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2017

Being the Body of Christ: rethinking Christian identity in a religiously plural world

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Boston University

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Dissertation

BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST: RETHINKING CHRISTIAN IDENTITITY IN

A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL WORLD

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

2017

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and the friends who have become family

through this process. You all have my deepest thanks for the support, love,

encouragement, commiseration, and humor that made this dissertation possible.

BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST: RETHINKING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL WORLD

(Order No.   )

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation develops a constructive theological interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor in order to provide a distinct understanding of Christian identity to assist Christians in responding to religious diversity. Presently, two academic approaches guide contemporary Christian theological responses to religious pluralism: theology of religions and comparative theology. They offer resources and insights into Christian responses, but questions remain regarding the relationship of Christian identity to contexts of religious diversity. Revitalizing the Body of Christ metaphor through engagement with contemporary theologians, this dissertation interprets their insights about alterity and embodiment regarding religious difference. Focusing on concepts of embodiment, relationality, diversity and praxis, the Christian identity that emerges is neither exclusive nor contained, but open and interdependent. This provides a framing of Christian identity that assists Christians in relating to religious diversity with openness.

Chapter one surveys contemporary approaches that have guided the Christian theological response to religious diversity. Turning to the Body of Christ metaphor in the New Testament writings of Paul, chapter two demonstrates the original power of the

metaphor to shape the values and worldview of early Jesus-followers. Chapters three and four explore womanist, feminist, queer, and crip theologies for critiques and contributions to the theological significance of bodies. Offering warnings about the failure to attend to the realities of difference, they offer essential theological insights into conceptions of bodies, hierarchy, and difference. The content they provide for the Body of Christ metaphor shapes Christian self-understanding in a manner that opens the Christian community as it engages other religious bodies. The final chapter provides a constructive interpretation of the Body of Christ and points to distinctive practices that guide the Christian community into a new embodiment of this metaphor.

The identity provided by the metaphor shapes Christian relationships with each other and the world through practices of discernment, re-membering, and partnership. It challenges Christians to value fluidity and porousness, putting them in tension with dominant conceptions of Western society, and, through relationality and appreciation for the other, it calls Christians to engage religious diversity with actions of social justice.

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Chapter One: Christian Responses to Religious Plurality

Many Christians are struggling to determine what it means to be Christian in a world of many religions. Questions of identity, acceptable engagement with other religions and their practitioners, and the uniqueness of Christianity are raised with new urgency.[1] My claim in this dissertation is that if Christians understand their identity, both as individuals and as a community, through the Body of Christ metaphor, they will be able to approach religious diversity with openness and respect. Approaching religious diversity in this way results in cooperation, respect, and mutual learning rather than fear, mistrust, and violence. A positive approach to religious diversity results from the Body of Christ metaphor because it directs Christians to focus on their embodied reality as porous, limited, and vulnerable individuals and communities interacting with the world. The metaphor provides a psychological and emotional grounding point in the face of the questions religious diversity raises regarding religious identity. This grounding point is found in the particularity of claiming a Christian identity while being concerned with the physical reality of Christians and the world in which they live. The psychological and emotional grounding results in confidence and dispels fear, while concern about embodiment causes Christians to focus on the physical well-being of others through actions of social justice and resisting violence.

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[1] Evidenced in even the WCC, an ecumenically-focused organization, tackling question of interreligious dialogue at the 2013 General Assembly.

Two major trajectories of Christian theological study have developed in response to the reality of religious diversity: theology of religions and comparative theology. Theology of religions, as practiced by theologians such as Paul Knitter and Jacques Dupuis, is the "attempt of Christian pastors and theologians to answer questions" raised by religious diversity through developing a systematic understanding of the relationship between Christianity's ultimate claims and those of other religious traditions.[2] Comparative theology, of the school of Francis Clooney and James Fredericks, "entails the interpretation of the meaning and truth of one's own faith by means of a critical investigation of other religious paths."[3] These two areas of Christian theology have now been joined by constructive theological projects addressing religious diversity.

This dissertation argues that a constructive theological understanding of Christian identity rooted in the metaphor of the Body of Christ can provide values and practices to assist Christians in their engagement with religious diversity. At first glance this metaphor seems to encourage exclusivity, but, through reframing, it can actually propel Christians into productive interreligious engagement as a necessary component of living out the kin-dom building practices encouraged by claiming a Christian identity. The context of religious plurality presents a challenge to Christian self-understanding as the uniqueness and significance of being Christian is put into conversation with other religious identities. By stepping back conceptually to reflect on Christian communal and

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[2] Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 1-2.

[3] James L. Fredericks, "Introduction," in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), ix.

individual identity, this metaphor offers Christians solid ground from which to understand themselves as they engage with a religiously diverse world.

As an ecclesial metaphor, the Body of Christ not only addresses communal and individual Christian identity, but also functions missionally by guiding Christian action, or praxis, in a religiously plural world. The Body of Christ does not exist in isolation; it lives within a world populated with other bodies with which it must interact. Thus, at the same time the Body of Christ metaphor shapes the manner in which Christians understand themselves to be in relationship with each other, it also entails Christians discovering how to act as Christ's body in the world today and be in relationship with non-Christians.

This dissertation constructively reimagines this biblical metaphor to provide new resources for Christian responses to religious plurality. Early feminist work on metaphor and contemporary work on the body (from feminist, womanist, queer and disability theologies) provide resources for thinking about the Body of Christ in light of concerns about exclusion and "otherness" and which in turn provides insights for thinking about religious pluralism from new angles.[4] These new angles will provide much needed resources for Christians to affirmatively engage religious plurality. It is only by engaging in positive and constructive ways with practitioners of other religions that Christians can come to understand their religious neighbors and form healthy and respectful relationships across religious boundaries. This understanding and relationship building is

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[4] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 34.

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necessary to combat religiously motivated violence as well as gain the resources to address global challenges such as poverty and ecological devastation.

This dissertation pursues a constructive theological interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor in order to assist Christians in understanding their identity, both individually and communally, in a world of many faiths. I argue that the Body of Christ metaphor has the potential to guide Christian self-understanding in a manner that provides resources for positively engaging religious diversity and causes Christians to be open to interreligious dialogue. Conceiving of the Christian community as the Body of Christ provides concrete practices and attitudes that can assist Christians in positive engagement with practitioners of other religious traditions. This dissertation will draw upon feminist, womanist, queer, and disability theologies for principles necessary to construct an understanding of the Body of Christ metaphor faithful to the Christian tradition and responsive to contemporary contexts.

The resources developed in this project arise partly from contemporary theological reflection in the fields of feminist, womanist, and queer theology as well as from the intersection of postmodern theology and disability studies. These fields have demanded new awareness of which bodies are included in the Body of Christ, how power dynamics function among the bodies that make up the Body, and revised understandings of the nature of bodies themselves. Feminist, womanist, and queer theology have highlighted gender, class, race, and sexuality differences among the bodies that make up the Body of Christ as influential factors in the formation of theological concepts. Disability studies, in conversation with postmodern theology, troubles claims of physical

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normalcy and wholeness, bringing to the forefront the vulnerability of all bodies.

Insights from these fields allow a constructive theological engagement with the Body of

Christ metaphor, which re-envisions the bodies that compose the Body and the

relationships among these bodies. In articulating the nature and purpose of these

relationships, this metaphor will also provide the foundation needed for new answers to

the questions posed by religious pluralism which stem from the primary question: what is

the proper Christian response to the reality of religious pluralism?

The rest of this chapter will explore the current context of religious plurality

within the United States, review the two primary fields of Christian theology which have

responded to the reality of religious diversity, and argue for the possibility of resources to

be found in the Body of Christ metaphor. The methodology, accomplishments, and

limitations of the two fields of theology of religions and comparative theology will be

examined in an effort to demonstrate the indebtedness of this project to the work already

done regarding Christian responses to religious plurality and clarify the need for a

different, constructive approach in order to address questions that remain in regards to

Christian identity. Examples of other constructive theological projects that have

expanded Christian responses to religious plurality beyond theology of religions and

comparative theology will be presented along with the rationale and methodology of this

dissertation.

The Current U.S. Religious and Theological Context

There are over 25 different religious traditions in the United States. If agnostics, atheists, the spiritual-but-not-religious, and the various Protestant Christian denominations are included, that number jumps to over 100 distinct communities.[5] Religious diversity is a pervasive reality throughout all regions of the country and it influences the daily lives of citizens in cities, small towns, and rural communities in both ideological and practical ways. There is little question about the need to engage religious diversity in the United States, but there are many questions regarding what kind of engagement is proper, permissible, or productive.[6]

The practical questions of how to live side by side with practitioners of different faiths brings home the material and particular nature of the challenge of the religious other. Individuals are not only wondering abstractly about the significance of religious diversity, they are seeking guidance in how to interact in public spaces with persons whose religious beliefs and practices are quite different. Whose holy days will be recognized as national holidays? What accommodations should be made regarding dietary restrictions in public schools? Which organizations are recognized as religious communities and then granted tax-exempt status?

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[5] "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Forum, last modified May 12, 2015, accessed May 30, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

[6] Engagement across religious boundaries comes in many forms, but there are four widely recognized categories of interreligious dialogue: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of worship, and theological/philosophical dialogue. These categories were first articulated by the Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, last modified 1991, accessed May 30, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/index.htm.

If religious diversity is not consciously engaged in a positive manner, people tend to approach the religious other with fear and mistrust. This fear and mistrust causes tension which manifests in a range of actions from exclusionary practices in private lives to full blown religiously motivated violence. It is imperative for the future peace and flourishing of all societies generally, and US society particularly, that fear and mistrust of the religious other is combatted. The processes of globalization have made it so that the diversity of religious traditions can be accessed from anywhere, and the particular context of the United States will be religiously plural for the foreseeable future.[7] In order to avoid religiously motivated violence, fear and mistrust of the religious other must be addressed even on the relatively low level of exclusionary practices in private lives.

The challenge posed by the reality of religious diversity and the religious other stems from the questions their existence causes for an individual and the religious community with which that individual identifies. While the practical questions can cause some anxiety and tension, ideological questions can also give rise to fear and mistrust. These questions include:

- What does religious diversity mean for me?
- Why is that person's religious tradition different from mine?
- How is that person's religious tradition different from mine?
- Is that person's religious tradition better than mine?
- If the other person is happy being part of another religious tradition, is there something deficient with my religious tradition?
- Is my religious tradition the best? How can I know if this is true?
- If my religious tradition is truly the best religious tradition, why doesn't that person convert to my religious tradition?

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[7] For a concise introduction to the topic of globalization and its relationship to theology, see Joerg Rieger's *Globalization and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).

- If my religious tradition is not the best, why should I stay in this religious tradition?
- If my religious tradition cannot be proven the best, but neither can the other person's religious tradition, why should I choose one religious tradition over another?
- What is actually significant about being part of a particular religious tradition? What difference does it actually make for my life?

Since these questions hold great existential significance related to a person's identity and purpose, it is not surprising that fear and mistrust are often responses to religious diversity. The search for answers to questions such as these, whether conscious or unconscious, becomes an important aspect of understanding oneself. For guidance in answering these questions, individuals need religious resources from their personal religious traditions.

It is important that each religious tradition develop resources to assist their practitioners with handling religious diversity. While one religious tradition can certainly make suggestions for another, the danger of hegemony is always present in how one tradition views another. As such, what works within one religious tradition may not work within another for reasons the first tradition cannot foresee. Hearing from their own religious tradition on how to engage religious diversity positively is important for individual practitioners. In one sense, they need permission from their religious tradition in order to engage the religious other without feeling they are betraying their home tradition. It is also more likely that individuals will understand the resources proposed for engaging religious diversity and accept these resources if they are formulated within the worldview and terminology common in the religious tradition. Resources grounded

in one's own religious tradition are likely to be more authoritative than resources from another religious tradition.

For Christians, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, there is a long tradition of theological resources to assist individuals in making sense of the multireligious societies in which they live. While many areas of Christian theology can and do take religious plurality into account, the Christian theological response to religious plurality has primarily fallen within two closely related fields: theology of religions and comparative theology. These fields provide methodologies for theological reflection on religious plurality which can and have been utilized by theologians and religious scholars from multiple religious traditions, but it is their use within Christian theology that concerns us here. The Christian forms of these fields approach religious plurality with different concerns and objectives, but both theology of religions and comparative theology strive to address the reality of religious diversity while being theologically faithful to the Christian tradition.

They are rich and fruitful fields which have opened new avenues for Christians concerned about religious diversity, but the distinct methods and goals of theology of religions and comparative theology result in limitations regarding their utility within Christian communities. As will be examined comprehensively below, theology of religions focuses on creating a theological system within which to understand the relationship between different religious traditions. The relationship between Christianity and other traditions is shaped by questions of the possibility of salvation for individuals and the role of Jesus Christ in that salvation. While various theologies of religions

continue to be debated and refined, a well-established typology, proposed by Alan Race in 1983, of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism structures the field.[8]

This typology has been theology of religions' largest contribution to the Christian community's attempt to deal with religious diversity. Lay Christians have been provided with a vocabulary to express the extent of their openness to the truth and salvific efficacy of other religions traditions, setting the groundwork for processes of learning about other religious traditions and engagement in interreligious dialogue. Yet, having a ready answer for whether or not you believe a Hindu can go to heaven doesn't provide much help in deciding whether it is permissible for you to watch or participate in a Buddhist festival or whether you should honor Jewish kosher laws when preparing food for guests in your home.

Comparative theology, also to be examined in more detail below, approaches the question of religious diversity quite differently. The aim within comparative theology is to suspend any attempt to judge other religious traditions, particularly in regards to salvific efficacy, and instead focus on gaining greater understanding of other religious traditions. While scholarship from Christian comparative theologians has led to more appreciative engagement of other religious traditions and provided innovative insight into Christian theological concepts, this scholarship has rarely influenced those outside of the academy. The extensive academic training required to skillfully engage in comparative

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[8] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

theology precludes the average Christian from participating in such a process, which in turn limits the impact of comparative theology on the Christian community.

Comparative theology has most definitely opened Christians to a more general appreciation of other religious traditions, but without further personal involvement in the process, the lay Christian is unlikely to find assistance in the practical questions which can result. If comparative theology has convinced some Christians that there can be beauty and truth in Islam, it has not always addressed the questions which then rebound to Christianity. If I, as a Christian, believe that a Muslim is not completely wrong and Islam contains some truth, does that mean I am less right than I originally thought? Does this mean Christianity doesn't contain all the truth? Am I wrong in some of my beliefs? How do I figure all of this out?

Theology of religions and comparative theology have provided important support for Christians as they engage the religiously diverse societies around them, but, on their own, they are unable to address the full range of questions and issues religious diversity presents. There is a need for Christian theologians who address religious diversity outside of theology of religions and comparative theology. Yet, to demonstrate the necessity of moving beyond theology of religions and comparative theology, a deeper examination of their methods, goals, and outcomes must be undertaken.

Theology of Religions

The field of theology of religions has made great strides in giving Christians a theological framework for understanding a world composed of many religious traditions.

As a whole, this field "reflects from the perspective of one's own religion on the meaning of other religions."[9] Usually, an overarching theory of religion and the relationship between different religions is proposed. The field strives to hold in balance the historical Christian claims of the particularity of Christ and the universality of God's love. Traditionally, Christians claim that "God's love is universal, extending to all" for the purpose of reconciling all of humanity to Godself, but also "that [God's] love is realized through the particular and singular community of Jesus Christ."[10] At the heart of the tension between these two claims lie the Christian doctrines of Christology and soteriology. How theologians answer the questions of "who is saved?" and "how are they saved?" determines the manner in which the two poles of Christian universality and particularity are addressed. Thus, articulations of theology of religions have focused in great part on explaining how Christians can understand the possibility of salvation for practitioners of other religious traditions. Three main positions within theology of religions have been developed, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, all with their own answers to the meaning and function of other religions in relation to Christianity.[11]

Exclusivism places stress on the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity to other religious traditions. Salvation is to be found only through Christ which necessitates

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[9] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 14.

[10] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, 19.

[11] Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 7. This typology has been critiqued, revised, and expanded by a number of theologians, but Alan Race's threefold typology still holds a primary place in in any theology of religions discussion.

a conversion to Christianity for any who wish to be saved. Other religious traditions may contain some truth and knowledge about God, but this truth cannot be understood unless viewed through the lens of the truth of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. A spectrum of exclusivist positions exists, often differing on whether or not conversion after death is a possibility, but all share a commitment to the necessity of Christ for an individual's salvation.

Anglican theologian Alister McGrath provides a prime example of an exclusivist theology of religions. While he counsels respectful engagement with the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions, he holds firm to the theological claim that salvation can only be found in Christ. He makes no judgment about the salvific possibilities for those individuals throughout history who have never come into contact with the Christian gospel, but strongly affirms the particularity of the salvation testified to in the Gospels. Viewing himself as a Christian apologist, McGrath refers to his theological position as particularist, rather than exclusivist.

The naming of this position as particularist instead of exclusivist is grounded in two claims: one linguistic, one theological. First, exclusivist or exclusivism holds negative connotations for those living in diverse societies. McGrath, and others holding similar theological positions, wants to distance himself from perceptions of disrespectful attitudes toward religious difference. By calling himself a particularist, McGrath hopes to communicate both his specific theological affiliation and his openness to dialogue with practitioners of other religious traditions. Second, particularism refers to McGrath's understanding of salvation which gives rise to his theology of religions. He argues that

"For Christianity, the notion of salvation explicitly centers on a relationship, inaugurated in time and to be consummated beyond time, with none other than the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' We are thus dealing with a highly particularized notion of salvation."[12] For McGrath, there is no general understanding of salvation with which to evaluate religious claims, only particular conceptions of salvation specific to religious traditions.

This means that for individuals to be saved, in the Christian understanding of salvation, individuals must leave other religious traditions behind and become Christians. Other religious traditions, while possibly containing accurate knowledge about God, cannot provide the salvation found in Christianity. As McGrath explains:

> Christianity is the only religion to offer salvation *in the Christian sense of that term*…Salvation in the Christian sense of that term is proclaimed as a real and attractive possibility for those who are presently outside the Christian community…By responding to the Christian gospel and embracing the salvation it confers, individuals as a matter of fact become members of the church.[13]

McGrath is not claiming that an individual must attend church services regularly or have their membership recognized by any official church body to be a Christian and experience salvation. Instead, he argues that once an individual becomes a Christian through embracing the salvation offered by Christ, that individual is automatically part of the church universal.

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[12] Alister E. McGrath, "A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 169.

[13] Ibid., 175.

While McGrath's acceptance of the possibility of salvation for individuals who are not part of formal Christian communities may sound similar to positions of inclusivism, there is a crucial difference which places his theology in the particularist or exclusivist category. Salvation for an individual entails a conscious acceptance of the salvation found in Christ, a conscious conversion to this understanding of salvation and the conception of God implied in this salvation. The individual might not join a Christian church, but that individual has consciously become a Christian. In not necessitating formal membership in the Christian community, McGrath argues that he is acknowledging the limitations of human evangelism and the freedom and power of God. Christians cannot claim definite knowledge of which individuals are saved because "God's revelation is not limited to the explicit human preaching of the good news, but extends beyond it. [Christians] must be prepared to be surprised at those whom we will meet in the kingdom of God."[14] A conversion to Christianity is necessary for salvation, but only God knows the truth of an individual's conversion.

Inclusivism recognizes the possibility of religious truth in other religions while insisting that Christianity contains the fulfillment of these truths. Due to God's universal love and desire for the salvation of all human beings, inclusivism believes God has reached out and continues to reach out to all people. God has and will use all means of communicating Godself to humanity, including religious traditions. This has resulted in religious traditions other than Christianity containing some of the truth which is found in

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[14] Ibid., 178.

its complete form in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Other religious traditions do not provide salvation, but individual practitioners may have grasped enough of the truth of God to be saved by Christ. For inclusivists, it is not considered necessary to convert to Christianity to be saved, but conversion provides greater assurance for individuals of their salvation in Christ.

Karl Rahner, a Catholic theologian, is considered the quintessential example of an inclusivist theologian of religions. While upholding the primacy of Christ as the locus of salvation, he argues that there is great possibility for individuals outside of the Christian tradition to be saved. This stems from his understandings of human nature, the grace and nature of God, and the reality of salvation. For Rahner, when an individual, from any religious tradition or none, understands their true nature, that individual is connected with the God known through Christ and thus experiences salvation. Unlike in McGrath's exclusivist position, conscious recognition of this connection with God through Christ is not necessary in Rahner's inclusivist theology of religions.

The basis of Rahner's theological argument is his understanding of human and divine nature. For Rahner, "Man's whole spiritual and intellectual existence is oriented towards a holy mystery which is the basis of his being."[15] Human beings by their very nature are centered toward something transcendent and holy which, while always mysterious, must be known in some way in order for human beings to know themselves. This "holy mystery" is God who Rahner believes is always reaching out to humanity.

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[15] Karl Rahner and Gerald A. McCool, *A Rahner Reader* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 207.

God is, by grace, communicating Godself to all of humanity in order that human beings

might know God and know themselves. Christ is one such self-communication by God

to humanity and is, in fact, the fullest of God's self-communication as Christ "constitutes

the goal of all creation."[16] Since orientation toward God is at the center of human nature,

any acceptance of God's self-communication is at the same time an acceptance of an

individual's true nature and any movement toward understanding human nature is at the

same time a movement toward knowledge of God.

It does not matter in Rahner's theology if the individual is consciously aware of

this connection between his or her nature and the holy mystery which grounds said

nature. For Rahner,

> In the acceptance of himself man is accepting Christ as the absolute perfection
> and guarantee of his own anonymous movement toward God by grace, and the
> acceptance of this belief is again not an act of man alone but the work of God's
> grace which is the grace of Christ, and this means in its turn the grace of his
> Church which is only the continuation of the mystery of Christ, his permanent
> visible presence in our history.[17]

All those who accept their own nature are believers in God according to Rahner and thus

also believers in Christ. The lack of conscious belief in God and Christ as a necessary

component of this theology gives rise to Rahner's famous phrase "anonymous

Christian."[18] Those individuals who have accepted their true nature have become

Christians without conscious decision. They may never formally convert to Christianity,

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[16] Ibid., 212.

[17] Ibid., 213.

[18] Ibid., 214.

but Rahner argues that these individuals are Christians and will experience salvation just as those who consciously believe in and practice Christianity.

There are serious concerns with the term "anonymous Christian" as it connotes a very paternalistic attitude toward practitioners of other religious traditions. The term implies that individuals are anonymous to themselves; that they are unaware of the accurate label with which to name themselves. It denies on one level an individual's right to claim their own identity by placing a superseding identity over any statement of belonging to a different religious community.

Yet this was not Rahner's intent in articulating this inclusivist theology of religions or creating the term "anonymous Christian." The term is meant to open Christians to the idea of salvation outside of the bounds of the Church and to cause Christians to see something of themselves in practitioners of other religious traditions. Rahner wanted to encourage Christians to engage positively with other religions and practitioners, and he viewed "anonymous Christians" as individuals who have the potential to teach something to those formally practicing Christianity. The term is meant for use within Christian theological conversations as a way to signal respect and connection with those of other religious traditions.

This respect and connection extends in a more limited sense from engagement with individual practitioners to the evaluation of the religious traditions they may practice. While practitioners of many religious traditions may be saved, the traditions themselves are not to be considered salvific. For "Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside

itself as of equal right."[19] Other religious traditions do not contain salvation, because

they do not contain knowledge of Christ, the fullest example of God's reaching out to

humanity. This is not to say that other religious traditions have no value in Rahner's

theology of religions. Throughout history God has been reaching out and communicating

Godself to humanity, so it is possible for other religious traditions to contain accurate

knowledge of God and of human nature in limited amounts. In such cases, "a non-

Christian religion can be recognized as a *lawful* religion...without thereby denying the

error and depravity contained in it."[20] Other religious traditions may guide individuals in

the correct direction for knowledge of God through Christ, but if one was to subscribe

only to the beliefs and practices of another tradition, she or he would never know the full

truth of God and human nature.

The affirmation of the possibility of truth within other religious traditions while

claiming ultimate knowledge of God within Christianity is a hallmark of inclusivist

theologies of religions. Rahner, along with other inclusivists, argues that the distinction

between the salvific possibilities for individuals and the inability of other religious

traditions to provide salvation upholds the uniqueness of Christ as the complete self-

communication of God. As well, this affirmation is meant to honor the nature of the God

known through Christ who desires the salvation of all people. Thus, Rahner is confident

in saying, "everyone who follows his or her conscience and is true to it...is and

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[19] Ibid., 215.

[20] Ibid.

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remains...encompassed by the salvation of the one, eternal God."[21] He never presumes to have definitive knowledge of the salvation of an individual whether within or without the Christian tradition, but his theology of religions argues for an optimistic outlook on the possibility that all of humanity will experience salvation.

Pluralism focuses on the mutuality of religions as differing paths toward the same religious truth. Not only might other religious traditions contain some truth about God, they may very well contain saving truth: practitioners of other religious traditions may be saved because they are practitioners of those traditions. Pluralism often stresses the possibility that other religious traditions may have truth about God that Christianity has lost or ignored. This causes pluralist theologians to place importance on interreligious dialogue and educating oneself about other religious traditions in order that one's faith may be strengthened and expanded. The multiplicity of religious traditions is viewed as a reflection of the creativity of God. Such multiplicity has resulted in widely different religious paths, Christ is one such path, but all are ultimately leading to the same truth.

Catholic theologian Paul Knitter has articulated a prime example of a pluralist theology of religions. His personal theological position within theology of religions has migrated from Christian exclusivism through inclusivism to a current religious pluralism as his participation in interreligious dialogue and personal practice of Zen Buddhism have convinced him that "the Source of truth and transformation [Christians] have called the God of Jesus Christ may have more truth and other forms of transformation to reveal than

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[21] Ibid., 340.

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have been made manifest in Jesus."[22] At the same time, his academic engagement with

liberation theology and personal involvement in social justice movements have placed a

concern for marginalized and suffering people at the center of his theological work. This

has also influenced his understanding of interreligious dialogue and the purpose of

articulating a theology of religions, leading him to argue that "any interfaith encounter is

incomplete, perhaps even dangerous, it if does not include, somehow, a concern for and

an attempt to resolve the human and ecological suffering prevalent throughout the

world."[23] Therefore, Knitter has proposed a form of Christian religious pluralism he calls

globally responsible, correlational dialogue as a method for productive and just

interreligious dialogue.

Each of the three words Knitter uses to describe dialogue (globally, responsible,

and correlational) are integral to his theology of religious pluralism. While not beginning

as some religious pluralists do with affirming beliefs, practices, or experiences held in

common by all or most religious traditions, Knitter does insist that religious practitioners

exist in "a common *context* that contains a common complex of *problems*."[24] All

religious practitioners find themselves located on the same planet, facing the same

realities of global economic systems, environmental degradation, and the possibility of

violence, among others. While religious practitioners experience these realities in

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[22] Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 30.

[23] Ibid., 15.

[24] Ibid., 57.

different and particular ways according to their contexts, Knitter argues that the interconnectedness of human and ecological life on the planet provides a common global context: forming the "globally" aspect of his theology. For Knitter, the common global context is most succinctly understood as "the horrible reality of *suffering* – suffering that is draining the life and imperiling the future of humankind and the planet."[25]

Knitter argues that this suffering demands a response from all religious people: the "responsible" aspect of his theology. The immediacy of suffering, the direct need individuals are confronted by when witnessing or experiencing suffering, calls all of humanity to action. Drawing primarily on Christian liberation theology, Knitter argues that the voices of the socially-politically excluded "have a privileged place in the discourse [of dialogue]…because their difference is challenging and…can rupture and reroute our awareness."[26] All religious practitioners have a responsibility to respond to eco-human suffering because "there is the clear and strong sense that an effective, enduring, really transformative dialogue with the suffering of this world will have to include a dialogue with the world religions."[27] Knitter believes religious traditions provide the fire for sustainable liberative action.

The third aspect of Knitter's theology, correlational, is his expansion of the term pluralism. By calling his form of dialogue correlational, Knitter is placing emphasis on the need for mutual co-relationship among dialogue partners. By choosing the word

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 91.

[27] Ibid., 14.

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correlational, Knitter is trying to distinguish his approach from the two dangers pluralists

fall into in which they "either do not take plurality seriously enough and therefore miss

the ineradicable differences among religions, or they are so swept up by the desire to get

along that they gloss over or play down what is unique in each religion."[28] Instead, the

dialogical relationship should be "analogous to the kind of human relationships we seek

to nurture among our friends and colleagues. These are relationships in which persons

speak honestly with each other and listen authentically."[29] All those involved in the

dialogue should respect the opinions and beliefs of their dialogue partners and honestly

represent their own positions. Diversity is affirmed and appreciated in a correlational

dialogue.

The final piece to Knitter's approach to religious pluralism is the methodology he

proposes for interreligious dialogue itself. In this, he further utilizes liberation theology:

liberative praxis is the first step, dialogue is the second. He develops a hermeneutical

circle of four movements: compassion, conversion, collaboration, and comprehension.[30]

Compassion is the first movement, for without a compassionate response to suffering no

action will be taken. Next is conversion as those who respond to suffering with

compassion experience a demand on their lives and a call to stand with those who suffer.

The third movement is collaboration as those who have experienced conversion band

together with other converts and the suffering to engage in concrete action.

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[28] Ibid., 38.

[29] Ibid., 16.

[30] Ibid., 140-144.

Comprehension follows concrete action as a time of reflection and discussion of the motivations, challenges, and triumphs of the earlier three movements. He describes this form of interreligious dialogue as one in which,

> Together the participants determine what are, in their particular social or national context, the examples of human or ecological suffering that they feel called to address. And together they attempt to do something about these pressing realities of poverty or hunger or exploitation or environmental devastation. From this effort…there will result a context…on the basis of which the participants in the dialogue will be able to understand themselves and each other in new ways.[31]

Practitioners of different religions are brought together by common action determined by their context and interreligious dialogue occurs as a result. By not determining a specific agenda for either the praxis or the dialogue, Knitter believes this form of interreligious dialogue will be acceptable to practitioners of many if not all religious traditions and result in productive dialogue.

While Knitter's pluralist theology of religions spends the majority of its time discussing interreligious dialogue, he does still address many of the same soteriological and Christological questions exclusivists and inclusivists focus on. An understanding of Jesus as liberator and spirit-filled prophet provides the theological groundwork for his globally responsible, correlational dialogue. For Knitter, "Jesus' divinity [must be] understood and presented to other believers in terms of his role as social prophet."[32] It is Jesus's deep experience of God's Spirit which fueled his prophetic action and caused others to sense God's presence in him. The salvation brought about by Jesus can be

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[31] Ibid., 138.

[32] Knitter, *Introducing Theology of Religions*, 144.

experienced both individually and communally in the form of liberation and transformation from oppression and suffering to love, justice, and peace. These new realities are available to all people regardless of their religious affiliation. Salvation is possible for all of humankind, not just Christians.

Critiques of Theology of Religions

While the resulting theological framework of the three positions are quite diverse, they all engage questions of soteriology and Christology. These theologians recognize that questions about the salvific efficacy of other religious traditions and the role of Christ in saving individual practitioners are at the heart of Christian concerns regarding religious plurality. As might be expected, any Christian theology of religions ends up placing other traditions within a worldview shaped by Christian religious concerns. Due to this, critiques have been raised from various quarters that "all positions in the tripartite typology of exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism fall prey to a self-referential construction of the diverse religious forms. The 'other' is not allowed to be distinctive but rather is judged by how much 'like' the Christian's his or her religious practice and achievements are."[33] Feminist theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher argues that while this charge of viewing the religious other through the lens of Christianity can most clearly been seen in the positions of exclusivism and inclusivism, even the position of pluralism can be charged with theological hegemony. The particularities of traditions are not allowed to

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[33] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19.2 (Fall 2003): 9.

stand in tension with each other but rather relativized as idiosyncratic manifestations of the same underlying principles, often drawn from the Christian tradition. This can be seen in the dominance of the question "How might practitioners of other religions be saved?" being applied to religious traditions like Buddhism and Islam where such a question has no relevance inside the tradition.

In Hill Fletcher's assessment, difference is erased in exclusivist positions through a process of dismissal. Since exclusivists argue for a singularity of truth, found in Christianity, differences in other religious communities are discarded as inaccurate deviations from the true message. Any similarities found between traditions are treated as miracles of the God known through Christ or as dangerous elements that might confuse Christians into accepting beliefs outside of the Christian tradition. Hill Fletcher critiques pluralism as it also "suggests a singular aim of human fulfillment, albeit revealed in a diversity of forms."[34] Differences are not fully honored in pluralist positions because they are viewed as variations on a single theme. Inclusivism explicitly states its Christocentric view, evaluating diverse religions according to the norm of Jesus Christ rather than allowing diverse beliefs and practices to be understood within their own context. For Hill Fletcher,

> None of these positions seems accurate to the lived encounter with the religious 'other' that is often an encounter of both sameness and difference. Perhaps more importantly, none can fully embrace the value of difference while forging solidarity among religious communities. An underlying reason for this rests on the construction of Christian identity employed in the discourse on religious pluralism.[35]

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[34] Ibid., 8.

[35] Ibid., 7.

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Hill Fletcher argues that there is a "logic of identity" operating throughout attempts to construct a theology of religions. She explains, "A logic of identity proceeds by drawing category distinctions to identify what is 'in' or 'out' of the totality."[36] Once the lines are drawn, everything within the category is considered the same, and everything without is different. While Hill Fletcher recognizes the helpful utility of categories, she critiques the idea that all within a particular category are the same. The logic of identity does not recognize the inevitable internal diversity within a category. As she states,

> When Christian theologians argue for a similarity among Christians that distinguishes them from non-Christians, it is at the expense of the diversity one might find within Christianity itself. This erasure of particularity within the collective is the first outcome of employing a logic of identity. A second and simultaneous outcome is the distancing of otherness.[37]

The logic of identity operating throughout theologies of religions actually hinders the ability of theologians and religious practitioners to engage fully with those who practice traditions different than their own. In treating religious communities and individual practitioners as homogeneous entities, the differences and similarities of traditions and people cannot be fully understood and engaged. A theology of religions like Paul Knitter's that focuses primarily on how to engage in interreligious dialogue does have potential to guide Christians' interactions with practitioners of other faiths, although the theological assertions undergirding his framework need to be examined closely before

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[36] Ibid., 12.

[37] Ibid.

determining if he has escaped the logic of identity. Building upon a theology of religions like Knitter's could assist in developing practical skills for engaging religious diversity, but it is unlikely to result in addressing the internal questions religious diversity prompts within the Christian community. Overall, theology of religions can provide a helpful framework for understanding the significance of other religious traditions, but in operating from a logic of identity, it cannot provide all of the tools Christians need for engaging difference.

Comparative Theology

Comparative theology is the second major field in Christian theology which focuses on addressing the reality of religious diversity. Comparative theology, like theology of religions, starts from a particular theological position, but intentionally does not seek to develop a meta-theory of religion or engage general and vague religious categories. Instead, this field strives to understand other religions as distinct traditions and hopes to glean insights which may influence the home theological position. Comparative theology argues that without the serious study of a tradition other than one's own, "those who follow other religious paths are manufactured to fit comfortably into Christian theological presuppositions."[38] Thus, comparative theology, as undertaken by prominent theologians Francis Clooney and James Fredericks, stresses direct engagement with concrete teachings and practices of other religious traditions primarily through

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[38] James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: From Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 98.

religious texts. The nuances of both the theologian's home tradition and the other tradition under comparison are studied in great depth in order to ensure that the beliefs and practices of each tradition are given the space to express their true alterity.

Christian comparative theologians delve into particular practices and beliefs of other traditions, placing them in conversation with Christian practices and beliefs. Comparative theology offers the opportunity to truly learn from other religious traditions in the hope that one's own tradition may be enriched in the process. The goal is not a theology all religious practitioners will agree upon or a system of how religious traditions relate to each other. Instead, comparative theologians work toward authentic and respectful engagement with religious traditions different than one's own in order to develop new insights for one's own tradition. Comparative theology does not engage Christology and soteriology with the same focus as theology of religions, but these areas of Christian theology are under study by some comparative theologians.

The actual process of comparative theology is one of careful and slow study. Prominent comparative theologian Francis Clooney recognizes that comparative reflection could be undertaken through a study of a variety of aspects of religion, but argues for the primacy of textual study in comparative theology. In his understanding, "texts have been central to most theologies as they have been to most disciplines in the humanities, and there is no reason to imagine that interreligious learning should be primarily non-textual learning. Reading can be primary even if religion is not lived only or mainly through books."[39] The comparative theologian should begin by choosing texts

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[39] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 58.

from different traditions. Each text should be read independently and studied to understand its position and function within a religious tradition and the context of the text as it was written and as currently interpreted. This involves careful study of the religion from which the texts originate. For James Fredericks, it is this "careful study of a specific religion [which] helps to guard against the temptation to orchestrate comparisons such that encounters with those who follow other religious paths are manufactured to fit comfortably into Christian theological presuppositions:" a charge he levels against all theologies of religion.[40]

During the process of careful reading and study of the texts, Clooney encourages theologians to engage in a form of interreligious dialogue by also reading commentaries from practitioners of the religion which claims the text. This allows the comparative theologian greater insight into the historical perspective of the text, and, Clooney claims, keeps the comparative theologian accountable to the other tradition. By using commentaries, other voices are brought in to dialogue with the comparative theologian's understanding of the text. Once the texts have been studied separately, the comparative theologian brings the texts into conversation with each other. Furnished with insights from the other religious tradition, the comparative theologian is able to reexamine his or her tradition and ask new questions about practices and beliefs that may shape new ways of being religious in today's world.

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[40] Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, 98.

There is a second form of comparative theology which was undertaken by the Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP) at Boston University from 1995-1999.[41] Organized by theologian Robert C. Neville, CRIP brought specialists in six different religious traditions together with generalists in religious studies and comparative religion to engage in a dialogical process of comparison.[42] Like the comparative theology undertaken by Clooney and Fredericks, the focus of CRIP was on texts of the religious traditions involved, but the methodology of CRIP was much less solitary.

CRIP proposed a vague category, meaning "a category used vaguely enough to allow room for the coexistence of different kinds of things within it," to be reflected upon by multiple scholars: the human condition as one example.[43] Specialists of the chosen religious traditions then "used their selective approaches in an effort to determine how the human condition is conceived in each of the six religious traditions."[44] Their reflections on particular traditions were then discussed by the entire cohort to be understood in their specificity and then translated back into the vague category. This third step of translation is central to CRIP as "only when the specifications are translated into the language of the vague category, enriching that language, is it possible to make

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[41] Robert C. Neville, "Preface," in *The Human Condition,* ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), xv.

[42] The traditions examined in CRIP were Buddhism, Chinese religion, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, chosen for their long literary and scholarly history.

[43] Robert C. Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas," in *The Human Condition*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 14.

[44] Robert C. Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, "Introduction," in *The Human Condition*, ed. Robert C. Neville (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 4.

comparisons."[45] The vague category is impacted by the specifications, critiqued and

revised to be fully appropriate as a vague category, but it is only possible to make

comparisons between the specifications once their meaning has been translated out of

their particular contexts into the language of the vague category.

As may be expected, this different comparative methodology is utilized for

different purposes than enriching one's home religious tradition through insights from the

second religions tradition. Instead, CRIP uses its methodology for three purposes:

> "deepening mutual understanding of the religious traditions discussed through
> accurate description, elaborating a comparative understanding of religious
> traditions that allows us to say how they are similar and different in relation to the
> [vague category], and enhancing well-established traditions of interpretation
> about the [vague category] in cross-cultural perspective."[46]

CRIP's methodology is focused more on furthering human intellectual exploration

through gathering knowledge from multiple perspectives than enhancing one's personal

religious perspective or developing praxes for engaging religious diversity in daily life.

Critiques of Comparative Theology

Comparative theology, in the school of Clooney and Fredericks, is not as free

from the hegemonic tendencies of theology of religions as it might appear. As noted by

second generation comparative theologian Kristin Beise Kiblinger, it seems "impossible

to deeply engage others on theological matters without having some preliminary

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[45] Neville and Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas", 15.

[46] Ibid., 10-11.

theological presuppositions about those others. Recognizing and disclosing these theology of religions leanings upfront, stipulating them clearly, is preferable to leaving them implicit."[47] She argues that theological presuppositions influence how a comparative theologian reads the sacred texts of other religions, and some form of theology of religions is always in place before comparative theology begins. The warning comparative theology offers to theology of religions to recognize and disclose one's biases is important and must be applied to comparative theology as well. Yet, "to say that one has some theological assumptions about the other, and that some such assumptions are preferable to others, is not tantamount to saying that one's theological presuppositions are set in stone; rather, certainly they are revisable, in light of the findings."[48] Theology of religions may precede comparative theology, but comparative theology can productively critique theology of religions in a continuing cycle of insight and revision.

Through their process of careful study, Christian comparative theologians address specific theological themes and articulate new insights for Christian believers. This is understood by Fredericks to provide a more productive way forward into the reality of religious diversity than the endless debates between theologies of religions. He argues that

> By comparing their own faith with the faith of other religious believers, Christians can deepen their own religious lives and come to a better understanding of the

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[47] Kristin Beise Kiblinger. "Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology," in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis Clooney (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 22.

[48] Ibid., 25.

gospel. And in the very process of doing this, Christians will also come to a deeper knowledge and appreciation of believers who follow other religious paths. Thus, by exploring the meaning of their own faith by doing theology in dialogue with their non-Christian neighbors, Christians will have developed practical skills for living responsibly and creatively with non-Christians.[49]

While the development of appreciation, knowledge, and respectful engagement with difference are definite benefits derived from the process of comparative theology, the theological results of comparative theology themselves do not propel Christians into productive interreligious dialogue.

Comparative theology is well suited for the task of respectfully growing in knowledge of other religious traditions while creatively engaging this knowledge for its benefits to Christian theology. Yet, while the insights gained through the process of comparative theology may garner greater interest among Christians to know about other religious tradition and the respect for difference modeled in the process provides a good foundation for engaging well with religious difference, the insights and process do not necessarily orient Christians toward engagement with practitioners of other traditions. Comparative theology focuses chiefly on texts rather than observational study of lived religious practices. The process calls for researching the opinions of scholars and practitioners of other traditions, but comparative theology is primarily a solitary process which does not require Christian theologians to directly engage with other scholars or practitioners.

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[49] James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 167.

Furthermore, as was noted above, to do comparative theology well, one must engage in deep study of at least two religious traditions. The methodology of comparative theology requires rigorous scholarship in order to respectfully represent the traditions involved, but necessitating such specialized training precludes the vast majority of lay Christians from utilizing comparative theology to make sense of the religious difference that impacts their daily lives. Comparative theology's influence on academic theological study may be vast, causing the context of religious diversity to be taken seriously within many theological fields, but the influence on lived Christian community is quite small.

This is not to say that comparative theology must incorporate all forms of interreligious dialogue or be a process which engages religious practitioners of all levels. Comparative theology does what it sets out to do quite well: expand Christian understanding of other religious traditions and explore how the insights from other traditions might enrich Christian theological reflection. For more sustained theological reflection and guidance on what it means to be Christian in a religiously diverse world, it is necessary to turn to the field of constructive theology.

Constructive Theological Approaches to Religious Plurality

A third area of constructive theological projects is developing in which Christian theologians turn to their tradition for arguments in support of interreligious dialogue or theological positions which value religious diversity. This is a growing field in which some theologians are proposing a theology of interreligious dialogue itself, some are

offering practical attitudes toward interreligious dialogue grounded in Christian theology, and others are addressing historical Christian categories with greater awareness of religious diversity. These theologians are responding to the reality of religious diversity and while they may engage theologians of religions or comparative theologians, they are not necessarily proposing a new theology of religions or doing comparative theology. Instead, they are putting forth new suggestions as to how to approach religious diversity from a theological perspective.

Anselm Min and Catherine Cornille are two Christian theologians who have engaged questions posed by religious diversity without remaining strictly within the fields of theology of religions or comparative theology as they have been defined above. Both work to respond to religious plurality by turning to the Christian theological tradition for resources with the potential to orient Christians toward productive interreligious dialogue. Anselm Min achieves this by proposing a theology of "the solidarity of others" to promote interreligious cooperation, while Catherine Cornille articulates five theological virtues of dialogue she argues are necessary for interreligious encounters. Both Min and Cornille have worked within the fields of theology of religions and comparative theology, but their work on a theology of solidarity of others and virtues of dialogue venture outside of these fields. Neither of these specific projects are comparative as both theologians draw only from the Christian tradition, and neither of these projects is a theology of religions as no claims are made regarding validity of other religious traditions. Instead, both Min and Cornille utilize existing theological concepts to construct new Christian responses to religious plurality.

Anselm Min's impetus for developing his theology of the solidary of others stems from a desire for an adequate response to pluralism. Frustrated with the extremes of particularity, resulting in the denial of common ground and affirmations of incommensurability, and universalism, which threatens to deny the validity of difference, Min instead chooses to "explor[e] within the best and deepest of one's own tradition the possibility of making room for the other, and exposing oneself to the dialectic of dialogue and interaction with the other."[50] He argues that "pluralism as a *problem* does not lie in the mere coexistence of a plurality of different religions; it lies in the mutual *confrontation* and mutual *demand* – both practical and theoretical – of diverse religions, each with its own distinctive claim."[51] It is the manner in which religious traditions interact with each other that causes religious plurality to be an issue for Min, rather than concerns about ultimate truth.

This means that for Min, the problem of pluralism as it relates to religious traditions is "a problem of historical praxis…[which] demands, above all, interreligious cooperation in the praxis of liberation, or *diapraxis*, as distinct from dialogue: this means cooperation in the alleviation of unjust and unnecessary suffering of the *concrete human subjects* of religion."[52] Instead of focusing on reconciling or disproving competing religious beliefs, Min calls upon religious traditions to turn to each other in a spirit of

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[50] Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others in A Divided World: A Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 86.

[51] Ibid., 159.

[52] Ibid., 160-161.

cooperation he calls "the solidarity of others." Through the solidarity of others, Min

believes questions of "equality, truth, superiority, and finality [which] presuppose a

common horizon of meaning and discourse," currently unavailable to theologians, can be

set aside.[53] In fact, he believes "a Christian theology of non-Christian religions, that is,

an evaluation of the salvific role of non-Christian religions from the perspective of

Christian theology, must be regarded as premature."[54] Such theological assertions should

not be the focus of Christian engagement with other religious traditions, at least for the

foreseeable future..

The solidarity of others proposed by Min is a call for all religious traditions to

examine their own resources in order to address the present needs of humanity. For Min,

the solidarity of others does away with any competition between religious traditions

because, "solidarity of others, somewhat uncolloquial but grammatically perfectly

correct, implies that there is no privileged perspective, that all are others to one another,

that we as others to one another are equally responsible, and that all are subjects, not

objects."[55] The otherness of different individuals and communities is to be respected, but

not viewed as a barrier to interaction. Individuals and religious communities are called to

"forge a solidarity of others in which others *together* can achieve the minimum

conditions of common life, such as basic needs, basic justice, and basic culture as a

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[53] Ibid., 177.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid., 82.

condition for the flourishing of constructive, enriching otherness in the realm of freedom."[56]

Min goes on to argue that the solidarity of others is supported by different aspects of the Christian tradition including "the Trinitarian conception of God, the model of Jesus Christ, and the dialectic of divine incarnation and divine incomprehensibility, or positive and negative theology."[57] These theological resources are used to argue for Christian commitment to the solidarity of others and, in turn, Christian engagement with other religious traditions. Nowhere does Min make claims about the truth of other religious traditions or use teachings from other traditions to bolster his argument for the solidarity of others. He utilizes only Christian resources as he constructs a theological argument for Christians to engage with religious diversity and merely requests that other religious traditions search their own teachings for reasons to support the solidarity of others.

Catherine Cornille approaches the issue of religious diversity with a concern for the process of interreligious dialogue. She examines the commitments participants make to each other and to their home religious traditions and critiques calls to abandon "religion-specific norms" as a pre-requisite for interreligious dialogue.[58] While she acknowledges the validity of the concern that religion-specific norms may "entail a form of religious imperialism and arrogance, or to express a sense of superiority of one's own

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[56] Ibid., 127.

[57] Ibid., 83.

[58] Catherine Cornille, "Introduction: On Discernment in Dialogue," in *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue,* ed. Catherine Cornille (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), x.

religious framework over that of others," she does not think it is possible to find criteria for interreligious dialogue that are tradition neutral. [59] Not only do these supposedly neutral criteria always end up being influenced by the perspective of the one who proposes them, Cornille argues that it is impossible for dialogue participants to ignore evaluative criteria from their home traditions.

Instead of searching for neutral criteria to ensure the equal treatment of dialogue participants, Cornille argues that "it is in the very realization that every religion inevitably judges the other according to its own particular criteria that the equality between religions in dialogue is established."[60] Each religion participating in the dialogue will find itself in the position of judge and judged, creating, according to Cornille, an atmosphere of equitable dialogue. By choosing to participate in interreligious dialogue, the various traditions are implicitly agreeing to this process of mutual evaluation. Cornille thus argues that "the use of confessional criteria in the dialogue between religions may thus be regarded as both an epistemological necessity and an expression of fidelity to the truth of one's own tradition."[61] No one is asked to relinquish their particular beliefs or to submit to criteria imposed by an unfamiliar tradition. All are allowed to draw upon their own religious tradition in the process of understanding their dialogue partners.

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid., x-xi.

[61] Ibid., xi.

Cornille goes on to articulate five theological virtues she feels are necessary for

engaging in productive interreligious dialogue. These virtues include

> doctrinal or epistemic humility…commitment to a particular religious
> tradition…[recognition of] interconnection, or the belief that the teachings and
> practices of the other religion are in some way related to or relevant for one's own
> religious tradition…the ability to gain not only an intellectual but also an
> experiential understanding of the other…[meaning to develop] empathy…[and]
> hospitality to the authentic truth of the other[62]

Cornille then calls for Christian acceptance of these five virtues of humility, commitment,

interconnection, empathy, and hospitality by supporting them with arguments drawn from

the Christian theological tradition.

Similarly to Min, Cornille has articulated theological virtues meant for Christians

engaging with religious diversity and does not claim that these same virtues are necessary

for practitioners of other religious traditions to engage in interreligious dialogue. She

does offer them as a possible starting point and encourages theologians from other

religions to search their traditions for elements which might support these same virtues.

Still, her focus is on clearly naming the theological virtues which should shape Christian

participation in interreligious dialogue rather than making any claims about non-Christian

traditions or comparing aspects of different traditions. She constructively examines the

Christian tradition for resources which can assist Christians desiring to deal with religious

diversity in a positive manner.

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[62] Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing
Company, 2008), 4-6.

The Promise of the Body of Christ

The Christian community is in need of theological resources beyond those supplied by theology of religions and comparative theology and theologians like Cornille and Min are beginning to constructively supply these resources. The reality of religious diversity not only prompts questions regarding the religious other; the plurality of religious traditions also raises questions about one's own religious identity. An encounter with the religious other, whether academic or experiential, turns an inquisitive eye toward the boundaries of identity. A struggle arises within a religious community as to what is necessary for a person to claim a particular religious identity. Christians, as practitioners of other traditions are doing within their own communities, are asking, what needs to be shared by those who identify themselves as Christians? What differences or variations can exist in the identity while it remains a Christian identity? If some differences are allowed, are they merely tolerated or do they enrich our understanding of what it means to be a Christian?

These questions regarding internal diversity within the Christian community are made pressing due to questions surrounding the external diversity of religious plurality. While there are different emphases when discussing internal or external diversity, it is my contention that the skills needed for Christians to productively engage religious difference are tied to the way in which Christians handle difference within the Christian community. I also contend that the two areas of difference are theologically related. At the root of both are debates about Christian identity, Christian community, and humanity's relationship to God. Among other theological concerns, this means

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conceptions of ecclesiology are actively engaged as Christians discuss the importance, meaning, and implications of difference within and without their churches. In an effort to expand the resources available to Christians engaging the reality of religious diversity and provide further assistance with the internal questions religious diversity raises, this project will utilize a constructive theological approach rather than engaging in a strictly theology of religions or comparative theology style project.

Internal and external diversity forces Christians to examine the boundaries of their community and rearticulate what it is to be the particular religious community called the church. Who is part of the church? What does membership consist of? How is church structured? What does church look like? Other questions are raised as Christians discuss the meaning of what is to be church. What is the purpose of the church? How should the church interact with the world? What distinguishes the church from other religious communities or secular organizations? These ecclesial questions of the nature and purpose of the church strike at the heart of Christian communal identity, but also have implications for the identity of individual Christians within the community as the responsibility of members to maintain and strengthen the community are discussed anew.

Addressing the whole of these questions is the work of many minds and many years. Yet, there is a resource within the Christian tradition that touches upon the heart of Christian identity and involves ecclesiology: the Body of Christ metaphor. The church as the Body of Christ is one of the central metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the early community of Jesus-followers, and it continues to be used today to refer to local churches and the global Christian community. Since the time of Paul, the Body of Christ

metaphor has been used to teach Christians about the significance of their identity as Christians. It has been used both to understand the dynamics of the Christian community and to define the Christian community as a separate entity from the wider society.

Even though the Body of Christ is a metaphor internal to the Christian community and has been used for exclusionary purposes, this inward turn does not necessitate an exclusivist position. Instead, by turning inward to closely examine the Body of Christ metaphor, Christians are able to retrieve values and praxes which enable them to engage religious diversity with respect and openness. In order to be the Body of Christ, Christians must learn how to relate across differences of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, etc. through praxes that can then be used to relate across differences of religion. The metaphor gives Christians a solid answer to the question, "what difference does it make to claim a Christian identity?", which directly impacts the manner in which they engage in forming relationships with other people. By focusing their sense of identity on being the Body of Christ, Christians are able to bring their particularity as Christians into a religiously diverse world without the fear and mistrust religious plurality can, at times, create when an individual or community has based their sense of identity on the ability to prove others wrong.

When operationalized, the Body of Christ metaphor contains great theological and practical richness, demonstrated in its ability to shape Christian self-understanding and mobilize Christians into concrete action in the world. This single metaphor touches upon the individual identity of Christians as each person searches for her or his role within the body; the corporate identity of the whole community in the relationships between the

individual Christians who make up the body; and ecclesiology in terms of the nature and purpose of the Christian community as church. In being related to all of these theological categories, the Body of Christ metaphor has the potential to provide many new avenues for Christians who have questions arising from the current context of religious diversity.

The Body of Christ metaphor brings attention to relationality as foundational to Christian identity. An individual cannot be the Body of Christ on her own, she can only be part of the Body of Christ in relationship with other people. The larger, communal relationships, or hierarchy and power dynamics, are also brought under scrutiny by the Body of Christ metaphor. Questions arise about how a body functions, what it means for a body to function properly, and what is needed for a body to function properly. Transferred to the Christian community, these questions become how should the community go about its activity, what is the proper activity for the community, and what is needed for the community to undertake this activity organizationally, materially, and ideologically.

Diversity is also highlighted as foundational for Christian community. A body is made up not only of *many* parts, but of many *different* parts. Not everyone in the Christian community can be exactly the same; there is a fundamental need for difference and diversity for the Body of Christ to exist. The Body of Christ metaphor also puts emphasis on embodiment as foundational for Christian community. It is significant that the metaphor is the *Body* of Christ, rather than the house, spirit, heart, hands, family, etc. of Christ. Calling the Christian community the *Body* of Christ draws attention to the fact that there are concrete bodies within the Christian community which physically interact

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with each other. The Body of Christ as a community interacts with the world, and other bodies in the world, through the bodies of its members. The metaphor necessitates examination of the conception of bodies and embodiment functioning within the community.

Finally, the Body of Christ metaphor brings attention to the praxis of the Christian community. Bodies exist in the world through their interactions with the world. If the Christian community is to be like a body, then it too exists through its interactions with the world. Examination is needed of the types of actions the Body of Christ can and should take within the world: what praxes are appropriate for a community shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor. In necessitating the examination of relationality, diversity, embodiment, and praxis within the context of the Christian community and that community's engagement with the world, the Body of Christ metaphor can provide habits and principles when engaging the issues of relationship, diversity, embodiment, and praxis within a context of religious diversity.

To undertake a constructive theological interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor it is necessary that the origins of the metaphor be examined and that contemporary critiques regarding the conceptual elements of the metaphor be brought into the conversation. Since central themes of the Body of Christ metaphor include embodiment, relationality, and diversity, it is appropriate that areas of Christian theology which have often addressed these themes be utilized. Along with the bodies of knowledge utilized by these areas, feminist, womanist, queer, and disability theologies

can provide resources with which to critique and construct an understanding of the Body of Christ metaphor for a religiously diverse world.

Methodology

This dissertation is a text-based research project primarily engaging contemporary theological texts. The majority of the texts will come from the fields of feminist theology, womanist theology, queer theology, and the intersection of postmodern theology and disability studies. Biblical scholarship on the Pauline texts will also inform this project with particular attention to the biblical passages in the Pauline Epistles which discuss the Body of Christ metaphor.

This project is approached from a feminist theological perspective. Feminist theology itself is inherently constructive, incorporating the constructive methodological elements discussed below, but also engaging the Christian tradition critically to identify experiences and voices that are either privileged or excluded. Traditional sources of theology, as well as interdisciplinary sources brought into conversation with the Christian tradition, are examined for their liberative potential or lack thereof. Once identified, feminist theology reconstructs the Christian tradition with the intent of including those experiences and voices previously excluded and providing liberative resources for the same.

I identify myself as a feminist theologian who engages in constructive theology. I affirm with feminist theology that women's experience, including my own, is a valid source for theological reflection. I also uphold the "critical principle" of feminist

theology which is the "promotion of full humanity for women," particularly in its more contemporary understanding as the full humanity of all human beings and the flourishing of creation.[63] This critical principle will provide a touchstone for evaluating the constructive theological arguments made regarding the Body of Christ metaphor and its efficacy in forming Christian identity and shaping Christian action in the world. This dissertation will employ insights from feminist theologians regarding the hybrid nature of human identity as well as those directly engaging the metaphor of the Body of Christ.[64] This dissertation will also utilize feminist insights with regard to theory that analyzes assumptions, language, and rules which subtly but actively shape knowledge and contribute to the oppression of women, other historically marginalized people, and creation.

Feminist theology also places great emphasis on the contextualization of theology, particularly that of the author. I affirm the importance of identifying the social location out of which a theologian writes and the context which shaped the theologian's identity. My own social location is that of a lifelong practicing Christian raised primarily in the United Methodist tradition and confirmed in that church. I am also a young, white, first-world, female, economically privileged, educated theologian shaped by a childhood and adolescence in the Midwestern region of the United States. I am largely the product

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[63] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 18.

[64] Jeannine Hill Fletcher discusses the hybridity of an individual's identity in her article "Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19.2 (Fall 2003): 5-24.

of three colonizing powers – Western Europe, the Christian Church, and the United States of America. In this dissertation these aspects of my social location will serve both as benign factors influencing the specificity of my work as well as cautions for hidden presumptions, particularly as regards any privileged tendencies in my work.

I also approach this project as a constructive theologian. The constructive theological method arises out of concern to preserve and pass on the Christian theological tradition while critically engaging the same tradition in order to articulate a theology attentive to the realities of the twenty-first century. This methodology utilizes classical Christian themes to rework them in dialogue with contemporary challenges, deliberately engages with other disciplines for a fully-informed theology, and strives for the transparency of the theologian's social location and his/her audience. Constructive theologians also draw on liberation theology's attentiveness to power and the way language functions to shape reality.[65]

As a constructive project, this dissertation will focus on reworking a classic Christian theme, namely that of the biblical metaphor of the Body of Christ. It is important that the history of this metaphor be brought to bear on contemporary understandings of the Body of Christ as well as my own constructive revisioning of the metaphor. Articulating origins of theological reflection on the Body of Christ in the Christian tradition is particularly important in this project as the metaphor will be discussed in a new theological sphere: religious pluralism. For this project to be of use to

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[65] Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 6-18.

Christian churches, its roots in the tradition must be demonstrated. Thus, this project will engage the biblical texts which provide the foundation for this metaphor and the biblical scholarship which strives to understand the context and meaning of the metaphor for the biblical audience. This scholarship will be brought into conversation with contemporary theological texts engaging themes central to the Body of Christ metaphor.

In regards to the constructive methodological concern for interdisciplinary work, multiple pertinent fields within and without Christianity will be engaged to inform my research and critique my conclusions. These will include but not be limited to biblical and theological studies of the Body of Christ metaphor, contemporary feminist, womanist, queer, and postmodern theological reflection on embodiment, power, and subjectivity, historical, contextual, and theological research on disability, reflections on religious pluralism from theology of religions and comparative theology, and the theory and models of interreligious dialogue. While drawing on a number of disciplines, this dissertation is a Christian theological project, and as such, is intended to further inform the Christian tradition in its understanding of the Body of Christ even as it critiques that tradition.

With regard to constructive theology's concern for the social location of the theologian and his/her audience, this project is first and foremost a dissertation. Thus, it is primarily written for the academy. As religious plurality is a social reality which all Christians face, I intend for its conclusions to be of use to Christian churches attempting to answers questions regarding the relationship of religious diversity and Christian identity. This dissertation is also written to engage the motif of diversity that

contemporary Christian theologians have developed and to expand their work to engage

religious diversity more directly. Also, this dissertation increases attention to the

interaction of Christian bodies with other bodies; thus, the conclusions of this dissertation

hold significance for those engaging in and studying interreligious dialogue and the

manner in which religiously diverse persons interact with each other. My particular

social location has already been disclosed as part of my identity as a feminist theologian.

The scholarship and theology regarding religious pluralism, ecclesiology, and the

Body of Christ are, together and separately, vast in content and scope. The focus of this

dissertation is constructively to develop a theology of the Body of Christ which assists

Christians in addressing questions of identity in regards to religious pluralism. The scope

of the implications for Christian engagement in interreligious dialogue will be narrowed

to the proposal of a new Christian metaphor for interreligious dialogue and guidelines on

forms of interreligious engagement. It will not include a model of or rules for

interreligious dialogue.

With respect to the large fields of scholarship falling under the categories of

feminist, womanist, and queer theology as well as at the intersection of postmodern

theology and disability studies, this literature will be utilized within its relevance to the

metaphor of the Body of Christ and the nature of Christian identity, both individual and

communal. With respect to the fields of theology of religions and comparative theology,

this literature will be utilized within the scope of setting the context for my research

question and demonstrating the relation of those theological projects and the project of

this dissertation. This project will not provide a complete history of the fields or the controversies within them.

Looking Forward

The following chapters will focus on a constructive theological interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor by examining topics necessary for forming the content of the metaphor. Chapter 2 will focus on the roots of the Body of Christ metaphor within the Christian biblical and ecclesial tradition. The passages from Paul's letters to the Roman and Corinthian communities within which the metaphor originated will be examined for insight into the early meanings and purposes of the metaphor. The context within which Paul wrote and the prevailing understanding of bodies will be discussed in order to bring to light underlying assumptions operating below the surface of the metaphor. Contemporary use of the Body of Christ metaphor also will be critiqued as too shallow to address both the benefits and problematic aspects of the metaphor and inadequate for productive reflection on Christian identity. Using the work of Sallie McFague on metaphors and models, I will argue that although the Body of Christ currently functions as a dead metaphor, it is possible to revivify the metaphor and cause it to become a live model which can shape Christian self-understanding and action.

Chapters 3 and 4 bring into focus concerns which need to be addressed in any constructive articulation of the Body of Christ metaphor. The Body of Christ may seem like an idyllic vision of unity for the Christian community, but attention must be paid to the manner in which the metaphor functions. The Body of Christ metaphor is not without

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its negative aspects; it has, at times, been problematically employed. To combat uses of the metaphor which will not promote a type of Christian community which can productively engage difference both within and without, the insights of womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology will be brought to bear upon the Body of Christ metaphor. Within and across these four diverse theological areas, concerns surrounding embodied existence, hierarchy, and sameness and difference form points of contact which result in productive critiques of the Body of Christ metaphor.

Chapter 5 proposes a constructive theological interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor which provides the Christian community with resources for understanding Christian identity in the context of religious plurality. It will articulate the model stemming from this metaphor for relationality within the Christian community, actions of the Christian community within the world, and principles for dealing with diversity in all forms and all contexts.

Chapter Two: Reviving the Biblical Metaphor

        The Body of Christ metaphor was first used to describe the Christian community

in the Pauline letters of 1 Corinthians and Romans. Its biblical origins demonstrate the

metaphor's historical significance in shaping Christian self-understanding.

Contemporary use of the Body of Christ metaphor may not strictly conform to the

manner of its use within the Pauline corpus, but it is helpful to examine the likely

reception of the metaphor within its original context. Paul's use of the metaphor to stress

the unity of the early Christian communities and the dependence of their communal

identity on Jesus Christ placed these communities in tension with the surrounding Greco-

Roman culture.[66] By focusing the community's identity on Jesus Christ – a Jewish, poor,

and beaten body – the Body of Christ metaphor did not conform to Greco-Roman societal

norms of valuing masculinity as expressed in impenetrable and active bodies.[67] The

metaphor originally challenged societal conceptions of bodies, relationality, power, and

community, but this challenge has been lost in contemporary Christian use. In order for

the Body of Christ metaphor to regain its critical power, it needs to once again provide

distinct understandings of bodies, relationality, power, and community, although these

understandings need not be the same as those contained in Paul's use of the metaphor.

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[66] Jeremy Punt, "Pauline Agency in Postcolonial Perspective: Subverter of or Agent for the Empire?," in
The Colonized Apostle: Paul Through Postcolonial Eyes, ed. Christopher D. Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress
Press, 2011).

[67] Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, eds., *New Testament Masculinities* (Atlanta, GA: Society
of Biblical Literature, 2003).

Exposing and examining Western society's understanding of bodies is a first step in the process of reviving the metaphor. Only then can this traditional Christian image of community provide a distinct Christian identity able to guide individual Christians and the Christian community into faithful engagement with a religiously plural world. When the Body of Christ metaphor once again presents a contrast with dominant models of embodiment, relationality, power, and community, Christians will find that there are particular attitudes and practices that distinguish them from other communities within Western society. Having a clear sense of who they are as Christians enables them to approach engagement with practitioners of other religions without fear and mistrust.

Paul and His Metaphor

The metaphor of the Body of Christ is a central image in the Christian tradition for Christian community. The roots of this metaphor are found in the Christian New Testament within the Pauline letters of Romans and 1 Corinthians and the Deutero-Pauline letters of Ephesians and Colossians. As the apostle Paul seems to have originated the use of this metaphor within the early Christian community, this chapter focuses on his undisputed writings of Romans and 1 Corinthians, seeking insight into the original purpose and meaning of the metaphor.

Chronologically, Paul's first, and most detailed, use of the metaphor is found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27:

> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jew or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the

body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissention within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (NRSV)

This long description of the relationship between parts of a body comes in the middle of

Paul's enumeration of the many different spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the

Corinthian community. While a visualization of talking body parts or a human body

consisting only of ears may seem humorous, Paul's purpose in calling the Corinthian

community the Body of Christ was actually quite serious. As in the majority of his

letters, Paul wrote in response and anticipation of questions and problems which arose in

the early communities of Jesus-followers. The entirety of the letter to the Corinthians

was meant to instruct, govern, and encourage the community to act in accordance, in both

thought and behavior, to the gospel message Paul proclaimed.

Paul's letter to the Romans seemingly served a different purpose, given that he

was writing the community in Rome that he had not founded or even met. In this context

also, he chose to communicate his vision for the believing community. In this letter, he

uses the metaphor of the Body of Christ twice, once in chapter seven and again in chapter

twelve. The second usage echoes his words to the Corinthians, "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:5-4, NRSV). The focus seems concentrated on causing the Romans to call to mind the diversity of the parts of their bodies and applying the metaphor to their community. The first usage in Romans brings the metaphor into the context of Paul's discussion of Jewish law as he says, "In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God" (Romans 7:4, NRSV). Here, the focus is on the believers' relationship to Christ, rather than to each other.

Paul's use of the metaphor differed between the two letters, but his use of the metaphor in addressing more than one community communicates that the Body of Christ does not refer to one particular community of Christ-followers. Paul developed this metaphor as a way for all believing communities to understand themselves. To come to a clearer understanding of the meaning of the Body of Christ metaphor in Paul's usage, it is necessary to examine what is known about Paul and his socio-historical context.

The apostle Paul is a towering figure in Christian history and theology. His writings are the earliest portions of scripture in the Christian New Testament, and he is credited with spreading the gospel message of the small group of Jesus-followers beyond the borders of the Jewish community into the larger, surrounding Gentile communities of the Roman Empire. Through his travels throughout Asia Minor, numerous early church

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communities were formed where believers responded to the gospel message and strove to respond faithfully to the presence of Christ's Spirit among them.

What scholars know specifically of Paul himself is drawn mainly from the biblical texts written by him and the accounts of his ministry found in the book of Acts. He identified himself as a Jew numerous times in letters written to different communities.[68] His knowledge of scripture and familiarity with Jewish practices indicate that Paul was a faithful first century Jew before he joined the movement of Jesus-followers. The last details of Paul's identity are found in the book of Acts where twice he is identified as a Roman citizen.[69] This would have given Paul certain rights and privileges not enjoyed by all of his fellow Jews or every Gentile follower he converted.

These sources are, of course, not unbiased records of this important figure. The letters Paul wrote were intended for specific audiences with particular goals in mind: what Paul revealed about himself in these letters was done intentionally and carefully. The author of Acts wrote this account of the origins of Christianity in consort with the Gospel of Luke, and addressed it to someone called Theophilus, most likely a pseudonym for the author's patron or symbol of the type of person the author hoped would read his work: a high ranking Gentile who was a new or potential convert to the Jesus-movement.[70] Research more broadly on the context of first century life in the Roman

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[68] Galatians 1:11-16, 1 Corinthians 11:22, and Philippians 3:5-6

[69] Acts 16:37 and 22:25-28

[70] Dale B. Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 126-127.

Empire and the territories Paul ministered in is needed to both understand the information found in the biblical texts and expose possible biases in these biblical accounts.

Paul traveled through and preached the gospel in territories that had been conquered by the Roman Empire. This was a context of great religious and cultural diversity, but one in which a clear hierarchy had been established. The Roman imperial cult, centered on the emperor, and Roman culture, heavily influenced by the Greeks, were the ideal: all other religions and cultures were subservient and needed to find their place within the Roman system. Other cultures, languages, and religions were allowed to continue, provided they did not disrupt the status quo of the Roman Empire.[71]   This practice applied to Jews and Gentiles alike throughout the Roman Empire. It meant that

> The imperial context was an integral part of the lives of Paul and the Jesus-followers in Corinth whom he addressed…the 'divinity of the emperor was obvious and uncontroversial in most of the Roman world. The military success and the worldwide power and control of the emperor and his legions underscored for many his god-given right to rule. It was in a world constituted by these notions that Paul proclaimed the *gospel* according to which Jesus Christ, after being crucified by Roman soldiers, had been raised from the dead and was the world's true Lord, claiming universal allegiance.[72]

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[71] For a comprehensive example of how conquered peoples navigated integration with Roman culture and religion see Steven Friesen, Daniel Schowalter, and James Walters, eds., *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* (Boston: Brill, 2010). The articles contained in this collection examine the culture, religion, politics, and social interactions which took place in the Roman colony of Corinth. In particular, the chapters written by Christine Thomas, Jorunn Økland, and Mary E. Hoskins Walbank discuss the Roman policy of allowing worship of local deities to remain, after renaming them in a Roman fashion, as long as devotion to foreign gods did not disrupt political or economic systems. By comparing archeological evidence from Roman Corinth with artifacts recovered from other sites, the authors demonstrate that such religious and cultural integration was widespread in the Roman Empire while having particular expression in each colony. The policy in Rome itself on such matters was similar, although patterns of immigration to the city allowed for geographical pockets of religious uniformity. James Walters' study of the Roman Jewish and Early Christian communities, *Ethnic Issues in Paul*, discusses the parameters within which immigrants in Rome were able to practice their traditional religions without Imperial interference.

[72] Punt, 57.

The imperial context meant that Paul's message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection conflicted with the religious and political structures of his time. A recognition of this context should allow contemporary readers a greater understanding of the significance of becoming a member of the early Jesus-movement. Declaring Jesus Christ as Lord had political ramifications in a context where the emperor was considered the highest deity by those with the greatest political and military power, and, as we will see, involved a shift in fundamental conceptions of bodies and power.

Greco-Roman Bodies

Greco-Roman society was hierarchically organized by classes of citizens, freedmen, and slaves as well as by gender and family relations through men, women, and children. Within this hierarchy, control over what happened to one's body or the bodies of others was closely connected to one's socio-economic status: conceptions of bodies and the organization of communities were intimately intertwined. Those who occupied positions of authority and power, male Roman citizens, had the most control over their bodies and the bodies of others. They had sovereign control over their bodies which were not to be scarred by whip or chain and which were not to be penetrated by the phallus or any other part of someone else's body. They had the power and authority to whip, chain, or penetrate those without power and authority: slaves, conquered peoples, children, and

women.[73] One could determine one's peers by the degree to which their bodies were impenetrable.

There existed a vast spectrum between the fully impenetrable male Roman citizen body and the fully penetrable conquered female slave body within which each individual was placed. This spectrum was closely tied to conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Those with the power and authority to penetrate others were considered more masculine, while those who were subject to penetration and unable to protect their bodily integrity were considered more feminine. While it was possible for one's position in society to change over a lifetime, "according to the ancient ideology, then, every human body, male or female, occupie[d] some position on the spectrum male-female" of impenetrable to penetrable.[74]

What is important for a contemporary reader to understand is that one's biological sex, one's physical characteristics, were not the only factor in determining one's position on the spectrum. While a male slave would be closer to the male end of the spectrum than a female slave, he would have been closer to the female end of the spectrum than a male freedman who in turn would have been considered more effeminate than a male citizen. In fact, "ethnic groups, as well as people with different shades of skin color, [were] also categorized" on the male-female continuum.[75] Masculinity and femininity in

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[73] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9-21. The first chapter, "Bodies and Souls," discusses the physical vulnerability of slaves in Greco-Roman society and the varying degrees of physical integrity experienced by particular classes of persons.

[74] Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 33.

[75] Ibid., 33-34.

Greco-Roman society, while associated with biological sex, were ultimately viewed as being determined by one's social status which were not static assignments. Social status and gender existed on a sliding scale. New Testament scholars Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore note that

> Clustered at one end of the scale were those who, notionally at least (for the scale was treacherously slippery and unstable), qualified as the supreme exemplars of hegemonic masculinity: adult male citizens, primarily, although not exclusively, those of high social standing: rulers, heads of elite households, powerful patrons, and so on. Clustered at the other end of the scale were countless others who, in different ways and to different degrees, seemed (in the eyes of the elite, in any case) to fall into a catchall category that might best be labeled *unmen*: females, boys, slaves (of either sex), sexually passive or 'effeminate' males, eunuchs, 'barbarians,' and so on.[76]

Those at the preferred end of the scale, adult male citizens, could find themselves sliding down the social hierarchy toward the feminine end if they did not comport themselves in a manner consistent with Greco-Roman notions of masculinity.

This sliding scale meant masculinity was closely regulated and great effort went into maintaining one's masculine status. Being born a man, free or slave, did not automatically confer masculinity on a person. Diana Swancutt notes, the "ancients did not conceive of gender as a stable personality characteristic independent of sexuality but as a spectrum of culturally assigned, mutable, and binarized *acts,*" which could, theoretically, be performed by anyone regardless of their biological characterlics.[77]

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[76] Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, "Matthew and Masculinity," in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 68-69.

[77] Diana Swancutt, "'The Disease of Effemination': the Charge of Effeminacy and the Verdict of God (Romans 1:18-2:16)," in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 199.

Masculinity was demonstrated through physical strength, rational capabilities, being active rather than passive, and wielding political power. Femininity then was seen in acts of irrationality, passivity, and political weakness.[78] An individual could biologically be male, but understood to be feminine in characteristics and social status, but the inverse was not generally true for women. The biological traits of being female were viewed as physical manifestations of inward passivity and inferiority which greatly limited the possibility for an individual woman to rise too far in the social hierarchy.

In fact, women were understood to be imperfect or deficient males rather than a truly different sex or gender. Greco-Roman society "did not conceive of the people assigned to the ends of the spectrum as referring to two genetically differentiated sexes, male and female. Rather, ancients constructed the human physique on a one-body, multigendered model with the perfect body deemed 'male/man.'"[79] Men were then "the measure of all things…[even though] not all males [were] masculine, potent, honorable, or hold power, and some women exceed[ed] some men in each of these categories. But the standard of the human body and its representations [was] the male body."[80] To be fully human was to be a male Roman citizen whose actions and physical appearance conformed to the standards of masculinity held by Greco-Roman society. Others in the

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[78] Diana Swancutt, "Sexy Stoics and the Rereading of Romans 8:22-23" in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 54.

[79] Swancutt, "The Disease of Effemination" 197.

[80] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 62.

social hierarchy may have embodied some of the same traits, but their masculinity, and hence their humanity, were viewed as inferior or incomplete.[81]

As can be seen by the ascription of positive values to masculinity and negative values to femininity, the spectrum of masculine-feminine, impenetrable-penetrable was understood to be a hierarchical system which ordered all of human life. In fact, this spectrum ordered not only humanity, but all aspects of the world as Greco-Roman society understood "the male-female hierarchy [to] reflect the cosmic hierarchy."[82] All of nature was understood to be organized hierarchically in regards to gender. In a similar manner that ethnic groups could be viewed as more or less masculine in nature, "entire species…[could] be located on the male-female continuum."[83] Every body, human or animal, had a proper place within the cosmic hierarchy which was determined by how masculine or feminine each body was understood to be, and since "the cosmic hierarchy *itself* was constructed as the reification of the gender polarity between masculinity and femininity, between rule and subservience, gender dynamics must be treated as central,

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[81] Colleen Conway discusses the Greco-Roman understanding of women as deformed or deficient males in her book, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity*, but also explains that this "deformity" was not viewed as unnatural. The masculine-feminine spectrum of impenetrable-penetrable bodies and its manifestation in the hierarchy of citizen-free-slave was a necessary part of Greco-Roman society. As Conway noted, "even as a deformity, women are a necessary and natural deformity since further reproduction requires their participation." Deviations from the ideal and perfect male were indispensable occurrences for the continuation of Greco-Roman society. Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 165.

[82] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 34.

[83] Ibid., 33.

not peripheral, to the forging of believers' religious and sociopolitical identities vis-à-vis other groups and movements."[84]

Bodies and their characteristics were used to organize and understand society, but the relationship between the male-female hierarchy and the cosmic hierarchy also allowed bodies to be used to understand the cosmos. In Greco-Roman society, "the human body was not *like* a microcosm; it *was* a microcosm – a small version of the universe at large."[85] How a body functioned both mirrored and was connected to the functioning of the universe. There was no hard distinction between the body and the universe for the "workings of the internal body [were] not just an imitation of the mechanics of the universe; rather, they [were] part of it, constantly influenced by it."[86] Thus by understanding the human body, one could understand the world.

This insight was utilized to understand the nature and proper organization of human society. Politicians and philosophers used "the body as a vital expression of the unity of a community despite the diversity of its members. The image of the city or state as a body (the body politic) was already familiar in political philosophy."[87] As the different members of a human body functioned together for the overall health and well-being of the body, so the different members of the body politic should fulfill their roles

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[84] Swancutt, "Sexy Stoics", 73.

[85] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 16.

[86] Ibid., 17.

[87] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 550.

for the health and well-being of Roman society. These different members of the human body did not enjoy an egalitarian relationship. The male-female hierarchical continuum existed within the body where certain members had greater importance and higher status. For instance, "the 'governing' part of the body, variously spoken of as the soul or mind, was the highest-status member of the body…that ruled over the body."[88] In applying the image of the body to the state, male Roman citizens were considered the governing mind of the body politic.[89]

This hierarchical understanding of the human body and the social organization of multiple bodies is the context within which the apostle Paul proclaimed the Body of Christ. Therefore, when examining Paul's use of the Body of Christ metaphor, care must be taken to investigate the manner in which the Body of Christ conformed to and challenged the dominant understandings of bodies in Greco-Roman society. The pervasive concern over masculinity/impenetrability and femininity/penetrability would have influenced how Paul and the early Christians understood the significance of forming a community centered on an individual who had been beaten, scorned, and nailed to a cross. This would also have affected the opinion of the wider Greco-Roman society on the plausibility of early Christian claims.

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[88] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 30.

[89] For more extended accounts of Greco-Roman society and the philosophical ideologies operating within the Roman Empire see works such as Dale Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), and Christopher Stanley, ed., *The Colonized Apostle: Paul Through Postcolonial Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

The interplay between conformity and challenge to the dominant society is where the Body of Christ metaphor had the potential to form a Christian identity distinct from the surrounding Greek and Roman religions and the larger Jewish community in which many early Jesus-followers still participated. A distinct Christian identity was necessary in Paul's context in order to make clear the newly emerging significance of being a Christ follower. In the contemporary U.S. context a distinct Christian identity is still necessary, not for political reasons but to make sense of the significance of being Christian in a world with many possible religious identities. Contemporary religious plurality has renewed questions regarding what different religious affiliation actually makes in a person's life.

The Biblical Body of Christ

Examining Paul's use of the Body of Christ metaphor demonstrates that at one time it was powerful in its ability to shape Christian self-understanding. When Paul used the metaphor, it provided distinct ways of understanding the nature of Christian community and the impact of claiming the Christian identity on an individual's life.[90] The exact impact of using the Body of Christ metaphor today will not be the same as when it was used by Paul because the change in context will influence its meaning. But,

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[90] It is important to note that the early Jesus-followers were not specifically claiming identity as "Christians" since the community had not yet split from the wider Jewish tradition into a distinct tradition called Christianity. Still, those who starting following the teachings of Jesus Christ were claiming a particular identity different from either the Jewish or Gentile identities they had before joining the Jesus-movement, and this identity was grounded in how they viewed Christ. Even though Paul and the Jesus-followers were not calling themselves Christians at the time, the Body of Christ metaphor was providing a particular identity that would eventually be called Christian.

the metaphor can still powerfully shape Christian self-understanding when it provides

distinct concepts of Christian community and the impact of claiming a Christian identity.

To understand how the Body of Christ metaphor can be powerful again, we need to see

how it was powerful in Paul's usage.

It is important to note the difficulties facing anyone who strives to interpret and

understand ancient texts. Without direct access to the author, study of a text is always a

process of interpretation rather than objective reading. As biblical scholar Dale Martin

states, "the texts don't 'speak' – except in the most tenuous of metaphorical senses of that

term – and that we humans have to do lots of hard work to interpret the texts before they

have any meaning for us at all."[91] The historical context, including nomenclature,

philosophy, and rhetorical styles, all influence the manner in which a text would have

been received and understood at the time of its creation. These same factors impact the

conclusions drawn by contemporary readers of the same text. It is highly unlikely

readers from different centuries would understand a text in exactly the same way.

This is not to say that there was not a particular meaning intended by the author or

that it is impossible to gain insight into what this meaning may have been.

Hermeneutical processes like socio-historical criticism are necessary for any kind of

insight into an original meaning of a text, but the personal biases of the interpreter will

always influence the textual analysis. Contemporary readers must recognize that

"interpretation is never a passive event. It is the exercise of power and is always

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[91] Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1.

implicated in rhetoric and ideology."[92] Any interpretation of a text, ancient or otherwise, must be viewed critically to understand the dynamics influencing said interpretation.

Dale Martin calls this approach to textual interpretation "postmodern Christian historicism."[93] Care is taken to avoid "attributing to the text a meaning that would not be believable in its ancient context," but no claim is made that the original meaning has been uncovered once and for all.[94] It is accepted that there are still multiple possible interpretations of a text that are plausible after the socio-historical research is taken into account. This makes the approach postmodern because it "uses the methods of modernism without the confidence in the 'knowledge' produced by modernism."[95] Conclusions are presented as informed and defensible interpretations which could be revised by scholarly critique and new discoveries in the field. Thus, all claims regarding Paul's purpose and meaning of the Body of Christ metaphor are made with both confidence and caveat.

At the core of Paul's letters is his desire to see these communities flourish, and the Body of Christ metaphor is used in service of this desire. Particularly in regards to the Corinthian community, Paul sees divisions within the early church as a threat to its potential to flourish in the gospel life. It is clear that "throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul attempts to bring unity to a divided church. In fact, 1 Corinthians may be called a

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[92] Ibid., 35.

[93] Ibid., 162.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

homonoia letter."[96] Paul's discussion of the parts of the body and the Corinthian's

membership in the Body of Christ is part of his larger argument for harmony and unity.

He stresses the inability of an individual body part to accomplish all of the functions a

body needs for survival. As well, Paul highlights the need for the diversity of body parts

to have a diversity of functions: each part has a different role to play.

Thus, when Paul "compares the Christian community to a (human) 'body' in

order to make clear to his readers that the Christians are (or should be) a community

tightly bound together by social and religious beliefs and activities and whose members

feel (or should feel) solidarity with one another,"[97] he is framing this solidarity within a

context of diversity. As each part of the body is needed for its individual function for the

good of the whole, each member of the community is needed for his or her skills for the

good of the whole community. Together the individual Corinthians or Romans make up

the Body of Christ. They should experience unity while maintaining the diversity of the

roles they play within the community.

But why doesn't Paul just tell the Corinthian and Roman communities that they

are like a body? Why does he specifically call them the Body of *Christ*? The answer of

course is both simple and profound: it is because of Christ that these individuals are

bound together in a community. Paul's instance on the centrality of Christ is not just that

the Corinthians and Romans are responding to the message of Christ; Christ is the source

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[96] Martin, *New Testament History and* Literature, 227. As Martin discusses, *harmonoia* was a well-known rhetorical and literature style in Greco-Roman culture used to counter division and promote harmony.

[97] Harm. W. Hollander, "The Idea of Fellowship in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22," *New Testament Studies* 55, no. 4 (October 2009): 464-465.

of their unity and the means by which they are in relationship to God and each other. The focus is not on the individual, him or herself, but on individuals in community: "For Paul, Christian living is no private matter; God saves and transforms a people, the body of Christ, not autonomous individuals."[98] And this transformation comes because of and through Christ.

In calling the church the Body of Christ, Paul's emphasis truly is on the community of believers itself. It is the relationships within the community and the relationship of the community to God that are being described, not the relationship of the community to the rest of society. The church is the Body of Christ, but "Christ is not depicted as using his Body the Church, as he used his earthly body; the metaphor, as we have said, is concerned with the structure of the Church and not with its work."[99] Believers are to use the metaphor to govern their interactions with each other: the different gifts they have are to be used for the edification of the community itself.

This is not to say that the Body of Christ metaphor had no impact on how the early Christians were to interact with those outside of their religious community. At the most basic level, the metaphor helped to create a particular identity within a social context of religious diversity. Paul used the metaphor to distinguish the early Jesus-followers from the rest of Judaism and the other religions practiced in the Greco-Roman world. Paul's use of the metaphor didn't provide specific guidance on how the early

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[98] Brian Rosner, "Paul's Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul,* ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 217.

[99] Ernest Best, *One Body in Christ: A Study in the Relationship of the Church to Christ in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), 111.

Jesus-movement should engage with other religious traditions, but it served to form a separate identity for the early Christians. The challenge for contemporary use will be to reclaim aspects of Paul's use of the Body of Christ metaphor without using it for such exclusionary purposes.

The Corinthians and Romans are being called to respect and honor each other despite the differences in their roles and skills within the believing community. Paul encourages them to recognize their need for each other and the value each has in relationship to the community. The believing community should not be divided into different factions according to preference of particular spiritual gifts or identity in the larger society. They have all been baptized in Christ and brought into relationship with God through their baptism. They must strive to find solidarity and unity in their diversity as they live as a community of believers.

Having examined some of Paul's purposes for using the metaphor in addressing the early church communities, let us turn to what the metaphor may have meant in Paul's usage. Once again, the context of the first century Roman Empire is important in any attempt to understand the viewpoint of an individual living at that time. Paul, like all human beings, was shaped by his context and influenced by the societies within which he lived. We know from Paul's own testimony that he received a great deal of education within Judaism, and from studying his epistles, scholars are convinced he received instruction in rhetoric as well.[100] Drawing on what is known about first century Greco-

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[100] Stanley Stowers is one of many scholars who argues that Paul was educated in Greco-Roman rhetoric and letter writing. He discusses Paul's assumed education level in the first chapter of his book, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

Roman education, we can safely assume that Paul was aware of the major streams of philosophic thought active in his day.[101]

The way in which the body politic was discussed in political writings of the Greco-Roman world is paralleled within Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The image of the human body was used to explain the organization and function of the Roman state, and the epistle uses the image of a human body in much the same way to discuss how the Corinthian community should function. Paul most certainly drew upon established methods of using the body image in his writings. In fact, "Paul's uniformity of use of this metaphor with ancient political writers applies even to the details."[102] He personifies certain body parts, giving them voices which highlight the absurdity of a body part removing itself from the larger body, and talks of weak and strong body parts in much the same manner as other ancient writers.[103] Yet, "while the term 'body' did not originate with him, Paul was apparently the first to apply it to a community *within* the larger community of the state, and to the *personal* responsibilities of people for one another rather than for more external duties."[104] A distinctive character of Paul's work is his view that a small community could consider itself a fully functioning body apart from the larger body politic.

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[101] Ibid.

[102] Margaret Mary Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 159.

[103] Ibid., 159.

[104] Robert Banks, *Paul's Ideal of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 70.

Paul's application of the body metaphor to the community of Jesus-followers was in itself novel, although some of his purposes in doing so are very similar to the purposes others had for using the body metaphor. For instance, "an important component of Paul's argument in 1 Cor 12 is the differentiation of personal gifts and contributions within the community. This is one of the most common applications of the body metaphor for the state in antiquity."[105] As well, "the metaphor of the body for the social organism in ancient political texts…*is used to combat factionalism*, both in Greco-Roman texts and even in Hellenistic Jewish appropriation of it." [106] This, as was discussed above, is the main function of the entirety of Paul's letter to the Corinthians including his development of the Body of Christ metaphor. His purpose is centered on creating unity within a divided community.

There are important differences in Paul's application of the body metaphor from Greco-Roman use of the image of the body, most of which can be found in the meaning he finds in calling the Christian community the Body of Christ. Paul's Body of Christ, like the body politic, is arranged in a given order, but for him, "it is God (not 'nature') who has placed each member in its appropriate place."[107] As well, while Paul uses status terms in speaking of members of the body which are accorded different amounts of honor and respect, he challenges the community to rethink their assumptions about which members are truly deserving of honor. He claims "that the normally conceived body

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[105] Mitchell, *Paul and Rhetoric*, 159.

[106] Ibid., 161.

[107] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 94.

hierarchy is actually only an apparent, surface hierarchy."[108] The true status and hierarchy of the body is given by God, but it is not what the Christian community assumes it to be. The hearers of Paul's words are able to draw upon what they knew of body images, but their traditional ideologies surrounding bodies and community would be challenged by what Paul meant in his metaphor of the Body of Christ.

When Paul uses the term "Body of Christ" he is referring to the Christian community.   The Body of Christ is a particular group of people distinct from the rest of society. There are times in Paul's epistles where he talks about the body of Christ as either the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth, the resurrected body of Christ, or the Eucharistic meal, but when used as a singular term, the Body of Christ means the community of Jesus-followers usually called the church. Both "church," *ekklēsia*, and the Body of Christ refer to the same community, and as such are interchangeable even though the terms highlight different aspects of what it means to be that particular community.

In calling the church the Body of Christ, Paul is stating that "the Christian assembly is a body, like the secular body politic, but it is different precisely because its distinctive and identifying feature is that it is the body *of Christ*."[109] The Body of Christ is a body, so what is known about human bodies applies to this community as that knowledge also applies to the wider society, but since this is Christ's body, what is

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 551.

known about Christ will apply to this community in particular. This means that Paul's

Christology, what he has preached and taught about Jesus Christ, will greatly shape his

understanding of what it means for the Christian community to be the Body of Christ.

Christ is at the center of Paul's teaching about the life of the community he calls

the Body of Christ. The unity of this community has its source in Christ because "for

Paul to speak of Christians as members of the Body of Christ is to imply that they are

closely linked in fellowship with him, that they are included in him."[110] The church has

become the physical presence of Christ in the world as each member is incorporated by

Christ's Spirit into the Body of Christ. [111] The community does not belong to the

individual members which compose it. Biblical scholar Robert Banks argues that the

community belongs to God and Christ, saying "the church is described as belonging not

to the people…but rather to the one who has brought it into existence (that is God) or the

one through whom this has taken place (that is Christ). This means that *ekklēsia* is not

merely a human association, a gathering of like-minded individuals for a religious

purpose, but a divinely-created affair."[112] Individual followers of Christ become the

Body of Christ through the activity of Christ's Spirit. This is not to say that the local

church is identified with Christ himself. The Body of Christ as the church is not Christ's

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[110] Best, *One Body*, 86.

[111] Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "1 and 2 Corinthians," in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 82.

[112] Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 37.

literal post-resurrection body, but instead a metaphor for the physical means by which

Christ's Spirit interacts with the world.

What is also interesting to note, is the Body of Christ is used by Paul to refer to

two different communities, the Corinthian community Paul founded and the Roman

community Paul had yet to meet. This highlights both the universality of the Christian

community and the wholeness of each particular church. Paul does not say the Body of

Christ is only formed by a universal community of every Christian in every location.

Banks argues that in the letter to the Corinthians,

> the community at Corinth is not said to be *part* of a wider body of Christ nor as *a*
> 'body of Christ' alongside numerous others. It is '*the* body of Christ' in that
> place. This suggests that wherever Christians are in relationship there is the body
> of Christ in its entirety, for Christ is truly and wholly present there through his
> Spirit.[113]

Each local church is the Body of Christ in its entirety, even as all churches together are

also the Body of Christ. The local church should view itself as complete and whole,

applying Paul's message of what it means to be the Body of Christ to their own situation.

We have already seen that Paul intended the Body of Christ metaphor to help

Christians overcome divisions which threatened to disrupt the unity of the community.

The reason the Body of Christ metaphor can serve this purpose is because it stresses the

interdependent nature of the Christian community. Being the Body of Christ means that

individual Christians are intertwined with each other and cannot function as a healthy

body, a healthy community, without one another. The metaphor also stresses that the

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[113] Ibid., 63.

individuals which make up the Body of Christ are diverse, in social status, education, and perhaps most importantly, spiritual gifts. Each member of the Body of Christ has been given a charism by the Spirit. A person's charism is "the contribution which the individual member makes to the whole, its function within the body as a whole."[114] Each individual makes his or her particular contribution to the life of the community and it is these particular contributions which together constitute the proper functioning of the community.

The influence of the Greco-Roman worldview on Paul can be seen in his concerns about community purity. Paul understood bodies in terms of the spectrum of masculine/impenetrable-feminine/penetrable. He had the same concerns for bodily integrity as much of the ancient world, and these concerns were tied to his understanding of how a society, or a community within a society, should function. For Paul,

> The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other.[115]

Thus, concerns about the penetration of physical bodies extended to the communal body. In being the Body of Christ, Paul viewed the Christian community as one which should be holy and whole. This resulted in Paul's great attention to issues of purity and unity, for "the greatest threat to a holy body is pollution; comparably, the most dangerous threat

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[114] Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 554.

[115] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 65.

to a whole body is unwholeness, that is, a body defect or mutilation," which would manifest as divisions and factions within a community.[116]

The interconnectedness of the Body of Christ meant that the community was affected by each of its members' actions. Paul's concerns about proper behavior of community members is not just about the well-being of an individual acting contrary to Paul's expectations, but also about the integrity of the Body of Christ as a whole. For Paul, "so close is the link between members of the community that what affects one necessarily affects all."[117] Being a member of the Body of Christ means one must consider the consequences of one's actions not only for oneself, but for the whole community. The impure acts of one individual could pollute the whole Body of Christ.

The absence of any particular member, along with his or her function within the community, also impacted the community at large. Without each member, the body would not be whole, both in the idea of missing a member, but also in missing the function that member provided. The different functions of the members of the Body of Christ were necessary for the health of the overall body. Not only did this mean all members were needed, but the community also should not strive for uniformity.

The Body of Christ was to be united and interconnected, but not homogenous. Paul's use of the body image "repeats the usual assertion that the body would perish – or at least would become a nonfunctioning monstrosity – were it not for the different

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[116] Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of his Letters* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 138.

[117] Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 64.

functions of the different members."[118] Further implications of the need for internal

diversity within the Christian community is that no one individual or group can claim an

exclusive right to ministry. All members of the Body of Christ are to be actively

involved in the life of the community, none should be hindered in the attempt to fulfill

their role. It is easy to see that "when ministry is limited to the few the result is a

grotesque parody of the body, a body eighty or ninety percent paralyzed, with only the

few organs functioning, and functioning to little effect, since the effectiveness of the

body depends on its diversity functioning in unity."[119] The community cannot be the

Body of Christ unless all of its members are working together.

The character of the internal life of the Body of Christ is one of servant ministry

modeled on Christ himself. As Christ ministered to those in need, the Christian

community must look after the members of the Body of Christ who are struggling. The

behavior of the members of the community toward each other should reflect the harmony

needed between the diverse parts of body for healthy functioning. In order to "preserve

this internal harmony, members of the church body must learn, following another aspect

of divine design as revealed in Christ, to love and look out for one another's benefit,

particularly the less and the least."[120] For Paul, the Body of Christ metaphor should

govern the activity and organization of the Christian community.

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[118] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 94.

[119] Dunn, *Theology of Paul,* 560.

[120] Tat-Siong Benny Liew, "Redressing Bodies at Corinth: Racial/Ethnic Politics and Religious Difference in the Context of Empire," in *The Colonized Apostle: Paul Through Postcolonial Eyes* ed. Christopher D. Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 136.

Related to his call for members of the Body of Christ to serve one another is Paul's departure from typical Greco-Roman understandings of body hierarchy. He writes,

> the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. (1 Corinthians 12:22-25, NRSV)

He acknowledges in this passage that there appears to be a certain hierarchy in the body between strong and weak members, but Paul indicates that the hierarchy his readers assume is incorrect. God has arranged the body in a particular order, Paul states, but the order God has intended is not what society has stated. Bodily hierarchy is not done away with, but Paul informs the Christian community that

> the conventional attribution of status is more problematic than appears on the surface; the normal connection between status and honor should be questioned; and we must recognize that those who, on the surface, occupy positions of lower status are actually more essential than those of higher status and therefore should be accorded more honor. This is not, then, a compensatory move on Paul's part…Rather, his rhetoric pushes for an actual reversal of the normal, 'this-worldly' attribution of honor and status.[121]

The Body of Christ is to be a community arranged differently than the rest of society. Those who have great socio-economic status in the world are not automatically to be given the greater honor in the Christian community. In fact, those who the world has assumed to be inferior are to be lifted up and honored in the Body of Christ.

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[121] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 95-96.

There is a limit to the status reversal Paul calls for within the Christian community however. Paul's language in other passages of his epistles demonstrate that while "Paul does not seem to think that a slave's body is a different kind of body from that of a free person, or a manual laborer's from that of a man of leisure, or that a Jew's is different from a Gentile's…he believes, unquestioningly, that women's bodies are different from men's bodies."[122] The hierarchy he undermines within his use of the Body of Christ metaphor is not fully applied to the male-female hierarchy of Greco-Roman society. Paul does believe, "at least eschatologically and ideally, that in Christ there is no male and female….Yet he never makes the claim that the female is equal to, much less superior to, the male."[123] The Body of Christ, for Paul, does not mean gender equality.[124]

This does not mean, however, that it is impossible for the Body of Christ metaphor to indicate a fully egalitarian community. Conceptions of bodies and community have changed, and it is appropriate to revisit this metaphor with new insights into human embodiment, human community, and human relationships to God. The next two chapters will explore insights from feminist, womanist, and queer theology, as well as theology done in conversation with disability studies regarding how the Christian

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[122] Ibid., 199.

[123] Ibid.

[124] The limitations of Paul's calls for status reversal in regards to women are examined in Antoinette Wire's *The Corinthian Women Prophets*. She argues that part of the reason Paul puts limits on women's participation in the early Christian community is because women were expressing a new freedom, a gain in status, found in the Jesus-movement which is the opposite of Paul's experience of status loss by becoming a Jesus follower. Paul's writings indicate a strong belief that God's power was being demonstrated through what appeared to be weakness, and so the Corinthians women's claim of new found strength in Christ appeared counter to Paul's message. Wire argues that the response of the Corinthian women was an unintended consequence of Paul's message he was not able to predict or accept.

community is organized and how Christians understand the bodies composing the

community. These contemporary perspectives will be used to shed light on how the

Body of Christ metaphor can function today to provide meaning for Christians striving to

live faithfully and responsibly in a religiously diverse world. The contributions from

these theological areas will give definition to what is distinct about being a community

called the Body of Christ and what difference it makes to claim the Christian identity.

These conceptual elements will manifest in particular practices that prepare Christians to

form relationships across all types of diversity, including religious diversity.

Tension between Bodies

While debates are waged on just how much Paul and the early Christians

practically challenged the status quo of the Roman Empire, what is important to note here

is that the theology and lifestyle promoted by Paul and his followers would have gone

against the grain of the learned behaviors and ideologies of the early converts.[125] The

worldview and mindset of the Corinthians, Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, etc.

would have been undergoing radical shifts which were likely met with resistance both

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[125] One example of the challenge to engrained behavior and ideology the Jesus movement presented can be found in James Walters' study of dining practices and laws governing the use of meals in the political arena. His article "Paul and the Politics of Meals in Roman Corinth" from *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* discusses the extensive social protocols and political influence involved in being host or guest at a meal, as well as the role women and slaves would play in preparing and serving the meal. The common practices surrounding Greco-Roman meals are contrasted with Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to disrupt the hierarchy of host and guest by recognizing Jesus as the host. By displacing the human host of the meal with Christ, Walters argues that Paul is challenging any attempt of individuals to assert their traditional authority and power over others in the believing community. The believers' community meal has the potential to supplant the traditional power dynamics of Greco-Roman society.

externally and internally. Their understanding of the world and their place in it had been

shaped by "the hegemonic context in the first century C.E. [that] was dominated by the

power imbalance that was imposed and maintained by the Roman Empire and supported

by various other social configurations such as patriarchalism and slavery."[126] These early

communities existed in a context where the hierarchy of men over women, free over

slave, Roman over foreigner was maintained through political, economic, and military

systems that daily threatened the physical integrity of individuals who were determined to

be stepping outside of their assigned place in the hierarchy.

 In this context, the power one had over one's own body and the physical bodies of

other human beings was socially defined.[127] Those at the top of the hierarchical system,

male Roman citizens, had the most control over what happened to their bodies while

those at the bottom, enslaved persons, had very little say, if any, over what was done to

and with their bodies. Masculinity was closely linked to one's control over one's body,

and thus any form of penetration of one's physical body, sexual or corporal, was deemed

unmanly, feminine.[128] This meant that "in Roman habitus, whipping was the archetypal

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[126] Punt, "Pauline Agency," 55-56.

[127] While social structures have changed significantly since the Greco-Roman period, the power over one's own body or to control other bodies is still socially defined. Laws and social norms govern the actions and mobility of individuals and groups even today. The process of determining who has power over which other bodies is closely examined in works like Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977) which focuses on the methods of discipline wielded by the government including the prison system and the social structures supporting criminality and recidivism. The processes of discipline examined by Foucault may not be as explicit in the purpose of governing bodies as the hierarchical system of citizenship and slavery found in Greco-Roman society, but many of the central concerns about maintaining an orderly society remain.

[128] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passion: Greek and Roman Sexualities," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (2000): 1250-1261.

mark of dishonor."[129] Slaves were the ones subject to whipping and other forms of

beating, not Roman citizens. In such a context, to claim that the Jesus-followers were the

Body of Christ meant engaging directly with Greco-Roman conceptions of bodies and the

hierarchy made manifest in bodies.

In calling upon them to be the Body of Christ, Paul asked the early Christians to

align themselves with an individual who, according to Greco-Roman societal standards,

was weak, vulnerable, penetrated, and defeated. Christ's body had been beaten, his hands

and feet had been pierced, and he was killed as a political criminal on a cross. This was

not the kind of individual or body that people had been taught to value and imitate.

Through the Body of Christ metaphor, Paul argued against the prevailing logic of the

time to say that a body which appeared weak to the world was in fact strong and valuable

enough to claim membership in. According to Paul, a body which seemed weak and

defeated was salvific. The tension, and outright conflict, between the type of body

valued by Greco-Roman society and the type of body valued in the Body of Christ

metaphor, created an opportunity for the early Christians to question societal norms and

examine justifications for community organization. While in practice early Christian

communities did not dismantle all hierarchies or cross all social barriers, the metaphor

provided resources for new ways of thinking.

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[129] Glancy, Corporal Knowledge, 30. Glancy also discusses the dishonor associated with physical violation in the first chapter of her book *Slavery in Early Christianity* where she writes about the mental and emotional suffering endured by freedmen who were subjected to physical abuse and penetration.

Revitalizing the Body of Christ Metaphor

The Body of Christ metaphor has continued to be used to describe the Christian community throughout the history of Christianity, but contemporary use has lost much of its original power. Contemporary use of the Body of Christ is barely metaphoric. Often it is used as just another name for the Church: basically functioning as a noun. Examination of what is meant by the metaphor rarely goes beyond acknowledgement that the Christian community is made up of many different kinds of individuals who perform different tasks for the wellbeing of the whole community. As a metaphor, the Body of Christ no longer has much power to shape Christian identity.

I argue the Body of Christ metaphor can be revived and that this revivification is a worthwhile endeavor. The original potential of the Body of Christ to shape Christian self-understanding through challenging Christians to rethink conceptions of bodies and community organization can be tapped into once again. The first step in revitalizing the Body of Christ metaphor is to acknowledge it as a metaphor. In order to do this, it is necessary to examine the nature of metaphors and their role in Christian theology.

Sallie McFague is a feminist theologian who has done extensive work on the role and nature of metaphors in Christian theology. She argues that metaphors are at the heart of religious language. The very nature of what religious traditions are focused on, the divine, is something beyond human experience and understanding. Unlike physical objects in the natural world, humans cannot examine, dissect, or physically interact with the divine source of religious belief. Thus, anything Christian theology says about God or humanity's relationship to God is, in the end, said in metaphor.

According to McFague, a metaphor is "an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar;" something known is used to explain something unknown. [130] In a metaphor, "a word or phrase [is] used *in*appropriately. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another…what a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly or apart from it, for it if could be, one would have said it directly."[131] Instead, the use of a metaphor provides both a shock of recognition and a shock of disconnect. The metaphor allows some understanding of what the new object is while also making clear that there is more to the object than has just been expressed. This is because a "metaphor always has the character of 'is' and 'is not': an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition."[132] If a definition is possible, than a metaphor is not needed.

In the case of religious language, multiple metaphors are used for knowledge about God and humanity's relationship to God. Since each metaphor communicates both "is and is not," it would be limiting to only use one metaphor. Still, a certain metaphor may gain greater usage than others due to its "disclosive power, its ability to address and cope with the most pressing issues of one's day, its comprehensiveness and coherence, its potential for dealing with anomalies, and so forth."[133] When a religious metaphor has

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[130] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 33.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid., 27.

been found to be especially useful in assisting practitioners to understand God and their relationship to God, McFague notes that it can become a model. A model, "is a metaphor with 'staying power.' A model is a metaphor that has gained sufficient stability and scope so as to present a pattern for relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation."[134] When a metaphor which has become a model is used, it calls to mind more than just a single aspect of the object in question: the relationship of that object to other objects is implied in the single metaphor.

A religious metaphor is only useful if it continues to assist in the understanding of God and humanity's relationship to God. Thus, McFague demonstrates that certain metaphors live and die and are reborn again as their particular focus becomes more or less relevant to the needs of practitioners. These needs change in response to new knowledge and events both within the tradition and the cultures within which practitioners live. Thus, even as one metaphor is raised up to respond to current questions and concerns of the religious community, the power of other metaphors is not denied.

The metaphor of the Body of Christ has lost much of its original power. Instead of shocking Christians with a sense of "is and is not," the Body of Christ is now used less as a metaphor and more as a name for the Christian community. As discussed above, use of the Body of Christ metaphor rarely provokes much examination of the nature of Christian community beyond allusions to interdependence and acknowledgement of the

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[134] Ibid., 34.

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many different roles individuals can fulfill within the church. In many ways the Body of Christ metaphor has lost its ability to express anything meaningful about humanity's relationship to God. It no longer causes Christians to question society's values regarding bodies, hierarchy, or power. It no longer gives distinct shape to the Christian life.

It is possible for the Body of Christ metaphor to be reborn. The power of the metaphor to reveal insights into humanity's relationship to God and shape the communal life of Christians can be revivified. The Body of Christ metaphor can once cause Christians to think through how the Christian community is both like a body and not like a body; how the church is everything a body is and completely not what a body is; how the Christian community has limits like a body and also exceeds these limits. The power of this metaphor is regained when the original tension between the body as understood by society and the body as understood by the community of faith is once again made clear. The challenge Paul's metaphor presented to societal conceptions of bodies must be retrieved for a new generation. The metaphor will only provide a strong foundation for Christian identity, needed in order for Christians to feel confident when engaging religious plurality, if it offers distinct conceptions to shape the manner in which Christians value particular bodies and relationships with those bodies.

The challenge to societal conceptions exists when the conception of bodies and power developed by contemporary Christian theology functions within the Body of Christ metaphor. While numerous theologians have engaged themes of bodies and power, the areas of womanist, feminist, and queer theology as well as theology born out of the intersection of disability studies and postmodern theology have been particularly

focused on embodiment and power as it functions in hierarchical structures. These theologians have made issues of diversity, embodiment, relationality, and praxis central to the theological project: the same themes at the heart of the Body of Christ metaphor. This makes engagement with womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology an important component of reviving the Body of Christ metaphor for contemporary use in a religiously diverse world.

First, however, Western conceptions with which the metaphor will be in tension, particularly the Western ideal body, need to be made clear rather than assumed. Western philosophy has undergone shifts regarding its understanding of bodies, but what has remained

> the constant element throughout historical variation is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will creativity, freedom…) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization.[135]

The body is viewed as a possession of the self, distinct from one's physical reality, which should be controlled through the rational will. Body and self are distinct from each other, the former the object of the self-subject. The body-object is the property of "an isolated, independent individual" self who in Western society should be autonomous and self-sufficient.[136]

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[135] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 5.

[136] Nicole Sault, "Introduction: The Human Mirror," in *Many Mirrors: Body Image and Social Relations,* ed. Nicole Sault (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 5.

The body, which a self is thought to own, is often understood through a biomedical and mechanical lens. Western scientific advancement in relationship to philosophical exploration has contributed to the view that an "individual *has* a body and that body is like a machine that can be broken down into parts. By accepting this mechanical model, people now see themselves as divided into parts and their bodies as assemblages of functionally defined units."[137] This "Western biomedical model that separates body from self also divides the body, defining it as an aggregation of parts that break down and require repair."[138] Technological and medical advancements have made it possible to replace worn out parts of the body with transplanted organs or synthetic materials that can outlast a natural human life. When technology has nearly made it possible to exchange every part of a physical body for something new, it is not surprising that the self is understood to be separate from these interchangeable parts.

The distinction between body and self, or mind, spirit, soul, etc., functions in Western society to divide more than just body and self into an oppositional binary. As feminist theorists have definitively shown, gender has been understood through a binary system as well, equating masculinity with the rational self and femininity with the physical body. This has been detrimental to women for "if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be."[139] The result is men being valued

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[137] Ibid., 6.

[138] Ibid., 10.

[139] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 5.

over women, men considered the appropriate wielders of political power, and women defined primarily through their physical reality. This duality is usually extended in terms of ethnicity and race into a "racist ideology and imagery that construct[s] non-European 'races' as 'primitive,' 'savage,' sexually animalistic, and indeed more *bodily* than the white 'races.'"[140] The ideal body then, is a white, male body which has been subdued by a rational will into a vehicle for individual, autonomous, intellectual self-mastery. It is this conception of the ideal body that the Body of Christ metaphor will need to challenge in order to regain its original power. Only if the conception of bodies within the metaphor is in tension with the Western body will it be able to shape the identity of individuals within the Christian community, and the identity of the community itself, with any significance.

Since, as hinted above in the feminist critique on the effects of the body-self binary, contemporary Christian thought has engaged themes of body and power, exploring feminist, womanist, queer, and disability theology should provide a conception of bodies which challenges the dominant Western model. When the Body of Christ metaphor incorporates this challenge, it will have regained the power to shape Christian self-understanding. The conception of bodies from womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology, along with other insights related to diversity, relationality, hierarchy, and power, will create a distinct understanding of Christian identity within the Body of Christ metaphor. This distinct identity will provide particular attitudes and practices for

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[140] Ibid., 9.

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the Christian community and Christian individuals. These attitudes and practices will shape how Christians engage all forms of diversity and create greater comfort with religious diversity even as Christians are challenged by their encounters with religious difference.

The Significance of the Body of Christ Metaphor

Christian identity was originally formed in the religiously diverse context of the Greco-Roman Empire, not unlike the current religious diversity of the United States. Thus, using the Body of Christ metaphor to understand Christian identity in relation to religious diversity is not antithetical to its original use by Paul to understand the new identity being claimed by the early Jesus-followers. The formation and definition of a particular identity always has at least some element of defining-out and distinguishing one group from another. It is not surprising that Paul's use of the Body of Christ metaphor created a distinct identity that separated the early Jesus-followers from their surrounding context. Clear boundary lines between religious communities were needed, particularly at the formation stage of the Christian movement, in order to make clear that the Jesus-followers weren't exactly the same as their neighboring Jews and Gentiles. Using the Body of Christ metaphor in the contemporary context of religious diversity will still provide a distinct identity, one that isn't the same as other religious identities, but it is not necessary to use the metaphor to create such hard boundaries.

The Body of Christ metaphor originally had great potential to shape Christian identity because it created tension and opposition to some societal values. In particular,

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conceptions of bodies, power, and gender were challenged when Paul used the metaphor because Paul drew attention to the body of Jesus, which was not the "ideal" body of Greco-Roman society. Jesus' body was poor, beaten, pierced, and crucified; a body deemed unworthy to be honored by the dominant Greco-Roman values. The tension this created meant that the Body of Christ metaphor encouraged Christians to examine their conceptions of power and authority and make changes to the way in which they viewed the world. The particular identity of the early Christian community impacted the manner in which the Jesus-followers interacted with each other and with their wider context.

The body of Jesus Christ is still not the kind of body Western society holds up as ideal. The Body of Christ metaphor still calls Christians to rethink their values and critique social norms and values. When used as a metaphor, instead of a noun, the Body of Christ still provides an opportunity to question society's values. This questioning will create tension, internally as Christians struggle to reorient themselves to different values and goals, and externally as Christians stop conforming to society's norms. This is unlikely to be a comfortable process, but the following chapters will highlight other practices and values encouraged by the Body of Christ metaphor that can assist Christians in moving through this process with grace and skill. These practices and values will open Christians to engage religious diversity even as they radically alter the Christian worldview and disrupt the status quo.

Paul challenged societal conceptions of hierarchy, but he did not use the Body of Christ metaphor to create an egalitarian society. As a feminist theologian, I cannot accept an interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor that does not affirm the full humanity of

women. Thus, contemporary use of the metaphor will need to challenge any understanding of bodies, power, or gender operating within the metaphor to ensure that all members of the Body of Christ, particularly women, are treated as equally valuable to the community. Work done by womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theologians provides conceptions of relationality, embodiment, diversity and praxis that can give the Body of Christ metaphor the substance it needs to influence Christian self-understanding while affirming the full humanity of all persons. The insights from these theological areas propose ways of understanding bodies, power, and community organization which are in tension with dominant Western models. When the Body of Christ metaphor incorporates these insights, it will create a similar tension with Western society today as it did with Greco-Roman society in Paul's time.

The Body of Christ metaphor calls attention to the fact that claiming a Christian identity, claiming membership within the Christian community, connects all Christians to each other. Christians all around the world are part of the Body of Christ, just as one local community is also the Body of Christ. There is great diversity within world Christianity as many different cultures have interpreted the Christian message in particular ways and formed distinct ways of worshiping God. Being part of the Body of Christ means being connected to a vast spectrum of diverse individuals.

The particularity of the Christian identity provided by the Body of Christ metaphor will distinguish Christians from practitioners of other religious traditions, but it will not isolate them. Identity can form boundaries, but those boundaries are not necessarily barriers. Identity can create a sense of self that provides a foundation from

which to grow and explore diversity in one's world. Religious plurality sometimes appears frightening to people who fear they will lose their uniqueness; however, the fear can be eased if religious plurality is approached from a place of self-knowledge and an openness to diversity. The Body of Christ metaphor can provide a Christian identity that embraces diversity and creates a sense of openness more than fear.

The next two chapters will examine bodies and power through womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theologies in order to give particular shape to the kind of community the Body of Christ metaphor entails. When the Body of Christ metaphor contains well defined understanding of relationality, embodiment, diversity, and praxis, it will imply particular attitudes and practices for the Christian community. These attitudes and practices will assist Christians not only in forming a community guided by the Body of Christ metaphor, but also aid them in approaching religious diversity with confidence.

Chapter Three: The Gendered and Raced Body of Christ

In this chapter, we turn to contemporary theological movements in order to

examine the possible use of the Body of Christ metaphor for understanding Christian

identity in a world of many faiths. If this metaphor is to be revivified within the Christian

community, it will not be enough to only examine the biblical origins of the metaphor. It

will be important to understand how the metaphor can shape Christian self-understanding

and mobilization in the world when informed by contemporary theological insights. This

chapter and the next will examine contributions from womanist, feminist, queer, and

disability theology regarding bodies, power, and Christian approaches to diversity,

embodiment, relationality, and praxis in order to construct an understanding of the Body

of Christ metaphor which provides a critique of contemporary society and assists

Christians in engaging religious diversity. In particular, the shared commitments these

four areas of theological inquiry have around affirming embodied existence, challenging

hierarchies, and examining sameness and difference will be highlighted. In this chapter,

womanist and feminist theology will be the focus while the following chapter will

examine queer theology and theologies of disability.[141] The womanist concept of re-

membering and rejection of surrogacy along with the feminist model of church in the

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[141] In this chapter I will often refer to theologies of disability as disability theology for the ease of listing the four theological areas to be examined in this and the following chapter. However, I am aware that it is less accurate to use the term disability theology than it is to use womanist, feminist, or queer theology. In the following chapter where the focus is on queer theology and theologies of disability, rather than on all four theological areas as general sources for constructively interpreting the Body of Christ metaphor, I will use more accurate terminology.

round and feminist exploration of otherness and hybrid identities provide concepts and practices which shape Christian identity in particular ways. These insights from womanist and feminist theology are not only useful for the internal dynamics of the Christian community, but also hold implications for the manner in which Christians engage religious diversity.

Shared Commitments of Womanist, Feminist, Queer, & Disability Theology

Womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology have contributed much to contemporary Christian theological studies. They represent distinct approaches to the study and development of Christian theology which strive to expose previously unexamined biases in theology and religious institutions as well as provide resources for including the perspectives of historically marginalized groups and supporting the liberation of the same. Part of the family of liberation theologies, these areas are concerned with the theological underpinnings of religious actions and the lived reality of religious communities. Womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology assert that theological concepts impact people's lives, and they argue that Christian theology has historically ignored and contributed to the oppression of particular groups including women, African-Americans, LGBTQ persons, persons with disabilities, and the poor.

Thus, the concrete implications of the Body of Christ metaphor are of concern to womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theologians. A critical lens needs to be taken to the metaphor in order to ensure that this concept of the Body of Christ does not cause harm to the populations which hold these theological areas accountable. Each area has its

own particular approach and emphasis regarding the doing of theology, and yet there are shared commitments between womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology in regards to how they examine Christian theology in general and Christian community in particular. All four share a commitment to embodied existence, or the concrete bodies of human beings. None of these areas would accept a theology which denigrates, marginalizes, or denies the importance of bodies. They recognize that human experience is always mediated through physical bodies and so theological conceptions of embodiment impact everyday life.

A second commitment they share is to the examination, exposure, and disruption of hierarchies. Womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology have demonstrated the oppressive consequences of religious, social, economic, and political systems which are arranged hierarchically. The ideological and theological support for hierarchal systems is dismantled by these theological areas and new systems are proposed and explored. A third commitment shared between these theological areas is a focus on sameness and difference. The ideological and social production of sameness and difference as well as the consequences of what is understood to be the same and different are of great concern to womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theologians. They have argued that sameness and difference have been used to marginalize, dismiss, cover up, and oppress those at the bottom of hierarchical systems as well as limit the freedom and flourishing of all humanity.

The Body of Christ metaphor will be examined below through particular examples of womanist and feminist commitments to these concerns. By placing these

concerns, and the theologians who express them, in conversation with the Body of Christ metaphor, we will be able to see both the possibilities and limitations of the Body of Christ metaphor for contemporary Christian community. While the theologians examined below do not typically have religious difference in mind while articulating their theological perspectives, I contend that their insights into embodied existence, hierarchy, and sameness/difference can provide creative resources for Christians seeking to engage with religious difference without fear and mistrust.

Re-Membering

Womanist theology arose out of the response of African-American women to the limitations and deficiencies of both black liberation theology, done mainly by black men, and feminist theology, done mainly by white women. Black women found that the focus on race in black theology failed to account for the role sexism and patriarchy played in the oppression experienced by black women and the focus on gender in feminist theology did not recognize the role of racism and classism in relations between women. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes has stated, "We find that our history of racial oppression has always been sexualized. And that all sexism is racialized and often by homogenizing it we miss the peculiar ways sexism is able to reinforce racial privilege for some and sharpen the consequences of racial oppression for others."[142] Womanist theologians refuse to

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[142] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies: The Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader,* ed. Katie G. Cannon, Emilie Maureen Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 85.

separate the race, gender, and class aspects of their identities as they work to articulate a theology that takes account of their lived experience.

The term "womanist" comes originally from the black community but was given fuller definition by Alice Walker:

> From womanish (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color...*Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually…Sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health…*Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.[143]

Many black women theologians have adopted this definition, sometimes with revision, and used it to help guide their theological reflections. Thus, "womanist" has come to designate theological and biblical scholarship done by African-American women which intentionally engages the lived experiences of black women. Womanist theology also intentionally examines theological concepts and arguments for the manner in which black women's lives are impacted. They will critique the Body of Christ metaphor and the conceptions of embodiment, relationality, diversity, and praxis operating in the metaphor to counter any use of the metaphor to denigrate or deny the fully humanity of black women.

There is a concept in womanist theology used by Karen Baker-Fletcher and M. Shawn Copeland that deals directly with embodiment called re-membering. Re-membering arises out of a concern for attention to the actual physical bodies of black

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[143] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1983), xi-xii.

people in particular. Copeland, Baker-Fletcher, and other womanist theologians argue that the physical bodies of women and African-Americans have been denigrated, threatened, and wounded through systems and ideologies that ignore the particularity of embodied existence. Western society has valued minds over bodies and white bodies over black and brown bodies. This devaluing and often outright ignoring of physical bodies can be countered in the process of re-membering.

Copeland recognizes that physical bodies are incredibly important to human existence and humanity's relation with the divine. She states her convictions that "the body is a site and mediation of divine revelation; that the body shapes human existence as relational and social; that the creativity of the Triune God is manifested in differences of gender, race, and sexuality."[144] It is only through bodies that human beings interact with each other and the world, and it is only as embodied beings that humanity can receive, experience, and examine divine revelation. To ignore physical bodies, the embodied nature of human experience, is to ignore a large portion of what it is to be human.

All human beings experience an embodied existence, but each person's individual experience of being an embodied creature "in large measure hinges upon cultural perceptions and social (political, economic, technological) responses (affirmation or rejection or indifference) to the physical body."[145] The gender, color, shape, ability, age etc. of a physical body will engender different responses as that body interacts with other

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[144] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 2.

[145] Ibid., 8.

bodies. What a given culture values as physically beautiful or socially necessary will impact reactions to a particular body which in turn influences the experiences of that body. These perceptions and responses are determined in subtle and overt ways by those in positions of power and influence in society and the consequences of such determinations are real. As Copeland states, "a social body determined by the arbitrary privileged position and, therefore, power of one group may enact subtle and grotesque brutality upon different 'others.'"[146] Physical bodies are impacted by social perceptions of bodies.

The harm which has been done historically and presently to black bodies is of particular concern to M. Shawn Copeland. Not only does she advocate for changes which would honor and respect bodies as sites of divine revelation in order to eliminate future harm, she recognizes the need to repair the harm which has already been done. She articulates a process of repair termed re-membering. In this process the physical bodies of individuals as well as the conceptual body of the black community is re-membered and made whole. The harm done to black bodies, both specifically and generally, is named, acknowledged, mourned, and healed. Whatever aspect of the physical body that has been denigrated, ignored, or forgotten is brought back to present consciousness and in that sense, re-membered, grafted back into the rest of the body.

The legacy of slavery and white racism in the United States has left the black community without some of its members: individual persons and body parts. As

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[146] Ibid.

articulated by another womanist theologian, Karen Baker-Fletcher, "We must literally re-member ourselves. We have become disembodied. We are disembodied from community. We are disembodied from self. We are disembodied from God. We are disembodied from earth. To become whole is to re-member."[147] Members of the black community are missing. They were taken from their families literally and figuratively through the slave trade, poverty, and violence. As the black community engages in re-membering, those members are brought back into the community's consciousness. The community itself is re-membered as individual members are incorporated back into the history of the community.

Re-membering also causes individual black bodies to be re-membered. Both men and women under slavery had little control over their bodies. Their bodies were commoditized, put to work for the profit of others and punished brutally for any resistance. Black women also faced the reality of their bodies being used for the pleasure of white owners as they were sexually exploited as forced breeders and mistresses. Such treatment of black bodies left physical and psychic scars. After slavery,

> In order to restore her body to wholeness, the freed woman had to love her body; and to love her body meant dealing with the wounds of slavery…The black woman had to cope with body memories of vulnerability, psychic and physical pain, in order to come to grips with internalized repercussions of violence and abuse…To love her body, the freed woman had to learn to claim and enjoy her body.[148]

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[147] Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 57.

[148] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 50.

Black women and men needed to re-member their bodies by reclaiming sovereignty over their physical selves and honoring the flesh that had been abused. The process of re-membering bodies is described powerfully in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* where Baby Suggs, holy,

> commands the people to love their flesh, to love their bodies, to love themselves and one another into wholeness. She names each bruised and tortured body part – eyes, hands, mouth, shoulders, arms necks, feet, liver, lungs, womb, reproductive organs. Her naming re-members broken bodies, heals torn flesh.[149]

This aspect of re-membering was not only needed during emancipation, but is still a valuable process for a community which continues to face discrimination and the devaluing of their bodies. By naming body parts and naming what has been done to these members of the body, black individuals can re-member themselves and engage in healing their relationships to their bodies.

Re-membering can also be a process of reconstructing the past through retrieving memories long suppressed or forgotten. Karen Baker-Fletcher, as discussed by Monica Coleman, explains that the black community has often rejected or suppressed their past. The history of black enslavement and the oppression caused by white racism can be viewed, consciously or unconsciously, as aspects of the past and present which should not be dwelled on, frustrations to move past in order to move forward. Baker-Fletcher challenges this practice as one which is harmful to the black community. She "refers to this preconscious feeling and rejecting of the past as 'dismembering.' When we disremember the past, it does not die out, but it does fade from our consciousness. Only

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[149] Ibid. 52.

through consciously remembering the past can we resolve the difficulties and strengths that often lie within our past."[150]

By consciously remembering the past, a process she calls rememory, Baker-Fletcher believes the black community can learn from the past and find a new way forward. Memories, both individual and communal, are consciously brought into the present for celebration, mourning, healing, and liberation. For her, "the process of 'rememory' helps [the black community] to address the challenges of [its] past...Rememory 'involves the power of reconnecting those memories that have been forcefully disremembered from community consciousness.'"[151] By engaging in rememory, individuals and the wider community have the opportunity to embrace the positive values of the past while addressing the negative aspects which have influenced the present. Only by consciously discussing memories can resistance and survival strategies be passed on to the next generation, and only by naming them can past hurts be brought to light for healing to take place. There is, however, a caution in the process of rememory: "the process of rememory is best done in community. Otherwise, Baker-Fletcher argues, rememory may be too painful...Oftentimes, people need the support of others in order to manage the memories of their past...Without community connectedness, rememory can be destructive."[152] Memories can be painful, so the

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[150] Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 104.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid., 106.

process of rememory or re-membering requires a community within which support can be given as individuals face hard truths.

Re-membering is different from simply remembering some event or idea from the past in that it involves consciously engaging the memory in order to bring about new life for individuals and communities. There is a power found in re-membering that is not present in the everyday instances of remembering. Re-membering calls forth events, people, and ideas which have been suppressed, devalued, or oppressed. M. Shawn Copeland argues that re-membering has long been a process the black community has engaged in, both during and after slavery. Re-membering "gave the slaves access to 'naming, placing, and signifying,' and thus the recovery, the reconstitution of identity, culture, and self. Memory, then, was an essential source of resistance."[153] By consciously drawing upon their own history and experiences, slaves were able to create a culture and identity outside of their designation as slaves by white owners. They retained and nurtured a sense of self not dependent on the will of owners.

This practice of re-membering is powerful for examining the Body of Christ metaphor. The individual members of the Body of Christ each have their own memories which can be brought to the consciousness of the community. By engaging in re-membering, the community which is the Body of Christ can address the past and current dynamics of a community composed of people from many different cultures, ethnicities,

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[153] M. Shawn Copeland, "Body, Representation and Black Religious Dialogue," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader,* ed. Katie G. Cannon, Emilie Maureen Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 150.

and classes. Re-membering will allow those who have been oppressed within the Body of Christ to hold other members to account and allow the whole Body to envision a new future. Copeland calls the memories engaged in re-membering, "dangerous memories" because of the impact they have on individuals and communities. For her, "those 'dangerous memories, memories which make demands on us,' memories which protest our forgetfulness of the human 'other,'" have the power to transform.[154] They can be difficult, but they provide the opportunity grow and heal.

The Body of Christ not only contains the memories of the individual members, but also the memories of the Christian community, including those of the one at the center of their community: Christ. A constructive interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor will need to take into account the history of the Christian community. As is the case for the black community, the Christian community can find both resources for the future and memories in need of healing when it engages in re-membering. Also, since for much of its history the Christian community has been in a powerful position, some parts of its re-membering process will involve confronting and addressing the hurts it has perpetrated.

Re-membering the history of Jesus Christ will also have a significant impact on the manner in which the Body of Christ interacts with the world. For, as womanist Kelly Brown Douglas has said, "It is simply hard for me to imagine that a body that remembers what it is like to be enchained, whipped, lynched, destroyed, and otherwise discarded

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[154] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 28-29.

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could ever do the same to another body."[155] It is just as hard to imagine that a body that

remembers what it is like to be crucified could ever do the same to another body. If the

Christian community truly re-membered the stories of Jesus Christ, then the Body of

Christ would not engage in activities that cause other bodies that kind of pain. Care

would be taken to avoid actions that cause members of the Body of Christ pain and

suffering and a sense of solidarity would develop with those outside of the Body of Christ

who are experiencing pain. Through the process of re-membering, the Body of Christ

would be compelled to act in the world in such a way that the suffering of others is

relieved. Concern for the well-being of others does not stop at the boundary of religious

difference. Christians who have engaged in the process of re-membering will recognize

the importance of honoring the embodied realities of all people. They will work to

relieve the suffering of the religious other as well as the suffering of other Christians.

Re-membering also calls Christians to account for and repent of past actions that

have harmed and killed the bodies of religious others. Re-membering can bring forth the

memory of those bodies destroyed by the gas chambers of concentration camps in World

War II; bodies which were placed in those camps partly through Christian Anti-Semitism.

Re-membering can force Christians to recall the genocide of indigenous peoples by

Christians in the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere, and to

recognize the harm done to indigenous bodies forced to renounce their native religious

beliefs and adopt Christian practices. Such re-membering requires Christians to

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[155] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 176.

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acknowledge the horror and suffering done in the name of Christ and to repent in such a way that these actions will not be repeated.

Surrogacy & Power Over One's Body

Womanist theologian Delores Williams examines power and hierarchy in light of the embodied reality of African-American women. Through her exploration of the experience of surrogacy which has dominated the history of black women in the United States, she raises concerns about the power dynamics at play in determining the roles of individuals in communities. Williams recognizes that the experience of many African-American women has been one of fulfilling roles meant for other people: their bodies have been placed in roles not of their choosing. For Williams, and other womanist theologians, to find the Body of Christ metaphor acceptable, then how it shapes the organization of the Christian community will need to guard against instances of surrogacy and coercion. The themes of interconnection and interdependence in the Body of Christ metaphor cannot be uncritically accepted if they lead to instances of surrogacy and coercion.

During the time of slavery, black women experienced coerced surrogacy as "black female slaves were forced to substitute for the slave-owner's wife in nurturing roles involving white children. Black women were forced to take the place of men in work roles that, according to the larger society's understanding of male and female roles,

belonged to men."[156] Black female slaves working in the household of the slave owners

often filled the role of mammy: nursing, raising, and disciplining the young children of

the owners and running the household slave staff. Mammies had a considerable amount

of influence in antebellum culture, but this role forced black female slaves to stand-in for

white wives who otherwise would be called upon to nurture white children and maintain

a functioning household.

Another way in which black female slaves were forced to be surrogates is in the

realm of field labor. The physically demanding labor of plantation farm work was, in

general, understood to be the domain of men. However, black female slaves often

worked alongside black male slaves in the fields, doing as much physical work as any

man. Coerced into roles not associated with their gender, these women were often not

viewed as women. As surrogate male field hands, their femininity was forgotten and

ignored.

The final main category of surrogacy roles black female slaves experienced was

that of mistress to white male slave owners. Black female slaves were forced to

substitute for white women in the white male pursuit of sexual pleasure. Instead of

seeking out their wives, white male slave owners often forced black female slaves to

engage in sexual acts regardless of the slaves' wishes or marital status. This form of

coerced surrogacy found structural expression in the "fancy trade" where black female

slaves, often lighter skinned as the result of being the offspring of past white male-black

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[156] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 60-61.

female liaisons, deemed physically attractive where sold specifically for the purposes of white male sexual pleasure.

These surrogacy roles did not disappear after slavery ended. They were no longer coerced, but became to a certain extent voluntary. As Williams explains, "The difference was that black women, after emancipation, could exercise the choice of refusing the surrogate role, but social pressures often influenced the choices black women made as they adjusted to life in a free world."[157] As could be expected, black men and women were concerned with asserting their freedom of choice and control over their own futures as they began their lives as free people. As free black men and women strove to claim their identities as moral, intellectual, and spiritual individuals, they often modeled their family structure on the white culture with which they were familiar. Thus, monogamous marriage, a nuclear family, and the economic privilege of only one parent working outside of the home, the husband, was the goal of many freed black families.

Among other things, this meant freed blacks "were especially anxious to relieve black women from those coerced surrogacy roles related to field work and to black women's sexuality involving black female/white-male sexual liaisons."[158] The surrogacy of black female/white male sexual liaisons was greatly curtailed after emancipation, although the continued stereotype of the hyper-sexualized black women demonstrates that the white male expectation of substituting black women for white women in their

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[157] Ibid., 61.

[158] Ibid., 71.

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desire for sexual pleasure is still operative. The other two categories of surrogacy experienced by black women, however, were much harder to avoid. Rightly or wrongly, the desire to have black women stay in their own homes was not a possibility for most black families. The economic reality of "poverty and the nature of work available, especially to southern black families, caused many black women to participate in some of the most strenuous areas of the work force…These realities pressured black women to choose to continue in two surrogate roles: that of substituting female power and energy for male power and energy, and that of mammy."[159]

Black women have continued to substitute for black men in the work force, fulfilling roles after emancipation through today that are commonly viewed as male occupations. As well, the prevalence of single parent families in the African-American community, due to a variety of factors including economic considerations and the high rate of incarceration of black men, has resulted in many black women fulfilling the role of both mother and father to generations of black children. The mammy role also continued in postbellum society as black women often found employment as domestic workers who were responsible for childcare and housekeeping in white homes.

It is these aspects of black women's experience, both historical and contemporary, that would drive Delores Williams to be suspicious of any interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor which advocated community organization along rigid role division. The Body of Christ metaphor can be used to articulate an understanding of the Christian

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[159] Ibid., 73.

community in which all will be well when everyone has a role: when everyone is their proper place. Not everyone will have the same responsibilities, but instead the many functions of the Body will be divided up and undertaken by the many members of the Body. In this understanding, some people will be an eye, others a foot, and others an ear. The biblical text cautions members of the community to not assume that their role in the Body of Christ is not needed or that they should all be doing the same thing. Christians are instructed to be happy with their particular role and not seek to change it since all roles are needed for the proper functioning of the Body of Christ.

While this can be read as a celebration of diversity, it can also be read as a problematic method for maintaining order. Delores Williams would question the process by which it is determined what role each person plays within the Body of Christ. Who decides which person plays which role? Do individuals get the chance to choose their role in the Body of Christ? Once an individual begins fulfilling a particular role, would they get the opportunity to change to a different role if the first one turns out to be personally unfulfilling? A beautiful vision of the diverse members of the body working together for their common well-being is disrupted if some of the members have been forced into their positions and are finding their roles to be oppressive.

She would caution those who would uphold a concern for internal integrity of the Body of Christ maintained by everyone staying in their assigned place. No one, Williams would argue, should be coerced by force or through lack of options into a role within the Body of Christ that she or he would not choose otherwise. Great care must be taken to

ensure that the Christian community does not operate under a hierarchy that causes individuals to substitute for one another.

This highlights the "is not" aspect of the Body of Christ metaphor. As metaphor, the Body of Christ should encourage Christians to examine how the Christian community is *like* a body and *not like* a body. Christians should recognize that the Christian community is like a body in that there are many different parts, many different people, who preform different functions for the good of the whole. But, keeping in mind Williams' concern about surrogacy, the Christian community should also recognize that it is not like a body in that its individual parts, the individual members, are not constrained to fulfill the same role all of the time. While bodily organs can't trade jobs with each other, the people who make up the Body of Christ can experience change and growth in their roles within the community.

Within the Body of Christ, there should not be instances of individuals being forced into roles not of their choosing. This is not to say that all members of the Body of Christ will enjoy every aspect of their role within the community all of the time or that individuals should refuse to assist with immediate tasks just because these tasks don't fall directly within the role they have chosen for themselves. Instead, this means that to determine how the many parts of the Body of Christ fit and work together, the Christian community needs a process of discernment that is just and respectful of the integrity of each person's sense of self and personal embodiment. Being the Body of Christ should cause Christians to examine the many different roles within the community and the process by which individuals are chosen or allowed to fulfill each role.

Beyond the process of discerning community roles or the physical reality of working together in community, Williams' challenges the Christian community to drive out any valorization of surrogacy which might be contained in their ideology. This challenge attacks the heart of Christian theological reflection on soteriology and Christology. Williams argues that in traditional Protestant theology, "Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure" who dies on behalf of others.[160] The long Christian tradition of understanding the primary work of Jesus Christ to have taken place on the cross in a process of substitutionary atonement is, under examination, revealed to be an instance of surrogacy as Jesus Christ fills in for sinful humankind. Williams is troubled by this interpretation of soteriology, asking, "If black women accept this idea of redemption, can they not also passively accept the exploitation that surrogacy brings?"[161] In the end, Williams argues, it doesn't matter if Jesus was a coerced or voluntary surrogate, either option validates surrogacy itself and gives legitimacy to the oppression that results when human beings become surrogates for each other.

Williams proposes that instead of looking to the cross for a sign of salvation, the Christian community should turn to Jesus' life and ministry for salvific meaning. She argues that the biblical "texts suggest that the spirit of God in Jesus came to show humans *life* – to show redemption through a perfect *ministerial* vision of righting relations between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and

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[160] Ibid., 162.

[161] Ibid.

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spirit."[162] When viewed as a whole, the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection point

toward a message of righting relations between self, others, and God. This means black

women, along with the rest of humanity, can recognize that "their salvation is assured by

Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the

death of identity caused by their exchange of inherited cultural meanings for a new

identity shaped by the gospel ethics and world view."[163]

Jesus' death becomes not a divine sanction of surrogacy, but an example of the

risk involved in living out the ministerial vision of right relations. In turn, the cross

becomes "a reminder of how humans have tried throughout history to destroy visions of

righting relationships that involve transformation of tradition and transformation of social

relations and arrangements sanctioned by the status quo."[164] The liberation experienced

through righting relations challenges the established hierarchies, including those that

would encourage or coerce surrogacy and the oppression inherent in such a process. The

cross appears as the response of the powerful in their attempt to limit the liberation

brought by Jesus, while "the resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in

the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the *ministerial* vision gaining

victory over the evil attempt to kill it."[165] The resurrection is an affirmation of life, a

divine yes to the ministerial vision of Jesus.

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[162] Ibid., 164-165.

[163] Ibid., 164.

[164] Ibid., 167.

[165] Ibid., 165.

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By turning the community's theological focus to Jesus' life and ministry, Williams can be seen as providing a foundation for the praxis of the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is challenged to follow in Jesus' footsteps by reaching out to the poor and outcast members of society. Jesus fed hungry people where they were gathered, so Christians are called to feed the hungry wherever they are found today. Jesus welcomed children and showed them love and affection. Christians are called to create a community in which children are loved and kept safe. Jesus offered forgiveness, so Christians are challenged to demonstrate God's love by forgiving others. Jesus reached out across religious boundaries to offer comfort and healing to Samaritans and Gentiles. Christians who model their actions on Jesus's should also reach out across religious boundaries to care for the needs of the religious other.

Church in the Round

A feminist theologian who would also have concerns regarding the power dynamics and hierarchy of the Christian community is Letty Russell. She has explored issues of power, authority, and leadership in great depth, proposing new models for Christian community which challenge the dominant model of top-down hierarchical structures. Her models for Christian community subscribe to the central principle of feminist theology that "whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a

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community of redemption."[166] Pioneering scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza examined the Christian tradition and scriptures to reclaim suppressed voices of women, challenge patriarchal teachings, and articulate new understandings of doctrine and scripture that would uphold the critical principle of feminist theology: the "promotion of the full humanity of women."[167] All theological claims are evaluated in relation to this principle.

In pursuit of the well-being of women, feminist theologians have drawn upon women's lived experiences as an appropriate source of theological truth. Ruether justified this move by claiming that "what have been called the objective sources of theology; Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified collective human experience."[168] Since the codified collective human experience that forms the Christian tradition has historically been drawn primarily from men's experience, feminist theologians are intentional in incorporating women's experiences into their work. Thus, feminist theology joins other liberation-focused theological scholarship in the movement to engage the lived experiences of groups that have been marginalized by traditional theological reflection.

Russell's work on authority and power would lead her to be concerned about certain aspects of the Body of Christ metaphor. She would want to examine the implicit hierarchy present in conceptions of the human body. Are there certain body parts that are

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[166] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 19.

[167] Ibid., 18.

[168] Ibid., 12.

understood to be more important, to have greater value or power in the desired functioning of the body? Are there body parts that are viewed with suspicion or embarrassment? Are all body parts treated with the same respect and care? Once it is recognized that yes, there are certain body parts that are understood to be more important than others, like the brain, and some which are viewed with embarrassment, like armpits, we can begin to see the possible problems Russell would identify in the Body of Christ metaphor.

Since the diverse members of the human body are not treated with the same respect and some body parts control the functions of other body parts, a bodily hierarchy is established. When the Christian community is called the Body of Christ, this bodily hierarchy is then transferred, explicitly and implicitly, onto the Christian community. Letty Russell would be concerned about which individuals are considered equivalent to the head or brain and which are determined to be the armpits or genitalia. An unthinking application of bodily hierarchy onto the Christian community, one that forgets the "is not" character of metaphor, would mean the Body of Christ metaphor could result in a structure where the diversity of individuals is not celebrated, but instead ranked into positions of power. To challenge the hierarchical structure found in both societal conceptions of bodies and in the natural functioning of bodies, it is necessary that a different organizational structure be proposed. The principles of Russell's model of "church in the round" can provide an alternative method of handling power dynamics within the Christian community.

In calling the Christian community the "church in the round," Russell "describes a community of faith and struggle working to anticipate God's New Creation by becoming partners with those who are at the margins of church and society."[169] This model of church uses images of circles and tables to discuss authority and power within Christian community and proposes a leadership style of partnership in order to create a community in which those at the margins are continually brought into the center. She argues that this model will break down hierarchies within the church that have resulted in the domination of particular individuals and groups.

Russell uses the images of tables because of the sense of community tables can imply. Tables are where people gather to share meals, fellowship, and make decisions. In the Christian community, a table is often at the center of worship as members gather together to share in the Eucharistic meal. Thus Russell reminds Christians that when a "table is spread by God and hosted by Christ, it must be a table with many connections. The primary connection for people gathering around is the connection to Christ. The church is the community of faith in Jesus Christ."[170] She argues that any table associated with the Christian community is one in which God is present, one of the significant details that makes the Christian table different from tables hosted by society.

The difference of the presence of God is put in conversation with Russell's emphasis on circles and round tables. Harkening back to the tales of King Arthur,

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[169] Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 12.

[170] Ibid., 18.

Russell reminds Christians that circles have no top and no bottom. There can be no "head of the table" when the table is round; all those sitting at a round table are on equal footing. And yet, circles still have centers and margins, which allows Russell to acknowledge that there are those who have been marginalized in the Christian community, as well as the larger society. Since it is God who sets the round table of Christian community, Russell calls for the development of a "table principle" where the church "looks for ways that God reaches out to include all those whom society and religion have declared outsiders and invites them to gather round God's table of hospitality."[171] Christians are to look out from the center of their community and draw others in from the margins.

This drawing in to the center is done with great care to ensure that the reasons individuals and groups are on the margins are not ignored. If the reasons are not addressed, they would be allowed to marginalize the same people or others all over again. In order to address this challenge, Russell provides a strong analysis of power and authority in order to propose a new model of leadership which assists the church in staying truly round. First, she acknowledges that "all human relationships include the dynamics of authority and power."[172] It is not her goal to get rid of power and authority, but rather change the systems and methods of their use. Second, she defines "*power as the ability to accomplish desired ends* and social power as the ability of one individual or

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[171] Ibid., 25.

[172] Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 22.

group to affect the behavior of another individual or group."[173] Power can be exercised

in a number of ways, most often through influence or force. Authority is then understood

"*as legitimated power. It accomplishes its ends by evoking the assent of the*

respondent."[174] Russell wants to ensure that within the church in the round assent is

given willingly and without coercion, through empowerment and authorizing, which

means authority and power need to be wielded by leaders operating in a model other than

the traditional hierarchy of Christian churches.

In contrast to the patterns of leadership through domination Russell sees operating

in Christian community, she proposes a partnership paradigm based on feminist

leadership styles. Russell describes feminist leadership as a model where "authority is

exercised by standing with others by seeking to share power and authority. Power is seen

as something to be multiplied and shared rather than accumulated at the top. A feminist

is one who inspires others to be leaders, especially those on the margins of church and

society."[175] The image is one of a circle where all are equals around a common table

rather than a pyramid where a few hold power over many. In this model, "authority is

exercised *in* community and not *over* community and tends to reinforce ideas of

cooperation, with contributions from a wide diversity of persons enriching the whole."[176]

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[173] Ibid., 21. Emphasis by author.

[174] Ibid.

[175] Russell, *Church in the Round*, 57.

[176] Russell, *Household of Freedom*, 34-35.

It allows for the possibility that the skills and gifts of each member of the community can be realized and utilized without exploitation.

Russell argues that the best leadership style through which to realize this method of exercising power and authority is one of partnership. Partnerships, for Russell, emphasize interdependence and mutuality, other ways of breaking down hierarchy and domination. A good partnership is one "where the partners each are whole, growing, and separate persons whose own identity is not lost, but enhanced in the relationship."[177] There is room for each individual to be him or herself which contributing to the common goal between the partners. In these types of partnership, it is recognized that gifts and skills each individual has do not need to be the same as everyone else. In fact, "every human partnership, of whatever kind, is based, not on equality of gifts, but on a relationship of mutual trust that allows each to find her or his own best forms of service and affirms this in others."[178] There is mutuality through difference, not sameness. Russell also believes strong partnerships are sites of creative action because they "produce an over-spill of energy greater than the sum of the parts and unexpected gifts that need to be shared."[179] This is particularly true in Christian partnerships because the central partnership each individual already has with Jesus Christ is brought into the partnership with each other.

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[177] Letty M. Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 39.

[178] Ibid., 59.

[179] Ibid., 25.

It is this model of partnership that Letty Russell would offer as a counter point to the bodily hierarchy implied in the Body of Christ metaphor. She would strive to ensure that the mutual interdependence of the body's members is realized through partnership relationships that exercise authority and power through empowerment and authorization. Her image of the church in the round reminds Christians that an examination of who is at the center of the community and who is at the margins is needed in order to be a community centered on Christ. The partnership relationships which form Russell's church in the round allows the Body of Christ metaphor to inform Christians that their community is like a body in that there are many different members performing different tasks which contribute to the life of the whole community, but it is also not like a body in that there is not one part that is objectively more important to sustain the life of the community. No individual member of the community, or subgroup within the community, should be viewed as fundamentally more necessary to the life of the Body of Christ. Only Christ is at the center of the Body of Christ.

The organization of the Christian community into a circle created out of partnership relationships teaches Christians to relate to other people with respect and mutuality. The skills involved in this process (listening to understand, clearly articulating one's own opinion, self-examination) are exactly the kinds of skills needed to engage in interreligious dialogue. Christians formed by the Body of Christ metaphor will have experience with the types of activities that are necessary to approach religious diversity with confidence and respect.

Relational Transcendence

In order for Christians to form the kind of partnership relations encouraged by Letty Russell, they will need both an understanding of true difference and insight into how to relate across differences. To examine difference and sameness feminist theology has a long tradition of drawing upon interdisciplinary scholarship. There is a strong relationship between feminist theology and feminist theory which utilizes psychoanalysis, literary studies, anthropology, philosophy, and many other fields in order to examine the reality of gender inequality and develop the concept of the true otherness. While feminist discourse around otherness has concentrated primarily on the otherness of gender, their insights can also be used in regards to the otherness of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability, etc.

Theologian Mayra Rivera advocates for allowing the Other to be other, respecting the unique subjectivity of individuals. She does not focus exclusively on sexual or gender differences in her discussion of subjectivity and otherness, but instead strives to develop an understanding of otherness which also addresses concerns of ethnic, racial, and class distinctions. Rivera's concerns arise from an awareness of the history of subjectivity in Western thought and society. Like the ideal body, the Western subject has historically been male, white, individual, and demonstrated through rational capabilities. This understanding of subjectivity has often been imposed on others whose individuality is then subsumed under a particular understanding of humanity held by those in power. The process of rational thought contained in the Western subject has led to claims of

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being able to truly and fully know the other, and such knowledge is often used for purposes of control and exploitation.

Thus Rivera would be cautious of the manner in which the Body of Christ metaphor can be used to emphasize unity and interdependence. On their own, unity and interdependence can be positive, but a problem arises when they are used to enforce uniformity. Rivera strives to develop an understanding of otherness that will ensure the independence and subjectivity of all those who have been marginalized by the dominance of the Western subject while not cutting off the possibility of relating across difference. While arguing for the autonomy of an individual's subjectivity, Rivera also is concerned that these diverse subjectivities not become isolated from each other. She doesn't want to avoid unity and interdependence, just guard against the dangers of taking them to the extreme. In order to address these concerns about subjectivity and relating across differences, she would turn to her understanding of relational transcendence.

Rivera's development of a theological understanding of transcendence is partially built upon concepts from two foundational feminist theorists: Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. These women devoted much of their careers to exposing the ways in which those in power, typically men, utilized rhetoric of unity and sameness to impose their conceptions of what it means to be human upon women in a manner which denied their full humanity. Simone de Beauvoir was a central figure of French feminism. While later waves of feminist theory have challenged some of her assertions, her seminal work *The Second Sex* and her declaration that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman"

still influences feminist thought today.[180] Beauvoir understood Western thought to be grounded in the assumption that the male is normative, an independent subject, while the female is the other of the male, an object on which to reflect. When philosophers claimed to be discussing humanity as a whole, they were in fact only discussing men. She argued that in Western thought "humanity is male, and man defines women, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being."[181] Men were considered the disembodied, universal standard of humanity while women were embodied, particular, unable to represent full humanity.

This meant, in Beauvoir's examination, that women were never allowed to be full subjects. They were never understood on their own terms but rather through the lens of the normative male. The man "projects onto her what he desires and fears, what he loves and what he hates. And if it is difficult to say anything about her, it is because man seeks himself entirely in her and because she is All. But she is All in that which is inessential: she is wholly the *Other*."[182] This affects how women perceived themselves as well. The woman finds "herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence." [183] She is unable to claim her own subjectivity because of the dominant cultural norms which place the male as subject and herself as object.

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[180] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 283.

[181] Ibid., 5.

[182] Ibid., 213.

[183] Ibid., 17.

Similarly to Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray charges Western thought as a whole with being male-centered or phallocentric. She calls it "an organized system whose meaning is regulated by paradigms and units of value that are in turn determined by male subjects."[184] Irigaray argues that in Western thought, "the fundamental model of the human being [has] remained unchanged: one, singular, solitary, historically masculine, the paradigmatic Western adult male, rational, capable."[185] This singular subject at the center of Western thought, while claiming to be universal, is in fact particularly male. The man is taken to be the "norm or ideal of the human species" while women have been judged as deficient males.[186]

The result of the single subject system Irigaray critiques is the creation of the other as the mirror of the male. She refers to this process as an "economy of sameness."[187] The masculine subject "has reduced all otherness to a relationship with himself – as compliment, projection, flip side, instrument, nature – inside his world, his horizons."[188] The other is always understood in relation to the subject, never on its own terms. Instead of allowing the other to be what or whom it is, "the other is always the other of the same and not an actual other."[189] For Irigaray, a true other would not be

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[184] Luce Irigaray, "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 22.

[185] Luce Irigaray and Noah Guynn, "The Question of the Other," *Yale French Studies* No. 87 (1995): 7.

[186] Morny Joy, *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender, and Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 8.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Irigaray, "The Question of the Other," 10.

[189] Ibid., 10.

defined in relation to anything or anyone else, but would rather stand on its own. Instead, in the "economy of sameness" or the "logic of the same", the other functions to help the subject know itself more fully. In the phallocentric system of Western thought, this means that "woman, as the other of men, functions both as fetish object…and as a mirroring device, reflecting to men their own narcissistic self-preoccupations – their sameness."[190] Within historical Western thought, women have no subjectivity of their own. They are merely the other of the male subject.

The result of Irigaray's critique of the phallocentric nature of Western thought is to insist on the necessity of developing female subjectivity. She argues that because of the logic of the same, Western thought does not have a conception of true sexual difference or an understanding of a true other. By understanding the woman through the lens of the man, there is really only one sex viewed two ways: the male and the not-male. This can be addressed by a movement away from a singular model of subjectivity to a model of sexual difference in which there are two autonomous subjects, two sexes. Only this will end the erasure of women in Western thought and society. The first step is to refuse to allow women to be reduced to the other of the same by insisting on the autonomous subjectivity of women. Women are "an/other subject" which is "irreducible to the masculine subject and sharing equivalent dignity."[191]

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[190] Joy, *Divine Love*, 9.

[191] Irigaray, "Question of the Other," 8.

For Irigaray, human subjectivity is fundamentally relational. Both the male and female subjectivity are formed through a process of relationship. In fact, "the ability to enter into relation with one (man or woman) who is other than oneself in the respect of difference(s) is, according to [Irigaray], what permits the constitution of a properly human subjectivity."[192] Yet, human subjectivity has two distinct forms: male and female. According to Irigaray, the particularity of male and female subjectivity arises out of biological difference as well as cultural factors. How the woman is relational differs from how the man is relational.

Irigaray proposes a movement toward "horizontal relations between the sexes" based not on hierarchy, but on mutual respect for difference.[193] In horizontal relations, individuals are not dependent on one another or placed in subordinate relationships. Instead, community is formed by "autonomous individuals in conscious relation to one another."[194] Irigaray notes that the vertical relations of genealogical traditions were connected with the vertical hierarchy of the transcendent other, God. In the horizontal relations she proposes, transcendence is not lost. In horizontal relations, the individual in recognizing the limitations of the self, senses "the horizontal transcendence of the other gender as irreducible to me, to mine."[195] The irreducibility of sexual difference provides a new sense of transcendence.

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[192] Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xi.

[193] Ibid., 15.

[194] Ibid., 102.

[195] Ibid.

It is through recognition of sexual difference that humanity comes to an understanding of true otherness. In affirming a fundamental difference between men and women, humanity escapes the logic of the same. Irigaray argues that there is always something unknowable about the sexual other that should inspire wonder. This wonder was absent from human relationships in the traditional phallocentric logic of the West. After an initial encounter with the other, we "reduce[d] the other to ourselves," removing all sense of mystery.[196] Without a sense of mystery or wonder, relationships between the sexes were characterized by "attraction, greed, possession, consummation, disgust, and so on."[197] In believing that one can know everything about the sexual other, the other was appropriated, made static, and in effect became dead. In Irigaray's model of sexual difference, the possibility of life and growth are present, for "it is when we do not know the other, or when we accept that the other remains unknowable to us, that the other illuminates us in some way."[198] Only the unknowable has the potential to teach us.

Rivera draws upon Irigaray's model of sexual difference, particularly the insistence on recognizing an/other and the irreducibility of difference. Put in conversation with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, principles from radical orthodoxy, postcolonial thought, and liberation theology, Rivera argues that the Other, who is truly other, can be touched, but not grasped. Rivera's focus is on developing an understanding

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[196] Ibid., 123.

[197] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 13.

[198] Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 123.

of divine transcendence which does not place God apart from creation and does not confuse immanence with sameness. This project, however, is not only concerned with the relationship between humanity and the divine; it also involves the relationship between human beings. Rivera argues that "theologically God's transcendence is inseparable from theological anthropology – that is, from theological notions of what a human being is and, as a consequence, of the meaning of interhuman differences."[199] How humanity relates to God's otherness is intrinsically related to how human beings relate to the otherness of other human beings.

In the vein of Irigaray and Beauvoir, Rivera outlines the tendency of Western thought to privilege sameness and its failure to deal constructively with difference. Her work strives to challenge the Western tendency to subsume difference under a system of dominance and combat notions of transcendence which make relationships across difference difficult or impossible. Thus, unlike radical orthodoxy or Levinas who use metaphors of space and distance to discuss transcendence, she suggests that transcendence is "best described using the metaphor of infinity. Thus defined, transcendence may evoke a sense of incompleteness and excess, rather than exteriority. Others are conceived as irreducibly Other, instead of absolutely Other."[200] Instead of picturing the Other as somewhere far away from the self, and quite possibly out of reach, the Other is understood to be nearby, but not fully known. This allows for difference to

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[199] Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 2.

[200] Ibid., 81.

be respected as real and important, but does not cut off communication across difference. For Rivera, this understanding of "*transcendence designates a relation with a reality* irreducibly different *from my own reality, without this difference destroying this relation and without the relation destroying this difference*."[201]

The transcendence of the Other disrupts the logic of the same which tries to account for everyone and everything under a totalizing system of self/not-self. Drawing on Levinas, Rivera notes that transcendence is "the opening of sameness to its Other. Transcendence breaks the totality of any system – conceptual or political, earthly or heavenly – appearing concretely 'in the face of the Other.'"[202] The face of the Other, by its very nature of being Other, demands attention as it refuses to fit neatly into preconceived systems. It demands recognition and response to the reality of otherness. This response, Rivera argues, must be an ethical one in which we confront the processes of self-definition and othering to examine the power dynamics at play and honor the subjecthood of the Other.

Part of the ethical response Rivera proposes is found within the posture she argues for in our relationship with Others. She uses the metaphor of touch as opposed to grasp to describe the manner in which the Other should be approached. Grasping, she notes, implies possession and control, while touch connotes relationship while indicating that a boundary is still in place. Touching the Other instead of grasping, "as feminist

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[201] Ibid., 82. Emphasis in original text.

[202] Ibid., 59.

philosopher Luce Irigaray defines it, means a 'touching that respects the other,' that never

aims at appropriating or capturing."[203] Touch allows for respectful relations where the

joy and suffering of the Other may be felt and responded to without an attitude of control.

Touch sustains a space between differences without divorcing self from Other. As Rivera

states:

> In this theology of transcendence, the intimate and yet insurmountable space
> between our differences would be divine. Like sap or placenta, what flows in and
> between us and nurtures us all is God among us, a living and dynamic, fluid
> envelope that both links – within and throughout – and subtends the space of
> difference and thus opens creatures to a relational infinity. Through it the Other's
> demands reach me and call me into responsibility. Through it the needs of the
> Other touch me.[204]

Space remains in order to allow the Other to be truly other in his or her irreducible

transcendence, but that space can be bridged as we touch each other and come to know

portions of each other's experiences so that we may respond appropriately to their

presence.

As noted above, this space between the self and the Other is divine in Rivera's

understanding. It is the "elusive third," the infinite difference between self and Other

which protects the integrity of both subjects as they relate to each other.[205] Rivera argues

that "rather than a void, the space between us is envisioned as that element that nurtures

each one of us."[206] It is the divine ground of life that allows for the possibility of all

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[203] Ibid., 2.

[204] Ibid., 137.

[205] Ibid., 129.

[206] Ibid., 137.

relations. In other words, all relations which operate through the posture of touch, a method of relationship that respects the subjecthood of both the self and Other, include the divine. The divine is present in the experience of relational transcendence.

Rivera's concept of touch is the method by which the partnership relationships advocated by Russell can be realized. Through a posture of touch, individual members of the Body of Christ can recognize their interdependence and respect both the particularity of each other's existence and their contribution to the common life of the community. Adopting a posture of touch would also call Christians to recognize the presence of the divine in their midst. The irreducible difference between members of the Body of Christ is God, who connects and unifies the community. This manner of relating to each other within the Body of Christ should also extend to relationships with those outside of the community. If God is within infinite transcendence between self and Other, then God is present in the relationship with the religious other as well.

Rivera's notion of intrahuman transcendence acknowledges the reality of difference, preserves subjectivity, and provides a method for relating across difference, yet her theology says little about the actual aspects of subjectivity that allow touch, and hence relationship, to occur. While her work assists Christian communities to respect the diversity of members within the Body of Christ without isolating members from each other, it does not provide a complete framework for understanding individual members; nor does it guide Christians in finding connection with a religious other. For help in understanding the complexity, the infinity of each individual, as well as what allows for

the touch of connection to occur, the work of Jeannine Hill Fletcher on hybridity is needed.

Hybrid Identities

Hybridity, a concept developed by postcolonial theorists, is a manner of approaching identity, an important aspect of how an individual realizes her subjectivity, which further challenges the Western single, solitary, male subject. As Jeannine Hill Fletcher summarizes well, "one fundamental insight of feminist theory has been that identities are not constructed on a singular feature (e.g. gender or religion) but that persons are located in multiple spaces and that these aspects of identity are mutually informing."[207] Each individual person has a hybrid identity composed of their race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc.

These different aspects of identity are inseparable, making it "difficult to substantiate the claim that [one's] understanding of the world and the shape of [one's] experience within the world are singularly informed by [one] community."[208] Instead, how one experiences a given event as a woman would be influenced by one's identity as a Christian and as white, and how one experiences an event as Christian would be influenced by one's identity as white and a woman. The whole of a person's identity includes gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, etc., all constantly in conversation and

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[207] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16:1 (2006): 14.

[208] Ibid., 16.

shaping how one experiences a given situation; no one feature can be considered primary.

The hybridity of our individual identities is what allows for connection across difference.

Because we are "members of multiple communities simultaneously, we possess a

multilingualism through which we might find a shared language."[209] One aspect of our

hybrid identity can connect with one aspect of another's hybrid identity.

It is these connections between aspects of hybrid identities that Rivera would

recognize as the touch that allows for relationship. At the same time, the hybrid nature of

identities is what constitutes the intrahuman transcendence that keeps one individual from

grasping another. While two people may touch across their differences because they are

both Christian, the reality that the Christian aspect of their identities are in conversation

with the aspects that are male, homosexual, African-American, middle-class, etc. in one

individual and are female, heterosexual, South Korean, refugee, etc. in the other. How

each individual has experienced life as a Christian is both familiar and infinitely different

from the other. It is their hybridity which creates the opportunity for touch and precludes

grasping.

Russell's work, as well as Rivera's characterization of relating to otherness

through touch and Hill Fletcher's development of hybrid identities, offer insights that can

be applied to relationships within the Body of Christ and to the relationship between the

Body of Christ and the world. The unity of the Body must not ignore the irreducible

transcendence of its individual members. Differences between members of the Body of

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[209] Ibid., 21.

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Christ should be respected, touched but not grasped, in order to assure mutuality and justice in the community's internal partnership relationships. These differences, however, will not lead to disunity or distrust if members of the Body of Christ continue to connect, or touch, through the reality of their hybrid identities. If the Body of Christ practices these relational dynamics within itself, then the same principles can be applied to relationships outside of the Body.

If Christians can learn to form relationships with each other while acknowledging their varied hybrid identities, then they may find hybrid identities provide a sense of safety in a broader context of religious diversity. Within the Body of Christ, individuals are given the opportunity to experience relationship and connection without creating a homogenous community. Already within the Christian community, members can experience the process of connecting with someone whose gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, physical ability, etc. are different. Having found that a relationship is possible across these forms of difference, it should not be much harder to believe that relationship is possible across religious difference as well. Even if an individual appears vastly different from oneself, the reality of hybrid identities can provide confidence that there will be a point of connection.

Using Feminist and Womanist Theology to Construct Christian Identity through the Body of Christ Metaphor

The shared concerns of womanist and feminist theology directly engage the issues at the center of the Body of Christ metaphor. Their focus on affirming embodiment and respecting the varied realities of embodiment can keep the Christian community aware of

the impact community attitudes, structures, and actions have on the concrete bodies of its members. By challenging hierarchies and providing other models of community organization, feminist and womanist theology provide a counter-vision to the dominant structures of Western society. In acknowledging the reality of otherness while affirming the ability to connect across differences, Christians are given tools which can assist in positively engaging all forms diversity, including religious diversity.

The Body of Christ metaphor will regain its ability to shape Christian identity powerfully when it requires Christians to be intentional about making their interactions with other people and the world conform to the model of Jesus Christ. There must be an understanding of some actions being appropriate to the vision of being a member of the Body of Christ and some actions being not appropriate for the metaphor to have any discernable impact. The particularity of the Christian identity contained in the Body of Christ metaphor is only apparent when there is specific content to the concepts of relationality, diversity, embodiment, and praxis operating in the metaphor. The themes of re-membering, surrogacy, church in the round, relational transcendence, and hybrid identities go a long way to providing that content by arguing for the value of all bodies, the need for self-reflection and internal communal revision, and offering a manner of respecting difference.

Womanist insight into the impact embodiment has on the trajectory of an individual's existence in the world makes apparent the relationship between identity and embodied existence. The identity claimed by an individual impacts the manner in which that individual presents her or himself to the world, and the particular embodiment of that

individual will be received and responded to by society through embodied actions. Womanist theology insists the Christian community recognize the significance of being embodied creatures and creates an imperative for those claiming a Christian identity to honor the reality of embodied existence.

The bodies within the Body of Christ matter and must be treated respectfully, and the same is true of bodies outside of the Christian community. The process of re-membering and the principle of avoiding surrogacy are methods the Christian community can use to guide its affirmation of embodiment and development of practices that care for and honor bodies. These insights also make necessary the creation of partnership relationships within the community since the historical pattern of hierarchical power relationships factors into much of the coerced surrogacy and bodily harm experienced by marginalized people. The mutuality necessary for partnership requires the deconstruction of hierarchical relationships and repentance for past behavior that has caused harm. These practices are necessary for just relationships with the religious other.

The efforts of feminism to develop an understanding of true otherness provide conceptual space within the Body of Christ metaphor for honoring the diversity of individual members. Christians can learn to recognize the relational transcendence operative in all of their interactions with each other. They will be forced to engage in dialogue and discernment in order to know about each other rather than making assumptions based on a distorted self-reflection. Their efforts to create partnerships will be aided by the reality of their hybrid identities which provide points of connection between individuals. Christians can recognize that their religious identity as Christians

does not cut them off from individuals claiming different religious identities. Their

Christian identity is hybrid, influenced by other factors which allow them to make

connections with those outside of the Christian community.

A distinct Christian identity begins to form when these themes from womanist

and feminist theology are incorporated into the Body of Christ metaphor. Particular

attitudes and practices can be named as essential components of being the Body of Christ.

This helps answer some of the questions raised by religious diversity including "what is

actually significant about being part of the Christian tradition?" and "what difference

does it actually make for my life?". Having answers to these questions dispels some of

the fear and mistrust religious diversity can create. A distinct Christian identity can

function to create an atmosphere of confidence in regards to the reality of religious

diversity.

A Christian community shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor will engage in

practices that promote direct and respectful engagement with diversity. Relational

transcendence, hybrid identities, and partnership relationships are elements which assist

Christians as they learn about and from individuals within their community that differ

along gender, race, and class lines. The same principles are needed when learning about

and from practitioners of different religious traditions. Being part of the Body of Christ

should prepare Christians for engaging a religiously diverse world.

The insights from womanist and feminist theology examined in this chapter

provide some of the content needed for a powerful Body of Christ metaphor. Two other

theological areas share their concern about affirming embodiment, challenging

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hierarchies, and examining sameness and difference: queer theology and theologies of disability. These next two theological areas will expand the content of the four central elements of the Body of Christ metaphor which together provide a distinct Christian identity. Relationality, embodiment, diversity, and praxis still need to be examined more fully before the Body of Christ metaphor will regain its former ability to shape Christian identity.

Chapter Four: The Queerly Disabled Body of Christ

This chapter expands the turn to contemporary theological movements as sources to revivify the Body of Christ metaphor within a context of religious diversity. Here, queer theology and theologies of disability provide concepts with which to trouble the dominant Western understanding of bodies through their respective queering and cripping perspectives. By disrupting the gender binary and demonstrating the fluidity of bodies both in their physicality and performance, queer theology challenges the bounded, isolated self of the ideal Western body and argues for the interconnectedness of human existence. Theologies of disability force an examination of bodily limits and vulnerability which highlight the manner in which Western society has denied human finitude and labeled as deficient and different those aspects of lived reality, particularly disabled bodies, that might remind humanity of our shared vulnerability. These insights from queer theology and theologies of disability draw attention to the queer and vulnerable aspects of the conception of bodies found in the Body of Christ metaphor and bring greater focus to the challenge the metaphor offers to dominant Western models. By emphasizing the limitations of members of the Body of Christ and thus their dependence on and connection to each other and those outside of the community, the Christian community is encouraged to form relationships of mutual support both within and outside of the Body of Christ. Having practiced these relationships within the Christian community as part of what it means to be a Christian, individual Christians will also gain experience in engaging with practitioners of other religious traditions. Their experience

with being impacted by the other members of the Body of Christ will dispel some of the fear religious diversity can create. Christians will be practiced in responding to the effects one person has on another. Instead of mistrusting the intentions of the religious other, they will be ready to discern what the encounter with religious diversity means for them.

Queering & Cripping

Queer theology and theologies of disability are both amorphous and diverse fields of theological reflection. Within queer theology, some theologians focus on sexual identity and its role in religious thought; some strive for theological support for full inclusion of sexual and gender minorities within the Christian tradition; and others seek to disrupt all aspects of Christian theology which they feel have been influenced by a strict gender binary. All of these focuses, and more, are included within the field of queer theology. Theologies of disability also cover a wide range of theological reflection. While there are some theologians who specifically identify themselves as disability theologians, Nancy Eiesland for example, there is a broader group of theologians who draw upon the more established field of disability theory.[210] These

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[210] It is important to note that not all theologians who deal with topics related to the disability community can be said to be doing theologies of disability. Throughout Christian history various theologians have reflected on human impairment, the role of God in restoring health and wholeness, and inclusion of socially marginalized persons among other issues which affect the lives of persons with disabilities. However, such theological reflection cannot be considered theologies of disability unless conceptions of disability itself are questioned and critiqued. Theologies of disability require some kind of commitment to examining theological assertions previously unexamined for the purposes of affirming the fully humanity of persons with disabilities or exploring the unique insights experiences of disability can offer Christian theology.

theologians sometimes use disability theory in the vein of liberation theology or constructive theology. There is also significant movement toward using disability theory within postmodern theology, as does Sharon Betcher, viewing disability as a postmodern, poststructuralist critique. While the relationship between the varied approaches to queer theology and theologies of disability are intertwined, it is the forms of these theologies which offer a more structural critique of Christian theology that provide more resources for revivifying the Body of Christ metaphor: theological queering and cripping.

Theological queering is "the deliberate questioning of heterosexual experience and thinking which has shaped our understanding of theology, the role of the theologian and hermeneutics."[211] Its purpose is to expose the gender and sexuality norms operative in society and religion in order to question their authority to shape individual and communal lives.[212] From the perspective of queering, queer theology examines traditional Christian doctrines and questions the way in which heteronormativity and a strict gender binary have shaped Christian theological reflection. This deconstructive move is often followed by a constructive proposal for how the doctrine could be reimagined once informed by a broader understanding of human sexuality and gender.

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[211] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

[212] Queering draws up on the nature and use of the term "queer" in English speaking societies. As Susannah Cornwall points out, the word "is an odd term which serves the treble function of noun, verb and adjective…[and] has built into it from the start an idea of elusiveness, uncertainty, non-fixity, and a resistance to closed definitions." While "queer" has become in some circles a political identity marker, it "is often characterized as being more a critique of the concept of identity or the definition than an identity or definition in its own right." To call oneself queer is to consciously challenge the status quo and defy definition as male or female, heterosexual or homosexual. To call oneself queer is to both claim and deny categorization. Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 9.

Cripping is a similar approach to theology which arises out of the perspective of persons with disabilities.[213] Sharon Betcher is a prime example of a theologian who utilizes this method of doing theology which she sometimes refers to as doing theology "on the slant," meaning from a perspective that is destabilizing to those steeped in Western society.[214] Its goal, like queering, is to disrupt traditional theological categories and "help bring forth an alternative way of minding the world – a world in which we are called to believe and to work out conditions of entrustment to this life in all its variations and vulnerabilities."[215] Cripping theology exposes assumptions of abled-bodiness and limited understandings of wholeness and health. Betcher, and others, find that this process opens up new possibilities to unhinge Christian theology from Western capitalism and develop more inclusive conceptions of human fulfillment.

Concerns about affirming embodiment, challenging hierarchy, and examining sameness and difference are important within queer theology and theologies of disability just as they are for womanist and feminist theology, but of course they are addressed from different angles and with different emphases. Their approaches of queering and cripping cause them to focus more on disrupting the foundations of these three areas

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[213] Cripping comes from crip theory which draws upon the political identity marker "crip" being used by some disability activists. The development of term crip is discussed by Robert McRuer as having been "expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well." With this broader understanding of crip, activists, theorist, and theologians are acknowledging a shared experience between all those viewed by dominant society as disabled or impaired even when the particularities of their experiences are quite diverse. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 34.

[214] Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 1.

[215] Ibid., 4.

rather than exposing the ways in which particular constituencies are treated unjustly within existing systems and concepts. In many ways, queer theology and theologies of disability build upon work done by womanist and feminist theologians in exposing the socially constructed nature of Western understandings of embodiment, hierarchy, and sameness and difference. With queering and cripping, these theologians assume the subjective nature of these concepts and dive right in to exploring how these concepts can be reconceived through their particular perspectives.

All four of these theological areas challenge us to consider the physicality of the Body of Christ and the significance of particular corporeal characteristics. What kind of body do Christians envision when they speak of the Body of Christ? What does this body look like? Is it tall or short, chubby or trim, old or young? Perhaps the image of the body called to mind when Christians speak of the Body of Christ is male, as Jesus was, or androgynous since it is made up of many different people, both male and female. Would the Body of Christ ever be envisioned as female? What color is the skin of this body? Do individual Christians picture the Body of Christ looking just like them, or is the Body of Christ a shade or two darker or lighter? Perhaps the body's head is covered with dark, tight curls cut close to the scalp or long red hair flowing down past the chin. Is it assumed that the body is strong and muscular, ready to lift heavy loads or run marathons? Is the body without blemish, no birthmarks or scars to detract from some culturally defined standard of beauty? Would Christians ever picture the Body of Christ in a wheelchair or blind, dependent on ramps or a service dog to navigate the world?

While the physical characteristics of the Body of Christ as the image of the Christian community may seem insignificant compared to the moral and ideological characteristics guiding the community's actions, the influence of how the Body of Christ is physically pictured cannot be ignored. Human beings make judgments about one another based on physical appearance. Perceived gender, race, class, sexuality, and physical ability impact the manner in which one person interacts with another. The womanist and feminist theologians already discussed have made clear that personal experience is shaped by embodiment and the options presented to individual persons influenced by how society views particular aspects of embodiment. As M. Shawn Copland notes, the "assignment of meaning and significance to race and/or gender, sex and/or sexuality of physical bodies influences, perhaps even determines, the trajectories of concrete human lives."[216] Yet meaning is not only assigned to race, gender, and class. Other aspects of corporeality, including disability, sexuality, and gender performance, must be considered.

Queer theology and theologies of disability draw attention to the queer and disabled aspects of the body of Jesus Christ itself. This, of course, is not a simple task as already when speaking of Christ there are two bodies with which to engage. First, there is the body of the historical Jesus. This body was male, Middle Eastern, Jewish, a little over thirty years old, - which by contemporary standards would suggest young adulthood but in the ancient world was closer to middle aged - and presumably healthy and

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[216] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 8.

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physically fit enough to travel through Galilee on foot. This male body engaged in practices associated with masculinity, such as teaching, preaching, leading a group, and in practices associated with femininity, such as healing, feeding, welcoming children. Then there is the second body of the risen Christ. This body is solid enough to partake of food, but fluid enough to pass through walls; distinct enough to be recognized by his friends, but imprecise enough to be mistaken for a stranger; bearing scars from wounds received during life, but showing no signs of being in pain.

Neither body, nor the manner in which either was received by society, can be ignored when considering the significance of the corporeality of the Body of Christ. Viewed through the lenses of queer theology and disability theology, it is clear that the bodies of Jesus Christ upon which the Body of Christ metaphor is centered would be considered queer or disabled in contemporary society. Neither of the two bodies of Jesus Christ are the Western ideal body. Theological queering and cripping take the recognition of Jesus Christ's bodies as queer and disabled as a starting point for affirming other queer and disabled bodies as well reflecting theologically on the significance of forming a community around a queer and disabled body. To see this at work, we will turn to queer theological engagement with the gender spectrum and body fluidity as well as theologies of disability which examine the limitations and vulnerability of bodies.

Being centered on a queer and disabled body suggests that the Christian community itself does not fit into the ideal Western pattern of being human and being community. The Body of Christ is challenged by the bodies of Jesus Christ to let go of presenting itself to others in stereotypical, socially acceptable ways and instead focus on

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affirming the queer and disabled aspects of the community. This also suggests that the

Christian community, as it engages religious diversity, is challenged not to relate with

other communities through social stereotypes. Instead, the Body of Christ is called to see

other religious bodies as they truly are and affirm the full spectrum of human

embodiment.

Omnigender & the Gender Spectrum

Queer theology has a similar relationship to queer theory as feminist theology has

with feminist theory.   Queer theology relies on queer theory for some of its foundational

concepts and critiques and uses these more secular insights to question, deconstruct, and

reconstruct Christian theological arguments and doctrines. Not all areas of queer

theology utilize queer theory to the same extent, but "queer theologians and biblical

scholars exhibit a wide range of familiarity and agreement with its tenets."[217] Some of

the insights taken from queer theory include:

> a deconstructionist methodology; an assertion that all meaning is constructed; a concept of gender as performance; a belief in the instability of identity; an understanding of individuals as shaped by discourse; and a claim that the processes of becoming *a* subject, and becoming subject *to* the norms disseminated via such discourse, occur simultaneously.[218]

These theories on the construction and variability of identity and subjectivity inform

queer theological reflection in both method and content by providing new approaches to

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[217] Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, 11.

[218] Ibid., 27. Susannah Cornwall summarizes these six insights from the work of theologian Mary Elise Lowe.

traditional conversations and renewed focus on particular themes like the Trinity and human nature. Queer theology brings these insights from queer theory into conversation with Christian theological concepts and the experience of LGBTQ persons in order to achieve the various goals of the field outlined above.[219]

Queer troubling of the gender binary is an extension of the kind of work done in feminisms' development of the true Other. Instead of focusing on the equality of both parts of the binary or demonstrating that the binary hasn't been a binary (self and not-self instead of self and other), queer theory and theology brings forth the continuum of gender expression and identity found within the queer community. While the feminist

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[219] There are also some central terms queer theory and queer theology share of which it is helpful to have clear definitions. Four of these central terms are:

 Gender Identity: the origins, formation and acquisition of the individual characteristics and personality traits that denote male and female, men and women, 'masculine' and 'feminine'. This area is often associated with psychological tests for 'sex differences', which seek to identify empirically the respective qualities of masculinity and femininity and their contribution to an individual's sense of self.

Gender Relations: patterns an prescriptions concerning gender norms and roles; customs and cultural expectations concerning marriage, sexuality and familial arrangements; the relative position of women and men before the law, education and the State; work and the sexual division of labour; the distribution of wealth and material opportunities and rewards.

Gender Representations: this aspect refers to the deepest structures of culture, and how gendered metaphors are used to order and shape our perceptions in ways that far exceed simple ideas about women and men. Many other binary distinctions, such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body, and so on, are imbued with gendered connotations which associate each pairing with the primary dichotomy of 'masculinity'/'femininity'. However, most cultures also order such binary pairings hierarchically, reinforcing the subordination of all things associated with the feminine. Gender difference then becomes part of a perceived reality in which human experience and the natural order are axiomatically divided into two mutually exclusive and ontologically separate halves.

Heteronormativity, a neologism, was coined as a new category when queer theory defined itself as an academic-cultural movement. It became a term to describe the dominant sex/gender system that privileges heterosexual males while it subordinates women and disprivileges gender/sexual transgressors. Elaine L. Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood, and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 224 and 343-344.

development of the true Other argues for the reality of true difference and disrupts the power dynamics which would reduce some individuals to derivatives of a homogenous universal human modeled on Western men, it usually still operates within a binary system of masculine and feminine. Queer theorists and theologians seek to disrupt the binary itself by viewing masculinity and femininity as the two poles of a continuum within which a vast spectrum of gender exists.

Gender is understood to be a social construct used to regulate and understand human bodies.[220] It "is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine takes place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes."[221] Gender is both the concepts of masculinity and femininity and the process by which these concepts are assigned to individual bodies based on societal reception of particular physicality, emotions, and actions. The proof of gender's social construction is demonstrated through the fact that "societies vary radically in their understandings of what constitutes 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (that is, in their gender *roles*)."[222] Masculinity and

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[220] Virginia Ramey Mollenkott explains a social construct as "a useful fiction developed in order to summarize masses of facts or to formulate theories that explain a configuration of facts" in *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 8. She makes clear that in and of themselves, constructs are not negative things, but tools which are used by human beings to make sense of the world. Constructs, like gender, become problems when their artificial nature is forgotten and they become used to negatively regulate persons and ideas which do not conform to the traditionally operating construct.

[221] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 42.

[222] Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender*, 3.

femininity are not consistently defined from society to society, making the definition of each gender dependent on a particular social location in order to be understood.

Within a binary system of gender, the social construct serves to uphold a hierarchical system of power in which particular roles are assigned to each gender and those who conform to gender norms are rewarded while those who do not conform are punished through social, economic, and political barriers. While a division of labor within a society is not inherently bad, queer theorists and theologians recognize that "the social construction of gender has not been evenhanded about the assignment of roles and rewards."[223] In Western societies, for example, the role of breadwinner has been mainly viewed as a masculine characteristic while household management has been viewed as feminine. Thus, even when both men and women work outside of the home for salaries that financially sustain a family, it is women more than men who arrive home only to start a second job taking care of the house and any children rather than finding their work day ending when they leave the office.

The binary system of gender, in which masculinity and femininity are understood as clearly defined wholes which either function as polar opposites or complementary but separate realms, has served throughout Western history "as a boundary to hold in place the established patterns of power."[224] These patterns of power divide the world into oppositional categories in which conformity to the status quo is viewed as natural and

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[223] Ibid., 4.

[224] Ibid., 2.

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necessary. The danger, as theologian Virginia Ramey Mollenkott notes, is that "left unchecked, the conviction that the world is divided into good and evil empires, with our nation and our religion everything that is good, yet confronted by evil all around…that addiction to dualistic certainty will destroy our entire planet."[225] A binary system, taken to the extreme, provides impetus for the destruction of everything labeled evil and no room for growth by learning from what is different.

Even when not taken to extremes, the binary system of gender has damaging effects on both individual and communal lives. As queer theorist Judith Butler states, all "persons are regulated by gender, and…this sort of regulation operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility for any person. To veer from the gender norm is to produce the aberrant example that regulatory power…may quickly exploit to shore up the rationale for their own continuing regulatory zeal."[226] Individual men who do not conform to society's conception of masculinity and individual women who do not conform to society's conception of femininity are viewed as outsiders to the rest of society. They are considered unnatural, and their existence threatens the perceived truth of the binary system. To contain and minimize this threat, consequences are leveled against nonconforming individuals ranging from shaming to physical violence. Society justifies this by believing that "any person who deviates from [the binary system] is a gender

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[225] Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "We Come Bearing Gifts: Seven Lessons Religious Congregations can Learn from Transpeople" in *Trans/Formations,* ed. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2009), 54.

[226] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 52.

transgressor, outside the pale of genuine humanity, undeserving of full human consideration."[227] Their lives are not valued because they are not seen as fully human.

The response from queer theory is to understand gender not as a naturally occurring binary, but as a process of performance. Gender is the result of many different actions which together construct what society considers to be gender. Instead of being something which one is born with or a concrete definition bestowed upon a person by virtue of their biological sex, "the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of [its] performance."[228] The actions within this performance are both voluntary and involuntary, chosen by individuals and engrained deeply into psyches through processes of socialization. Judith Butler explains, "If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint."[229] The norms of society form a boundary of intelligible actions while individuals choose how or whether to live out these norms.

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's response to the socially constructed nature of gender, the harm caused by the binary gender system, and the performative aspects of gender is to propose what she calls an omnigender paradigm. Unlike the binary system in which individuals are forced into one of two static categories, in her omnigender paradigm "people locate and enact the gender presentation that seems fulfilling to them at

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[227] Mollenkott, *Omnigender*, 2.

[228] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 218.

[229] Ibid., 1.

any given time, with the option of shifting along the continuum at other times, should the necessity arise."[230] Gender is conceived along a spectrum upon which individuals may move back and forth between what society might call hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine. All of the possible variations in between are available and acceptable in the omnigender system.

Mollenkott argues for her omnigender system from the basis of a theological claim that "ethics, medicine, and theology should begin with the facts of the Creator's work, respecting that work as worthy, instead of telling people that they must adapt themselves to a humanly constructed set of abstractions."[231] She understands humanity to be created as gender fluid beings who are not meant to be constrained to static notions of masculinity and femininity. In support of this claim, Mollenkott holds up intersexual people as "the best biological evidence we have that the binary gender construct is totally inadequate and is causing terrific injustice and unnecessary suffering."[232] The naturally occurring intersex condition means that there are individuals born with chromosomal variations and/or genitalia which are not readily identified as male or female or in some cases identifiable as both male and female.[233] Their existence defies a strict gender binary and attempts to force their conformity to one socially constructed gender through

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[230] Mollenkott, *Omnigender*, 46.

[231] Ibid.

[232] Ibid., 55.

[233] In her book exploring theological implications of intersexuality, Susannah Cornwall also defines various intersex conditions and notes that "estimates suggest that at least 1 in 2,500 children in Europe and North America is born with an intersex/DSD condition." Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010), 2.

surgery or behavioral therapy send a message that their natural state is somehow deficient. Mollenkott finds such a message deplorable, and instead insists on the omnigender paradigm as a way in which each individual's gender identity can be honored.

For theological support that intersex conditions are, in fact, part of God's creation, Mollenkott references the biblical creation narratives. She summarizes,

> "For our purposes here, the important point is that both Jewish and Christian scholarship has recognized that the original created being is either hermaphroditic or sexually undifferentiated, a 'gender outlaw' by modern terms, closer to a transgender identity than to half of a binary gender construct. According to this very ancient interpretation, binary gender would be a later development, not the first intention of the Creator but provided subsequently for the sake of human companionship. From this angle, hermaphrodites or intersexuals could be viewed as reminders of Original Perfection.[234]

She argues that as intersexual persons are examples of God's good creation, they must be allowed to express their gender in whatever form feels appropriate. Since it is impossible for the gender binary to adequately represent the gender of intersexual persons, it becomes an ethical imperative to change the system. As Mollenkott states, "if people are ever going to be free to embody and enact the precise gender-blend they sense themselves to be, they need to be aware of the range of human possibilities" which can only be expressed by breaking open the gender binary and moving to the omnigender paradigm.[235] Only an understanding of gender as a fluid continuum will allow each person the freedom to be true to themselves.

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[234] Mollenkott, *Omnigender*, 99.

[235] Ibid., 8.

In regards to the Body of Christ metaphor, Mollenkott's omnigender paradigm highlights that the body of Jesus Christ doesn't fit neatly into the dominant gender binary. Jesus' body was male, but his gender performance was not strictly masculine. He taught, argued, and challenged authority in a manner commonly associated with masculinity, but he also provided food, comforted people, and passively submitted to judgment, all actions associated with femininity. The body upon which the Christian community is focused falls outside of what the gender binary can understand. It is a body which proves the necessity of an omnigender paradigm.

The omnigender paradigm also asks what type of gender the communal body presents to the world. A Body of Christ that adheres to a strict gender binary would not be able to honor the full humanity of each individual member of the community, and wouldn't be representative of the community as a whole. The Body of Christ is a community made up of men, women, and intersex persons, as well as masculine, feminine, and transgender bodies. Looked upon as a whole, the Body of Christ is an omnigendered body. The community should work to deconstruct the gender binary and encourage society to embrace the omnigender paradigm.

Practices of dismantling the gender binary go a long way toward disrupting other binary structures that divide people into us and them. The disruption of such a foundational human assumption of binaries, rooted in the male/female binary structure, provides conceptual space for understanding the full spectrum of human diversity. Understanding human difference as variation instead of either-or breaks down the conceptual dividing wall between categories, including the categories of religions.

Christians formed by the Body of Christ metaphor should view practitioners of other religious traditions as less fundamentally different than the Western binary has led society to believe. The queer disruption of the binary makes feminist use of hybrid identities more natural and relationships across religious boundaries more possible.

Bodily Fluidity

Queer theory and theology go beyond exposing the fluidity of gender and also demonstrate the fluidity of human embodiment itself. Most foundationally, there is a vast spectrum of naturally occurring body types in terms of height, weight, build, skin color, eye color, etc.: human embodiment does not come in one form. Even one's own body presents itself in multiple forms and goes through natural physical transformations throughout a typical human life. Bodies grow and change shape, they move through various spaces differently, projecting confidence, fear, stealth, or calm. Queer theorist Judith Butler notes

> Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: again, altering shape, altering signification - depending on their interactions - and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future.[236]

One's body is not a static object to be owned. It is a dynamic physical vehicle for expressing oneself and acting in the world.

Bodily fluidity is more than the spectrum of human bodies or the way in which a particular body changes over time. It also entails the porousness of the physical

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[236] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 217.

boundaries of bodies. While not denying the importance of being able to control what is done to one's own body, as was discussed with Delores Williams, Butler argues that human bodies are not the bounded wholes they are regularly considered to be. While there are boundaries which delineate one body from another, "bodily autonomy, however, is a lively paradox" as the physical boundaries of bodies are much more porous and fluid than Western society regularly conceives them to be.[237] Oxygen, water, and other molecules are taken in from the environment and passed on from one body to another and back into the environment. Whether through lungs or skin, the boundaries of the human body are regularly crossed by elements from the environment necessary for the body's survival.

Human bodies also constantly shed skin cells which are breathed in by other bodies. Modern science has taught us "that all of the atoms in our bodies are replaced every seven years, moving into other bodies or into the atmosphere. So the atoms that make up the bodies of all persons are identical and constantly interchanging as our tissues age and die and rebuild."[238] The very materials which makes up our bodies is shared, making our physical existence dependent upon others and interconnected at a molecular level. To live an embodied life is to both occupy a defined physical space and to have those boundaries continually crossed through a fluid exchange of molecules.

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[237] Ibid., 21.

[238] Mollenkott, "We Come Bearing Gifts," 56.

The porousness of bodies is not only physical but also social and conceptual in terms of the manner in which a particular body is received. Butler notes that "it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings. In a sense, to be a body is to be given over to others even as a body is, emphatically 'one's own,' that over which we must claim rights of autonomy."[239] As an example, gender is performed by a body according to the gender that person understands herself to be. While she may intend certain actions as expressing some form of masculinity, there is no guarantee her actions will be perceived as masculine. Another person may view the action as feminine and respond accordingly, which in turn impacts how she understands the action originally intended to convey masculinity. There is a persistent interconnectedness between intention, action, and perception that results in a fluidity in how a body is understood.

This bodily fluidity is at play within the Body of Christ as well. The Body of Christ is composed of fluid, porous bodies which are physically and conceptually interconnected with each other. Each member of the Body of Christ exists in an impermanent embodied reality constantly impacted by the presence of the other members. They are changed by and change each other, cross-contaminating their physical boundaries and impacting each other's conceptions of themselves, others, and the world around them.

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[239] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 20.

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The Body of Christ, as a community, is a fluid, porous body itself. It is in a constant state of transformation like a human body in the sense of being constructed by and of human bodies, but it is unending in a way human bodies never will be in the sense that it is continually renewed with new members of the body. The community also interacts with and is impacted by bodies outside of the Body of Christ, including those bodies which practice different religious traditions. Since all of these bodies are fluid and porous, there will be continual mutual influence between the Body of Christ and the world. The Body of Christ cannot be isolated from the rest of the world, so it will interact with, change, and be changed by the world.

Familiarity with the fluid nature of boundaries makes engagement with religious diversity less fear inducing and more of an opportunity for learning and growth. Christians who are practiced at responding to the influence of their fellow members of the Body of Christ are more receptive to the influence of the religious other. The changes that result from the fluidity of boundaries are natural and expected even though they can't be predicted. The fear and mistrust religious diversity can create is less likely in a context where individuals anticipate being influenced by other people and know how to move forward from these encounters. In this context, religious diversity is cause for curiosity and excitement over the potential for personal enrichment.

Limit Model

The interconnection between bodies and persons seen in the fluidity of boundaries is expanded by the limit model of disability that explores the reality of interdependence

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for all people. Theologies of disability have grown out of the field of disability theory which, in turn, arose from the Disability Rights Movement. The Disability Rights Movement became active in the 1970s and 80s as persons with disabilities became inspired by the national efforts for racial and gender equality, and it reached a high water mark with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990.[240] As disability rights activists advocated for public accommodation and legal protection for persons with disabilities, this diverse group brought together by similar needs realized new models and theories of disability were necessary to understand both the movement and the individuals of which it was composed. These activists recognized that "if you live long enough in life, it is statistically likely that you will develop some kind of disability in your advanced years, as only 15 percent of persons with disabilities were actually born with a disability. Simply put, disability is ordinary."[241] As wider society seemed unwilling to recognize the ordinariness, the normality, of disability, activists began searching for tools to question social perception of disability.

Disability activists rejected the historically dominant moral model of disability in which disability was viewed as an outward manifestation of inward sin or moral defect. Prevalent during "the 1700s and early 1800s, the moral meaning of disability was primarily in its representation of divine favor or disfavor. As such, religious organizations had primary authority for interpreting disability within the culture and for treating

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[240] Paul T. Jaeger and Cynthia Ann Bowen, *Understanding Disability: Inclusion, Access, Diversity, and Civil Rights* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 39-42.

[241] Ibid., ix.

disability through spiritual means."[242] This shifted with the rise of modern medicine as

disability began to be understood through biological terms. Within this medical model,

"disability has been considered a priori a medical condition and people with disabilities,

sick. This has nothing to do with disease per se but with a medical category. If people

with disabilities are first a category of medicine, then by definition [they] are intrinsically

ill, with infirm bodies and minds."[243] This model was also rejected by disability activists

who felt it reduced persons with disabilities to their bodily differences and pathologized

aspects of their lives which were in no need of medical "fixes."

Bolstered by disability theory, activists began to view disability through a social

model in which disability itself was understood as a socially created category. Disability

was distinguished from impairment, "similar to the feminist distinction between gender

and sex. [This model] sees disability as *socially created*, or constructed on top of

impairment, and places the explanation of its changing character in the social and

economic structure and culture of the society in which it is found."[244] Persons who have

physical or mental impairments become disabled in the eyes of others when society labels

them as different and excludes them from social, economic, and political spaces.

Disability is not something possessed by an individual, instead "disability is the active

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[242] Nancy L. Eiesland, "Barriers and Bridges: Relating the Disability Movement and Religious Organizations," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice,* ed. Nancy Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 216.

[243] James Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1998), 56.

[244] Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, "Mapping the Terrain," in *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, ed. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (New York: Continuum, 2002), 3.

and purposive social exclusion and disadvantaging of people with impairment."[245] Thus those with visual, auditory, ambulatory, physical, or mental differences and impairments can be considered a particular minority group within larger society even though the needs of such individuals can vary greatly.

Even as activists worked for greater social inclusion and quality of life improvements and theorists worked to analyze conceptions of disability, wholeness, normal, etc., the relationship between the disability community and religion remained largely unexamined. Some disability theorists mentioned the role of religions and religious communities in the lives of persons with disabilities, but often only in the context of refuting the moral model of disability and the role of religions in promoting that model. Theologies of disability did not arise until some theologians began to engage the insights of disability theory.

Drawing on the social model of disability, theologian Deborah Creamer uses the disability perspective to crip theological anthropology, reconceptualizing what it means to be human through what she calls the limit model. In the limit model, Creamer demonstrates that disability is not an aberration unrelated to the foundations of human experience. Instead, her model promotes "a consideration of disability as an instantiation and reminder of human limits" which affect all of humanity.[246] All human beings are limited in one way or another, and disabilities are an example of these limits.

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[245] Carol Thomas and Mairian Corker, "A Journey Around the Social Model," in *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, ed. Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (New York: Continuum, 2002), 18.

[246] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

Creamer begins by examining the traditional relationship of Christian theology to persons with disabilities. She finds that "they have historically been looked at as symbols of sin (to be avoided), images of saintliness (to be admired), signs of God's limited power or capriciousness (to be pondered), or personifications of suffering (to be pitied) – very rarely are people with disabilities considered first as *people*."[247] Persons with disabilities become demonstrations of God's action, whether beneficial or punishing, rather than individuals with agency. They are treated as objects of theological reflection instead of members of the Christian community striving, like everyone else, to understand their purpose in the world.

By ascribing to a social model understanding of disability, Creamer argues that "disability identity, as both a label and a form of self-understanding, depends a great deal on the interpretations of others. One is disabled insofar as he or she appears disabled."[248] Instead of functioning as an ontological description of a person's nature, disability operates as a social label describing certain types of limitations. Creamer points out that "all people are limited to varying degrees, and offers this perspective as a foundation for theological reflection. When understood as part of what it means to be human, limits are no longer something to be overcome in search of perfection or something that is experienced as a punishment for sinfulness."[249] Limits are natural aspects of being human, and being limited is a shared human experience.

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[247] Ibid., 36.

[248] Ibid., 5.

[249] Ibid., 33.

The limit model is based on three religious claims Creamer believes should be easily acceptable to Christians:

> "First is the notion that limits are an *unsurprising* characteristic of humanity…A second and related claim suggests that limits are an *intrinsic* aspect of human existence – part of what it means to be human…Finally, the limits perspective implies that limits are *good*, or at the very least, not evil."[250]

Human beings are finite creatures, and part of being finite is being limited in what one can do and achieve. Having limits is a common characteristic shared among people; it is only the type and extent of limits that is particular to each individual.

In and of themselves, limits are generally neutral, even beneficial. For example, limits "contribute to self and communal identity" as we identify our own strengths and weaknesses.[251] An individual may find that her hand-eye coordination limits her ability to participate in competitive sports, but that her musical capacity allows her to form a close group of friends who perform together in a band. A community can learn that it is excellent at nurturing the intellectual talents of its youth but doesn't have the resources to provide the continual physical care needed by the elderly and so depends on a different community to provide such care. Being limited provides a sense of self and marks the boundaries between different communities and cultures.

Problems arise when societies divide limits into different categories, determining some limits to be "normal" while others are "abnormal" or "disabilities." A hierarchy is created when "some limits are viewed as more normal (I cannot fly) than others (I cannot

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[250] Ibid., 94-95.

[251] Ibid., 102.

run)" or when needing glasses is considered a normal variation of human eyesight but depending on a cane for mobility is viewed as a disability.[252] Those limits considered normal are understood as good or neutral, while those labeled abnormal or disabilities are viewed as bad and needing to be overcome. Instead of accepting the variations of human ability, some peoples' abilities receive a higher social value while the limits of other people are deemed shameful. The false hierarchy established between different limitations causes some people to be subject to attempts to "fix" them, when, in reality, they are merely examples of particular human limits.

This is not to say that all limits are good or valuable, but "the importance of this model is its demand that limits, as well as the diversity of ability, must be seen as integral elements of our understandings of self and other, as key characteristics for reflection in a theological anthropology."[253] Limitations are not the sole province of persons with disabilities, they are a fundamental part of human life. Thus, "the limits model suggests that the insights that come from disability are something with which we all have experience."[254] Persons with disabilities are not the only ones who, because of their limits, are faced with the need to depend upon other people. Their lives may highlight the human need for assistance and community, but they should not be viewed as living lessons existing for the edification of able-bodied individuals.

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[252] Ibid., 96.

[253] Ibid., 109-110.

[254] Ibid., 96.

Each body within the Body of Christ experiences limits, which means that the Body of Christ itself is limited in what it can do. Creamer would encourage the Christian community to recognize their individual and communal limitations as part of God's creation, not instances of deviation from God's intention for humanity. Instead, the limits each member experiences demonstrate that all bodies are dependent on other bodies in some way. The disabled members of the Body of Christ may have more experience in depending on others, but all members of the Body of Christ are dependent upon each other. In learning to accept their dependence on each other, Christians can learn the value of interconnection. They can experience instances of reaching beyond their individual limitations when joining together in mutual relationships that enhance the abilities of the community at large.

Yet even though the Body of Christ as a community may be able to transcend particular limitations faced by individuals, the Body of Christ experiences limits as well. The Body of Christ is dependent on other bodies in a similar manner to how its individual members are dependent on each other. The Body of Christ cannot be everywhere, do everything it might wish to do, or recognize every possibility available to it, and so the Body of Christ must often depend on bodies outside of the community. By accepting the limit model, the Body of Christ, as individuals and as a community, must depend on those who are not Christians to expand its vision of what is needed in the world. The Body of Christ is dependent on the diverse religious communities of the world in order to reach past its own limits. Religious diversity can be seen as an opportunity for the Body of Christ to recognize its own limits and its need for relating deeply with others. If the

Christian community accepts it limitations and dependence on other religious communities, one of the results will be the ability to enhance human relationships and contribute justice in the world than if the Christian community worked alone.

Vulnerability

The limits experienced by individual and communal bodies can be experienced as sites of vulnerability which may be uncomfortable to acknowledge. Sharon Betcher is another theologian who utilizes disability theory to crip Christian theology and Western society by examining the symbolic and social functions of disability; she challenges Christians to embrace their vulnerabilities. Betcher maintains that disability is socially constructed and she challenges the association of disability with abnormality. She explains, "rather than admitting how differently abled we all are and how the ingress of time, environment, and work affect the life of the body, we protect a certain transcendentalized version of the body and of life as average or normal."[255] The "normal" body upheld by Western society – active, healthy, in top physical shape, etc. – is actually not the normal experience of individuals. In reality, due to the effects of old age, everyone will experience disability if they live long enough. Rather than being an abnormal event, disability is a normal part of human experience.

Yet, the conception of disability functions in society as a negative rather than a description of the average human life. Betcher notes that disabilities "have often

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[255] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 72.

theologically been considered evidence of the brokenness of nature pursuant to the fall, they presume cosmic devolution."[256] Even in secular thought where disability is not so directly associated with sin, disabilities are still a sign that something has gone wrong. Disabilities are viewed as something to be fixed, covered up, or shunned from the realm of "normal" physical existence. In the face of these efforts, Betcher strives "to pick up the traces of a religious hope that stays honest to corporeality – that knows how to traverse the tears in a tragic, transient, sentient nature."[257] She wants to understand why disabilities have been so negatively valued and develop a new relationship to the reality of disability that honors lived corporeality.

At a foundational level, Betcher identifies a fear of vulnerability at the heart of society's rejection of disability. Western society has tried to ignore the vulnerability of embodied existence, constantly developing products that will cure pain, extend life, and renew youth. The hard fact that all bodies will eventually grow old and die is held at bay and rarely acknowledged. However, persons with disabilities, particularly those with visible corporeal variations, are a stark reminder that bodies are vulnerable. Betcher explains that "by creating the set-aside named 'disabilities,' society shields its eyes from the vulnerability of birth and the risk of becoming; it always already buffers the existential conditions of precariousness by marginalizing certain bodies and excluding them from the pool of aesthetic value."[258] Society marks those whose bodies testify to

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[256] Ibid., 32.

[257] Ibid., 194.

[258] Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh: A Secular Theology for the Global City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 15.

the vulnerability of human life as different, abnormal, or disabled. Persons with disabilities are pushed aside, institutionalized, marginalized, and denied access to the power and authority of those considered able-bodied. By marking examples of human vulnerability as different, society is able to deny that vulnerability is normal.

It is not just the human vulnerability to death that is ignored when persons with disabilities are marked as exceptions to the norm; it is also human vulnerability to pain and suffering. Contemporary society strives to eradicate pain and suffering, denying that they are aspects of normal human existence. By viewing disability as the location of pain and suffering, able-bodied people can deny that their embodiment incorporates these aspects of human life as well. Betcher notes that "disability has been assumed to be inherently suffering – though for most crips it is what is, the ground condition of our liveliness."[259] Mainstream able-bodied society refuses to consider life from a different frame of reference which would recognize that persons with disabilities are not condemned to a life of suffering. Instead, "the hearing person, thinking him or herself into deafness can only imagine it to be something like the silent treatment, a sociological form of punishment, driving toward despair, even threatening the stimulation of and cognitive growth of the mind."[260] The hearing person cannot conceive of the rich culture of the deaf community which brings fulfillment to many deaf people.

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[259] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 40.

[260] Ibid., 61.

Betcher argues that it is necessary for society and religion to accept the vulnerability of embodied life and find meaning even amidst pain and suffering. She notes that

> While modernity has slated pain for wholesale demolition, pain, throughout much of our religious history, has been treated as a resource that, pricking us with its impingements, can be the occasion for personal, egoistic, or cultural deconstruction and reconstruction. Could it be, insomuch as pain is a psychophysical gauge of our being in the world, that 'the attempt to render our bodies free from suffering…is morally impoverishing?'[261]

She argues that when pain is relegated to the realm of the abnormal, society becomes indifferent to the need for change and the lack of justice that pain and suffering is indicative of. Pain and suffering that marks the opportunity for change comes from both persons with disabilities and from able-bodied people but is generally ignored in both cases. The first because it is assumed that their lives cannot be without suffering, and the second because there is a desire to not acknowledge pain because it might mean the able-bodied person is slipping to the abnormal. Betcher challenges us to accept our vulnerability so that "out of a more honest acquaintance with our sentient situation, we can reinstitute subjective economies that recognize that bodies have needs, that communities are woven together among people who need each other, that everyone has needs – not just the community of the disabled."[262]

Betcher's examination of vulnerability challenges the Body of Christ metaphor to acknowledge and deal with the precariousness of life. The members of the Christian

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[261] Ibid., 40-41.

[262] Ibid., 199.

community are encouraged to accept that they will need to rely on each other. Each body within the community is vulnerable to pain, suffering, disability, and death. These uncomfortable truths need to be confronted in order for the community to recognize where change is needed within the community and respond appropriately.

Betcher's work also brings attention to the vulnerable body upon which the Body of Christ metaphor is centered. That body was poor, beaten, and pierced. That body experienced the pain of abandonment, suffered on a cross, and died. Even after the resurrection, that body bared scars, memories of the pain and suffering it had endured. The body of Christ was not an ideal Western body separated from vulnerability, pain, and death. Thus, the Body of Christ is not meant to be the ideal Western body. The Body of Christ is called to remember experiences of vulnerability, listen to the cries for justice found in pain and suffering, and respond empathetically because of the vulnerability the Body of Christ continues to experience.

Vulnerability characterizes the Body of Christ, and it shapes the way that the community interacts with the world, not as a self-contained and privileged body, but as a body that knows pain and feels the larger pain of the world. As a vulnerable communal body, the Body of Christ is already connected with and dependent on those outside of its own community. The Body of Christ must rely on the religious other for assistance through the precariousness of life and support in times of pain and suffering. Since the bodies outside of the community are also vulnerable, the Body of Christ must not ignore the pain and suffering of others, but instead allow that pain and suffering to challenge the Christian community to examine its role in structures that oppress and marginalize. The

mutual vulnerability between Christians and practitioners of other religious traditions

should lead to a recognition of common humanity and greater ability to relate respectfully

and appreciatively with each other. With a sense of vulnerability, Christians open

themselves to an attitude of compassion and to actions that relieve suffering alongside

people in other religious traditions.

Rethinking the Body of Christ and Reshaping Interreligious Relationships

The Body of Christ metaphor, informed by queer theology and theologies of

disability, challenges Christians to examine the meaning of the queer and crip nature of

the bodies of Jesus Christ and the bodies which make up the Body of Christ. The

presence of queer and crip bodies call Christians to critique and resist Western norms of

autonomous, solitary, and dominating bodies. Instead, queer theology and theologies of

disability make clear that bodies exist along an omnigender spectrum where infinite

expressions of gender reflect the nature of God's diverse creation. The deconstruction of

the gender binary assists Christians in dismantling other conceptual binaries that divide

humanity into strict categories. A spectrum perspective on human diversity challenges

Christians to view other religious traditions not as fundamentally separate entities, but

varied expressions of humanity's search for the divine.

Queer theology and theologies of disability insist on an understanding of all

bodies as fluid, limited, and vulnerable, not just those society has labeled different, queer,

or disabled. Being human entails physical and conceptual interconnectedness, limitations

and the need to depend on others, and experiences of vulnerability which expose our

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finitude and mortality. The interconnectedness and interdependence of all bodies

challenges Christians to accept their relatedness to those outside of the Body of Christ.

The shared vulnerability of Christians and religious others calls Christians to work to

eliminate the pain and suffering of persons in other religious traditions and rely on the

same for the alleviation of their own pain and suffering.

Queer theology and theologies of disability recognize that there are aspects about

the body of the historical Jesus that can influence the Body of Christ metaphor today in

terms of the actions that body took, the boundaries that body crossed, the vulnerable

locations in which the body placed itself, and the experiences the body endured. These

two theological areas also recognize the body of Christ after the resurrection as important

to the Body of Christ metaphor. That body remembers all the historical body went

through; it bears scars as physical reminders of what that body did and what was done to

it. Christians scriptures recount the event of "the resurrected Jesus Christ [who by]

presenting impaired hands and feet and side to be touched by frightened friends alters the

taboo of physical avoidance of disability and calls for followers to recognize their

connection and equality at the point of Christ's physical impairment."[263] This

resurrection body should influence the Body of Christ metaphor today in terms of re-

membering the past, offering forgiveness and community, and being a sign of hope that

pain and suffering do not have the last word.

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[263] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 101.

Neither of the bodies that impact the Body of Christ metaphor are examples of the ideal Western body. Those bodies did not demonstrate the strict gender binary that influences much of contemporary hierarchies, those bodies did not wield power through authoritarian means, those bodies did not shun other bodies into concepts of disability or abnormality, and those bodies did not isolate themselves from the physical and conceptual interconnectedness that results from being in contact with other bodies. It is clear that the Body of Christ metaphor contains an understanding of embodiment that does not uphold the dominant Western ideal body. The concept of bodies found within the Body of Christ metaphor encourages Christians to reshape their approach to relationality, diversity, power, each other, and the religious other.

An identity formed by these "non-ideal" bodies causes Christians to question Western values which shun vulnerability, limitations, and dependence upon others. To claim a Christian identity means Christians must reorient themselves in order to embrace their interconnection with each other and those outside of the Body of Christ and respect the limitations they experience as individuals and as a community. Acknowledging their vulnerability does not mean Christians are automatically comfortable with the impact others have on their lives or the manner in which they must depend on other people. Being vulnerable is not always a pleasant experience, but Christians can find reassurance in the practice of discernment which allows individuals and the community to reflect upon and grow from the impact others have on their vulnerable bodies.

The fluidity of the boundaries between individuals Christians and between the Body of Christ and the rest of the world can also cause some discomfort for Christians

seeking to understand their particular religious identity. The boundaries of the Christian community, shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor, are not rigid and impermeable to outside influence. The Christian community is influenced by its context just as it, in turn, influences its context. The fluidity of the boundaries of the Body of Christ means that there is a spectrum of Christian identity, similar to the omnigender spectrum. The practice of discernment can, once again, assist Christians in responding to the fluidity of boundaries and provide reassurance that the changes caused by boundary fluidity will be examined and critiqued by the Christian community.

The risen body of Christ is a body that has known pain and suffering. The pain and suffering has ended, but its scars demonstrate that pain and suffering are not erased as meaningless. This body remembers pain and suffering and uses those memories to have compassion for those who currently suffer. The Body of Christ as a community is composed of members who have known pain and suffering and as a community has experienced pain and suffering. It is a community that should stand as a witness to the memory of suffering that calls people to remember and repent of the suffering they have caused. The Body of Christ does not hide from its vulnerability to pain, suffering, and death, but uses the knowledge of its vulnerability to work to relieve the pain and suffering of all people.

Womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theology provide significant content for the four central elements of the Body of Christ metaphor: relationality, embodiment, diversity, and praxis. This content gives the metaphor the ability to influence Christian self-understanding both communally and individually. The result is a distinct identity

formed by the Body of Christ metaphor. If it is taken seriously, the Body of Christ metaphor can powerfully shape Christians as they face a religiously diverse world.

The identity provided by the Body of Christ metaphor results in particular attitudes and practices. They create a community in which the vulnerability of human life and the limitations of human existence are not hidden like they are in Western society. Members of the Body of Christ should recognize that all human beings are limited and finite creatures, and that the community itself is limited and finite in what it can achieve. They should know that their community is dependent on and interconnected with those outside of the Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ metaphor calls Christians to honor the significance of embodied existence. Physical realities shape personal and communal experience so the Body of Christ cannot ignore the physical morphology of those who compose the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ must acknowledge the significance of the genders, ethnicities, races, classes, sexualities, and corporal diversity of its members.

Hierarchies are generally used to keep in place unfair power dynamics and marginalize certain groups of people. The Body of Christ must be examined for the various hierarchies disrupted by womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theologians in order to ensure more just relationships within the Christian community. Since contemporary conceptions of bodies usually entail an implicit hierarchy of bodily parts, it is also necessary for the Body of Christ to acknowledge the tendency to identify particular individuals or groups as specific body parts and to strive to utilize the concept

of the interdependence of body parts rather than the specific roles of body parts when conceiving of the community as the Body of Christ.

Use of the Body of Christ metaphor must incorporate the fact that a metaphor has both "yes" and "no" aspects. The Body of Christ is like a body in that there are many members working together for the good of the whole, but the Body of Christ is not like a body in that there are no members who are fundamentally more important than any others. The Body of Christ is like a body in that it is vulnerable and subject to change, but the Body of Christ is not like a body in that it is constantly renewed by new members and continues to exist indefinitely.

Sameness and difference exist on a spectrum and are not binary opposites. The particularity of individuals is to be respected while the interconnectedness between members of the Body of Christ needs to be recognized. The same principles of particularity and interconnectedness apply to relationships outside of the Body of Christ. By gaining comfort with difference, hybridity, and fluidity, Christians can approach religious diversity with more openness and respect. They will have learned how to honor the full spectrum of human embodiment in terms of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and class. They will have practiced forming partnership relationships in which power is shared and the unique contributions of each individual are valued. They will be better able to apply these same practices to their interactions with the religious diversity they encounter outside of the Body of Christ.

Chapter Five: Rethinking Christian Identity in a Religiously Plural World

The Body of Christ metaphor provides an understanding of Christian identity, individually and communally, that assists Christians in responding to religious diversity with openness and respect rather than fear and mistrust. This is true for a number of reasons. First, by pointing to a communal identity that holds unity and diversity as one and gives meaning to being unique members within one Body in which every member, or body part, matters, the metaphor displays the significance of being part of the Christian community. In a context of religious diversity, Christians need an understanding of the difference it makes to be part of the Christian tradition. Second, by identifying themselves as part of an inclusive and living body, Christians are able to encounter religious difference from a place of confidence. Christians grounded in a sense of identity view religious difference with less fear that they will lose their sense of self or ability to belong in the Christian community. The exposure to new ideas and ways of being occurs in conversation with a richly textured sense of self and community rather than an amorphous claim of being a Christian.

Third, the particular Christian identity formed by the Body of Christ metaphor encourages the development of a particular habitus for the Christian community and individual Christians within the community. Specific attitudes and practices encouraged by the metaphor, such as humility, openness, discernment, and re-membering, shape a distinct manner of being in the world. This Christian habitus, created by the Body of Christ metaphor, does more than influence the internal actions of the Christian

community. The particular attitudes and practices that define the Christian community are also useful in the context of religious diversity. When Christians understand themselves through the Body of Christ metaphor, they are better able to engage persons in other religious traditions with openness and respect. The Body of Christ metaphor shapes the community's ways of relating, processes of discernment, respect for diversity, and commitment to full human flourishing, along with attitudes and processes for forming relationships and discerning the individual roles of Christians within the community. These involve the same practices of internal examination, sharing of authority and power, evaluation of personal limits and skills, active listening, etc. that are needed in contexts of religious diversity.

The Body of Christ metaphor teaches Christians that boundaries are not rigid and impermeable, but instead fluid and porous. The metaphor requires Christians to engage across lines of difference within the community, and as Christians improve in their ability to handle diversity within the Body of Christ, they will also improve in their ability to handle diversity outside of the Body of Christ. Improvement of this type often happens simultaneously as Christians living in religiously diverse societies engage with both Christians and persons of other religious traditions on a regular basis, often within their own families and within themselves. Interreligious families are becoming more common in the United States, and individual Christians sometimes intentionally engage in practices from multiple traditions. Christians will go back and forth from situations in which they engage diversity within the Body of Christ and in the wider world. Their development of skills in handling diversity in one situation will strengthen their skills in

handling diversity in another. Christians live realities of fluid boundaries and the Body of Christ metaphor helps them to recognize and embrace this fluidity.

The Body of Christ metaphor can function as conceptual space to step into when confronted by religious diversity, but such reflection does not occur in a vacuum. Religious diversity is a tangible reality for Christian people, even as they reflect on their Christian identity. The conceptual space of the Body of Christ has fluid boundaries, particularly for those Christians who relate deeply with another religious community. The Body of Christ metaphor can assist individual Christians in understanding how their claim of membership in the Christian community influences them even as their personal religious identity may be impacted by more than one religious community.

Fourth, the Body of Christ metaphor articulates the necessity of Christian engagement with the world as intrinsic to Christian identity. A body exists through its interactions with the world, and the same is true of the Body of Christ. It is impossible for the Christian community to be the Body of Christ without engaging with the world, which includes persons from other religious traditions. It is impossible for the Body of Christ to fulfill its purpose without engaging with those outside of the Christian community.

Fifth, and finally, the Body of Christ metaphor creates a prism through which Christians can understand their relationship to persons outside of the Christian community. The fluidity and porousness of boundaries, seen in the Body of Christ metaphor, can allow Christians to recognize the fluidity of the boundaries of the Christian community itself. This assists Christians in acknowledging their interconnection with

practitioners of other religious traditions and helps them make sense of multiple religious

belonging. Those who claim Christianity as one part of their religious identity can be

viewed as the embodiment of boundary fluidity, demonstrating the spectrum of ways in

which Christian identity influences individuals. Whereas the Body of Christ represents

Christian identity, the image of a body can be extended to include all of humanity.

Christians, together with persons in other religious traditions, and persons who identify

with multiple religious traditions or with no tradition can all be considered parts of the

Body of Humanity. Christians can view the interconnected and interdependent nature of

the entire human community through the prism of the Body of Humanity in which all

persons are members of one Body, each individual and community fulfilling unique roles

that impact the entire human family.

Qualities of the Body of Christ

The Christian identity formed by the Body of Christ metaphor is given definition

through the qualities of embodiment, relationality, diversity, and praxis. These qualities

are elaborated in the imagery of the Body of Christ metaphor, and through the conceptual

reconstructions of womanist, feminist, queer, and disability theologians, as discussed in

chapters 3 and 4. The nature of the metaphor, the "is" and "is not" aspects of

metaphorical language discussed in chapter 2, cautions against uncritical application of

knowledge of bodies, Christ, or concepts from contemporary theological areas to the

Christian community. Careful examination of the manner in which these concepts

function within the Body of Christ metaphor is needed. This examination begins with

reflection on primary qualities of Christian community as uncovered by the Body of Christ metaphor.

Embodiment

Critical use of the Body of Christ metaphor necessitates examination of embodiment. It is significant that the metaphor is the *Body* of Christ. Paul could have used many other images to describe the community of the early Jesus-followers. He could have used Family of Christ, Hands of Christ, Heart of Christ, Servants of Christ, etc. While it is impossible to know exactly why Paul chose to use the image of a body for his most common metaphor of the Christian community, contemporary use of the metaphor should intentionally investigate what the image of a body contributes to current Christian self-understanding.

First and foremost, calling the Christian community the Body of Christ brings attention to the embodied nature of human existence. All human beings have bodies, and these bodies are how individuals interact with the world. Bodies move through the world, impacting other people and the surrounding environment and are impacted by the environment and other people. While the intellect is often held up as the defining feature of human existence, the Body of Christ metaphor calls attention back to the physical aspects of human nature. The metaphor insists Christians acknowledge the importance of embodied existence.

By focusing on the image of a body, the metaphor implicitly recognizes the goodness of embodied existence. The value of bodies, in and of themselves, is a common

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theme in many contemporary theological areas, including womanist and feminist theology. These theologians strive to combat the undue importance Western thought has placed on intellect and rationality at the expense of materiality and physical existence. They affirm the embodied nature of human existence and declare the physical to be just as important as the immaterial. They recognize that embodiment shapes individual and communal experiences of the self and the world just as much as intellectual knowledge of persons, places, and objects.

Embodiment shapes experience through the physical abilities a particular body has and through the manner in which the particular characteristics of a body are perceived. Theologies of disability emphasize both the physical limitations all bodies experience and the effects of society's perception of these limitations. What a person can accomplish in a given day or throughout a lifetime is partially determined by physical limitations. No person will be able to experience flight without the assistance of machinery, but some will accomplish climbing Mount Everest while others will never experience walking.

Yet physical limitations are not the only factors involved in embodiment's influence on experience. Social preconceptions of various characteristics of embodiment impact how others react to particular individuals and groups. Theologies of disability highlight the social construction of these preconceptions by pointing out the manner in which society arbitrarily views particular physical limitations as disabilities. The inability to fly is not called a disability nor, usually, is the need for glasses, but the need for hearing aid causes an individual to be considered disabled. The perception of some

physical limitations as disabilities results in different treatment of particular individuals in the same situation. Their experiences are impacted by how their particular embodiment is received.

Physical limitations are not the only characteristics of embodiment that shape human experience. Race, ethnicity, gender, physical fitness, culturally distinct clothing, and even the manner in which one moves one's body are all perceived by society as conferring negative or positive value on an individual. The reactions a person receives from these negative and positive values in turn impacts their experience of the encounter and can even impact how that person dresses, moves, or speaks in the future. Embodiment matters greatly in terms of human experience.

This means that a community formed by the Body of Christ metaphor should value embodiment and demonstrate its value by being concerned about more than just the spiritual well-being of its members. The Christian community should care about the physical bodies of its members, working to improve the lives of people here and now. This involves actual physical care of community members (food, shelter, heath care, etc.) and addressing elements of the embodied reality the members face (the social and symbolic reception of physical characteristics). A community called the Body of Christ should assist members with their physical needs and work to change social structures that symbolically and literally harm them because of their particular physical characteristics.

Valuing embodiment includes engaging in practices that honor bodies and repair the harm done to bodies. The womanist process of re-membering, discussed in chapter 3, is a practice that the Christian community as the Body of Christ should engage in on a

regular basis. Through re-membering the community is able to lift up all parts of every human body as important and cherished. The parts of bodies that have been denigrated, harmed, or ignored are named and given space within the community to be acknowledged, honored, and healed. The wrongs done to bodies and their individual parts are exposed and condemned, the actions undertaken by community members that have done harm are acknowledged and repented, and steps are taken to change attitudes and systems which have injured others. Re-membering also creates space to celebrate the achievements and joys of those bodies which have been ignored or forgotten by bringing them to the forefront of the community's consciousness.

Focusing on embodiment also involves examining conceptions of bodies themselves, bodies in relation to other bodies, and bodies in relation to the world. Queer theorists and theologians in particular challenge the dominant Western understanding of bodies as bounded, autonomous wholes which exist independently from each other. Fundamentally, that autonomy is just not true. Queer theorists argue for a fluid understanding of bodies due to the manner in which bodies exchange elements on a molecular level. The exchange of oxygen and the shedding of skin cells are just some of the ways in which bodies are fundamentally interdependent and interconnected with each other. Bringing a fluid conception of bodies into the Body of Christ metaphor strengthens the metaphor's image of an interconnected, relational community.

Bodies in Western society have not only been understood as primarily static, they have also been understood as existing in a primarily binary from. Western society images bodies as existing in one of two options: male or female. Queer theorists and

theologians highlight the inaccuracy of this binary by lifting up the experiences of intersex individuals and arguing for an omnigender paradigm. They demonstrate that human embodiment exists on a spectrum from male to female and this embodiment is expressed through a continuum of gender identities from masculine to feminine. A Christian community that embraces the omnigender paradigm affirms the whole spectrum of human embodiment. In fact, in being composed of many different bodies, the Body of Christ itself is omnigender.

Examining embodiment in the Body of Christ metaphor leads to an image of a body radically different from the dominant Western body. This image exists in opposition to the Western body and the societal values which have upheld the image of a male, white, physically fit, eternally young, autonomous body. The Body of Christ metaphor calls Christians to resist the attempts of Western society to isolate individuals by proclaiming a fiction of self-sufficiency. The Christian community, as the Body of Christ, should resist the attempts of Western society to deny the reality of death, pain, and suffering because to do so marginalizes groups of people and portions of each individual. The Body of Christ metaphor calls Christians to examine embodiment in such a way that their conception of an ideal body is reshaped and consequently places Christians in tension with Western society.

Relationality

Using the Body of Christ metaphor also necessitates an examination of relationality. As a human body is made up of many parts, so too is the Body of Christ. It is impossible to be the Body of Christ by oneself: one must be in relationship to be part of

the Body of Christ. Thus it is important to explore what kind of relationships are appropriate to the Body of Christ. Relationality includes both the interactions between individual members and the organization of the community as a whole. The structure of the community, how it organizes power and authority, is as important as how members of the community relate to each other on an individual basis.

The Body of Christ metaphor offers a structure with which to organize the Christian community: the model of a human body. At first glance this model may appear to be perfect for describing the corporate relationality of the community. In a human body many different parts work together for the well-being of the whole body. Many different functions are undertaken which are all necessary for the flourishing of the body. The same is true within the Christian community. The many members of the Christian community work together in many different roles for the well-being of the community. Like parts of a body, members of the Body of Christ are interconnected and interdependent upon each other in order to accomplish the various activities of the Christian community that allow the community to flourish.

Yet there is more to the relationality of a human body than general interdependence and interconnectedness between parts. Within the model of a human body there is a hierarchy, both intrinsic to the body and placed upon it by society. Fundamentally there are parts of a human body more necessary for basic survival than other parts. The brain, heart, lungs, and digestive system, for example, are much more necessary for basic existence than fingers, toes, and ears. The brain also controls the activities of the other parts of the body. Society also designates some body parts as

shameful or disgusting, like genitals and armpits, and keeps them hidden.[264] Is it

appropriate to use the hierarchy of a human body to understand the communal

relationality of the Body of Christ?

This is where it is important to remember both the nature of metaphors, the "is"

and "is not" aspect, and that this particular metaphor has two main images: body and

Christ. As a metaphor, there are going to be aspects of the images used that are not like

the thing being described. That means there are aspects of a human body that are like the

Christian community and aspects that are not like the Christian community. The image

of Christ will also inform the manner in which the Christian community is organized.

The image of Christ is in tension with the hierarchy found in a human body. The

image of Christ is in conflict with a structure that values some members over others and

allows some members to control the actions of others. Jesus preached and demonstrated

the importance of creating justice and mutual relationships. He brought into his

community those that Jewish and Greco-Roman society had deemed unimportant or

unclean and proclaimed God's love and care to all people. His example makes the strict

hierarchy of a human body, the brain as more essential than fingers, inappropriate for the

Christian community. The Body of Christ is not like a human body when it comes to

communal organization.

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[264] Societies vary greatly regarding which body parts are considered shameful or sensual, and thus to be regulated. In some cultures hair, ankles, and calves are all kept covered in public as signs of modestly. The examples given above reflect the general U.S. culture's practice of keeping genitals covered in public but viewing most other body parts as appropriate to display.

If the human body is not what provides the model for the structure of the Christian community, then the example of Christ is where the Christian community should focus. Jesus did not live long enough or stay in one location long enough to establish a particular community which could serve as a model for contemporary Christian community. Instead, theologians must develop models that appear to be in agreement with the principles of relationality demonstrated in Jesus' life and work. Letty Russell's model of church in the round is one such model that upholds the principles of relationality found in the image of Christ. [265]

The model of church in the round focuses on creating a community in which power and authority are shared among all members. The image of a circle reminds members of the Christian community that they are all on equal footing with each other; no single member of the community is more important than another. It is still possible within a circle to have people in the center and others on the margins, which means even the image of a circle cannot be unthinkingly applied to the Christian community. In order to live into the example of Christ, the community must continually seek to widen the circle, ensuring there is space for those who have been on the margins to move into the center of the circle. Widening the circle, however, is not a simple process of creating room. Widening must involve processes of acknowledging and changing the attitudes and systems which put some members on the margins in the first place. Work has to be done by the whole community to repent and reform in order for the circle to truly widen.

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[265] Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

The Body of Christ metaphor encourages the community to recognize its interconnection while the model of church in the round provides an organizational structure more in concert with the example of Christ.

At the core of the model of church in the round are the partnership relationships between individual members of the Christian community advocated by Letty Russell. A circular form of sharing power and authority in the larger community can only be sustained if power and authority are shared on the basic level of person to person. Mutual relationships in which the gifts and graces of each individual are recognized, honored, and nurtured are needed. These partnerships allow each individual to determine her or his appropriate role within the community, avoiding processes that coerce individuals into roles not of their choosing. By relating to each other through mutual respect, no one finds themselves functioning as surrogate for another. An individual's personal integrity is upheld even as she uses her gifts to help the larger community flourish.

Partnerships reflect the vulnerable and limited aspects of human nature. All human beings are limited in what they are able to do, comprehend, and achieve. Each person is vulnerable to circumstance and the world around them. Thus everyone is dependent upon others for help and support as they move through life. Interdependence is an intrinsic element in partnership relationships resulting from the mutual vulnerability and limitation of human beings. In the Body of Christ, this mutual vulnerability and limitation is acknowledged and accepted so that the gifts and graces of other people can be allowed to fulfill the roles needed for the flourishing of the whole community.

Diversity

The final aspect of relationality, relational transcendence, is closely tied to another quality of the Body of Christ metaphor: diversity. Not only is a body made up of *many* parts, it is made up of many *different* parts. A body is not able to survive if it doesn't have different kinds of organs fulfilling many different roles, and the same is true of the Body of Christ. The Christian community is made up of many different people from every ethnicity and race, every socio-economic situation, every gender expression, every sexual orientation, every morphological variation, and from every region of the world. They engage in a wide variety of roles within the community that are all needed for the flourishing of the community. Diversity is as fundamental to the Body of Christ as is relationality. Difference must be present for the Body of Christ to exist.

This means that the Christian community needs to learn how to accept and engage diversity with respect and openness. Difference cannot be feared within the Body of Christ or efforts will be made to eliminate difference, which in turn would destroy the Body of Christ. Yet difference is often viewed as an obstacle to forming connections, which are also necessary for the well-being of the Christian community. Christians need an understanding of diversity that respects difference and a method of relating across differences in order to form partnership relationships.

Relational transcendence, developed by Mayra Rivera, is manner of conceiving of the relationality between persons that can help Christians understand and respect

diversity.[266] Through relational transcendence, in which the transcendent nature of another person's difference is experienced through relationship, individual Christians come to see the reality of difference, as discussed by feminist theorists in chapter 3. It is impossible for one person to grasp fully the totality of another person; there is always something more, something transcendent about the other. Other people are not merely variations of oneself, they are "irreducibly different."[267] And yet this irreducible difference does not cut individuals off from one another. They can still come to some knowledge of each other, touching at the truth of who each other are even though they cannot fully grasp each other.

In that moment of touch, where knowledge comes up against irreducible difference and recognizes the transcendence of another person, individuals are able to experience a sense of the divine. God is in the difference between people. That transcendence human beings recognize as larger than themselves, the infinity they cannot fully grasp, is the presence of God. God, never fully knowable, is experienced in the irreducible difference between people. Engaging the diversity of humanity allows human beings to experience God. The diversity within the Body of Christ attests to the presence of God within the Christian community. If Christians do not embrace that diversity, they

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[266] Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2007.

[267] Ibid., 116. Rivera is careful to distinguish *irreducible* transcendence from *absolute* transcendence in order to argue that even though the other person cannot be fully known by me, it is still possible to relate to the other person. I am not able to quantify the difference of the other person. It will always exceed my ability to comprehend even as I encounter that difference through interpersonal encounters.

are not embracing God. If Christians try to remove diversity from the Body of Christ, they are trying to remove God from the Body of Christ.

Transcendence, the reality that there will always be more to another person than can be understood, can be overwhelming; recognizing the transcendence of other human beings can make the task of forming mutual relationships daunting. Partnerships require deep connections with another person and mutual respect. Mutual respect requires honesty and trust, which may seem difficult to obtain with the knowledge that one will never fully know the other person. The sheer number of ways in which people can be truly different from each other may cause some people to think partnerships are impossible.   Diversity among human beings comes in many forms, and there are infinite variations within each societally determined category. Even in just regards to gender, Christians are encouraged to see gender as a spectrum through the omnigender paradigm. There aren't just two genders represented within the Body of Christ; the whole spectrum from hyper-masculinity to hyper-femininity is contained within the Body of Christ. Finding a way to relate across gender differences along with all the other variations of human embodiment can be difficult. It can seem that the differences between individuals within the Body of Christ are too great to be bridged and will result in cutting community members off from each other.

Thankfully, human beings are not formed by only one trait, so diversity within the Body of Christ does not result in separation or isolation. The personal identities of individuals are composed of an interplay of many different characteristics. Each person has a hybrid identity formed by the multitude of ways in which he or she understands him

or herself. These hybrid identities allow connections to be made between individuals who are truly different from one another. One aspect of a person's identity can connect with one aspect of another's identity, providing the possibility for mutual learning about each other and the creation of a respectful partnership. There will always be a sense of transcendence, of more to learn and explore, between two individuals because even that point of connection will not mark an absolute correlation. A middle-class African-American woman married with two kids who grew up in the Southern U.S. may connect with a Caucasian woman who is single, poor, and from the Midwest through their shared identity as women, but their experiences of being women are uniquely informed by the other aspects of their identities. Even in their common ground they will experience a sense of relational transcendence. The ability of Christians to find connection across gender, ethnic, racial, class, sexuality, and disability differences within the Body of Christ provides confidence that they will also be able to find connection across religious differences outside of the Body of Christ.

Praxis

Along with embodiment, relationality, and diversity, praxis needs to be examined as a quality of the Body of Christ metaphor. To be embodied is to exist in the world: to interact with the world and be acted upon by the world. The Body of Christ exists in the world and thus must interact with the world and be acted upon. Christians do not exist in an isolated bubble within which they only have to interact with other Christians. They exist in a world, and in particular societies, composed of many different people who are influenced by many different religious traditions. It is impossible to exist in the world

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without being impacted in some manner by people outside of your immediate community. The Christian community then needs to examine what praxes they should engage in when interacting with religious difference. The body image of the metaphor does not provide much help in determining what kind of actions are appropriate for the Christian community, so it is the image and example of Christ which gives greater guidance to the praxis of the Christian community both internally and externally as the community encounters religious diversity.

In Jesus' life and teaching, two main themes, among others, stand out: the worship and honoring of God and the declaration and creation of God's future, or what I am calling kin-dom.[268] These themes then are central praxes of the Body of Christ. Worshipping God involves actions undertaken primarily in the gathered Christian community. Actions taken to help in the creation of the kin-dom are more externally focused, even though they include assisting members of the Body of Christ, and will necessitate encounters with people in other religious traditions because they involve interacting with the wider world. These actions are focused on sharing the love of God, creating peace and justice, resisting and dismantling structures of oppression, and bringing relief to the suffering. Kin-dom building praxes are needed within the Christian community, they are part of honoring embodiment, creating partnering relationships, and respecting diversity, but they cannot be contained within the Body of Christ because Christians are interconnected with the rest of the world. Christians are called by their

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[268] The use of kin-dom instead of kingdom is becoming a wide-spread practice in feminist theology. It was first popularized by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz in "Kin-dom of God: a *mujerista* proposal," in *In Our Own Voices – Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamin Valentin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

participation in the Body of Christ to address suffering and oppression anywhere it exists and to engage in kin-dom building practices out in the world.

These praxes of the Body of Christ directly propel Christians into engagement with persons in other religious traditions. What Christians generally identify as kin-dom building practices include identifying, challenging, and dismantling structures of oppression; education and awareness building; non-violent resistance; relief assistance in times of crisis; political actions of solidarity; advocating for peace; etc. Each of these practices is too complex for only Christians to be involved. First, any actions undertaken to dismantle structures of oppression in society will need to be informed by the theological and ethical perspectives of people in diverse faiths. If the goal is truly to change the status quo, then Christians cannot only engage other Christians. Members of multiple religious communities compose the social networks Christians seek to engage through kin-dom building practices. To stay true to the principles of relationality encouraged by the Body of Christ metaphor, Christians will need to dialogue with practitioners of other religious traditions to reflect on diverse and shared values and perspectives and to form coalitions to address issues of common concern. Efforts to understand each other and each other's perspectives are necessary for just and respectful partnerships and for engaging in common action. Christians will have to learn about the issues practitioners of other religious traditions care about.

Second, the people whose suffering Christians are called to alleviate are not always going to be Christian. Christians will interact with individuals who practice other religious traditions as they seek to relieve suffering. Effective and just actions to

alleviate suffering cannot occur without learning from those who are suffering. Those who have the experience of a particular oppression have wisdom to share regarding how systems and attitudes function to cause suffering and knowledge about what kind of assistance is needed and useful. The religious traditions of those who have been oppressed influence how individuals understand their oppression and what kind of change they believe is possible. Christians are called through kin-dom building practices to stand in solidarity with all those who are oppressed, but they cannot be truly in solidarity if they do not engage the whole personhood of the people with whom they wish to be in solidary.

Third, individual Christians and the Christian community as the Body of Christ is limited in what it can achieve. There is only so much each Christian and the entire Body of Christ is going to be able to do, and the process of creating justice is too large for Christians to understand and accomplish on their own. Partnering with individuals and communities of other religious traditions is necessary to address the challenges facing the world. In partnering with individuals and communities of other religious traditions, Christians will be exposed to new perspectives and values that address suffering and create justice. The rich history of other religious traditions has been a resource for their practitioners in negotiating the various realities of the world, including systems and experiences of oppression. Other religious traditions have teachings which their practitioners have used to resist injustice and work for peace. Christians will be limited by their own perspectives and history from seeing the effective resources found in other

religious traditions. Acknowledging their limitations, Christians should seek to learn from the experiences and wisdom of other religious traditions.

These practices of building peace and creating justice are not uniquely Christian practices, although viewing them as interconnected practices of kin-dom building is particularly Christian. Other religious traditions have teachings and doctrines that guide their practitioners into similar practices of peace and justice, but they are unlikely to understand their participation in such practices as contributing to the kin-dom of God. The different motivations for engaging in practices of justice should not function as a barrier for partnership between Christians and practitioners of other religious traditions, but should offer an opportunity to dialogue and learn from one another. Each member of the partnership can find their individual perspectives deepened and transformed through being exposed to the values and motivations present in a diverse group working toward a common goal.

The imperative placed on Christians to engage in kin-dom building practices by the Body of Christ metaphor holds no normative power for practitioners of other religious traditions. The Body of Christ metaphor speaks only to the Christian community, giving shape to the identity and practices of individual Christians. The actions of Christians toward practitioners of other religious traditions are influenced by the metaphor, but the metaphor has no bearing on the actions of those practitioners toward Christians. Persons in other religious traditions will find guidance for engaging religious differences from within their own traditions.

Christian Identity through the Body of Christ Metaphor

The Body of Christ metaphor creates a Christian identity that ties Christians to each other in partnerships. These partnerships are mutual relationships where power and authority are shared as each individual in the partnership is allowed to discern her or his gifts and role within the community. Partnerships within the Body of Christ are formed among diverse individuals whose particularity is affirmed and respected within the shared identity of the Christian community. The Body of Christ metaphor encourages an awareness and acceptance of the interdependence and interconnectedness of community members. Christians honor and respect the limitations and vulnerability of themselves and each other. The Body of Christ metaphor reminds Christians that they are impacted by each other and the world around them through fluid boundaries and that change resulting from their interactions is natural. Power and authority are shared through the model of church in the round as those in the center of the circle consistently work to create space for those on the margins to take their rightful place in the circle. The Body of Christ metaphor calls Christians to care about the physical and spiritual well-being of each other. Christians are challenged to participate in kin-dom building by going out into the world and partnering with others engaged in peace and justice practices.

A Christian community formed by the Body of Christ metaphor is one that internally strives to be as just, respectful, and welcoming as possible. The hierarchical structures of society are disavowed as the Christian community works to organize itself on the model of an ever-expanding circle where power and authority are shared. The model of a human body is used to stress the interconnected nature of the many different

roles within the Christian community, but Letty Russell's church in the round model provides a less hierarchical mode of sharing power and authority. Discernment about who should be in leadership roles and how leaders should guide the Christian community is undertaken by the whole community multiple times as the needs and membership of the community change. There is ongoing discernment to identify where the community still needs to dismantle attitudes and structures of privilege or exclusion. Processes of re-membering are used to allow past wrongdoings to be acknowledged and repented for. Past hurts can be mourned and relationships can be repaired. The Christian community expects to undergo change as it collectively learns and grows from each other. This change is handled through more discernment to understand the best way forward.

The Body of Christ metaphor shapes the Christian community by encouraging diversity among its members and demonstrating that diverse members can work together for the common good. The community works to help each member discern her or his role within the community. Each individual's gifts, skills, and potential should be nurtured and supported so that the individual flourishes and in turn so does the community. This Christian community understands diversity to exist on a spectrum, not in binary categories within which individuals must be compelled to conform. The full continuum of human embodiment, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, physical morphology, etc. is celebrated as particular examples of God's creation.

A Christian community shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor experiences God in the diversity of its members. This community respects the irreducible difference between individuals and welcomes the experience of transcendence found when forming

relationships across difference. The Christian community celebrates diversity and encourages its members to be true to themselves. It draws upon this diversity as a resource for engaging in the many praxes of the Christian community. Through the diversity of its members, the Body of Christ contains members who can fill the many different roles necessary for the flourishing of the community. Each individual's role may change throughout their lifetime as their personal skills develop and the needs of the community change, but all members of the Body of Christ can find a place within the community.

The Body of Christ is composed of omnigendered, limited, and vulnerable bodies, and consequently, the Body of Christ is an omnigendered, limited, and vulnerable community. Such a community welcomes the full range of gender expression and identity in order to honor the full spectrum of God's diverse creation. This Body of Christ accepts its need for others and embraces its interconnectedness with the rest of creation. This Body of Christ acknowledges the precariousness of life and remembers its experiences of pain and suffering as sources of empathy for all who bear psychological and physical scars.

The Body of Christ is a queer and disabled body centered on the poor, beaten, and pierced body of Jesus Christ. A Christian community formed by the image of an omnigendered, limited, and vulnerable body should honor the precariousness of life and affirm the experience of pain and suffering endured by each of its members individually and as a community. This community uses the process of re-membering to honor the precariousness of life by naming the hurts that have been done to its members and the

community. It uses re-membering to acknowledge, mourn, repent, forgive, and change for the future. This process develops empathy and causes the Body of Christ to exist in solidarity with other bodies Western society has marginalized and oppressed, no matter the religious identity of the other bodies.

The Body of Christ metaphor calls the Christian community to work for the physical and spiritual well-being of its members. The community comes together to worship God and learn about God's love for them. The community also comes together to improve the earthly lives of its members. The physical needs of the community are given as much priority as the spiritual needs. Actions are taken to relieve immediate suffering and to change the systems that create inequality. The present and the future are of concern to the Christian community.

A Christian community shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor recognizes the impossibility of being isolated in a globalized world and abandons any attempt at creating isolation. The community should acknowledge that it exists within the world and will be impacted by the world. Recognizing that the boundaries of the Body of Christ are fluid, the community should expect to change its social context and to be changed by its context. In its efforts to engage in practices of kin-dom building, the Christian community will need to recognize its own limitations and dependence on others as it seeks to impact the world. The Christian community should purposefully reach out to practitioners of other religious traditions to form partnerships that further their efforts to build the kin-dom and deepen their perspective on the work of justice building itself. The

Body of Christ metaphor, through its emphasis on embodiment, insists that the practices Christians engage in must be active, not just conceptual.

The fluid boundaries of the Body of Christ indicate that the Christian tradition does not exclude those individuals whose personal religious identities are multiple. The Body of Christ metaphor calls upon Christians to recognize their interconnection and interdependence with community members who personally identify as with more than one religious traditions. Individuals who identify with multiple religious traditions, including Christianity intermixed with others, are also part of the Body of Christ. The metaphor also shapes their individual religious identities, albeit in distinctive ways as the metaphor interacts with concepts from other religious traditions.

The interconnectedness and interdependence symbolized in the Body of Christ metaphor can also be used to frame relationships outside of the Christian community. Already the metaphor calls Christians to recognize interconnection and interdependence between those who singly belong within the Christian community and those who multiply belong with more than just the Christian community. It can provide Christians with interfaith families an understanding of how they relate to their family members. The image of the body used within the Body of Christ metaphor can also be used to form a prism of the Body of Humanity in which all people are included. Christians with spouses, children, parents, or other relatives who identify with other religious traditions or multiply belong can recognize the ways in which their religious identities are mutually influenced by each other. The porous boundaries of religious identity can explain how an individual Christian has been strengthened in her Christian identity by the presence and

influence of her Jewish father. All Christians, whether related through familial ties or not, are connected to practitioners of other religious traditions in the Body of Humanity.

Of course, this Christian prism of the Body of Humanity will need to be put into conversation with the prisms used by practitioners of other religious traditions to understand their relationship to the religious other. Just as the Christian motivations for engaging in justice making practices need to be put in conversation with the motivations of their interreligious partners, the Christian Body of Humanity prism needs to engage other prisms, such as the Islamic People of the Book. Both prisms for understanding an individual's relationship to the religious other are likely to be challenged, enriched, and transformed in the process.

Engaging Religious Diversity as the Body of Christ

A Christian community shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor will find itself engaging religious diversity with openness and respect in daily life and in order to fulfill its purposes regarding the praxis of kin-dom building. Engagement with communities and individual practitioners of other religious traditions is a necessary component of working for justice in the world. But the Body of Christ metaphor provides more than just an imperative to partner with practitioners of other religious traditions. The metaphor also provides attitudes and practices that assist Christians in engaging positively with the religious other. The process of being the Christian community as the Body of Christ prepares Christians to approach religious diversity with curiosity, respect, mutuality, and skill.

Members of the Body of Christ develop attitudes of welcome, humility, respect for diversity, comfort with change, and compassion. These attitudes are part of the distinctive habitus created by the Body of Christ metaphor, and this habitus influences the actions of Christians outside of the Christian community. As defined by French social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, habitus refers to "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes."[269] What this means is that an individual or community's past experiences and actions impact the manner in which they respond to present circumstances.

All habitus "is 'structured' by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is 'structuring' in that one's habitus helps shape one's present and future practices. It is a 'structure' in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned."[270] The attitudes, practices, and viewpoints shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor all contribute to a Christian habitus that influences how Christians act, not only within the Christian community, but outside of the community as well. The attitudes and practices of Christians toward practitioners of other religious traditions will follow the attitudes and practices of Christians toward each other.

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[269] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53.

[270] Karl Maton, "Habitus," in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. Michael Grenfell (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2008), 50.

Being part of a community that continually strives to widen the circle creates an attitude of welcome and openness to new people. The model of church in the round proposed by Letty Russell includes a continual process of discernment to ensure that those on the margins of the community can find space within the center to contribute their gifts and experiences to the community. This process of discernment should create an atmosphere of welcome and openness in the Christian community as it keeps reviewing its own practices to eliminate barriers to full participation and strives to include new insights into the community's daily life. Christians should approach encounters with new people as opportunities for positive, new experiences. The process of widening the circle within the Body of Christ also creates an attitude of humility within individual Christians. They will have engaged in times of discernment where their actions have been examined for unwanted biases, and they will have learned the necessity of repentance when their actions have caused harm within the Christian community. Members of the Body of Christ should be humble enough to accept that they are not always right and may have something to learn from the religious other.

The respect Christians have for the full range of human diversity within the Christian community can easily be extended to the reality of religious diversity in the surrounding context. Practitioners of other religious traditions are understood to be irreducibly different and yet still knowable through their own hybrid identities. Christians expect to experience a sense of the divine when encountering religious diversity. Relational transcendence exists between Christians and religious others, so Christians expect to find God in their relationships with practitioners of other religious

traditions. The expectation of finding God amidst religious diversity should help to dispel some of the fear that can surround encounters with religious difference and provide motivation for Christians to form relationships with practitioners of other religious traditions. Christians should welcome the opportunity to experience the presence of God.

Members of the Body of Christ are challenged to embrace change because of the processes of discernment involved in relating to each other as partners. Christians can recognize that their encounters with other people will impact them, both physically and symbolically, due to the fluid boundaries of their bodies. They are called to accept that change occurs as a natural part of human existence and they can be confident in their ability to handle the changes that will result from engaging with practitioners of other religious traditions.

Encounters with other people should also develop an attitude of compassion within the members of the Body of Christ. Christians are impacted by their relationships and the creation of mutual partnerships should result in compassion for the other people when harm is done to them. This compassion is not a form of pity, but a deep sense of empathy which leads to solidarity and actions focused on relieving the suffering of the other. This attitude of compassion helps to fuel the kin-dom building praxes of Christians and is not stopped by encountering religious diversity. Compassion reaches across all boundaries.

The kin-dom building praxes may be what grounds Christian engagement with religious diversity, but they are not the only practices drawn from the Body of Christ metaphor that Christians can use when encountering practitioners of other religious

traditions. Discernment processes, partnership relationships, and re-membering are

practices that are just as useful in a context of religious diversity as they are within the

Body of Christ. By engaging in these practices within the Christian community,

Christians become well versed in skills beneficial for positive interactions with religious

diversity.

Engagement with religious diversity is often framed through the concept of

dialogue, and dialogue is more than just talking with another person. Dialogue "as

genuine conversation among humans is not concerned about domination and power.

Dialogue, rather, has everything to do with gaining insights and growing in understanding

while being in conversation…dialogue resembles roundtable talks."[271] To engage in

dialogue, all participants must learn to listen to each other, treat each other with mutual

respect, and be ready to examine his or her own motivations, actions, and speech. This is

true of every form of dialogue between practitioners of different religious traditions,

including the dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience.[272]

Whether engaging with religious diversity in shared public space, partnering across

religious communities for a common goal, learning about each other's beliefs, or sharing

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[271] Christopher H. Grundmann, "Introduction: Interreligious Dialogue and Peace in the Age of Globalization," in *Interreligious Dialogue: An Anthology of Voices Bridging Cultural Religious Divides*, ed. Christopher H. Grundmann (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2015), 17.

[272] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, last modified 1991, accessed May 30, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/index.htm.

in a spiritual practice, the concept of dialogue necessitates openness, respect, and mutuality from all participants.

Openness, respect, and mutuality are the ideals of interreligious dialogue, but they are not always the reality. Suspicion, mistrust, and prejudices can be present in dialogue participants even when everyone present has good intentions. Mutuality can also be hard to achieve when the implicit and explicit hierarchies between and within religious communities are not addressed. Many religious traditions have an internal hierarchy of authority and leadership. This can result in clerics of religious traditions being taken more seriously in interreligious dialogue contexts than lay practitioners even when the lay practitioner has more knowledge of the tradition. There are also power dynamics at play between religious traditions in terms of majority/minority status demographically, who has invited who to the dialogue table, who has set the agenda of the dialogue, who has provided the funding for the dialogue, etc. Gender also influences the manner in which individuals are accorded respect and authority both within and across religious traditions.

The practices of re-membering, discernment, and mutuality have potential to dismantle some of the hierarchies that often operate in situations of interreligious dialogue. These practices provide resources for Christians to identify such instances of hierarchy and tools which Christians can offer as methods of changing the dynamics of the dialogue. Christians, shaped by the Body of Christ metaphor, are equipped to help the process of interreligious dialogue itself become more just, respectful, open, and mutual. Of course, these practices of re-membering, discernment, and partnering will only be able to influence the process of interreligious dialogue if they are willingly

accepted by the other participants of the dialogue. Christians will need to use the attitudes of welcome, humility, respect for diversity, comfort with change, and compassion as they learn whether or not other interreligious dialogue participants are willing to engage the practices of re-membering, discernment, and partnering as tools for revising interreligious dialogue itself.

Discussions of the method of interreligious dialogue rarely speak of discernment specifically, but reflection on the process of dialogue itself often uses terms similar to that of discernment. Leonard Swidler, Catholic theologian and pioneer of contemporary interreligious dialogue, defines interreligious dialogue as "an experience of encountering people of different fundamental convictions in such a way that each one's assumptions come to light, and that all can move ahead in reciprocal learning. Dialogue means strengthening and affirming our fundamental beliefs and practices, but transforming them as well."[273] Change and growth are central in interreligious dialogue just as they are in discernment processes.

Discernment, with its emphasis on listening and self-examination, helps Christians handle the impact of engaging with practitioners of other religious traditions by providing a process through which to examine the experiences and respond to any changes that have occurred. The process of discernment can be used by individual Christians to reflect on their experiences, by the Christian community to learn as a group from the individuals who have engaged in interreligious dialogue, and by groups of

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[273] Leonard Swidler, "A Vision for the Third Millennium the Age of Global Dialogue: Dialogue or Death!," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 1 (Spring 2002): 8.

practitioners from many different religious traditions. Interreligious groups also need times of reflection and discernment in order to understand the significance and value of the encounters. It would be helpful for all involved in an interreligious context that Christians already have experience with discernment processes, just as it would be helpful if other participants have discernment processes from their religious traditions to offer.

Discernment processes within interreligious encounters is also useful in navigating the differing motivations held by the various participants. Christians may be reaching out to practitioners of other religious traditions for help with what Christians view as kin-dom building practices, but practitioners of other religious traditions will have their own reasons for engaging with Christians or working toward greater justice in the world. Jews may engage in justice building because of teachings on *tikkum olam*, or world repair, in which sparks of the divine, present throughout creation, need to be gathered back together. The concepts of *karma* and the cycle of *samsara* may provide the motivation for Hindus to help the oppressed. The process of discernment can allow the diverse participants to discuss their various motivations for coming together to work for justice. This may result in a reshaping of an individual's motivation for participation: a possibility Christians should be relatively comfortable with due to the familiarity the Body of Christ metaphor provides them with being changed by interpersonal encounters.

The mutual relationships Christians form within the Body of Christ are also the type of relationships most useful in contexts of religious diversity. Mutuality and respect are necessary for the encounter to remain a positive experience. Swidler writes, "only

equals can engage in full, authentic dialogue...[and] each partner is to come to the dialogue with total sincerity and honesty."[274] The integrity of all involved needs to be honored and the gifts and graces of each participant should be allowed space to benefit the group. Having learned to share power and authority within the Body of Christ, Christians can approach practitioners of other religious traditions prepared to work with their interreligious partners instead of dominating them.

Re-membering is also a practice used within the Body of Christ that has direct use within contexts of religious diversity. The history of encounters between communities and individuals of different religious traditions has often been contentious and violent. That history is present in any engagement between persons who practice different religious traditions. To ignore that history is to ignore important experiences in the individual and collective lives of religious communities. There is a need when encountering practitioners of other religious traditions to acknowledge, lament, respect, and honor the past in order to move forward into a positive future. For instance, if Christians refuse to acknowledge the fear some Muslims have experienced in the United States because of anti-Islamic rhetoric and discrimination, Muslim partners will likely feel that their experiences are being disrespected. Christians need acknowledge the reality of these kinds of experiences in the Muslim community, demonstrate their disapproval of such actions, and express sorrow for the hurt members of their religious

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[274] Leonard Swidler, "Understanding Dialogue," in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, ed. Rebecca Kratz Mays (Philadelphia, PA: Ecumenical Press, 2008), 14-15.

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community have caused. Re-membering is a practice that can assist Christians and their interreligious partners in this kind of endeavor.

Christians, as well as practitioners of other religious traditions, have past actions to repent of in terms of their relationship with religious diversity. Both historically and contemporarily, Christians have acted in ways that limited the religious freedom of other people, physically harmed practitioners of other traditions, and discriminated against non-Christians. Many of those negative actions were undertaken in the name of God. The Body of Christ metaphor helps Christians to acknowledge that these actions were wrong and contrary to the will of God, because they conflict with the kin-dom building practices Christians are called to through Jesus Christ, while re-membering helps Christians move forward from past actions.

Difficult conversations are not new to interreligious dialogue. The violence which has occurred between religious communities is often a motivating factor behind the creation of interreligious organizations and dialogue groups. Such organizations know there is a need to address the violent events and attitudes which precipitated their formation. The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel specifically includes "discussing core issues of the conflict" as part of their program to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians.[275] They use a process of professional facilitation to guide dialogue participants through a discussion that is "often very painful, jarring and difficult, often jolting to the ears and eyes, since it is often the first time that much of these core

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[275] Ron Kronish. "The Other Peace Process: Inter-Religious Dialogue in the Service of Peace in Israel and Palestine," *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 20/21 (2015): 91.

issues are discussed in a supportive atmosphere which allows and fosters this kind of conversation."[276] Rather than being a hindrance to the peace process, they "have found that this phase of the dialogue process sensitizes people in a profound and personal way to the double narrative of [the] conflict."[277]

Christians can offer the process of re-membering as another method for past hurts to be named and brought forward into the collective consciousness of a particular interreligious group. Re-membering can provide the opportunity and space necessary for religiously diverse groups to work through deep wounds that would otherwise function as barriers to positive engagement. This is not an easy process, but it is a valuable one. Both Christians and practitioners of other religious traditions have actions for which to repent and wounds in need of healing. Without a process like re-membering, religiously diverse groups may not have the tools necessary to deal with the challenges their contentious history presents to forming partnership relationships with each other.

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[276] Ibid., 93.

[277] Ibid., 94.

Conclusion: Being the Body of Christ

This dissertation has focused on articulating Christian identity through the Body of Christ metaphor in order to assist Christians in approaching religious diversity with openness and respect, but there are numerous other topics that have only been touched upon. The Body of Christ metaphor stresses the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals and communities, but the concepts examined in this dissertation are just as interconnected and interdependent with other theological, ethical, and practical areas. There is more work to be done regarding multiple religious belonging, the nature and purpose of interreligious dialogue, the formation of Christian community, understandings of soteriology and Christology, the role of the Holy Spirit, etc. It is impossible in the space of this dissertation to draw out all of the implications of viewing Christian identity through the Body of Christ metaphor, but there are a few points discussed below that demand further attention.

Approaching Religious Diversity by Examining Christian Identity

This focus on Christian identity through the Body of Christ metaphor offers a different and necessary perspective on engaging the reality of religious diversity than do the fields of theology of religions and comparative theology. Constructive projects like this one offer resources from within the Christian tradition to assist Christians in approaching religious diversity in their daily lives. In the vein of Catherine Cornille's work to develop criteria for interreligious dialogue, this interpretation of the Body of

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Christ metaphor encourages Christians to utilize teachings from their own tradition in order to discover their own motivations and methods for engaging religious diversity.[278] This project examines how the Christian tradition shapes Christians in regards to religious diversity rather than seeking a neutral or common perspective with which practitioners of all religious traditions can agree. It recognizes that practitioners of different religious traditions will encounter each other already influenced by their respective traditions and seeks to utilize the particular teachings of Christianity to assist Christians in how they engage religious diversity.

The understanding of Christian identity developed in this dissertation allows Christians to suspend judgement on the salvific efficacy of other religious traditions or the ability of individual practitioners of other religious traditions to access truth about God. It is possible to hold any of the three main theology of religions positions, exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism, and understand one's Christian identity through this interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor. Yet it is likely that individuals influenced by this Christian identity, having been encouraged to engage practitioners of other religious traditions through practices of peace and justice building, will find themselves leaning away from the exclusivist standpoint. The knowledge gained about individual practitioners and their religious traditions through working side-by-side should create respect for both the practitioner and the tradition. This respect can be expected to influence how a Christian views the possibility of salvation for the religious other, and

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[278] Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008).

most likely will result in an inclusivist or even pluralist position. The processes of discernment Christians utilize within the Body of Christ and in their engagement with religious diversity can assist them in making sense of any such change in their personal theology of religions.

Approaching religious diversity through a particularly Christian lens can, however, result in a Christian hegemonic understanding of practitioners of other religious traditions. If Christians, called by the Body of Christ metaphor to partner with the religious other, do not honor the true nature of partnership relationships, they may come to view their religious partners as unknowing participants in the creation of God's kin-dom. Christians could fail to recognize and honor the diverse motivations and perspectives of those working alongside them in works of love, justice, and mercy, in effect extending Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christian" perspective.

The nature of partnerships can assist Christians in avoiding this problematic perspective. True partnerships require all involved to seek understanding of each other. To be in partnerships with a practitioner of another religious tradition, Christians must intentionally learn about the perspective and motivation of their interreligious partner. The beliefs and practices of other traditions will need to be understood in order to comprehend why a practitioner of another religious tradition has chosen to engage in practices like peace building. Christians and persons in other religious traditions hold different motivations for engaging with each other. These different motivations will be explored as mutual relationships are formed, resulting in a process similar to the method of comparative theology. Everyone involved may find their understanding of the

common work changing, and Christians, having been influenced by the Body of Christ metaphor, are prepared to process this change through the discernment skills practiced within the Christian community.

Limitations & Conclusions

There are many avenues touched upon in this dissertation that have not yet been fully explored. For instance, the concept of hybridity is much richer than its use in this dissertation to discuss the external relationships between people. Hybridity can, and is, utilized to examine the internal relationships between different aspects of identity within one individual. Religious identity was used as one, fairly fixed, aspect of identity that influences and is influenced by other aspects of identity when, for a growing number of people, religious identity itself is hybrid. While I hope to have pointed toward the ways in which hybrid identity and the fluidity of boundaries can assist Christians in understanding the reality of multiple religious belonging, I acknowledge that this is an underexplored aspect of Christian identity and religious diversity. My desire to offer a resource that could be accepted by Christians currently apprehensive about religious diversity has limited my ability to discuss the full spectrum of Christian identity in a religious plural world.

Throughout this dissertation I have juxtaposed the initial fear and mistrust religious diversity can create with the comfort, confidence, and openness Christians can gain from understanding their religious identity through the Body of Christ metaphor. This is an assertion I want to uphold: the Christian identity shaped by this interpretation of the Body of Christ metaphor can dispel the fear many Christians have about religious

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diversity and cause Christians to be comfortable with the reality of religious plurality.

Yet, I do not mean to imply that the process of understanding Christian identity through

the Body of Christ metaphor or the process of engaging religious diversity is, or even

should be, a comfortable process.

The Body of Christ approach to Christian identity encouraged in this dissertation

places Christians in tension with many dominant Western values. Attuned to the

historical and contemporary imperial forms of Christianity, Christians are called through

their identity in the Body of Christ to dismantle hierarchies, rethink methods of relating

to each other and the world, care for the embodied existence of all people, respect

diversity, and engage in practices of peace and justice. It is not an easy or comfortable

process to reshape the norms and values that have shaped one's identity, particularly

when those norms and values have conferred status and power to an individual as they

have for many White Christians in the United States. Being asked to go through

processes of re-membering in which the past actions that have done harm to others need

to be acknowledged and repented of is difficult and uncomfortable.

Accepting the fluidity of boundaries and the spectrum of human identity as

realities provides conceptual openness to the influence of religious diversity on Christian

identity, but such acceptance does not guarantee that encounters with religious diversity

will always be pleasant. It is challenging to be confronted with different ways of

understanding the divine and humanity's place in the world. It is uncomfortable to have

one's perspective questioned and one's limitations pointed out. However, the processes

of discernment in the Body of Christ can encourage Christians to explore the religious

diversity that was part of Christianity from its very origins. Such discernment does not mean Christians won't feel destabilized while undergoing the process.

The Body of Christ metaphor provides an understanding of Christian identity that assists Christians in responding to religious diversity with openness and respect. The identity formed by the Body of Christ metaphor, including the attitudes and practices contained in the identity, allows Christians to encounter religious difference with confidence and openness rather than fear and exclusion. The metaphor requires Christians to examine their conceptions of embodiment, relationality, diversity, and praxis in a manner that enables Christians to engage difference more hospitably and requires their participation in actions which improve the world in which they live. Christians are attuned through the Body of Christ metaphor to conceive of relations with persons of diverse religions as potential and valuable partnerships rather than threats to their safety and security. The Body of Christ metaphor calls Christians to *be* the Body of Christ in a religiously diverse world by working for God's kin-dom and expanding the lens through which they view the world by being vulnerable to the religious other.

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Wire, Antionette Clark. *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

<div align="center">Curriculum Vitae</div>

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Education

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA
Ph.D. in Constructive Theology and Theological Ethics   2016
Dissertation: "Being the Body of Christ in a Religiously Plural World:
A Constructive Theological Proposal"
Advisor: Dr. Shelly Rambo

Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY
M.A. in Religious Studies, Theology of Religions   2009
Thesis: "Understanding Salvation through the Holy Spirit:
Opportunities for Dialogue"
Advisor: Dr. Paul Knitter

St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN
B.A. Religion and Music   2007
Distinction Thesis: "An Analysis of the Office of Interreligious
Relations and Dialogue of the World Council of Churches"
Advisor: Dr. Anatanand Rambachan

The United Methodist Church
Deaconess   2014
Consecrated to the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner

Awards

Henry Luce Foundation GETI Scholarship
*Global Ecumenical Theological Institute & 10th Assembly of
the World Council of Churches*, Busan, South Korea   2013

Henry Luce Foundation Student Scholarship
2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, Melbourne, Australia   2009

Mark Chriesman Tyson Scholarship
Boston University School of Theology   2009 – 2010

Doctor of Theology Fellowship
Boston University School of Theology   2009 – 2012

Teaching Experience

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA
Teaching Assistant – to Dr. Shelly Rambo in "Constructive Theology"   Fall 2014 & Spring 2013

Collaborated on syllabus and exam development, facilitated
discussion groups, met with students during office hours, and
graded all written work in collaboration with the professor.

**Teaching Assistant – to Drs. Wanda Stahl and Cristian De La Rosa
 in "Urban Ministry Models"**   Fall 2013
Coordinated off-site field visits, met with students upon request,
and graded all written work, including final exam papers.

**Teaching Assistant – to Dr. Thomas Thangaraj
in "Doing Theology in a Global Context"**   Fall 2012
Collaborated on syllabus and exam development, met with students
during office hours, and graded all written work, including final
exam papers.

**Teaching Assistant – to Drs. Elizabeth Parsons, Shelly Rambo,
and Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore in "Practices of Faith"**   Fall 2010 – Spring 2012
Collaborated on course development with teaching team, facilitated
weekly discussion group, met with students during office hours, and
graded all written work in collaboration with the professor.

Eastern Nazarene College, Boston, MA
Guest Lecturer – for "World Religions"   Fall 2013 & Fall 2014
Lectured on the topic of "Christianity Among the World Religions"
to an undergraduate class, provided an introduction to Christian
responses to religious diversity including theology of religions,
comparative theology, and interreligious dialogue.

Related Experience

Andover Newton Theological Seminary & Hebrew College, Newton, MA
**Research Associate for the Center for Inter-Religious &
Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE)**   Feb 2015 – May 2016
Assisted Co-Directors in the evaluation of the CIRCLE Fellowship
Program by interviewing alumni of the program, summarizing and
evaluating data from the interviews, and co-authoring an article
based on the findings.

First United Methodist Church, Melrose, MA
Director of Education Ministries   June 2010 – June 2015
Researched, developed, and implemented Christian education
classes and events for adults, children, and youth.

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA
Research Assistant to Thomas W. Porter, J.D.   January 2015 – May 2015
Obtained resources for professor's research, provided format and
content editing, and assisted in the development of a paper
examining the relationship between jurisprudence and theology.

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA
Research Assistant to Dr. John Berthrong   August 2009 – May 2014
Managed course websites, obtained resources for professor's
research, provided format editing, and functioned as liaison
between students and professor.

Religions for Peace, International New York, NY
Independent Consultant   June 2009 – August 2009
Designed and implemented a system to reformat, sort, and clean
existing contact records in preparation for a company-wide
transition to a new CRM system.

General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious
Concerns - UMC, New York, NY
Ecumenical & Interfaith Research Associate   August 2008 – May 2009
Assisted General Secretaries on programming initiatives and
collected, reviewed, revised, and created resources for distribution
to local churches.

Religions for Peace-USA, New York, NY
Interim Director of Operations   Jan 2008 – August 2008
Provided day to day organizational and financial oversight and
recruited, interviewed, selected and managed a team of volunteer
interns in the development and implementation of programming.

Publications & Papers

Hillman, Anne. Women and Interreligious Dialogue: Themes of Concern. Anna Howard Shaw Center Newsletter, Vol.28, No.1 Fall 2011, 4-5.

"Supporting the Body of Christ: A Theological Exploration of Lay Ministry in The United Methodist Church"
Paper presented at the Lay Order Conference of the Office of Deaconess and Home Missioner, Nashville, TN, September 26-28, 2014
Published online at http://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/gc2016/dhm

"When a Family Member's Faith is Not Yours: Finding Common Ground in a Theologically Diverse Society"
Workshop facilitated at the United Methodist Women's Assembly, Louisville, KY, April 25-27, 2014

"Developing a Feminist Methodology for Interreligious Dialogue"
Co-authored, with Karri Whipple Ph.D. student at Drew University, paper presented at the Where We Dwell in Common Conference of the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network, Assisi, Italy, April 17-20, 2012

"Empowerment by the Holy Spirit: a Study of Spirit Soteriology"
Paper presented at Boston 2010: The Changing Contours of World Mission & Christianity, Boston, MA, November 4-7, 2010

"Reflections from Current Students and New Professionals"

Panelist at Educating Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Leaders for Service in a Multi-Religious World: The American Seminary Context, Boston, MA, April 14-16, 2010

Languages
English – native language
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Memberships
American Academy of Religion
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