

Body Spirituality

Incarnation as an Invitation to an Embodied Spirituality

Mathew Jayanth SJ

Dept of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune 411104

Abstract: Drawing inspiration from the feminist movement, recent studies highlight the importance of the body and body experiences in defining the identity of a person. The interest in body shown in the secular disciplines proved to be a remote preparation for serious theological reflection on the body. Following in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II who, in his theology of the body, initiated the process toward a deeper appreciation of the embodied nature of human existence in the world, the author explores the different dimensions of this embodied existence in the personal, social and ecological spheres from the Christian incarnation faith perspective, i.e. body spirituality.

Keywords: body spirituality, body, spirit, feminism, incarnation.

Introduction

Body theology is a new discipline. Hardly anyone talked about it before the 1960s. The second wave of feminism that emerged in the sixties, affirmed the necessity of women reclaiming their bodies from patriarchal control as the first step toward women's liberation in society. The feminist movement gave importance to women's bodily experiences and accentuated the significance of the body as an essential dimension of who we are as well as a source of knowledge of the world, human persons and God.¹ Drawing inspiration from the feminist movement, the studies in masculinity also highlighted the importance of the body and body experiences in defining the identity of a person. The interest shown in the secular disciplines proved to be a remote preparation for serious theological reflection on the body.

The preparation for body theology in the Catholic Church began, perhaps inadvertently, with the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950. The dogma of the Assumption, by highlighting the dignity of the body of Mary, implicitly underscored the dignity of human body persons. Behind the pronouncement of the dogma one could detect the memories of the atrocities committed against the human person in the course of the two World Wars, as well as the death and desecration of the human person in the Nazi concentration camps and in the bombing of the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It can be said that by declaring the Assumption as a dogma, Pope Pius XII unintentionally emphasized the centrality of the body in the Christian religion.² However, the prevailing dualistic view of human persons and a corresponding spiritualistic emphasis on the salvation of the soul, prevented the development of body theology in the Catholic Church for many decades until the present Pope John Paul II initiated a process in the late seventies and early eighties.³ Still, body theology continues to be in its exploratory stages. This essay is a further exploration in this area focusing on body spirituality.

However, before we begin this exploration, it is necessary to differentiate the 'theology of the body' and the 'spirituality of the body' from 'body theology' and 'body spirituality'. Though these set of phrases are sometimes used interchangeably, they do not mean the same thing. The theology of the body examines the body in the light of scriptural data. Insofar as it studies the body as an object of theological interest, it differs from body theology. The focus of body theology is to explore the significance of the body for the process of theologizing and theological knowledge. That is to say, while the theology of the body asks, what does theology say about the body, body theology asks what does the body say about theology.⁴ This difference is also true of the 'spirituality of the body' and 'body spirituality'.

This essay is exploratory in nature. The main argument of the essay is that the body is a source of experience and knowledge of God. This being the case, Christian spirituality ought to begin with the foundational truth that the human being is an embodied being and, as an embodied being the human person experiences and knows

God in the body. This exploration begins with a brief discussion on the relationship between the incarnation and the centrality of the body in Christianity. It will be followed by a brief overview of the attitude towards the body in Christian Tradition. The development of a dualistic anthropology and its impact on Christian spirituality will be examined next. The following section will highlight some of the pre-suppositions for developing body spirituality. Next, the focus will be on the significance of human sexuality in body spirituality. Keeping relationality as a central principle, the essay will go on to examine the importance of the multifaceted human relationships for body spirituality. The last section of the paper will focus on some of the characteristics of body spirituality.

Incarnation and Body Spirituality

The reality that God became flesh makes Christianity eminently a religion of incarnation – a religion based on the embodiment of God in the person of Jesus Christ.⁵ This central confession of the Christian faith finds its expression in diverse spheres of Christian life, beliefs and practices. It is expressed in the understanding of the church as the body of Christ into which the believers are incorporated as members of the body. The members of the body of Christ are sustained and nourished by the life-giving food and drink of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. In the sacraments, God's saving presence is made real through the material realities such as water, wine, bread and oil that are accessible to the bodily senses. Even the final destiny of the human beings does not exclude the body. The Christian eschatological hope is expressed through the faith in the resurrection of the body.

The enfleshment of God in the person of Christ makes the body central to the Christian self-understanding. Rather than being something accidental or peripheral, the body is essential to the Christian life of faith. For, body is the locus of the encounter between God and humans and, thereby, it becomes the locus of the knowledge and experience of God. In other words, God is known in the body insofar as the reality of God has become flesh.⁶ In the body of Christ, God has become accessible, as the First Letter of St. John states, through the bodily senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell (1 Jn 1:1ff).

This is the core meaning of the incarnation. This incarnational faith finds its actualization in the social ethical sphere as well as in the ecological ethical sphere of Christian existence. It ought to find its expression also in Christian spirituality since it affirms that God is known in the Word become flesh, in the church that is the body of Christ, in the eucharistic body of Christ, in the body of the Christian, in the bodies of other humans, and in the body of creation. However, this truth has not been adequately understood nor has it guided Christian life and spirituality in any significant way. A brief overview of the understanding of the body in the Christian tradition will illustrate this point.

Overview of the Body in the Christian Tradition

The attitude toward the body in the Christian tradition is marked by ambiguities, mistrust and even hostility. Without going into a detailed study, an attempt is made to briefly delineate the main trajectory of the Christian attitude toward the body.⁷ It is to be noted that Christianity, which began as a reformist sect within Judaism, inherited the Hebrew view of the human person as an integral whole. The two Hebrew words, *nephesh* and *basar*, roughly translated as ‘breath’ and ‘flesh’, respectively, stand for the total person. While the word *nephesh* is used to emphasize the breath, or life or spirit dimension of the person, the word *basar* is employed to underscore the fleshly or bodily or material dimension of the person. In this way, Hebrew thought, especially the early Hebrew thought, maintained a unified view of the human person as a living body without dichotomizing the person into body and soul.⁸ Along with this unified view of human persons, Christianity also inherited the sexual dualism prevalent in Hebrew thought.⁹

However, the encounter of Christianity with the Hellenistic and the Roman culture influenced and shaped Christian thought on the body. Though the classical Greek culture emphasized and celebrated the beauty of the human body in sculpture and sport, the platonic philosophy that developed toward the end of the classical age advocated a dualistic understanding of the human person as composed of a perishable body and an immortal soul or spirit. The body was viewed negatively as a prison where the soul is imprisoned until its libera-

tion. As Christianity spread to the Hellenistic world, it necessarily came under the influence of the Greek dualistic thinking. This can be seen in the Fathers of the Church such as Origen, Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine and others. The dualistic thinking tends to split a unified reality into two irreconcilable principles. Thus the biblical understanding of the human person as a unified and integral whole of embodied soul or ensouled body gradually gave way to a dichotomized understanding of body and soul under the influence of the dualistic anthropology of Platonism.¹⁰

Similarly, the complex system of Gnosticism with its dualism of body and soul, matter and spirit, male and female and its denial of creation as the work of God, posed a serious threat to the integrity of the Christian faith. Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, accepted the challenge of Gnosticism and defended the biblical faith in the goodness of creation as coming from a good God and on that basis he maintained the goodness of the body.¹¹ Augustine, who was himself a Manichean for nine years, later in his life attacked the Manichean form of Gnosticism as contrary to the Christian faith.¹² Both Gnosticism and Manicheism were found unacceptable by the Fathers of the Church who vehemently denounced them and, thereby, sought to maintain the integrity of the Christian faith.

However, Christian thinkers who struggled with these challenges did not always succeed in warding off the dangers. This is because living in a milieu seeped in body negating tendencies, the Fathers themselves were not immune to those very tendencies they condemned. In their defence of the Christian faith, especially regarding the body, the dualistic thinking enshrined in Platonism, Gnosticism, Stoicism and other philosophies of the ancient world influenced them. It is evident, for example, in St. Augustine's attitude toward the body as expressed in his approach to sex and sexuality.

This legacy continued in the Christian Tradition. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas rejected the Platonic dualism that denigrated the body in favor of the Aristotelian theory of hylomorphism that emphasized the unity of the body and soul. He emphasized the role of the body in human knowledge and affirmed the goodness of the created universe. And yet his stress on mind and intellect as the superior faculty of human persons had the unintended consequence of

reducing the significance of the body.¹³ The Aristotelian anthropology of the scholastics did not succeed in replacing the Platonic dualistic anthropology, and it continued to influence the physical sciences and mathematics, which began to objectify the world and the human body beyond the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, there was a renewal of the Platonic tradition and a renewed interest in the human body as an expression of the inner spirit. This, in turn, led to the idealization of the body in art.¹⁴ The Reformation, on the other hand, with its opposition to the Catholic sacramental system, desacramentalized the world and desacralized the body and, thereby, robbed them of their spiritual significance¹⁵. Descartes' division of the world into that which thinks (*res cogitans*) and that which lacks psychic qualities introduced a new dualism which greatly influenced the Enlightenment thought. It objectified the universe and the human body and reduced them into artifacts for scientific analysis¹⁶. This objectification based on dualism continues in the modern consumerist society and finds its supreme expression in the technological manipulation of the body and nature, as well as in the fashion and advertisement industry.

Dualistic Anthropology and Body Spirituality

This very brief overview of the factors that shaped the Christian attitude toward the body shows that the original biblical view of the human person as a duality without dualism or a dichotomous division of body and soul encountered serious challenges from different philosophies and worldviews. The Christian Tradition did not succeed in effectively meeting these challenges mainly because of the dominance of the Platonic and the Augustinian tradition over Christianity. As a consequence, a dualistic anthropology developed which saw the soul, the spiritual aspect of the human person, as superior to the body, the material aspect. This type of anthropology gradually paved the way for the glorification of the soul at the expense of the body. In the course of time, Christian spirituality, by and large, came to view the body as an obstacle to the ascent of the soul, and therefore, as something to be controlled, conquered and subjugated. Not only the body but also everything associated with the body came to be degraded as worthless or of inferior value.¹⁷ The feminist thinkers have highlighted the disastrous consequences

of this thinking pattern that linked body, women and nature and assigned them an inferior position as compared to the supposedly superior trio of soul/spirit, men and culture.¹⁸

In conformity with this development, the growth in spiritual life came to be associated with asceticism and mortification of the senses and sensual desires, and a corresponding enhancement of the interior life or inwardness. The celibate life came to be viewed as superior, because it represented the triumph of the human will over the body and over everything bodily, especially sexual desires. The consequence is the development of a bodiless spirituality of inwardness, of interior life of the spirit of which we are all heirs.

This calls for a rediscovery of body spirituality. However, there are difficulties to be surmounted. Since Christianity inherits, to a large extent, a bodiless spirituality and considers it as the authentic, the best and the genuinely Christian spirituality, the affirmation of the body in spirituality is bound to be looked upon with suspicion. Moreover, in the modern world, where youthful bodies are admired and adored, even if for no other purpose save to promote a consumerist economy, any talk about body and body spirituality may be dubbed as giving in to the secular spirit of the age. In the context of a civilization that is becoming ever more 'physical' that focuses on bodily comfort, bodily pleasure, bodily beauty, and bodily fitness, while experiencing a spiritual vacuum, any attempt to develop a body spirituality may be viewed as an attempt to promote the fixation with the body that characterizes the modern secular world.

Thus, there arises a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the traditional, bodiless spirituality focusing on inwardness tends to negate the body, and, on the other, there is a culture that suffers from a fixation with the human body at the expense of the spiritual. In this situation the rediscovery of body spirituality calls for a clear perception and articulation of its goals. Both the bodiless spirituality and the fixation with the body presuppose a dualistic approach to the human person. Body spirituality, on the other hand, seeks to transcend such dualism. It attempts to retrieve the unified biblical understanding of the human person and, thereby, to reconstruct a spirituality that takes seriously the embodied nature of human existence. Accordingly, it assigns great importance to every single body experi-

ence – from the most prosaic like the experiences of eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, washing, sleeping, walking, talking, laughing, crying, sweating, and having sex, to the most sublime experiences of contemplation and communion. The value of the experiences is not determined extrinsically by reference to whether they belong to the spiritual or physical realms; rather the experiences have value precisely because they are experiences of body-persons. In other words, body spirituality does not seek to ‘use’ body experiences as means to attain some ‘spiritual’ goals, like the traditional spirituality that advocates the ‘use’ of the body for attaining inwardness through breathing techniques, yogic postures, listening to the sounds around and concentrating on a still point.¹⁹ Instead, body spirituality approaches the body experiences themselves as having profound spiritual significance and as sources of the knowledge of and communion with God.

Presuppositions of Body Spirituality

Body spirituality, as already indicated, is based on the specific biblical understanding of the human person as a unity of body and soul. It rejects at the outset the body-soul dualism that has plagued Christian spirituality from the very beginning as well as monism, either of the soul as seen in contemporary spirituality or of the body as reflected in modern culture. Body spirituality abandons the notion that ‘we have a body’, and accepts the fact that ‘we are bodies’.²⁰ The first proposition that ‘we have a body’ is based on a dualistic understanding of the human person, which sees the spirit or soul as constituting the essential component that is in opposition to the body or material component of the person. The second proposition takes the human person as a body-soul duality without any opposition. Accordingly, the human person constitutes a harmonious blend of spirit and matter, soul and body. They are distinguishable and, yet, they make up an indivisible reality. The body is seen no more as a disposable material object possessed and carried around by the essentially spiritual person.

Thus, basing itself on the original Hebraic view of humans, body spirituality defines human persons as ‘bodies’, as ‘embodied beings’, and as ‘body-selves’. Human persons exist as embodied

beings and it is as body-selves rather than as mere intellects that they relate to God and God's creation as the image and likeness of God on earth. In our bodies we sense the goodness of creation and the graciousness of the Creator. We see the goodness of creation; we hear the goodness of creation; we taste and smell the goodness of creation and we touch and experience the goodness of creation. In other words, our embodiment is a prerequisite for the experience of God and God's creation. This manner of understanding human persons has immense consequences for theology and spirituality.

Theology is concerned with the knowledge of God, as well as the knowledge of ourselves and of the world as created, fallen and redeemed by God. How we see God determines how we understand ourselves and our world. Conversely how we see ourselves and our world determines how we understand God.²¹ For too long theology understood itself as a rational endeavor to understand the incomprehensible God. It is spiritual persons trying to obtain rational knowledge of the transcendent God. In this attempt the body has little to contribute, as it is the lower dimension of the human composite that is often considered the enemy of the knowledge of God. As a result, the body was separated from the spirit in the pursuit of theological knowledge. In the process, the body itself became an object of theological investigation and questions were asked as to the fate of the body after death and the nature of the resurrected body. This method of theologizing did not envisage the possibility of the body itself becoming a source of theological knowledge.

Something similar happened to Christian spirituality as well. The combined influence of Platonism, Gnosticism and Stoicism on the Christian religion from the early centuries paved the way for a passionless, bodiless spirituality that aimed at the ascent of the soul to God, the pure Spirit. In accordance with this spiritual endeavour, the body and everything bodily came to be seen as an obstacle for the ascent of the soul and, therefore, as something to be controlled, conquered, subjugated, tortured, mutilated and mastered in order to facilitate the upward movement of the soul. The primary aim of the ascetic practices such as penance and mortifications of the body through deprivation of food, sleep and other basic needs was precisely to attain this objective. Passions, desires, and feelings were

seen as dangerous, as they belonged to the realm of the body and, hence, detrimental to the spiritual progress of the soul.

At the root of the development of this phenomenon is the dichotomous and dualistic understanding of human persons. The spirit-body dualism along with the sexist dualism of male/female and a corresponding theology and spirituality that tend to denigrate the body, have wreaked havoc on human body-selves and creation. And it continues to pose a threat to the survival of life on the planet earth.

There may be serious socio-cultural and historical reasons for this specific turn in the development of Christian theology and spirituality. However, there is no sufficient reason for holding on to a specific historical creation in the changed circumstances. Human beings, as body-selves, are certainly historical beings, but they are not slaves of history. The emancipation from the tyranny of history depends neither on the negation of history nor on a blind adherence to it. Rather, it depends on a radical hermeneutical critique of the historical development itself and its consequences in the light of the core affirmation of the Christian faith. This is precisely what body spirituality proposes to accomplish. It aims at a hermeneutic retrieval, for the contemporary times, of the full implications of the incarnational faith that God has become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the foundation of body spirituality is the truth of the incarnation, the event in which God united God's self with every flesh and, thereby, transformed the bodily existence of the created order into the sacrament of divine presence in the world. In this way, body spirituality also facilitates the development of an eco-spirituality based on a sacramental understanding of the entire creation.

These presuppositions – that human persons are bodies, that embodiment is an essential dimension of being body-selves, that a disembodied theology and spirituality constitute a threat to the continued existence of humanity and the cosmos, that without being a captive to history, Christianity can fruitfully retrieve the full significance of the incarnation faith for contemporary times – provide the rationale as well as the context for a body spirituality. However, the immediate starting point of body spirituality is the awareness that human persons are bodies and they exist as sexual bodies. One of

the most important aspects of body spirituality is its affirmation of human persons as sexual bodies and the other aspects flow from it.

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Body Spirituality and Sexuality

As bodies, human persons are sexual beings and they exist as male and female. Sexuality is integral to our existence as bodies. Sexuality is the specific way of being male and female body-selves in the world. It involves the specific biological structures that make one either male or female, the socially constructed meanings of those specific biological differences, the specific affectional orientations toward either or both groups of sexual body-selves as well as the desire for physical and emotional intimacy, communion and communication.²²

Theologically the most significant aspect of being sexual body-selves is the desire for intimacy, communion and communication.²³ This dimension manifests itself in the spheres of relationships. The relational spheres encompass the relationship with our own body-selves, with other body-selves, with the creation and with the Creator God. Human existence as bodies is a cryptic statement that our existence is essentially relational and human sexuality eminently symbolizes this reality. Since sexuality as a symbol of the relational dimension of human existence is central to body spirituality, it is necessary, first, to discuss the multidimensional relationships and then to delineate the specific characteristics of body spirituality.

Relationship with our own Body

The relationship with our own sexual body-selves expresses itself at the perceptual level. The body can be perceived dualistically as an object while assigning a superior and subject position to the soul/spirit. This is what is implied in the statement that 'we have bodies'. Accordingly, the body becomes a collection of organs that the soul/spirit requires as long as it is united to the body. From this perceptual stand the body is viewed as an object external to the real self. The modern medical profession and the advertisement industry seem to promote an objectified view of the body. When the body is reduced to the level of a mere object, abuse of the body becomes a distinct possibility.

The body can be perceived holistically as a subject. This perspective maintains the body-soul duality without dichotomizing it. The body is no more seen as a collection of organs. Rather every organ becomes an integral part of the body-selves. It is from this vantage point that human persons are defined as 'being bodies' or 'we are our bodies'. It would be easier then, to own up genuinely as one's own the pleasures and pains, feelings of ecstasy and excitement, despair and disappointment, peace and quiet as well as desires and longings of the body. At this stage, the alienation from the body is overcome and we begin to love our bodies as our selves. This is the threshold at which we begin to experience the body's grace²⁴ and embark on the journey of knowing and experiencing God in our bodies.

Relationship with other Body-Selves

The experience of the body's grace provides the precondition for a relationship with other body-selves. When the body is objectified, the relationship with other bodies becomes commercialized and, correspondingly, the finality of body-selves is foreclosed. On the other hand, a subjective approach to the body, affirms the central meaning of the sexual body-selves as a relationship with other body-selves. The body is designed for relationship – for holding and hugging other body selves, for seeing, hearing, touching and tasting other body-selves, for caressing, kissing and having sexual intercourse. The corresponding desire to hold, hug, see, hear, touch, taste, caress, kiss and to have intercourse with other body-selves is a supreme expression of the fundamental human longing and desire for fulfilment through intimacy, communication and communion. The genital sexual act and all the expressions of love and respect that go with it, symbolize and actualize the essential human vocation to the fullness of life. Pope John Paul II has powerfully brought out this dimension of sexuality in his interpretation of the nuptial meaning of the body based on the second creation story in the bible. In his theology of the body, the Pope has emphasized the nature of the body as a gift to be shared. He also underscores the finality of the body as communion and communication leading toward the fulfilment of human life by being a body-gift to others.²⁵

However, the Pope's theology of the body has been criticized for its lack of rootedness in the lived experience of the common people. The main criticism is that his theology of the body is somewhat disembodied, as it restricts the nuptial meaning of the body and sexual intimacy to the context of a heterosexual, monogamous marriage. By doing this, the pope has diminished the deeper and broader implications of the nuptial meaning of the body as a gift to be shared. It has been argued that in the context of the universal call to the fullness of life, it would be myopic to restrict genital sexual expression to heterosexual marriages and to condemn that significant minority of the body-selves in the church who are oriented toward the same-sex body-selves and who wish to enter into committed same-sex unions as a way to actualize the divine vocation to life in fullness through the deepest intimacy, communication and communion.²⁶

Sexual Body and Celibacy

If the deepest human intimacy and communion are available in the context of sexual intimacy, is not the celibate life an aberration, a conscious negation of the possibility of realizing one's fullness as a body-self? It has already been noted that sexuality symbolizes our desire for fulfilling intimacy, communication and communion and sexual intimacy is the furthest and deepest one can go in intimacy with other body-selves. It is also true that such communion is fulfilling. But it would be disastrous to conclude that this is the ultimate fulfilment for sexual body-selves, as the secular spirit tries to convince us. If celibacy were defined exclusively in negative terms as the renunciation of marriage and sex, then the celibate life would be understood as an unfulfilling life and as an aberration.

However, though a negative definition is assigned to celibacy on account of the dualistic thinking pattern that tends to reject or denigrate the body and everything bodily, a celibate life enhances rather than diminishes the symbolic dimension of sexuality. First of all, celibacy does not negate the central fact that we are sexual body-selves. Second, it does not deny our essential need for intimacy and communion with other body-selves. Third, it does not belie our physical and emotional need for all that is pleasant, desirable and beautiful. Without repudiating all these crucial dimensions of our body-

selves, celibacy symbolically proclaims the truth of what Saint Augustine discovered through his tempestuous life: “for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rest in you”.²⁷ In other words, the celibate life is a declaration, the content of which is that our ultimate fulfilment as body-selves is in intimacy and communion with God. Thus, celibacy affirms the human fulfilment on earth and then points beyond to the ultimately fulfilling relationship with God. In the final analysis, celibacy consists not primarily in the denial of the body; rather it is in opening up the possibility of body-selves to move toward their ultimate self-realization in and with God.

A celibate life chosen freely and deliberately in loving response to God’s self-gift, functions as a powerful symbol of the eschatological fulfilment of the body-selves in the definitive union with the Trinitarian God effected in Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. The question, then, is whether an imposed celibate life can function as a symbol. The various churches and denominations are struggling with this question in the face of severe criticism, that when celibacy is imposed on an unwilling minority that is oriented to the same-sex, it symbolizes more the narrow mindedness and the intolerance of the culture and institution that thus impose it, than the definitive fulfilment of the body-selves in God. A sexual ethics based on a limited understanding of the natural law need not necessarily provide convincing answers to this urgent and troubling issue, especially when the complexity surrounding the concept of nature itself is being astutely perceived.

Thus the relationship with other sexual body-selves actualized in the context of sexual intimacy and mutuality, is a celebration of the body’s grace by transforming our bodies into a channel of the knowledge and experience of God’s love in the world. The reduction of other body-selves to a sexual object, is a radical denial of God in our bodies. Celibacy, by symbolizing the ultimate fulfilment of body-selves in communion with God, enhances the communion aspect of sexuality, especially in relation to other sexual body-selves. In this way, in body spirituality, the relationship among body-selves assumes a sacramental dimension insofar as it represents in an eminent way for our vocation to find fulfilment in communion with others and with God.

Relationship with God

Spiritualities modelled on the body-soul dualism (all our spiritualities more or less approximate this model) tend to identify certain actions as spiritual exercises or duties such as prayer, meditation, examination of conscience, Eucharist, reconciliation, retreat, and other popular devotions. Through these spiritual exercises, it is expected that the soul/spirit communes with and grows in intimacy with God. These acts are purely interior or inward acts for which the body needs to be quietened, brought to stillness through breathing and other yogic means. In other words, the spiritual exercises are exercises carried out by the spirit/soul and the body plays a secondary role by providing the necessary body-disposition.

Such spiritualities ignore the fact that we are body-selves – that we are spiritual as bodies and bodies as spirit. That is to say, if we are body-selves, then it is in our bodies that we experience and know God as well as enter into intimacy with God. Just as everything we do has a sexual dimension since we are sexual body-selves, so also everything that we do has a spiritual dimension since we are spiritual body-selves. There cannot be any dichotomy between spiritual acts and physical acts. However, this kind of a dichotomy, inherent in the spiritualities modelled on body-soul dualism, is proving to be dangerous not only for body-selves but also for the entire creation.

Body spirituality takes seriously our existence as body-selves and affirms that we experience God in our bodies. In other words, there is no way to experience and know God unless God becomes flesh. This is the incarnational faith – that we now know God because God has become flesh in the person of Christ. This process has not ended with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; rather it has become an ever-present reality. We keep on becoming one with the God who keeps becoming flesh in the church; we continue to become one with the incarnate God in the Eucharist; and we become one with the incarnate God in creation, the body of God, touched and transformed by the mystery of God who became flesh. This communion with God in the flesh happens in our body-selves.

There is no special time and place for this to occur; nor does it depend on certain mental gymnastics. Communion with the incar-

nate God happens constantly in the positive and negative experiences of the body-selves. The experience of the soothing and refreshing cool breeze on our faces on a hot summer day can be as much a spiritual experience as the consolation one experiences in deep contemplative prayer. Similarly, the advent of the Monsoon rain allowing the vegetation to sprout and grow, spreading, in the process, an emerald green carpet over the surface of the earth is a source of communion with the incarnate God who vivifies everything. The consoling touch of a friend, the reassuring smile of a teacher, the hug of the beloved, the appreciative and accepting look of the significant other, are all events of communion with the incarnate God. In the same way, we can commune with God by listening to the chirping of birds, the humming of bees, the fluttering of leaves, and the laughter of children.

Not only the positive experiences, but also the negativities of life are sources of communion with God who became flesh. The cries of the starving children on the streets, the pain and agony of people tortured and killed in the prisons, the victims of war, the rejection experienced by HIV and AIDS patients and those who suffer from incurable diseases, the sense of worthlessness experienced by the elderly, the despair of the debt ridden peasants, the insecurity of the migrant construction workers and their families, the loneliness of those who have lost their loved ones through accidents, crime or sickness and those who are suffering from the ravages of natural calamities like droughts, floods, earthquakes, and cyclones, are sources of communion with the incarnate God. For the God who became flesh is present as much in the positive experiences of the body-selves as in the negative experiences.

Body spirituality, however, does not stop with thanking God for the positive experiences and praying for the victims of negative experiences. Here body spirituality radically differs from the spiritualities modelled on dualism. For the latter, the body and the body experiences are of insignificant value compared to the disembodied and dispassionate contemplation of a disembodied deity. Since the body and the bodily experiences are seen as inferior and, hence, dispensable, a dualistic spirituality does not require its adherents to see any spiritual significance in the ordinary everyday activities and

events. It also prevents them from making any serious commitment to alleviating the sufferings and pains of others, to bringing about a just social order where human rights and dignity are respected, and where basic human needs are met, as well as to protecting the environment from the destruction being brought about by the greed and profit motive of people. Such a disembodied spirituality is escapist at the core, irresponsible and, hence, irrelevant. Here one can locate the disenchantment with spirituality that many in the contemporary world are experiencing. Those who are preparing themselves for priestly and religious life are not immune to it.

For Body spirituality, on the other hand, nothing is devoid of spiritual significance. Everything bodily is an occasion for spiritual growth and communion. Everyday household activities and experiences of the most ordinary kind like washing, cleaning, sweeping, dusting, grocery shopping, cooking and a myriad other things, are seen as opportunities for encountering the incarnate God. Moreover, since the body is the source of the experience of God in our body-selves, body spirituality necessitates involvement in the ordinary tasks of the day as well as it requires us to commit ourselves to the removal of injustice against and oppression of body-selves by other human beings, as well as to safeguard the ecosystem for us and for the future generations. In this way, body spirituality calls for body responses to the body experiences of the embodied God. It offers no loophole for escapism, nor does it encourage irresponsible behaviour. Instead, it demands that we embody the full implications of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, body spirituality seeks to embody God in our body-selves and it can be done only in our daily life: in our homes, in our work place, during our recreations and relaxations, during our meals, in our communion with other body-selves and with the environment. However, the experience and knowledge of God in our body-selves does not deny the need for quiet time for prayer and contemplation. Rather our encounter with the incarnate God in our day-to-day life will inevitably lead us to the deeper appreciation and savouring, the celebration and proclamation of that experience in the quietness of our heart in silence and solitude, as well as in communion with other body-selves in worship, especially in the eucharistic liturgy. From

this it becomes clear that the problem is not with prayer, contemplation, worship, and liturgy. The real problem is the dissociation of the interior life from the life of the body. The issue here is the denigration of the incarnation and the consequent development of a disembodied spirituality and a 'culture of false inwardness'²⁸ at the expense of other body-selves and creation, which is the body of God. Body spirituality specifically addresses this problem and proposes a way to reconnect our interior life with our body-life in the context of our life in the world.

Relation with God's Creation

As sexual body-selves, our relationship is not limited to other body-selves and to God. It extends to our relationship with the creation. Both the spiritualities modelled on dualism and the body spirituality affirm human ecological connection. While the dualistic spiritualities seek to transcend the mundane, material realm to reach a transcendent God in another world, body spirituality recognizes the life-giving presence of God in the worldly sphere and seeks to encounter and experience God in creation. Creation is not viewed as a mere collection of inert objects for exploitation. Body spirituality considers the world our home, which we share with myriad other life forms. The principles of mutuality and interdependence guide our relationship with creation.

This is because body spirituality locates the body-selves within the larger context of creation as an integral part of the created order. It acknowledges the Creator God as the fountainhead of all that exists, including the body-selves. It recognizes the pleasure that the Creator God takes in the well-being of creation and aims at participating in this divine pleasure. It also participates in the divine agony at the devastation of creation by the hands of human beings.

In this way, ecological mutuality is central to body spirituality. By promoting body-friendliness, body spirituality seeks to extend the same friendliness to the entire creation. A spirituality and culture that negates or denigrates the body will promote the violation of body-selves as happened in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and as it is happening in prisons in other parts of the world. An attitude that denigrates body-selves will apply the same attitude to other crea-

tures in the world. Thus, the violation of body-selves and the destruction of the environment are closely connected. One is the extension of the other. In body spirituality, on the other hand, creation is seen as the locus of divine presence and, as such, it is a source of communion with the Creator God.

Characteristics of Body Spirituality

Having highlighted the essential relationality of the body-selves based on the symbolic dimension of human sexuality and its significance for body spirituality, we shall now proceed to discuss some of the salient characteristics of body spirituality. These characteristics emerge from the context of the multiple human relationships implied in being sexual body-selves.

Embodied and Holistic Spirituality

Body spirituality is embodied spirituality. From this perspective, holiness is not merely a state of the mind or a state of the soul/spirit having little to do with the body and the bodily. From the perspective of body spirituality, holiness is integral to the existence of body-selves. Spiritual growth in holiness has to do with the body and it is manifested in the bodies. No part of the body is beyond the reach of the spiritual, or, in other words, lacking the dimension of the spirit. In this way, body spirituality considers the entire person – the totality of the body self, with all the desires and feelings, intellect and will, orientations and attitudes, capabilities and faculties, along with the body organs and their functions – as called to holiness. This holiness is embodied in one's thinking, feeling, hopes and desires as well as in all that one does and experiences. It considers every thought, feeling and action that denigrates and destroys the body, other body-selves and the creation, to be unholy and sinful. It is in our bodies and through our bodies that we sin against the incarnate God. For example, selfishness and greed are sinful because they deprive other body-selves of what is necessary for life. Thus in various ways individual and collective sins violate body-selves and creation. Accordingly, reparation and reconciliation have to be done in our bodies as body-selves, individually and corporately. Body spirituality is therefore essentially embodied and holistic.

Egalitarian and Differential Spirituality

Body spirituality is egalitarian and differential. It is egalitarian because holiness is not seen as the preserve of elite. It is accessible to all precisely because we are all body-selves created in the image and likeness of God. God's call to holiness is universal and every individual body-self in any state of life has been offered the gift of holiness. However, it is also differential in that as body-selves we are created male and female, with different orientations and attitudes. Accordingly, a male and a female, experience and know God differently in their bodies. A heterosexual person and a homosexual person experience and know God differently in their bodies. A married person and a celibate person experience and know God differently in their bodies. There is difference but there is no hierarchy of superior and inferior experience and knowledge of God. In other words, there is no gradation in holiness on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and one's state of life.

Grateful and Celebrative Spirituality

Body spirituality is grateful and celebrative. Body spirituality acknowledges that everything is a gift manifesting the goodness of a gracious God. We are motivated to experience the gracious goodness of God in our body-selves as well as in the entire creation. The gifted nature of our body selves and creation fills us with gratitude. Hence our existence as body-selves will be characterized by thankfulness. Our whole existence as body-selves will be a thankful celebration of the graciousness of God. We celebrate our bodies, we celebrate other bodies and we celebrate the whole creation. In celebrating these we celebrate the God who became flesh. And in the flesh we glorify God.

Gracious and Generous Spirituality

Body spirituality is gracious and generous and, hence, Eucharistic²⁹. It is constantly aware of the gracious generosity of God enfleshed in our bodies and in creation. This awareness not only leads to thankfulness and celebration, but also motivates us to be as generous and gracious as our God is. From the perspective of body spirituality, our body-selves are not something to be possessed and

preserved for ourselves; but they are meant to be given away as a gift just as God gives away God's self to us, especially in the Christ event and in the Eucharist. God became incarnate so that God's body could be broken and God's blood could be given away as gift that become a source of life for others. Body spirituality reminds us that we are body-selves precisely because as body-selves our body is to be broken and our blood is to be shed for the life of others. We break open our body-selves in order to enter into life giving communion with others. In this way, body spirituality is essentially Eucharistic.

Trinitarian and Incarnational Spirituality

Body spirituality is Trinitarian and incarnational. It is Trinitarian because it holds up the Trinitarian intimacy, communication and communion as the model to be followed by the body-selves. It is for this reason that relationality plays a central role in body spirituality. It tries to replicate the Trinitarian relationship in our bodies, in relation to other body-selves and in relation to the creation and the Creator God. The Trinitarian model of intimacy, and communion infuse our attitude to our bodies, to other bodies, to creation as the body of God. Since our body-selves and the entire creation have been drawn up into the Trinitarian communion through the grace event of God becoming flesh, the Trinitarian intimacy and communion that we model on is also incarnational. The model has already been made present in creation through God who became flesh. Body spirituality consciously acknowledges this fact and seeks to actualize this reality in the spheres of our relationships.

Conclusion

This essay, which is essentially an exploration in body spirituality, examined the implications of the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ for a body spirituality, the gradual eclipse of the body in Christian spirituality, the need and the presuppositions for its rediscovery, human sexuality and its relation to body spirituality, the essential relational dimensions emerging from the fact of our being sexual body-selves and their significance for body spirituality, and, finally, some of the characteristics of body spirituality. It is clear that body spirituality is a radical reinterpretation and hermeneutic

retrieval of the Christian incarnational spirituality for the contemporary times. The inspiration for this endeavour comes from the ancient Hebrew thought and the incarnational faith of the church. Without negating the traditional Christian spiritual practices, body spirituality seeks to broaden the scope of Christian spirituality in order to promote a spirituality that does justice – justice to one’s own body-self, justice to other body-selves and justice to the world and its environment. Following in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II who, in his theology of the body, initiated the process toward a deeper appreciation of the embodied nature of human existence in the world, body spirituality explores the different dimensions of this embodied existence in the personal, social and ecological spheres from the Christian incarnation faith perspective. In this way, body spirituality attempts to bridge the gap between the spiritual and material realms by bringing them together within the body-selves and transforming the body into the locus of the experience and knowledge of God. Thus, body spirituality aims at making the incarnation a lived reality in the everyday life of people.

Notes

1. The title of one of the works that initiated the perception of the link between reclaiming women’s bodies and women’s liberation through the knowledge of the body was *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The liberative potential of learning about the bodies is clearly brought out in this book. Cfr. The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book By and For Women*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971.
2. For a brief description of the background of the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption, see George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996, 198-199.
3. Starting from 1979 and lasting till 1984, Pope John Paul II gave a series of talks during his Wednesday Audiences focusing on the theme of human body which were collected and published under the title *Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body*. For a clear and succinct discussion of the various topics dealt with by the Pope, see Mary G. Durkin, *Feast of Love: Pope John Paul II on Human Intimacy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983). See also Sam Torode, *Body and Gift: Reflections on Creation. Based on a series of talks by Pope John Paul II*, South Wayne: Philokalia Books, 2003.
4. This difference has been aptly pointed out by James B. Nelson in his

Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, 20.

5. Cfr. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV: On The Theology of The Incarnation*. Translated by Kevin Smyth, New York: Crossroad, 1982, 105-120.
6. Cfr. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV: The Theology of the Symbol*. Translated by Kevin Smyth. New York: Crossroad, 1982, 221-252.
7. This overview is based on the following books: Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*, Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1985, especially chapters 4, 5, and 6; Mary Timothy Prokes, FSE, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1996, 1-23; James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 37-69; Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, *People of Passion: What the Churches Teach About Sex*, London: Mowbray, 1997, 94-109.
8. For a discussion on the positive view of the body in the Hebrew tradition, see James B. Nelson, *Body Theology*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, 30-31; Mary Timothy Prokes, FSE, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1996, 58-59; James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, 47 ff.
9. Cfr. James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*, Ibid.45.
10. Cfr. Benedict M. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*, Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1985, 103-135
11. Ibid. 113
12. Ibid. 125ff.
13. Ibid. 152ff.
14. Ibid. 165ff.
15. Ibid. 172ff.
16. Ibid. 204ff.
17. For a discussion on the alienation from bodies and the view of the body as inferior, see James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 37 ff.
18. Body is central to the feminist discourse in general. The ecofeminists have pointed out the connection between the identification of women with nature and body and its consequent oppression of women and exploitation of nature. For examples of representative writings, see Carol J. Adams, (ed), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993); Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving*

the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992). See also her *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 259-266.

19. Cfr. Wilkie Au, S.J., *By Way of the Heart: Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality*, Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1993, 85-113.
20. Body theology and body spirituality define human persons as 'bodies' meaning 'body-persons'. Cfr James B. Nelson, *Body Theology*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, 43.
21. This is the presupposition at the root of theology considered as theological anthropology. Cfr. Kuncheria Pathil and Dominic Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, Bangalore: The Theological Publication of India, 2003, 15-17
22. This description of sexuality is taken from James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988, 26.
23. James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*, 18.
24. For a discussion of Body's grace see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (ed), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, 309-321.
25. Cfr. Footnote number 3.
26. A brief critique of the Pope's theology of the body is found in Liza Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000, 73-77
27. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Translated by Edward B. Pusey, London: Collier Books, 1969, 11.
28. According to Stuart and Thatcher, spirituality like sexuality drives us out of ourselves to the neighbour in love. Quoting Kenneth Leech, the authors say that a culture of false inwardness leads spirituality toward narcissism instead of a self emptying in service. Cfr.. Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, *People of Passion: What the Churches Teach about Sex*, London: Mowbray, 1997, 230
29. One of the strongest points of the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Eucharist is that it links the Eucharist and the life of faith in the larger society. It also presents authentic Christian life as 'Eucharistic'. Cfr. *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, no. 20.

Article received: June 24, 2004

Article accepted: June 30, 2004

No or words: 8, 743