The Body Unbound

The Body Unbound:
Philosophical Perspectives on Politics, Embodiment and Religion

Edited by

Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Ola Sigurdson
and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir

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The Body Unbound: Philosophical Perspectives on Politics, Embodiment and Religion grew out of the second biannual conference of the Nordic Society for Philosophy of Religion (NSPR), "Religion and Politics of the Body", held at the University of Iceland June 26 – 28, 2009. The three day conference with its lectures and lively discussions laid the foundations for a book on biopolitical issues of embodiment in philosophy and religion.

The NSPR is an international and inter-disciplinary network of scholars doing philosophy of religion. For the period 2007-2010, the society received funding from the Nordic research board *NordForsk* in order to establish the network PRINE (Philosophy of Religion in Northern Europe) with a number of conferences and workshops. An additional grant from the *Nordic Culture Fund* made it possible to bring together scholars not only from the Nordic countries, but also from England, Germany, Australia, United States, Canada and the Baltic countries for the conference in Reykjavik. We would like to express our deep gratitude to NordForsk and Nordic Culture Fund for making possible the cooperation over the last three years that lead to the publication of this book.

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Oslo / Göteborg / Reykjavik in March 2010.
Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Ola Sigurdson and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir

INTRODUCTION

Marius Timmann Mjaaland, Ola Sigurdson
and Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir

The Double Bind of the Body

In the history of Western philosophy since Plato, the body has often been perceived as a prison for the soul. Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul imply a sharp distinction between the two: whereas the body perishes at the moment of death, the soul is immortal and enjoys a period of freedom before it may again animate the body of a living thing.[1] In Platonic dualism throughout the history of philosophy, the perishable body becomes a hindrance for the freedom and wisdom of the eternal soul. As Platonic thought was the major philosophical influence on Christian thinking and Gnostic movements in Ancient Europe and the Middle East, the body has remained suspect and has been subjected to control and discipline both in the dominant religious traditions and, in later history, in the more secular anthropologies of the Enlightenment and modernity. In other words, the body was doubly bound: on the one hand, it was perceived as a prison, binding the soul to transience, darkness, and confusion. On the other hand, it was itself controlled, bound and disciplined by reason and will, law and culture. The history of the body is truly the history of a double bind.

Since Abraham's binding of Isaac – minutely described by Søren Kierkegaard as an ethical, religious, spiritual, and physical double bind[2] – the body has been a focal point in the history of the three Abrahamic religions, either overtly or implicitly. The body which is born, the body which is bound to die, the sexual body, the gendered body, the nourished, the washed, the dressed, the ailing and challenged body, the healing body

[1] Cf. Plato, *Phaedo,* 105c; cf. 70c-72d.

[2] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

and the religiously observing body; all these bodies have been figured and disciplined by religious and philosophical ideas and ideals. Through a morality which has had a lot to say about our human existence as embodied beings, the religions have thus contributed to the formation of a biopolitics of the body, be it in the form of external or self-imposed control.[3] Yet biopolitics should not be understood merely as repressing bodies, as it can also act to empower. Meditation and ascetic lifestyles are examples of practices which discipline the body in order to deepen awareness, to converge and release creative energies. In the wake of various emancipatory movements, the repressed body has been liberated and unbound, yet at times leading to new and subtler forms of repression and control. Thus the unbound body can become ambiguous, a site of possibility as well as of bondage. To some degree, the unbinding of the body is always tied to some practice of shaping or directing the body.

Today, the religious context of those meanings given both to bodies and to embodiment has gained a renewed political significance. For centuries, Nordic countries, which present the original context for this volume, were part of a rather homogenous, Protestant region. But even here they have lately been the site of strong tensions between different religious cultures. Debates about whether Muslim girls should be allowed to observe Islamic dress codes in state schools, covering their hair with veils, have been fiercely disputed in Scandinavia as in other European countries. These intercultural tensions culminated in the so-called cartoon controversy, which has ridden the public discussions of religion, politics, freedom, and embodiment in the Nordic countries since 2005.

The twelve Muhammad cartoons which depicted the body of the Prophet with improper dress and demeanor, were perceived as a good political joke by many Danish readers of the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper in September 2005, though most readers failed to take much notice. All the more shocking was the reaction which followed from Muslims in Denmark, and later around the world. First, those ambassadors from Muslim majority countries who had petitioned the Danish state were not even granted a meeting with the prime minister. Attempts were made to try the case in court, without any result. In February 2006, Islamic leaders from Denmark then went to campaign in Islamic countries, raising consciousness about the cartoons. This led to attacks on Danish and Norwegian embassies in Damascus and Tehran, to a desecrating of the Danish and Norwegian flags in Gaza City, and to boycotts of Danish goods across the Islamic world. The Nordic countries had lost their

[3] Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

innocence in relation to the explosive mixture of religion and politics. However, the reaction was not only a response to the alleged prohibition against making pictures of the Prophet. It was an expression of massive anger at a perceived disrespect and a hubris in Europe toward the religion and culture of Islam. However, in Denmark and the rest of Northern Europe, the political principle of press freedom was the prime matter of concern.

The cartoon controversy was not only a shock to the Nordic countries; it was also a rude awakening to secular and liberal Europe, a signifier that something had changed. During the twentieth century, the dominating intellectual expectation had been that religion would pass away as soon as the rest of the world experienced their own Enlightenments. Yet at the turn of the Millennium, there was suddenly a terror threat, then a so-called "war on terror", and finally even the more secular parts of Europe discovered the range of cultural, political and legislative changes which had been instituted. These changes went hand in hand with rapid changes in communication, trade, and political interaction all over the world, subsumed under the term "globalization." The media typically focused on conflicts, some of which did indeed involve religious issues. But it is not only media that has tried to explain the conflicts in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, for instance, as conflicts generated by religion; it is a political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, who has put the term "clash of civilizations" (originally coined by the British-American historian and orientalist Bernard Lewis) to public use, giving the impression that some of the more prominent contemporary conflicts basically has to do with religion rather than some other cause for conflict.[4]

Whether one applies this disputed concept of a "clash of civilizations" or not, whether one subscribes to the idea of religion as a primary source of contemporary conflict or not, it touches directly upon our topic, since the conflicts mentioned above are highly political, interpellates old religious conflicts reaching back to the Crusades, and demands bodily sacrifice on both sides. The most dramatic expression of the body politics applied in these conflicts is the suicide bomber, who destroys his or her own body in order to cause as much destruction and anxiety as possible. This destruction of the body is again a double bind: at once the expression of unbound freedom, impossible to control, yet also the deepest suppression and despair. The body explodes in order to cause conflict, and

[4] Cf. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage", *Atlantic*, 266:3 (1990), 47-60.

the conflict increases the willingness to sacrifice the body. To this day, the body remains doubly bound in the crossfire of religion and politics.

Contested Bodies

As mentioned, globalization has led to major changes in the understanding of religion, changes which are deeply interwoven with other tendencies in global change. Religion is at once perceived as revolutionary and reactionary, as the cause of conflicts and as the way to peace, as spiritual and bodily, as sectarian and as a global movement, connecting people across national borders.[5] When the world is changing, when other identity markers such as national identity, economic and social status are threatened, religion tends to become more important for personal identity. This is not to say that previously religion has just been a secondary marker of identity, but rather that religion has gained a new visibility in public affairs that seems to give the lie to any thesis about the imminent disappearance of religion. Religion today is recognized as a significant factor in the construction of individual world-views as well as social bodies, in forming political values and judging ethical issues, in the perception of sense and identity, and in the social construction of the body. It has simply become impossible to abstract from the power and influence of religion in the shaping of the new, globalized and intercultural reality. Scholars in Europe and North America have described this development as a movement from a secular to a post-secular condition.[6] Even the age of secularism now appears less secular than it was generally assumed, since politics and culture, despite the separation of church and state, have been and still are imbued with religious content.[7]

Given the significance of bodies and embodiment in inter-cultural and intra-cultural religious conflicts, there is a need to assess their religious dimensions. It is necessary not only to clarify their conservative and anti-modern expressions but also to uncover the liberating potential in traditional religious and philosophical ideas about the body. The tension

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[5] See Ulrich Beck, *Der eigene Gott: Von der Friedensfähigkeit und dem Gewaltpotential der Religionen* (Frankfurt M.: Insel Verlag, 2008).

[6] Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 2008, No. 25, 17-29; Rosi Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," *Theory, culture & society* 2008, No. 25, 1-24.

[7] Cf. Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage, 2008); Ola Sigurdson, *Det postsekulära tillståndet: Religion, modernitet, politik* (Göteborg: Glänta, 2009).

between religious conservatism and secularism becomes particularly apparent in differing views on the female body. Traditionalist factions seek to veil the female body, whereas secularist factions interpret the exposition of the naked body as an expression of freedom. In an age of consumerism, market-capitalism, and technologies of bodily enhancement, both positions need to be scrutinized. From a post-secular point of view, we will have to ask whether it is not only the traditionalists but also the secularists who somehow return to ancient religious and philosophical ideas. What is the relationship between these opposite approaches and sacralization and de-sacralization, insofar as they pertain to the body? Which represent politics of the sacred and the profane, and how do they influence a politics of the body? For example, do the burqa and the pornographically exposed female body have a common root in religious views of women and sexual difference? On the other hand, maybe the religions are able to offer possibilities for overcoming denigrating and repressive ideas about women?

Given the significance of embodied life, current philosophical discussions display an immense, and growing, interest in the body. According to Sarah Coakley, one reason for this philosophical interest in embodiment is that the body seems to provide us with "an Archimedean point of stability" in a cultural condition where no "universal 'grand narrative'" is plausible anymore.[8] Yet as soon as Coakley raises this explanation, she dismisses the possibility that the body can provide such stability: the body is as contested a site as anything else. The body is not, and cannot be, a passive and pre-discursive firm foundation, somehow hovering before or below the conflict of interpretations. This does not mean that one gives up the materiality of the body, its earthly weight, but only the recognition that the meaning of this materiality is not given as such. As much as anything else, the body, including its materiality, is a site for political contestation. When one recognizes the interdependence of individual and social embodiment, the political implications of the body cannot be avoided.

As embodied creatures, human beings 'take place,' we inevitably cross each other's ways. As social creatures, we are gathered into institutions which also take place and cross each other's ways. Whether we are speaking of the individual body or the social body, bodies will always interfere with each other, since there is bound to be a 'competition' for that space in which bodies are located. This competition or overlapping of bodies is, of course, both for good (e.g. in friendship, care, and joint

[8] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford/Malden: Blackwells, 2002), 154-5.

resistance to oppression) and for bad (e.g. in domestic abuse, terror, and wars). But it is hardly ever completely neutral. The reason for the current philosophical interest in the body may stem from insights into the unavoidability of this discursive struggle. In other words: the body has a history, and this history is political.

Theories of the social construction of the body focus on how the body is shaped, formed, interpreted and understood in accord with the political interests and cultural forces that prevail. Such an approach to understanding the meanings given to the body fails to take sufficient account of the lived and felt experiences of the body, e.g. insofar as such experiences motivate resistance to control and domination. Phenomenological studies of the body, inspired by the work of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, offer means for analyzing the interaction of external (social, political and cultural) and internal (drives, motivations) aspects of embodied human life, including both liberating and repressive bodily practices.

Such an approach (now well-established in contemporary Nordic philosophy of religion) undermines a strict division between nature and culture. The lived experience of the body displays a confrontation between external, formative forces and internal desires and will. Thus a strict division between the natural and the cultural becomes impossible. The human body is both, insofar as the natural is cultural and the cultural – in many respects – is natural.

Moreover, such an approach allows us to draw a parallel between human bodies and social bodies. Human bodies are socially "fabricated," and yet at the same time they are also a natural occurrence as a life with an organic basis.[9] Social bodies, i.e. political and cultural institutions of all sorts, are similarly cultural products that are not only driven by human drives but also the result of struggles between human beings and social powers. Thus the social fabric is interwoven with threads which are both natural and cultural. Strong convictions which are based on strong emotions and deep values are the root of conflict and tension. However, when coupled with political interest they are also the driving force behind the establishment and maintenance of particular institutions.

In the face of political tensions created by religious convictions, contemporary liberal opinion sees religion as something private, often implying that it be counted as something mental or spiritual. Yet as soon as it is granted that religion is embodied in society's buildings, discursive traditions, rituals, etc., it becomes clear that religion also takes place in

[9] Cf. Vanessa Lemm, *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics and the Animality of the Human Being*. (New York: Fordham, 2009).

social spaces. The history of religion is, of course, a history of diverse embodiments, both of the individual and of the social kind. The Christian Church, for instance, is seen as the body of Christ, meaning that it is the social embodiment of all its believers. This is equally so for other religions as well.

In other words, the history of religious embodiment is also a political history. Given the history of embodiment, it is plausible that historical modes of embodiment which stem from religion are still part of our different modes of embodiment today. Judith Butler speaks of the "sedimentation" of embodiment through reiterative and ritual practices (which is how gender acquires the appearance of being something given). Part of this sedimentation is formed by our religious history.[10] Despite modern attempts to reduce religion to something private, religion remains a cultural and social phenomenon. As to our immediate circumstances, one way of interpreting the much debated "return of religion" or "new visibility of religion" is that religion, once again, is beginning to recognize its own social embodiment. The emphasis on embodiment enables us to look at the body with different eyes, slowly unbinding a body which, historically, has been doubly bound. On the one hand we can study the bodily expression of human life with new curiosity and, on the other, appreciate the historical embodiment of religion as its condition of possibility, if only a fragile one.

The Body Unbound

Some of the reasons underlying a philosophical interest in the relation between religion and embodiment – and thus also some of the reasons behind the creation of this volume – should now be rather clear. The importance of historical conditions when speaking of embodiment explains why several of the contributors to this volume have chosen a historical point of view for their discussion of religion and the politics of the body. The body can only be understood in a context; as such it always escapes static definition. As Friedrich Nietzsche's argued in his On the Genealogy of Morals, "all concepts in which a whole process is summarized in signs escape definition; only that which is without history can be defined."[11]

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[10] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. 2nd ed. (New York/London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

[11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals.* Oxford World's Classics. Translation: Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 149.

The current shift of the religious landscape in contemporary Western societies further adds to the relevance of the discourse underway in this book. The simultaneous process of secularization and de-secularization has marked the beginning of a new kind of reflection about the social embodiment of religious institutions in Scandinavia. For several centuries now, the Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish communities have organized religion in their societies through the use of a state church system. However, this form of organization has faced growing challenges, although only Sweden has so far formally loosened ties between church and state.

The reasons for these changes are both religious and political. Among the political reasons, the recognition of the plurality of contemporary Nordic societies has come to the forefront. In Scandinavia, there are many ways of being religious (and also of being non-religious), including various ways of being Christian. A state which aims at being a state for every citizen, and not just for some, must come to terms with this religious plurality in ways that involve recognition not only of the majority religion but of all. In principle, some form of religious neutrality, or at least impartiality, is often seen as necessary, but the way in which this should be organized in practice remains an open question. The call for a secular state is not necessarily a call for a state which is anti-religious but rather a state which recognizes the plurality of religious and non-religious ways of being-in-the-world. There is a demand for a transnational dialogue of religious cultures and ideals in contemporary Western societies. To mirror one's own culture in the culture of the other throws a new light on oneself, and vice versa.

Of course, this is not simply a regional issue relevant only for countries in Northern Europe, rather it is a question which is gaining in urgency in many places around the world. Nevertheless, the current situation in Scandinavia may be of more than local interest insofar as questions concerning the social embodiment of religion in relation to the body politics of a certain society become topical: What is the relationship between religious institutions and the state when they are all defined in terms of their social embodiment? Is it possible to be a citizen of many bodies, or are divided loyalties impossible? Who is supposed to counter the problematic disciplining of the body in religion and/or in the state? These are questions which are bound to become important in a time of cultural change – questions which demand a philosophical reflection on the interrelationship between embodiment, politics and religion.

The philosophy of religion, which since Kant and Schleiermacher has been situated at the border between philosophy and theology, has

undergone a major transformation over the last ten years. It has become more focused on political questions and more oriented toward other disciplines. The field of religion has become increasingly interdisciplinary and its scholars are in constant discussion with others from the humanities and the social sciences, from philosophy and psychology to gender studies and political science. The 2007 founding of a Nordic Society for Philosophy of Religion (generously funded by NordForsk and the Nordic Culture Fund) can be seen as a direct consequence of these academic challenges: there was a need to discuss the structure and influence of changes in philosophy and religion in a series of conferences and workshops across disciplinary and national borders. The present volume is based on a selection of contributions from a conference on Religion and Politics of the Body, which was organized by the NSPR in Reykjavik in June 2009. While the conference was hosted by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Iceland as well as the EDDA center of excellence, it attracted scholars from all over Europe and beyond. The multidisciplinary character of the field is certainly palpable in the present volume, as well as a clear emphasis on phenomenological approaches to an understanding of religious notions of embodiment.

Our comments so far have aimed at establishing a common context of inquiry rather than a particular philosophical, political or religious agenda. This context encompasses a cluster of philosophical and political problems which intersect over the question of individual and social embodiment. At this point it will be helpful to present an overview of the ten contributions to this volume. They stem from scholars in philosophy, anthropology, and theology and represent quite different opinions on some of the questions under discussion. Yet despite this variance, they are all engaged in a common philosophical discourse on politics, religion and the problem of embodiment.

The Structure of the Book

The book has been divided into three sections, each covering a major issue: (A) Religion and Politics, (B) History and the Body, and (C) Phenomenology of the Body. The thread which runs through all sections is defined by the topic of the entire book, namely to describe, discover and thus unbind the doubly bound body, and in so doing to scrutinize the ties of this double bond.

A. Religion and Politics

The first section on *Religion and Politics* focuses on the changing role of embodiment in the current political situation, where religion plays a major role. In the first chapter, Ola Sigurdson discusses the very concept of religion which, since the time of Kant and Schleiermacher, has dominated the perception of religion in general, and the philosophy of religion in particular. Both Kant and Schleiermacher locate religion in the interior person, in religious feeling and consciousness. This view went on to dominate religious studies, philosophy, and theology. Sigurdson detects a similar concept of religion in William James, Rudolph Otto, and Mircea Eliade. However, during recent years, scholars from Charles Taylor to Jürgen Habermas and Mark Lilla have argued that while the influence and position of religion changed, it was never absent from the public sphere. Following these scholars, Sigurdson describes the post-secular condition and argues that it presupposes a new perception of religious embodiment: only when perceived as a social body, may religion regain its public significance. However, he argues that in a post-secular world, this social body is not necessarily in competition with the state when it comes to territory. Hence, some conflicts concerning political power may be avoided, whereas others, e.g. concerning the human body, become all the more controversial.

Asma Barlas takes up this thread in her chapter on Islam and body politics. Barlas describes the veiling of women's bodies as a Muslim tradition, even though no such tradition is prescribed in the Qur'an. Hence, she introduces a general distinction between Islamic tradition, which is compatible with the maturity and responsibility of modern women, and Muslim tradition, which was first introduced by men, carried on by men and forcefully re-introduced today in order to control and discipline the female body. The distinction is then applied in a deconstruction of this male power strategy in order to show that it may very well be Muslim, but it is certainly not Islamic. On the other hand, Islam remains the religious other in Europe, always described and circumscribed by Christian and secular Europeans, thus allowing the body of the Prophet to become a site for inscribing difference. Thus she sees a connection between the body of the Prophet and the veiled female body in present Europe, but Muslim women remain caught by the double bind and the double oppression of conservative Muslim and secular Western politics of the body.

In the third chapter, Marius Timmann Mjaaland focuses on the disquieting phenomenon of suicide bombing. He enters a discussion with Talal Asad, who argues that suicide bombers cannot be seen as Islamists, since their actions mark a radical break with traditional Islam. On the

contrary, he sees them as followers of the political logic of their Jewish and/or Western oppressors. When they experience humiliation and suppression, they apply the liberalistic principle of freedom to its most radical consequence, far beyond the accepted limits of a stable liberal society. This argument is critically discussed with reference to Durkheim, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. Durkheim's theory of suicide is adopted as a framework for understanding the suicide bombers, yet his concepts of religion and martyrdom attract more detailed scrutiny. As opposed to Durkheim, Mjaaland argues that there is an important principal distinction between suicide and martyrdom, depending on motives as well as context and situation. He further points out that both Hegel's definition of terror and Kierkegaard's analysis of despair apply to the suicide bombers: In an unrestrained wish for freedom and a radical political fight against all enemies, either secular or religious, they effectively contribute to a movement of religious nihilism which dramatically sharpens the conflicts, even at the cost of deadly violence towards citizens of their own country and religion. Mjaaland concludes that this violent politics of the body has changed the very relationship between religion and politics and will probably continue to do so in the future.

B. History and the Body

The second section is entitled *History and the Body*, but it does not just seek to highlight important aspects of the history of the body. Rather, all three articles present a philosophical argument based on the work of a significant scholar in the history of the body (respectively: a mystic, a theologian, and a philosopher). With the help of phenomenology, Jonna Bornemark reveals a certain duplicity or ambiguity of the body in medieval mystical theology. Her argument is based on texts from the thirteenth century Beguine Mechthild von Magdeburg, and she detects a similar ambiguity in Mechthild as in contemporary phenomenology. In phenomenology this ambiguity, e.g. between the living body and the objectified body, is often understood as asymmetrical, where one part is primary and the other secondary. Similarly, time is considered to be more important than extension in space. This asymmetry is striking both in Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but it is even more conspicuous in the phenomenologists who deal with religion, such as Edith Stein and Michel Henry. While a similar ambiguity can also be found in medieval Christian mysticism, in Mechthild this does not imply that priority is given to the living body versus the extended or objectified body; nor is there any privileged position given to activity over passivity. Hence, Bornemark shows how Christian mysticism actually becomes a

resource for re-thinking embodiment in ways that question this privilege in current phenomenology of the living body over the objectified body, or of time over space.

In a way that, methodologically, bears some similarity to Bornemark, Martin Wendte turns to Martin Heidegger's philosophy of technology in order to analyze Martin Luther's theology of the Eucharist. Luther's reflections about the body give some crucial insight into the current thinking about bodily presence. Hence, we have again a mutual relationship between phenomenology and theology. The contemporary theme illuminated by Luther's theology of the Eucharist is the question of presence in a technological age. The "technological age," our age of the Internet and universally present IT-technology, is interpreted by Wendte as a loss of presence and meaning. We lose sight of our own embodiment, our vulnerability, and even of the alterity of the other. Luther's theology, for which the Eucharist was central, could be read as a resistance to these tendencies of the technological age. Eucharistic theology combines an understanding of human existence as an embodied being with the language of gift, thus giving us the chance to rethink presence in the technological age (and not outside of it, there is no nostalgia here): a presence which is not based on a metaphysics of presence but rather a presence that is given, as an event, through the integration of the body and the word, in the celebration of the Eucharist. As in Bornemark's contribution, Wendte shows the fruitfulness of engaging with pre-modern religious thought for a contemporary phenomenology of the body.

In Martina Reuter's contribution, we turn from pre-modern thought to modernity with an examination of the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft, an Enlightenment lay philosopher, wrote extensively on a number of topics, including questions concerning the body politic – the relationship between revolutionary politics and civic virtue – in her own time. An ardent defender of civic liberty, she founds this position not only compatible with her belief in providence, but based her moral and political reasoning on a theology of love in distinction from a theology of obedience. Commenting upon the specific bodily conditions of motherhood, she argued against the conception that motherhood should be regarded as a private duty rather than a public service to all society. The private is the public, in a certain sense, and thus the individual body and the body politic become mutually dependent rather than distinctively separate spheres. Wollstonecraft becomes an early modern example of the way in which embodiment, gender, and religion have been part of the political discussion throughout the history of political philosophy.

C. Phenomenology of the Body

The third section is concerned with *Phenomenology of the Body*. In her original analysis of Emmanuel Levinas' messianism, Bettina Bergo discusses deformalizations and deconstructions of faith in French phenomenology of religion. She claims that Levinas's messianism is more robust than Jean-Luc Nancy's post-orthodox ideas about faith and the divine – furthermore, it offers a ground of hope which is free from ideologies. In Bergo's view, Levinas offers a convincing attempt to think of transcendence, goodness, and the living subject together. His exploration of affective interiority, or affective disposition, is not about the interiority of belief, but rather about how the messianic moment of hope can be understood in the inter-subjective and the sensuous, thus bringing the body into play. The messianic hope becomes implicit in the affective connection to the other, to the point of feeling responsible for her or him. The goal is to think of hope through the living body, and for this purpose Levinas offers an innovative reading of the Nietzschean philosophy of life by locating the spiritual in a pre-subjective and affective encounter with the other. However, Bergo comes to the conclusion that Levinas does not succeed in bringing together the sensuous element involved in the affective connection to the other with the passivity which he sees as a precondition for the messianic hope. There remains a tension between the embodied experience and the metaphysical exposure of oneself to the other, i.e. between the aesthetic and the sensuous on the one hand and the ethical on the other. Thinking of hope through the living body is thus a task that remains to be undertaken.

The affective body is also a problem for Christian thought, here illuminated by Jan-Olav Henriksen's analysis of desire. He advances the thesis that the negative understanding of desire inherent to the common, popular Christian understanding needs a substantial clarification and reconsideration in order to acknowledge its vital importance for understanding the flourishing of human life and to recognize the internal relation between desire and goodness. Henriksen gives a phenomenological account of desire, discussing it thoroughly in the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment and Ricoeur's idea of the self as mediating between the body (the flesh of desire) and the world. The juxtaposition of desire for the finite and for the infinite allows Henriksen to proceed toward more theologically relevant considerations. He extends the notion of desire, building on Levinas's conception of metaphysical desire: a desire which does not originate in lack, but in the openness for the absolutely other. Henriksen concludes that the negative

understanding of desire in Christian thought may in fact be seen as an expression of lack of trust in God and in the goodness that God is giving.

In her chapter on the Mariologies of French feminist thinkers Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir reads their understanding of Mary as a reflection on embodied and relational human subjectivity. The features of Mary that Kristeva and Irigaray underscore and accentuate have been repressed in the Christian tradition. Thorgeirsdottir asks whether their post-orthodox re-appropriation of Mary as an embodied, relational and desiring being (versus the disembodied, solitary and elevated being of the Catholic dogma) may be of any relevance to contemporary philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular. Thorgeirsdottir does not endorse Kristeva's and Irigaray's interpretations as amendments of the divine by attributing it with feminine features. Such interpretations have been met with skepticism by feminist theologians and philosophers of religion who do not see the need to consolidate an idea of god in human form. Hence, Thorgeirsdottir instead interprets Kristeva's and Irigaray's efforts as a means to reflect on sacred moments in human, embodied life. Mary is thereby understood as a powerful symbol of the Western cultural tradition which expresses elements that have been repressed throughout this tradition. The Mariologies of Irigaray and Kristeva are therefore primarily read as criticism of disembodied, a-relational, and a-contextual conceptions of the human being prevalent in the Western philosophical tradition. She interprets this conception of Mary as yielding a distinct notion of the sacred, not in any traditional religious sense, but rather as a specific type of experience, regardless of whether it is understood as spiritual or not. The sacred is seen as an ambivalent notion, based on experiences of the vulnerability and wonder of life, for example when encountering experiences of birth and death.

Finally, Jay Johnston takes a similar path by revealing resources in the tradition of the philosophies of angels that prefigure and enable a richer contemporary conception of intersubjectivity and ideas of affective embodiment. Such a conception of hermetic embodiment that angels represent transcends the predominant dualistic schemes of body and soul and sexual difference in the western philosophical and religious tradition. Johnston draws on the work of Luce Irigaray and Michel Serres, thereby countering the idea that contemporary philosophy does not offer any reflections on angels. The bodies of angels are subtle bodies; subtle in that they are able to extend conventional empirical and substantial notions of the self and of human embodiment to include the way in which selves interrelate with and affect each other and the broader environment. Angels

maintain an individual subjectivity while being radically interrelated with the broader world and cosmos. Indeed, angelic bodies draw together the carnal and the spiritual, and are links between the corporeal self and the cosmos. Furthermore, angels are portrayed as both constituting and enabling ethical relations, representing the cultivation of ethical relations with alterity as well as the opening up of possibilities. Thus angels represent a radically intersubjective state of subjective becoming. With this interpretation of feminist and post-structuralist philosophies of angels in place, Johnston shows how philosophy opens itself to western esoteric traditions in order to achieve a richer understanding of embodied and relational human subjects. Irigaray's philosophy of the divine is Feuerbachian in so far she understands our ideas about angels as human projections. Her goal is not to recommend atheism (as Feuerbach did), nor advocate theism. Rather her philosophy is an attempt to situate the ideas associated with the divine (such as hope and mystery, and that the impossible may become possible) within the realm of an ethics of intersubjective relations.

Crisscrossing Perspectives

The three sections of this volume focus on three different fields of embodiment in politics, history, and philosophy. However, the ten contributions do show that these three fields are closely connected to one another, hence we see the emergence of a new discussion crisscrossing the fields and sections of this book. For example, there is one trajectory connecting Sigurdson's analysis of individual and social bodies on the secular condition with Reuter's analysis of social and individual bodies in early modernity. There is a common interest in the female body and its phenomenology running from Barlas to Bornemark and further to Thorgeirsdottir's analysis of the sacred in recent Mariologies. Johnston similarly makes use of angels to mark the possibility of overcoming the binary logic of sexual difference that entails a relation of domination and exclusion. Furthermore, we find a rather surprising trajectory running from Martin Wendte's analysis of the body in Luther's theology to Barlas's distinction between Muslim traditions based on men's will to power and Islamic tradition based on the Prophet and the Qur'an. The latter is in fact the result of an act of interpretation and liberation based on scriptures alone and thus a modern deconstruction of suppressive traditions, following in the footsteps of Luther, although it remains critical of Luther and current Lutheran theology.

Another interesting trajectory runs from Bornemark's analysis of the mystical experience of the living body by Mechthild von Magdeburg to Henriksen's emphasis on desire as a genuinely positive concern for contemporary theology, based in the desire for the other. Furthermore, Bettina Bergo explores the post-orthodox field of faith and hope which displays another way of returning to the religious roots of phenomenology in the post-secular situation which Sigurdson has described. And Bergo's deconstruction of the monotheistic god opens up possibilities of thinking of the divine in new ways, as Johnston suggests in her interpretation of the relation between the human and the divine signified by the figure of the angel. Finally, the deep conflicts surrounding the politics of the body become obvious in the contributions from Barlas and Mjaaland, including the radical quest for freedom which results in the self-destructive explosion of human bodies at the frontier between secularity, modernity, and deep religious commitment. These conflicts have existed throughout the entire history of the body, but in the present situation the interdisciplinary analysis of politics, embodiment, and religion seems more topical than ever.

Unbinding the body, as Abraham was told by the angel, is tedious work, full of fear and trembling – even when it is done in the philosophical sense by uncovering the embodiment of the discourse itself as a topic for analysis and discussion. Hence, we leave this work to the reader, in the hope that the philosophical perspectives raised here on politics, embodiment, and religion may raise new questions, provoke offense or otherwise stimulate further debate. After all, in many respects the body still seems to suffer under a double bind.

A. RELIGION AND POLITICS

CHAPTER I.

THE RETURN OF RELIGIOUS EMBODIMENT: ON POST-SECULAR POLITICS

Ola Sigurdson

The topic of this essay is the return of religious embodiment, with some regard for the political implications of this return for politics. It is an attempt to provide a historical and philosophical interpretation of a certain contemporary social trend since, for hermeneutical reasons, a philosophy of religion (or almost any philosophy for that matter) cannot be divorced from history. The paper aims to give an overview of this trend rather than a more elaborate interpretation of some of its minutiae – and so it will contain all the shortcomings of such a broader overview.[1] I shall begin with two sections: in the first, I trace the genealogy of the concept of religion and then, in the second, outline the story of the secularization of Western society, especially in northern (Protestant) Europe. These two sections will present reasons for why I think religion has come to be understood as something disembodied – the very presupposition for a return of social embodiment. It is a story that is in itself political and has to do with the rise of the nation-state in Europe. In the third section, I present reasons for the return of social embodiment, and in the fourth section I discuss, constructively, some consequences for politics in what I would like to call a post-secular condition.

The Concept of Religion

Some books have played a more important role than others in shaping the ways in which the societies and academies of modernity have come to understand both the concept and phenomenon of religion. Among these books we should most likely include Immanuel Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), Friedrich Schleiermacher's *On*

[1] I present this argument in much more detail in my book, *Det postsekulära tillståndet: Religion, modernitet, politik* (Göteborg: Glänta, 2009).

Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers (1799), William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), and Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). Another book that might well belong to this category is by the Romanian historian of religion, Mircea Eliade: *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957). Not only have these books had a significant impact on the understanding of 'religion' (both the concept and the phenomenon), they also share a common theme: they each strive to capture the 'essence' of religion or, as we find in the subtitle to Eliade's book, the 'nature' of religion.[2] Yet it is not at all self-evident that there is such a thing as an 'essence' or 'nature' of religion, rather this was a notion that was first conceived in a certain strand of Western modernity. The definition of this 'essence' is dependent on its binary pole: the 'secular'. To a pre-modern philosophy or theology, it was by no means self-evident that religion was a distinct phenomenon, identifiable as something common between different cultures, epochs and religions (in the plural). But concurrently with the rise of the nation-state and of a civil society distinct from religious institutions, 'religion' came to be an important category for identifying an autonomous sphere that exists parallel to and independent of other autonomous spheres in the life-world of human beings, such as politics, science and the economy. Through this process of differentiation these other spheres of civil society became free to follow their own internal logic independent of the church or any other religious institution in matters concerning knowledge, morals or politics. Given that I, as a human being, am still one person, in some important sense this process of differentiation becomes a political question, as with any question concerning the drawing of boundaries.

That which is also common to all five books mentioned is that they seek to study religion from a perspective different than one internal to the religions themselves. Different religious traditions have always had some form of reflection on the consequences of their own ideas and practices. However, these books have come to represent different forms of departure from what was sometimes regarded as a monological theology, which *a priori* and uncritically presupposed that its own perspective was also the true one. Instead, the authors sought to study religion as philosophers, historians or psychologists, thus studying religion 'from without' rather than 'from within'. This certainly did not mean that they were hostile to religion as a phenomenon, nor to the culturally dominant Christian church. On the contrary, it is possible (at least in some of these authors) to identify an apologetic strategy: by showing the way in which religion is a

[2] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

constitutive dimension of human nature, one could also argue for its cultural and intellectual legitimacy against 'its cultural despisers.' Thus religion was not a phenomenon that could be reduced to a manifestation of something else, such as psychological or economical factors, but was rather a phenomenon *sui generis.* It is significant that all the authors I have mentioned, with the exception of Eliade, come from a Protestant milieu. The significance of this fact has to do with their very definition of religion: it was the Protestant repudiation of the Roman Catholic liturgy, its customs and practices – its 'legalism' – which prompted the relocation of the essence of religion into 'the inner human being' where all legitimacy in the eyes of God depends on an inner faith, rather than on external achievements as such. Religion was privatized; its domain came to encompass feeling rather than thought or practice. In Charles Taylor's words, it was "excarnated" when it was increasingly understood as a private affair between God and the soul.[3] Or to adopt an image suggested by Mark Lilla: "The Reformation took its altars out of the churches and placed them in the human heart."[4] But even if this was predominantly a development in Protestant history, a similar development could also be traced in Catholic theology.

This development of the understanding of religion lead to the modern interest for identifying and systematically studying that which is now called 'religious experience.' Certainly according to Kant, the seat of religion was found within practical reason where its function was to strengthen moral aspirations.[5] But in principle, for Kant morality was independent of all religion. The function of religion was reduced to the elucidation of the true divine service of morality (that is, to obey the commandments of duty) and to do so in a way that was easier for most people to grasp. Thus it was not a particularly great leap to Schleiermacher's influential definition of religion as "intuition and feeling" of the universe rather than thought or action.[6] In his explanation of the essence of religion in *On Religion,* Schleiermacher was a thorough

[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Belknap Press, 2007), 554.
[4] Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 198.
[5] Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[6] Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers,* ed. Richard Crouter. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

Kantian in his separation of the essence of religion, as an experience of the eternal, from all the different but finite feelings and expressions that this experience necessarily manifested, all according to individual disposition. The different concrete forms of religion were necessary for the religious experiences of individual human beings, but to mistake their concrete form for the essence of religion would be to mistake the finite for the infinite. But in his *On Religion,* the Reformed Schleiermacher, just like the Lutheran Kant, promotes a pietistic emphasis on the piety of the individual human being, rather than on the word that was preached or the religious institution. A hundred years later, the psychologist James claimed in a similar way that true religion is something that one finds in the religious experiences of individual human beings; thus the religious life of a congregation or church is something secondary as it does not depend on first hand religious experiences but second hand experiences mediated through and by the institution.[7] This development means that, through the emphasis on experience, religion increasingly becomes a universal concept that includes, but is not circumscribed by, the historical religions for which a concept of God were central. Even if the descriptions of the religious experience carry an unmistakable Christian (and perhaps even Protestant) character, God became more and more distant in comparison to the more graspable personal experience. Historical religions thus came to be understood as species of a common genus, as more or less complete, particular instances of a universal religious experience.

Eliade was the exception among the authors I mentioned above, since he was not a Protestant. Nevertheless, the immediate precursor to Eliade's understanding of the essence of religion in *The Sacred and the Profane* was the German historian of religion and Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto. In *The Idea of the Holy,* Otto suggests that the essence of religion consists of an experience of the holy.[8] The groundbreaking aspects of his book was its determination of the character of the holy. In his book, another term Otto uses for the holy is the numinous, and the numinous is a mystery that is at one and the same time both fearful and fascinating (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*), beyond being manipulable or controllable by human technology and human knowledge. The holy manifests itself as something "irrational," – not necessarily in the sense of being in opposition to but rather beyond human reason. The experience of the holy is an experience of something "Wholly Other" even when it manifests

[7] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature.* Centenary Edition (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 29 f.
[8] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy.* 2. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).