The religious body imagined, part II

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Since antiquity, the relationship between the body and the soul has always been a complicated one, full of friction. From Socrates and Plato, including Saint Teresa of Avila, the body has traditionally been portrayed as the prison of the soul, and has carried the burden of being perishable, imperfect, and inconsequential; in other words, a burden for the perfectionist desires of the soul, always in search of the transcendental union with the divine. However, the essays in this issue offer a new horizon in this relationship, and propose new forms of collaboration and interdependence between the two, opening before our eyes a wide range of possibilities for the embodiment of the sacred.

This issue of Body and Religion offers five captivating answers to the interrelation between religion and body. It considers topics such as ritual bodies, the religious body represented in artistic form, the use of the body in shaping religious ideals, the agency of sexual, queer bodies, embodied ritual performance and reception, healing the body, and other related topics. These essays were first accepted for presentation at an international symposium on The Religious Body Imagined that was hosted by Elon University’s Center for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society (CSRCS) in February, 2019. This conference set out to ‘examine the ways in which the religious body has been imagined, imaged, and discursively produced in particular places, times, and religious traditions.’ As a result, this journal issue, together with Body and Religion volume 3(2), which includes the other half of the symposium papers, contributes new and original research as well as theoretical insights that can substantially help to expand our
understanding of the interdisciplinary field of religion and body studies in general.

Gilders’ article opens the issue with an article focusing his gaze on a specific body: that of Harvey Milk, the first gay activist to be elected as a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. In his article, ‘Harvey Milk’s (sexual and sacred) body,’ Gilders addresses the overlapping of two apparently contradictory motifs, which have transformed the figure of Milk into an icon: explicit sexuality and the martyrrological tradition, which come together in the representations of a ‘queer saint,’ in both senses of the word; that is, a political activist in the defense of LGBTQ+ rights, but also a non-conventional sacrificial lamb, assassinated for a greater cause. Gilders analyzes these parallels in the exhibits that remember the figure of Milk, and that are strongly influenced by the religious iconography around saints and relics of his sexualized body.

In contrast, Tavor’s article, ‘Surveilled, harmonized, purified: the body in Chinese religious culture,’ takes us to ancient China, where he explores the pervasiveness of the body as a central concept in medieval Chinese religious culture. Taking apocryphal medieval Buddhist scripture, *The Sūtra of Trapuṣa and Bhallika*, as his point of departure, he traces references to the body beyond its physicality, entering the symbolic realm that perceives the body as a microcosm of the social, political, and metaphysical worlds. Tavor argues that the importance of synchronizing this symbolic body with the natural cycles of the universe became central in the emerging doctrine of Buddhism and Daoism, two of China’s main organized religions. This notion of the microcosmic body and its social and political correlations remains central in Chinese religious culture today.

Pamela Winfield invites us to join her on a journey throughout the history of Japan, in order to elucidate the treatment given to the emperor’s body, not only physically, but also visually and ritually. In her article, ‘Religion and the imperial body politic of Japan,’ Winfield argues that, although this notion of body politic only emerged technically during the early modern period, it was already present in premodern Buddhist teachings and was reinforced by cultural enactments that identified the body of the emperor with his empire and sought out the health of the former to ensure the wellbeing of the latter. Winfield provides a rich historical, historiographical, and theoretical analysis of the emperor’s rhetorical, artistic, and ceremonial body-state, emphasizing the centrality of his human, physical body while framing his religious and political authority over Japan.

Katherine Zubko takes the above-mentioned themes of connection between body and religion in a completely different direction in her article, ‘The embodied palimpsest: dancing kinesthetic empathy in bharatanatyam.’
Turning her attention to the current refugee crisis worldwide as her point of departure, Zubko focuses on how choreographic sequences from Apsaras Arts’ Agathi: The Plight of the Refugee (debuted in Singapore, 2017), which are traditionally used to represent Hindu myths, can be reframed to explore issues related to social justice. In order to do this, Zubko analyzes the multitude of layers that constitute this novel dance production, and in turn, creates a scholarly palimpsest that allows her to make the invisible visible again. Her study of this choreography exposes the porosity of the performative body, which uses Hindu narratives and rasas (aesthetic moods) such as compassion to shape the immigrants’ experiences, adding a new perspective within aesthetic studies on kinesthetic empathy.

Finally, Megan Adamson Sijapati explores the instrumentality of the body in religion through a focus on praxis in a Shadhiliyya Sufi Muslim community based in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in western Pennsylvania. The practices and beliefs of this tariqah (Sufi order) are derived from the guidance of its recently deceased Shaykh, Muhammad al-Jamal (d. 2015), from Jerusalem, who began teaching in the United States in the 1990s. Drawing upon two years of fieldwork, Sijapati discusses the centrality of the body to these Sufis’ religious experiences and to their understandings of themselves and their relationship with the divine. The article elaborates on the ways in which the body is instrumentalized in the production of religious experience and self in the community’s healing practices and posits the body as a site where religion happens.

In this way, Sijapati’s contemporary study of a Sufi community in the United States provides a fitting bookend and brings us full circle, back to Gilders’ study of the cultural canonization of Harvey Milk. In the meantime, Tavor and Winfield have contributed with historical studies of the body as a microcosm, whose health equated the wellbeing of the social, political, and metaphysical worlds. These analyses led to Zubko’s convergence of an ancient ritualistic dance, used with a social justice agenda in mind, which exposes the misfortunes of current migrants all over the world. This journey through some of the most vibrant cultures around the world allows us to inquire into the different functions the human body can acquire, as well as some of the transformations that it is capable of. This journal issue is an invitation to explore, from the perspective of multiple disciplines and geographically diverse case studies, the plasticity that the embodiment of the religious body is able to reveal.