

Ellen Aasland REINERTSEN

A Religion of Body

I am a bodily creature. I am a body. I relate to all my surroundings as a body. And through my body I relate to my faith. Christianity is often accused of having had and having a sick relationship to everything bodily.

Throughout the history of the church the body has been seen as the lower part of creation: The body is the prison of our divine soul – the seat of evil desires. While acknowledging that the church's understanding of the body often has been unhealthy, I believe that Christianity is a religion of body.

A BODY LIKE GOD

At the core of the Holy Scriptures and the Christian tradition we find a positive view of the human body. The creation story in Genesis 2 gives us bodily images of how humankind was created. The Lord God took clay from the earth and shaped it into a human body. God blew the breath of life into the nose and the body came to life (Gen 2:7).

In the Hebrew tradition we find little separation between

body and soul. God did not first create a body, and then give it a soul. No, when God blew into the human being the life-giving breath the human being became a soul. A living soul. A living creature. If we combine the creation story in Genesis 2 with the one in Genesis 1, we believe that living beings, that embodied souls, are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27).

GOD AS BODY

One important Christian doctrine is that God chose to come to the world as a body. "Incarnation" comes from Latin and means "coming in flesh". According to what became a Christian doctrine, Jesus was not only 100% God, but also 100% human. He was the real thing, a real body.

The earthly Jesus preached good news for bodies. He proclaimed that in the bodies of our sisters and brothers we see God. When we satisfy the bodily needs of suffering bodies, we satisfy the needs of God. In a parable of the coming judgement, Jesus tells that the Great King says "What you

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Winter Conference of the Central European Sub-Region in the Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute in Pannonhalma, Hungary

7-10 FEBRUARY 2002

THE CROSS AT THE SILVER SCREEN - CHRISTIANITY IN THE CINEMA ART

Nordic Winter Meeting in *Vantaa, Finland*

11-24 FEBRUARY 2002

MAKE JESUS KING

Executive Committee Meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa

13-19 MARCH 2002

THE DIALOGICAL WAY

European Regional Committee Meeting in *Minsk, Belarus*

6-13 APRIL 2002

WOMEN AND MEN CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE... BUT?

Body and Sexuality between Denial and Assertion
Gender and Education Conference in *Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

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CONSULTATION FOR TEACHERS AND COURSE ORGANISERS

Lingua Franca Meeting in *Dobogókő, Hungary*

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WOMEN AND MEN AS GOD INTENDED

Thematic Conference by the Iona Community in the MacLeod Centre, *Iona, Scotland*

8-14 JULY 2002

ECOLOGY AND ECUMENISM

Central European Sub-Region Summer Seminar in *Vilemov, Czech Republic*

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REFLECTING UPON THE MEANING OF BEING CHRISTIANS TODAY

Agape's International Theological Camp in *Prati, Italy*

10-17 AUGUST 2002

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24-30 AUGUST 2002

STUDENTS' EVERYDAY LIFE IN EAST AND WEST EUROPE

International Ecumenical Student Meeting of ESG in *Waldsiedersdorf, Germany*

JUNE TO SEPTEMBER 2002

10 LINGUA FRANCA COURSES

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16-20 SEPTEMBER 2002

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ROLE MODELS IN THE BIBLE

European Regional Committee Meeting in *Rome, Italy*

2-9 NOVEMBER 2002

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY IN CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY

EYCE – WSCF Europe Joint Event in the Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute in *Tihany, Hungary*

5-9 FEBRUARY 2003

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF/IN THE FOR-PROFIT ENTERPRISES

Winter Conference of the Central European Sub-Region in *Spišská Kapitula, Slovakia*

did to one of the least of these my brothers, you did to me” (Mt 25:40b).

The last thing Jesus did with his friends before his death, according to the biblical gospels, was to eat with them. A meal is a bodily enjoyment and at the same time a strengthening of the body. “Do this in remembrance of me”, Jesus said. And we still do. We eat the body of Christ and drink the blood, and what we eat and drink becomes part of our own bodies.

Jesus died bodily. With blood and pain and despair. And as Christians we believe that the resurrection of Christ was a bodily one. We believe that eventually we will do the same.

When Christian theology was shaped in the first centuries of the common era, it meet with competing views of the body. A popular and fascinating worldview at that time was that bodies and all matter are made by an evil god, different from the good god who created the souls and all spiritual life. What became Christian theology had to struggle to keep the belief that the body is the good creation of the good God.

BODILY SPIRITUALITY

Studying the Old Testament, I came across two Hebrew concepts which fascinate me.

Yád'a is a verb describing knowledge, experience or insight. It is often used for knowing or being known by God, often in an intimate way. The same word can also mean bodily knowledge: sexual contact.

The Hebrew word **qáráb** means “come near” or “approach”. This word has a span of meaning from approaching the altar for cultic worship to (for a man) coming near a woman for sexual intercourse.

How do I relate to God? Through what do I experience and worship the divine? Knowledge in my tradition is often intellectual knowledge. My worship is not very often bodily. I find it inspiring that the words used for knowledge and worship in the Hebrew context have far broader meaning potential than in my context. The same word can refer to approaching the divine and coming close to your beloved and the way you know your lover is compatible with your insights into religious truths.

Is it not so that my knowledge of, and experience with, the divine has to do with every aspect of mine? With my entire body? I am a body and this is how I relate to God. My faith is embodied in a religion of body.

Suggested Readings:

MCFAGUE Sally, *Body of God*. 1959.

GALLOWAY Kathy (ed.), *Dreaming of Eden. Reflections on Christianity and Sexuality*. 1997.

Ellen Aasland REINERTSEN is a student of Lutheran theology at the University of Oslo (Norway) and the University of Vienna (Austria). She is 25 years old and has been part of the Oslo SCM since 1998, also on the local board. Since October 2001 she has been part of the European Regional Committee of WSCF, where she is the coordinator of the Gender and Education Working Group.

