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Book Review: Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology

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ignored” Rāmānuja’s “tradition-specific realities . . . in his reading of the Ācārya” (182). So the chapter ends with an investigation of Ramanuja’s theology and philosophy in his sectarian and temple-based context. Dunn’s final chapter develops his own “Christological Reconstruction” of the Gospel of John. He does this not “on the basis of ‘Rāmānuja’s philosophy,’” but by rereading John after a close reading of Appasamy and Rāmānuja (229).

Brian Dunn has produced a very well argued and compelling investigation of A. J. Appasamy’s theology. Dunn is clearly irritated by the bishop’s detractors who “have entirely misread him if indeed they have even read him at all” (180). However, Dunn’s defense is not polemical: he discusses weaknesses and flaws in his subject’s work. Dunn’s own constructive project, a theological rereading of John’s gospel, is fascinating, although it tends to

ignore tensions within the book. The main disagreement I have – and it is a minor one – regards the reasons for the current neglect of Appasamy. Dunn, following Homi Bhabha, lays the blame at the feet of colonial attitudes to Indian theology. However, contemporary criticisms of so-called “brahminic” Christian theologies do not care about what Swedish Lutheran missionaries said in the 1950s. Rather, the criticisms arise from Dalit and Tribal theologies (43). Until the logjam created by pitting Dalit against brahminic Christian theologies is disrupted, theologians such as Appasamy will continue to be disregarded, much to the detriment of Indian Christianity, as well as Hindu-Christian comparative theology.

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***Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology.* By Michelle Voss Roberts. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017, xlvii + 181 pages.**

TO conduct solid comparative scholarship requires clarity in purpose, an authoritative deftness with the nuances of two different religious systems, and a writing style that can create a bridge of understanding for its intended audience. Voss Roberts has excelled at all of these markers in her latest book, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology*, all while broadening commitments to inclusivity by centering feminist, ecological and disability studies’ perspectives.

The primary intention of her work is to re-embody the *imago Dei* and trace out some of the implications of making this shift within Christian theology. Going beyond the explicit goal of decentering mind and reason as the dominant lenses employed by theologians

when interpreting the *imago Dei* (xx-xxi), Voss Roberts works to upend the underlying dualism and hierarchies of body-mind constructions of personhood (13, 86) and between humans and creation (134) through her innovative engagement with her interlocutor, Abhinavagupta (10th-11th century), a Hindu philosopher within a branch of Kashmiri non-dual Saivism.

As a theological anthropology, the emphasis lies in the effects of the *imago Dei* metaphor on human beings as they see themselves as a reflection of God. For those unfamiliar to this genre of constructive theology, this volume does not involve the typical methods of fieldwork and interviews known to the discipline of anthropology, but

rather involves biblical references, engagement with a wide spectrum of classical and contemporary theologians, memoirs especially related to mental health, and commentary on current affairs with the intent of expanding the “anthro,” or human dimensions, of embodied selfhood as framed by Christian doctrine.

Unique to Voss Roberts’ approach to theological anthropology is the comparative window she places at the center of this enterprise. Within the complex oeuvre of Abhinavagupta, she carefully selects his interpretation of cosmic-divine-human manifest form detailed in two commentaries related to *The Goddess of the Three (Paratrisika)*. Her work creates a responsibly bounded space in which to utilize a reading of the embodiment of divine consciousness, enacted through the Hindu god Siva. Her purpose for this comparison is to “spark new possibilities – or revive the memory of forgotten parts of the Christian heritage” (xxx) in order to present an *imago Dei* in Christian thought that embraces multiplicity, limits, and equitable relationships (81).

Abhinavagupta’s processual emanation of consciousness, creating a non-hierarchical multiplicity within a simultaneous unified state, moves through thirty-six parts as grouped together in five categories that Voss Roberts adopts as an organizational strategy for her chapters. Starting with the “conscious body,” as Siva begins to recognize a distinct self in relation to other, the analysis takes the finely-tuned layers common to Hindu philosophical parsing to gradually examine facets of increasing density of embodied consciousness with chapters devoted to the limited body, the subjective body, engaged body, and elemental body.

Voss Roberts accomplishes loosening the influence of the cognitive capacity of the mind

on *imago Dei* through highlighting a model that places *manas*, the mind/heart as emerging only halfway through the embodying of consciousness as part of the subjective body, rather than its primary and most important feature (84-6). The second is through taking seriously each *tattva*, or part, as embodied (xxxv). These thirty-six *tattvas* include minute interactional processes common to many Hindu conceptualizations of “body” related to limitations, sensations and elements that co-create bodiedness in time and space.

This is some of the hardest bridgework Voss Roberts engages in when juxtaposing this complex “body”, helpfully envisioned in a table that reappears in each chapter, with a “body” consisting of few explicit correlates found within Christian theology. Why Voss Roberts is able to effectively engage these seemingly disparate models is because her goal is not a direct comparison of the conceptualizations of the body, which might unintentionally elide major differences between ideas of consciousness and soul. Instead, her more productive examination concentrates on the possible *effects* of viewing *imago Dei* through Abhinavagupta’s model as a resource for living Christian practitioners seeking to bring forth the “heavenly banquet – communal, inclusive, and countercultural – [that] is still breaking in” (157).

How do these thirty-six *tattvas* open up more inclusive Christian understandings of the *imago Dei*? One of Voss Roberts’ strongest argumentative threads occurs in chapters two and three on the limited body. In Abhinavagupta’s model, parts of Siva’s unfolding consciousness are circumscribed, namely power, knowledge, satisfaction (desire) as experienced within further confinements of time and space. These five limitations are predicated through *maya*, or

the illusion of being other or separate from the underlying unity of divinely pervaded creation (37). In Hindu devotional traditions, these limitations of divine consciousness can be found in Krishna taking the form of a child reliant on a mother's care, his heartbroken despondency in relation to hurting Radha, and consecrated *murtis* that must be attended to through *puja*. These examples note divine limitations, taken on by choice, in order to cultivate affection or deeply experience difference that can only be tasted through interacting with a perceived otherness.

Why this matters for Voss Roberts is that it points to how an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God leads to an *imago Dei* in which limitations experienced by humans prevent their full selves as they are from being included and valued within divinely sanctioned creation. When humans exist in limited states, permanently or temporarily, from the coma patient to those experiencing physical and intellectual disabilities or mental health struggles, all examples Voss Roberts explores, the *imago Dei* is off limits. Voss Roberts adroitly critiques scholars, such as Reinhold Niebuhr for his ableist self-transcendent solutions that “leaves bodies [in all states] behind” (32), builds off of the work on “normalization” of disability by Deborah Creamer, and points to underexamined Christian resources, such as the Trinitarian vulnerability of the Christ child within the work of feminist theologian Elizabeth Gandolfo (61-2). Ultimately, Voss Roberts utilizes Abhinavagupta to make the case for a positive valuation of limits in relation to God and humans. Limits can no longer be perceived as a “deficit in divine perfection,” leading to an *imago Dei* in which “human

limits reflect something of God's experience in the world” (54).

A noteworthy feature is the inclusion of “practices of attention” included at the end of each chapter. These invite readers to engage in practices in order to unlearn deeply seeded ideologies and in this case, metaphors such as the *imago Dei*, that have an impact on habits (xliv). Examples include bringing awareness to the everyday, engaging the imagination, and “yoking the instruments of cognition” to understand the stories of others (98). The practices are discussed more meta-discursively rather than presented as a “how-to” guide, the latter an approach remedied by the accompanying website. In some ways the discussion about “practices of attention” in the book may remain too tied to mental and able-bodied capacities that Voss Roberts intends to bring awareness to in her argument for inclusivity, but for many of her intended readers invites a more holistic engagement with the ideas presented.

On a final note, this is a work committed to religious pluralism (66), and one in which those steeped strictly in classical Christian or Hindu theologies may find difficult to engage. As an example of this pluralism, the *imago Dei* is extended as a possible category to all religions, while *imago Christi* is connected to a particularly Christian experience (116-20). Even if this form of pluralism goes too far for some readers, or if Christian theology is not your main expertise, there are many worthy offerings in this text for scholars interested in responsible comparative work, body theorizing, and disability studies.

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