divine. Furthermore it is important to consider these ideas not only in the context of Christianity and Hinduism, but in other religious contexts such as world religions like Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism, as well as in the context of tribal religious cultures in places like North America, Australia and Africa. Comparative studies that strive to better understand the body in the religious context need to allow for similarities and differences between the traditions to stand on their own merit, rather than to attempt to find universals that support a central argument.

By revaluing the body we open the door for a new epistemology, and a re-thinking of destructive ideas and assumptions. Women in particular have been associated with the material existence and the physical body. This has served to justify a patriarchal hierarchy based on the assumption that this material element of female existence made them less spiritually valuable or important. This type of disparaging behavior and way of thinking is problematic for all types of marginalized people, including the uneducated, the lower economic classes and low standing social or caste groups. By valuing and allowing for physical interaction with religion and the divine we can both revalue traditionally female, or low caste, means of interacting with the divine and open a new

approach for the traditionally elite, male, *logos* centered type of religious practices to involve and pay attention to embodied experiences. This has the potential to create fuller and better religious experiences and understandings of them.

The acknowledgment of physical and material expressions of religion and worship is intrinsic to a coherent study of religion and an improved understanding of the body. David Morgan (2005) suggests that, “by defining visual culture as method or approach rather than only as field or subject matter, we are able to focus on interpretation as the measure of value” (p. 258). Similarly, by considering the body and its role in religious studies we open-up the field to greater possibilities for understanding and for communication of ideas. This is true of interreligious or ecumenical dialogue, and is also true for communication and the sharing of experiences within a religious tradition. A re-valuing of corporal elements of religious practices could allow many believers who have been relegated to the periphery of religious life to engage in meaningful religious experiences. This notion, however, is not without its challenges. As much as the body serves as a means of creating a sense of connectedness it could also potentially be used as a tool for division and exclusion. An emphasis on bodily participation may, for instance, exclude people who have physical disabilities, and it may also be detrimental to people living within systems founded on notions of physical separation such as the caste system in India. The social body can be used to visually create a sense of belonging and ‘otherness’ and can consequently be used as a tool for exclusion. This again highlights the need for a genuine and focused reflection of the role physicality plays in the religious sphere.

While the role of the body in religious practice and theology is nuanced and varied, it nonetheless is an important area of examination. A closer look at the corporal reality of religious practice is important for theological and academic discourse, as well as for individual understanding and connection with religious practice. Human existence is located squarely within the human form, and social and religious interaction takes place in and through the body. There is no single approach – or means of thinking about – the human body, however, the body is an unavoidable reality of both religious and mundane elements of human life. By approaching religious studies with an understanding of the *mindful body* scholars have the opportunity to explore religion in an important and authentic way. The role of ritual and the concept of ritual bodies highlights the connection of body to spirituality in this world, and helps us to better understand and connect to theology, community and the divine.

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