The Body as an Alternative: Space for Utopia
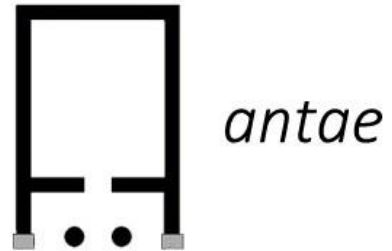
Francesca Borg Taylor-East

The Body as an Alternative: Space for Utopia

Francesca Borg Taylor-East

University of Malta

This essay starts with the query of whether the corporeal body may be viewed as an alternative space for utopia. I shall approach this through a phenomenological framework, considering the spatial aspect of the body specifically through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Following this, I shall consider whether the body can be viewed as a sacred space through certain notions, as well as practices, of the body. In light of this, the initial question posed transforms as follows: can we consider the body as a sacred space, for example, through the acts of meditation and prayer? These considerations will lead to certain others: for instance, if the body can be seen as a sacred space, then is this space a private or public space? What are the implications of the body as a sacred space in a social sphere? If we are indeed able to view the body as a sacred space, this will lead to the consideration of the body as an alternative space for utopia.

This essay shall also briefly tackle what is meant by "sacredness". Here, I outline some definitions on sacredness before focusing on the work of the religious historian, Mircea Eliade, as well as that of the anthropologist Mary Douglas. I address what is meant by "utopia" through the work of Vincent Geoghenhan, who explores the topics of ideology and utopia. I conclude with whether these notions, the sacred and the utopian, can be synthesised through the corporeal body, making the body an alternative space for expressing or manifesting utopia, or traces thereof.

The Phenomenology of the Body

Before moving to the main argument at hand, I shall first justify the body as an inherently spatial entity, the body as being *of* space and not *in* it. The notion of the body's spatiality is of present importance in that this argument approaches the corporeal body as being a sacred space itself, or at the least being spatial while taking on sacred aspects. In order to do this, I will begin by introducing Merleau-Ponty's notion of the perception of space.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the traditional view of space—space as a container—is an experiential error. As David Morris notes, his notion of space is characterised as pre-existing and independent of our perception.[1] Following this, the traditional philosophical view then questions how our depth-perception reconstitutes that already established space. Subsequently, space is viewed as entirely beyond the perceiver, and depth-perception is discussed almost as though it took place wholly within the perceiver. Of course, traditional philosophy felt the need to

---

[1] See David Morris, *The Sense Of Space* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 5-6, 10-11.

acknowledge that there is a crossing between body and world through the body perceiving depth within the world. Traditional analyses of space acknowledge a crossing but simultaneously sever it, either through predominantly viewing space as beyond the perceiver, as did George Berkeley through the given, or as predominantly putting emphasis on the perceiving subject as with Immanuel Kant's categories.

This leads us to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which views our sense of space as arising from the intersection between the body and the world. Through this, the body is not self-contained and neither is the perceived world. Merleau-Ponty's aim is to show that this sense of space is fundamentally rooted within the crossing of body and world. It is perhaps useful to mention here that this shatters the subject-object division held within traditional philosophy on this point. Though we shall not be delving into this, it allows us to conceptualise this crossing of body and world in a clearer light.

Here, I would like to continue in terms of Merleau-Ponty's body schema. *Sens* arises from the movement that crosses body and world; furthermore, this schema needs to be noted as both coming from movement and belonging to movement—it is dynamic. Morris notes that this is based in habit, and it 'crosses over into the places in which we form habits, the places which we inhabit'.[2] In a passage in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty indeed notes that the theory of body schema is a theory of perception, and that the body schema serves as a bridge between the body and the perceived world. Furthermore, it can be said that the body schema communicates *sens* to both body and world.[3]

In viewing space as arising from the dynamic crossing of body and world, we must also understand this crossing more deeply. As read by Morris, Merleau-Ponty shows that '[body] parts are not spread out side by side, but [are] enveloped in each other'.[4] The zones of the body, therefore, must function together in unity. The word "zone" here captures the concept of movement distributed along the body and its prostheses. Enveloping does not occur only at the level of the body; the body's zones envelop one another in perceptual movement. The body's movement crosses with the world; thus, envelopment is not unique to the body, but is found in the movement that crosses body and world. Here, Morris uses the term "envelope" in a descriptive manner:

> Experience discloses beneath objective space, in which the body eventually takes up place, a primitive spatiality of which [objective space] is merely the outer envelope and which merges with the body's very being. To be a body is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily in space: it is of it.[5]

---

[2] For an elaboration of the specific points made thus far, see Morris, pp. 11, 5. Quoted: p. 33.
[3] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology Of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 206.
[4] Morris, pp. 114.
[5] ibid., pp. 118-9.

Continuing the phenomenological tradition, Edward Casey explores the intimate relationship between body and place. Knowledge of place begins with being-in-place.[6] Casey follows Merleau-Ponty in the conception of the body being the first, where one's own body is the necessary and the sufficient condition of being located *here*. Casey notes that this is what Husserl refers to as the "absolute here". Furthermore, the living body has the capacity to regain orientation (after extreme situations of disorientation), or, at the very least, the body has the capacity to 'integrate lostness with an ongoing situatedness'.[7]

The scope of the above section is to illustrate an understanding of spatiality with specific consideration for the corporeal body. The most pertinent point in this section is specifically the spatiality of the body rather than a more traditional philosophical view: for instance, that of the body as inhabiting space, as though space were a container. In this sense, we have an understanding of the body as primarily spatial—it is *of* space itself. In doing this, now we can move on to the question of whether the spatiality of the body, its movements, and its relation to the world can take on the attribute of sacredness. Furthermore, we shall see whether this attribute of sacredness orients the body towards certain social ideals which contain traces of utopia.

Sacredness of the body

Can the body's spatiality be acknowledged as a sacred space? Furthermore, why look at the body as a sacred space? The former question will be answered throughout this section of the paper. Let me first start, however, with the latter. As we have seen through the brief analysis of phenomenology above, our sense of space is derived from the crossing between body and world, and that we are *of* space. Furthermore, the body is the "absolute here" from which we stand in relation to the world. This next section aims to illustrate how the body takes on certain meanings and symbols, precisely due to bodily experience being a shared human experience. It is not only the point in which we can have a sense of space, but it is also the point through which we begin to grapple with structures, reproduce beliefs, manifest them, and relate them to others. We may retain the phenomenological sense of the body as the "first here" or "absolute here", while also attributing it to the symbolism of the body as a way for human beings to grapple with the world. At the very least, we symbolise through the body as it is our first point of possible reproduction and manifestation of structures of the sacred, as well as the values that the sacred represents and the ideals that it maintains.

In terms of "sacredness", I shall here begin with an opening definition by Richard Jackson and Roger Henrie, which reads as follows:

> Sacred space is characterised by that portion of the earth's surface which is recognised by
> individuals or groups as worthy of devotion, loyalty or esteem. Space is sharply discriminated

---

[6] See Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 46-51.
[7] ibid., p. 51.

from the non-sacred or profane world around it. Sacred space does not exist naturally, but is assigned sanctity as man defines, limits and characterises it through his culture, experience and goals.[8]

I argue that this definition may be extended towards the corporeal body. This notion of the sacred shall now be viewed through the lens of Mircea Eliade's work, and, subsequently, the body's symbolism through Mary Douglas's work. I shall go on to show how the body becomes a symbol for society, and which may in turn take on the attribute of the sacred depending on the culture and its corresponding rituals; in becoming a symbol for society, we can begin to understand how the body represents the society's values. Thus, the definition given by Jackson and Henrie may not only be extended, but made manifest through the body in its symbolism. An analysis of the sacred and the symbols of the body will allow us to understand the possibility of how, within social practices, the body is already directed towards utopian notions and social ideals.

Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, examines numerous concepts, such as the sacred and the profane, as well as religious sites and phenomena. Eliade's work has been criticised for a number of reasons, amongst which is his appeal to mystical concepts. Eliade advocates notions such as "asceticism", "absolute liberty", "plentitude of life" and "harmony with the universe".[9] Furthermore, as Tony Stigliano forwards, Eliade may be criticised on the basis of adopting and applying a construction of myth and mythology to sociopolitical issues. His mythological project would then become the basis for a Romanian fascist movement from 1919 to 1940.[10] In *The Hidden Intentions of Eliade*, Yo-Han Yoo advocates that Eliade's work should neither be completely defended nor rejected. While Eliade's work should be challenged, and one must also criticise his method as it seeped into the sociopolitical realm, one should not disregard his work in relation to the deconstruction and interpretation of myth and religion. Eliade took on comparative studies in myth and religion from both Western and Eastern cultures, interpreting different paradigms in rituals, communities, and popular doctrines. Yoo notes how Eliade's analysis of Western and Eastern cultures refuses to adopt the dominant West-centred perspective.[11] Though Eliade's work should be approached with caution, there is value in understanding the notions of the sacred and the profane through the lens of his work, especially since these notions are grounded in the analysis of culture, religion, myth, as well as historical significance.

---

[8] Richard H. Jackson and Roger Henrie, 'Perception Of Sacred Space', *Journal Of Cultural Geography*, 3(2) (1983), 94-107, p. 94.

[9] See, for instance, Wilhelm Danca, 'The Origin of the Concept of Mysticism in the Thought of Mircea Eliade'. <http://www.academia.edu/11698172/The_Origin_of_the_Concept_of_Mysticism_in_the_Thought_of_Mircea_Eliade> [accessed 11 May 2017].

[10] See Tony Stigliano, 'Mircea Eliade And The Politics Of Myth', *Revision*, 24(3) (2002), 32-38, p. 32.

[11] Yo-han Yoo, 'The Hidden Intentions Of Eliade? Re-Reading Critiques Of Eliade From The Perspective Of Eliade's Expectation Of The History Of Religions', *Religion And Culture*, 11 (2007), 223-244, p. 231.

Randall Studstill argues that Eliade's work is threaded by a phenomenological approach, and he delves into this in some detail in his essay 'Eliade, Phenomenology, and the Sacred'. Studstill examines Eliade's interpretations of key concepts; in his words:

> [T]he structure Eliade considers fundamental—that which defines the religious as religious is the intentional relation between the believer and the sacred, where "sacred" is phenomenologically understood as that category of objects construed in the mind of the believer as both ultimately real and other with respect to the profane/material world.[12]

Eliade views the religious phenomenon as "hierophany" which, in his work, is seen as any 'manifestation of the sacred' which incorporates two elements: the 'modality of the sacred', and its expression in concrete historical phenomena. This 'modality of the sacred' is a phenomenological expression which refers to the structure of relation between the believer and the sacred. Relating to the history of the phenomena, the historical incident is a particularised history which underlies this entire structure of the believer, revealing some of the attitude that man holds toward the sacred. The history of hierophany outlines how the sacred was conceived and experienced. In approaching the religious as hierophany, Eliade focuses on the religious significance to the believer, either through conscious experience, belief or attitudes.[13] He gives the example of a hierophany which was left behind by the history of a group of people: a Semitic cult which adored a divine couple: Ba'al, the god of hurricanes and fecundity, and Belit the goddess of fertility, especially of the earth. Jewish prophets viewed the belief, and the cult, as sacrilegious; the old Semitic cult of Ba'al and Belit, however, persisted in their adoration for the deities. The divine couple became the object of worship, symbolising religious values of life and the forces of sexuality, fertility and fecundity. Eliade estimates that adoration of the couple was maintained for hundreds if not thousands of years until another hierophany became dominant. Indeed, in his analysis of hierophanies, he notes that these may take on 'universal value and significance, whereas others may remain local or of one period - they are not open to other cultures, and even fall eventually into oblivion even in the society which produced them'.[14]

According to Eliade, the attitudes and beliefs of the experiencer, as well as the rituals and symbols of religion (such as artefacts, myths, texts, and so on), express particular ways of relating to and understanding the sacred. For Eliade, all the above encapsulates a religious way of being-in-the-world; any of these may express a 'system' or 'structure of relation'. One of the most prominent examples, in fact, is the relation of the sacred to the real in the structure of relations. This is almost indistinguishable from the believer's conscious attitude of the sacred as being real in an ultimate sense. Furthermore, a belief or artefact represents a method for relation with the sacred and is generally not self-consciously or explicitly represented in the phenomenon itself.[15]

---

[12] Randall Studstill, 'Eliade, Phenomenology, And The Sacred', *Religious Studies*, 36(2) (2000), 177-194, p. 178.
[13] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns In Comparative Religion* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp. 2-4.
[14] *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 3-4.
[15] See Studstill, pp. 178-180.

Since hierophany is rooted in history, Eliade demonstrates how the 'understanding of a [religious phenomenon] will always come about in relation to history'.[16] In the Latvian tradition, for example, the great goddess was Laima, seen as the goddess of destiny, presiding over marriage, birth, bountiful harvests, and the general well-being of animals. Being a goddess who presided over birth and destiny, Eliade notes how she would be an archaic religious figure, one that belonged to the early stages of Latvian paganism. However, there have also been disputes of Laima's role in terms of historical alignments—Eliade cites Oskar Loortis, who argues that the figure of Laima would be too recent to be considered as an Indo-European divinity, and further notes her role as "goddess of destiny" as secondary.[17] In *'Zum Problem der Lettischen Schnicksalgöttinen'*, Loortis argues that Laima was the secondary manifestation of the figure of the Virgin Mary in Latvian religious folklore. Given Loortis's claim, Eliade goes on to note that it was more likely for the Virgin Mary to have substituted the ancient pagan divinities, borrowing traits from the Virgin mythos. Furthermore, aiding in the contradiction of Loortis's claim, there is speculation that the notion of a divinity who protects one during childbirth is more archaic than that of destiny, and thus the argument that divinity came to rule both of these aspects is reformulated through having a longer history than Loortis claims.[18] In looking at the historical traces, we can at least begin to understand the values that took precedence during that time period; moreover, we can see the influence of different cultures resulting in sharing and adapting certain attributes of their divinities.

In this way, Eliade shows that the history of religion is very much about a devaluation and a revaluation process—that is, a history of what people have valued as sacred. Furthermore, he goes on to outline that religion or religious experience is always rooted in historical context. While he does not go on to explore religious experience through its historical context, he does examine them as hierophanes, grounded in the religious domain. He argues that religious phenomenon are *sui generis*, which, in the view of other scholars, is an argument that proves definitely problematic since their approach of locating meaning is through the non-religious—namely the cultural, the historical, the political, and so on. Studstill examines Eliade's work with the example of prayer, seeing how, indeed, there may be non-religious aspects involved in this activity; however, according to Eliade, the activity of prayer is a distinct mode of experience and is consistently identifiable as such.

We have already briefly seen Eliade's understanding of the sacred, where 'every religious act and every cult object aims at a meta-empirical reality [that is, the sacred]'; religious symbols (a medium of the sacred) 'reveal reality' or 'a profound structure of the World'. Through this understanding, we can see religious symbols pointing towards a higher realm of reality or the divine—they strive toward a more profound image of the structure of the World and are

---

[16] *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 2.
[17] See Mircea Eliade, 'History Of Religions And "Popular" Cultures', *History Of Religions*, 20(1/2) (1980), 1-26.
[18] See Oskar Loortis, 'Zum Problem der Lettischen Schnicksalgöttinen', *Zeitschrift Für Slavische Philogie*, 26 (1957), 78-103.

contrasted with the everyday. Studstill goes on to comment that, '[f]urthermore, this "divine personality" is not to be simply looked upon as a mere projection of human personality'.[19]

Eliade claims that the *sui generis* aspect in the activity of prayer is present even if the objective towards which the prayer is directed does not exist. It is the act itself that is of interest, which has its own structure and its own set of qualities. Eliade does not deny that the cultural, historical and political realms are a part of the constitution of religious structures; in his view, religion does not occur in isolation from other domains. However, his argument pertains to religious experience constituting a unique domain, implying that it is superior to other domains of human life, arguing that the religious domain is that which explicitly shows the manifestation of the sacred. In this sense, as Yoo points out, he seems to rigidly combine the religious and the sacred, which causes him to proclaim one domain as superior over the rest.[20] His reasoning is an existential one, arguing that religious structures of consciousness stem from the circumstances of *being* human. He argues that our existential predicament allows for "archetypal intuitions" to form and in turn they become expressed as religious forms. Eliade's contention, then, is that the divine personality is not a mere projection or reflection of a human one and, in this sense, does not assert that the sacred is real, but, rather, that divinity is a manifestation of how believers come to terms with their humanness. This argument implies Eliade's consideration of the religious worldview as existentially valuable.

In looking at the religious domain as *sui generis*, Eliade is then criticised for an application of a religious and mythological project on the sociopolitical realm. One recalls how Stigliano argues that this extension of his decontextualised mystical thought of myth and religion over to the sociopolitical realm is a dangerous one in lending itself to fascist movements. However, Eliade should not be dismissed outright. In establishing a new field, he also creates a discourse and practice which resisted the method of instrumental rationality which dominated during that time period; indeed, even advocates of rationality should observe rationality's limits. Though Eliade is heavily mystical in his work, which he is both praised and criticised for, he remains highly influential in comparative mythology and the history of religion.[21]

Massimo Rosati's article 'The Archaic and Us' offers three main criticisms, originally of Jürgen Habermas's work on the sacred, but which can here also be attributed to Eliade: the '[r]efusal to fully recognize the normative dimension of the post-secular', the 'refusal to decouple the sacred', and the 'refusal to grasp the sacred as an unconscious dimension of modernity'.[22] Both Habermas and Eliade, also directly acknowledged in Rosati's work, tend to couple the sacred and the religious too rigidly; moreover, they do not make a clear distinction between a religious and a secular sacred. Rosati argues that this decoupling would aid the discussion on how the notion of

---

[19] Studstill, pp. 181-2.
[20] See Yoo.
[21] See Stigliano, pp. 35-37.
[22] See Massimo Rosati, 'The Archaic and Us: Ritual, Myth, the Sacred and Modernity', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 40(4-5) (2014), 363-368.

the sacred and human rituals affect both the religious communities as well as secular identities for both the individual and the collective. In Rosati's view, if we were to observe the sacred in both the religious and secular domains, the sacred appears without character. In this sense, the sacred is uncovered within its historical context and can be seen as 'a condition of the possibility of society'.[23] From this sociological point of view, the sacred is thus the outcome of human praxis, manifested through ritual action. It stems out of self-creation and self-representation which forms a part of our cognition, morality and judgements.

Rosati does, however, seemsto agree with Eliade that the sacred, without claiming it an ontological structure, seems to be a 'universal historical structure of human consciousness'.[24] In this sense, one can understand Eliade's approach to religion as an unmasking of the sacred in that domain, while also acknowledging that the sacred does not exist wholly within one domain, but appears throughout as a facet of humanity. It is here important to remember, as previously noted by Stagliano, that the rituals of one domain should not be overlapped or wholly applied to other domains, thus hindering us from viewing the sacred in other aspects of life.

In attempting to view the body as a sacred space, the argument now turns to Mary Douglas's work as elucidating the relationships between symbols, rituals and the body. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas writes of how '[t]he body [...] provides a basic scheme for all symbolism. There is hardly any pollution which does not have some primary physiological reference. As life is in the body it cannot be rejected outright'.[25] Here Douglas unmasks the symbolism of the body as being the root of both the sacred and the profane, or the pure and the polluted. In not being able to reject the body, and I argue that it is precisely due to it being the "absolute here", we cannot but start from the position of our own corporeality. By trying to make sense of body and world, as well as their relationship, we are using our body as the starting point of this symbolism. The body has been pondered, disgraced, and upheld, allowing us to trace back an acute fascination with our own corporeality, as the following passage from Ovid demonstrates:

> But one more perfect and more sanctified, a being capable of lofty thought, intelligent to rule, was wanting still man was created! Did the Unknown God designing then a better world make man of seed divine? or did Prometheus take the new soil of earth (that still contained some godly element of Heaven's Life) and use it to create the race of man; first mingling it with water of new streams; so that his new creation, upright man, was made in image of commanding Gods? On earth the brute creation bends its gaze, but man was given a lofty countenance and was commanded to behold the skies; and with an upright face may view the stars:—and so it was that shapeless clay put on the form of man till then unknown to earth.[26]

Douglas outlines notions of the body as being a simultaneously private and social symbol during rituals, and takes on meaning in terms of sexuality for both the pure and polluted, including the

---

[23] Rosati, pp. 365.
[24] ibid., pp. 365-6.
[25] Mary Douglas, *Purity And Danger* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), p. 165.
[26] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. by Aaron J Atsma, trans. by Brookes More. Book I, lines 76-88. <http://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidMetamorphoses1.html> [accessed 3 May 2017].

affirmation, as well as the wholeness, of the body. Within the next section, these concepts shall be discussed in some length, illustrated through examples. This shall allow us to view certain bodily symbols as sacred, while then giving us the basis to understand these symbols as orienting the body towards utopian ideals.

In looking at symbolism in rituals, Douglas notes that 'the more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wise and certain its reception'. The human body is a complex structure with different functions, lending itself to being symbolic for other complex structures in being able to stand for any bounded system. In looking at human rituals, she argues that we must first be prepared to view the body as a symbol for society, which allows for an accrediting of the powers and dangers of the social structure to become manifest and reproduced in the human body; in her words, 'what is being carved into human flesh is an image of society'.[27] Body symbolism makes part of a common array of symbols precisely due to the emotive aspect of the individual's experience.

In looking at rituals related to the body, both themes of purity (or sacredness) and dirt (or pollution) can be found in its symbolism, but the same aspects of the body can be thought of very differently depending on the culture. In some cultures, for example, female menstruation is regarded as a lethal and feared danger, and in others not at all. Excreta is dangerous to some and a joke to others. In the Hebrew religion, blood is thought of as the source of life, but should not be touched except in the sacred conditions of sacrifice. Douglas notes how sometimes the spittle of a person in a powerful position was thought of as effective in blessings. In looking at the cultures and the rituals surrounding them, the body is found mirroring the social situation of belief structures; according to her, this symbolism leads back to the experience of the self with its body, allowing for insight into the self's experience in society.[28] In this sense, as we shall examine more closely in the penultimate section concerning utopia, if the society had ideals and utopian strives, these values can also manifest in bodily symbolism.

In viewing rituals and symbols, the body takes up symbolism to reproduce both the sacred and profane, both of which can manifest simultaneously. We can even see instances of retaining the purity of the body for religious purposes, for instance through virginity, or self-control from the sinful nature of the body:

> Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. [...]. You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.[29]

> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from your sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, not in passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.[30]

---

[27] Douglas, pp. 115, 122.
[28] See ibid., pp. 121-2.
[29] I Corinthians. 6. 18.

The body as a symbol allows for the manifestation of both the sacred and profane, as well as different ways to reproduce these. In this way, the body can be thought of as an instrument *for* the sacred, to 'glorify God in your body', and *as* the sacred itself, as the object of devotion. Through the above examples, we can already see the symbolic aspect of the body as trying to retain social ideals and uphold what is important to a particular culture. For example, in the Sanskrit symbol of *lingam* (figure 1), a phallic symbol, the male and female genitalia are depicted alongside one another. This symbol is associated with male and female deities, usually as the forceful energy of the god Shiva alongside the *yoni*, the creative energy of Shakti—the female energy.[31] It is seen as a representation of the origin or source and is thus associated with creation, the primal source of all being, represented by a triangle with its apex pointing downwards, symbolising the female sexual organ from which life originates. The *lingam* symbol depicts the indivisible two-in-oneness of the male and female relationship, representing sexual practices, meditative processes and a mental union between the sexes.[32]

Figure 1. Image of the symbol *lingam*.

The symbol *lingam* would represent the unity of the deities in their femininity and masculinity; the gods and goddesses were represented alongside one another. Furthermore, a god would always have a consort, a goddess, and vice versa. The gods are thus illustrated in dual form so that when one was invoked, the other was necessarily remembered. For example, the consort of Brahma, god of creation, is Sarasvati, the goddess of the 'stream of speech', rhetoric, wisdom, intuition and the divine word, also known as patron to the arts, especially music.[33] Furthermore, it is understood that she is closely related to fertility and purification. The creation of the Sanskrit language, particularly its script which is known as the Devanagari script, is attributed to her and

---

[30] I Thessalonians 4. 3-8.

[31] See Margaret and James Stutley, *Harper's Dictionary Of Hinduism* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 351.

[32] See Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, Stephan Schuhmacher and Gert Woerner, *The Encyclopedia Of Eastern Philosophy and Religion* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1989), pp. 313, 432.

[33] Fischer-Schreiber et al., p. 308.

Brahma. She holds the divine word unmanifest, whilst Brahma creates the Sanskrit symbols within reality.

Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu, the maintainer god, and in the Rig Veda her name is defined as "fortune". In the Atharvaveda, she is looked to as the entity that brings fortune as well as misfortune, referring back to the notion of continuously maintaining balance. She is also seen as the goddess of surplus and happiness, as a symbol of beauty, and is often represented bearing a lotus blossom. Legend has it that she laid upon a lotus blossom upon creation. In another story, Lakshmi rose from the foam of the ocean, similar to Aphrodite in Greek mythology, another example of perfection. Upon birth, she becomes Vishnu's consort, and myth also has it that when the god and the goddess become incarnate, they are also united within their various forms of incarnation. For instance, when Vishnu was born as Parashu-Rama, she was his consort Dharani, and when he was born as Rama, she was Sita.[34] The relationship persists even from one incarnation to another. Shiva, the destroyer god, is joined by Parvati as consort. In Pauranic mythology, Parvati is closely related to notions such as World Mother, known as *shakti Jagadamata* and with *prakriti*, or natural language. In a specific myth, she is depicted as having a playful character, innocently covering Shiva's eyes. In order to prevent the whole of creation from being enveloped into darkness, a third eye appeared in the middle of Shiva's forehead.[35]

Through these diverse examples of divine couples, we can see the symbol of *lingam* having its roots within the divine and the mythological, wherein one deity is seen as inseparable from its counterpart and wherein the consorts complement one another. This takes on a corporeal representation in the symbol of *lingam* through male and female genitalia, proliferating the values of and what is important to that particular society; the symbol represents the ideals of that society and a utopian orientation of that society. In this case, these values are seen as the complementary aspects through the inseparable nature of the sexes.

However, in trying to preserve the purity of the body in sexuality, as demonstrated above, there is also the possible fearing of the pollution of the body. In Hindu culture, for instance, female purity is carefully guarded, and those women who have sexual relations with a man of a lower caste are brutally punished in consequence. This cultural aspect is asymmetrical for males and females since, if a male were to have intercourse with a female from a lower caste, he need only cleanse himself with a ritual bath. The male does, however, retain sexual responsibility since, according to Hindu belief, there is a sacred quality to the man's semen which should not be squandered; indeed, in such a culture, it is better to not have sexual contact with women than to waste one's sperm. In the analysis of rituals and their symbolism, we must recognise such rituals as an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture and set of beliefs. It is exactly through these beliefs wherein experience is controlled: rituals manifest these beliefs and maintain social

---

[34] See Stutley and Stutley, p. 160.
[35] See ibid., p. 222.

relations through which people get to know their own society. Ultimately, 'rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body'.[36]

In looking at the possibility of understanding the corporeal body as a sacred space through its symbolism, worship—religious or otherwise—can manifest *with* or *through* the body. Moreover, the body can be seen as sacred, a concept which need not adhere to religious practices. While avoiding a discussion of how these religious texts or symbols are in themselves viewed—in terms of contemporary relevance, for instance—this argument proffers the view that, through these rituals, artefacts and ways of devotion, the body can indeed be seen *as* a sacred space. My argument lies here: the spatiality of the body takes on sacred attributes, not necessarily excluding the profane, derived from cultural ritual. This points towards a symbolic mirroring of the body signifying a particular worldview, which can in turn reveal the ideals found in specific (possibly utopian) societies.

The act of prayer, as well as meditation, takes place through certain gestures of the corporeal body which can be socially recognised as devotion. There are certain social conventions which surround both prayer and meditation, both as sacred texts as well as spaces which establish and maintain these gestures; moreover, within the social realm, there is a hesitance to disturb someone who is praying or practising meditation. On both a personal and social level, prayer and meditation are gestures which symbolise sacredness, which are in turn enacted by the corporeal body. In light of the argument surrounding utopia, one must also take into account established social structures which are already oriented toward utopian thought through the ideals that the symbols and rituals proliferate.

Utopia

Utopia is popularly seen as the attainment of an ideal or perfect society, although there is vast academic discussion as to what this ideal society truly is. Following this, would we be able to synthesise the sacred space of the body with the general concept of utopia? The acts of prayer and meditation may be both an individual or collective act, ones which provide an element of peace and hope to the person enacting it. These gestures are recognised social symbols which point towards the understanding of a "sublime" or an "ideal" state, and thus allow us to view the corporeal body as being an alternative space—one which affords a glimpse of utopia—especially since certain sacred rituals, such as prayer or meditation, can and are performed collectively, pointing towards ideal states or values of the individual and society.

In this section, I would like to tackle what exactly is meant by the notion of "utopia", here focussed through all points addressed above. Drawing upon Vincent Geoghengan's essay 'Ideology and Utopia', what is meant by these notions according to Geoghengan's reading of

---

[36] Douglas, p. 129.

Karl Mannheim[37] and Ernst Bloch[38] shall be briefly outlined, especially in terms how utopia and ideology are related.[39] It is important to note that the underpinnings of Mannheim's work on utopia and ideology largely follow Marxian and Hegelian gestures of the dialectical theory of history; Bloch, on the other hand, himself undertakes a Marxian critique of Mannheim's work. In looking at a comparison between Bloch's and Mannheim's thoughts, we can begin to understand utopia in relation to ideology; in seeing the body as being an alternative space to utopia, we must also understand utopia in relation to the ideas of certain social structures and symbols.

The title of Geoghengan's work explicitly refers to Mannheim's work on utopian studies, according to whom both ideology and utopia are forms of 'reality transcendence'. While this quickly implies that both ideology and utopia are incongruent with "reality", they are also, however, themselves incongruent in different ways. As Geoghengan points out:

> [I]deologies are antiquated modes of belief, products of an earlier, surpassed reality, whilst utopias are in advance of the current reality; ideologies are therefore transcendent by virtue of their orientation to the past, whilst utopias are transcendent by virtue of their orientation to the future.[40]

According to Mannheim, ideologies are situational transcendent ideas which become the mode of conduct or good-intentions for individuals; though practically, he argues, the meaning of this behaviour is rendered distorted. Mannheim states that the relationship between utopia and the existing order of society is a dialectical relationship. In his view, every culture allows ideas and values to arise which contain concentrated, unrealised, and unfulfilled propensities of the society. These represent the needs of each age and burst through the limits of the social order. The cycle continues with the existing order giving rise to new utopias, leaving freedom of development for other orders of existence.[41]

In Geoghenan's illustration of Bloch's utopia, it is revealed that Bloch does not have the same dual understanding of ideology and utopia, and nor does he claim their incongruence with the real. Bloch agrees with Mannheim regarding the distortions of ideology; Bloch claims, however, that the utopian is an undistorted form of thought, embodying the analytical and the aspirational, which Bloch refers to as *docta spes*, or *comprehended hope*; this is what Geoghengan in turn refers to as 'educated hope'.[42] Following this, Bloch argues that utopian traces can be found threaded throughout history. In *The Principle of Hope*, he states:

> Egyptian architecture is the aspiration to become like stone, with the crystal of death as intended perfection; Gothic architecture is the aspiration to become like the vine of Christ, with the tree of

---

[37] See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology And Utopia*, trans. by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1954).
[38] See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle Of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).
[39] Vincent Geoghegan, 'Ideology And Utopia', *Journal Of Political Ideologies*, 9(2) (2007), 123-138.
[40] ibid., p. 124.
[41] See Mannheim, pp. 175-6, 178-9.
[42] See Bloch, p. 7, and Geoghegan, p. 129.

life as intended perfection. And in this way the whole of art shows itself to be full of appearances which are driven to become symbols of perfection, to a utopianly essential end.[43]

On this point, Bloch does not maintain Mannheim's linear temporality. In his view, then, history contains utopian moments, and the past can therefore still hold a utopian charge in the contemporary world, signifying how the archaic may nonetheless retain influence on the contemporary. Following this, transcendence of the past is not necessarily the defining characteristic of ideology.[44]

Geoghengan subsequently analyses the concepts of ideology and utopia in conjunction with religion. Bloch claims utopian traces are found to be powerful within religion, and views religion as the embodiment of some of the most powerful aspects of human hope. Bloch distinguishes between the notions of the ideological and the utopian within the religious, according to whom traces of utopia may be found in both the religious texts and practices—and these hold a contemporary significance. Religious texts are studied and noted for their ideological aspects, and subsequently tie the text to the dominant attitude of that time frame. The utopian elements in the text so point towards 'a richer form of being'; Bloch, in fact, recognises that the great questions of meaning are explored through religion, and 'that which seems at first sight furthest from the human— the divine—is actually the most intimate'.[45] In conclusion of this brief analysis of Geoghengan's reading, Bloch's and Mannheim's arguments, though differing greatly, both explore the relationship between the ideological and the utopian; furthermore, both explore key concepts in their function, that of hope, fear, and self-deception.

Utopia may be understood, at the very least, as the aspirations or attainment of a richer form of being, of hope for humanity as made especially evident through Bloch. I do not wish to conflate the notion of religion as an institution with that of the sacred, and here there must also be an acknowledgement of some forms of sacredness as adhering to other domains of human life (as already discussed through Eliade). Crucially, linking the notion of utopia with the body returns us to the idea that bodily symbols are not private ones, but ones socially recognised and which generally take place within established society. The body becomes a symbol rooted in the aspect of a shared experience of corporeality; moreover, from the perspective of the believer, as well as their social context, the body may become a symbol for the sacred—a sacred act, a sacred gesture, even a sacred body—which contains traces of the utopic. The body which engages in such gestures and rituals—for example, prayer or meditation—does so in line with an established belief system. Though these symbols may be misinterpreted by an outsider, we must also view them as mirroring an established social structure, one which orients itself towards specific ideals.

The symbols of the body—*for* and *as* the sacred—are both rooted in ideology, in the set of beliefs of a particular society, and allude to a striving towards hope and a higher form of being. This is further perpetuated by the society that manifested the bodily symbol. The point here is

---

[43] Bloch, p. 65.
[44] See ibid.
[45] ibid., pp. 133-4, 136.

not that certain symbols of the body are utopian states, but rather that the sacred bodily symbols contain utopian traces rooted in ideology:

> I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [...] for as in one body we have many members, and the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ.[46]

In looking at such symbols in belief systems, we can view the body as being oriented towards the divine, but also as possessing utopian principles—the ideals of a given society. The body becomes simultaneously symbolic of what is beyond society as well as what is of societal value. The symbolic rituals reveal the values of that society and manifest through the shared human experience of the body; they are, to recall the words of Geoghegan, 'educated hope'. In this way, the body is not only a possible alternative space for utopia, but already manifests utopian traces through established sacred bodily symbols. Furthermore, we can see bodily symbols of sacredness being influential in the contemporary as we continue to mirror the structure and beliefs of society—its ideals and values—through our own bodies.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have viewed the body from the perspective of phenomenology in order to come to grips with corporeal spatiality. I have discussed the definition of the sacred at some length, arguing that the body can be seen as sacred through its symbolic nature. The sacred, stemming from the ideology of specific cultures, can then become symbolised through the gestures, instances, attributes, and rituals of the body. Furthermore, these symbols are ones socially recognised, stemming from the social paradigm itself. With reference to these symbolic aspects, the body may be regarded as a space that is worthy, at least to some, of devotion and esteem, or a medium to worship the worthy. Furthermore, to briefly apply and re-iterate Geoghegan, these sacred bodily symbols reflect an educated hope, rooted in ideology and which contain utopian traces—indeed, these sacred bodily symbols are already oriented towards and represent social ideals which contain traces of the utopian.

What is the use of this in utopian studies? What insights may we gain from viewing the body itself as containing traces of the utopian through particular social symbols? Firstly, we may view utopia, or traces of it, as manifesting through the corporeal body itself. Secondly, we may be underestimating the powerful nature of the body and the social symbols that are perpetuated daily. Indeed, if the body may be both a sacred space and as striving towards the utopian, we may also need to continue analysing the body as the "absolute here" in relation to the religious, social, and political realms.

---

[46] Romans 12. 1, 5.

List of Works Cited

Bloch, Ernst, *The Principle Of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986)

Casey, Edward S., *Getting Back Into Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009)

Danca, Wilhelm, 'The Origin of the Concept of Mysticism in the Thought of Mircea Eliade'. <http://www.academia.edu/11698172/The_Origin_of_the_Concept_of_Mysticism_in_the_Thought_of_Mircea_Eliade>

Douglas, Mary, *Purity And Danger* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2015)

Eliade, Mircea, 'History Of Religions And "Popular" Cultures', *History Of Religions*, 20(1/2) (1980), 1-26

——, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996)

Fischer-Schreiber, Ingrid, Stephan Schuhmacher and Gert Woerner, *The Encyclopedia Of Eastern Philosophy and Religion* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1989)

Geoghengan, Vincent, 'Ideology And Utopia', *Journal Of Political Ideologies*, 9(2) (2007), 123-138

Jackson, Richard H., and Roger Henrie, 'Perception Of Sacred Space', *Journal Of Cultural Geography*, 3(2) (1983), 94-107

Loortis, Oskar, 'Zum Problem der Lettischen Schnicksalgöttinen', *Zeitschrift Für Slavische Philogie*, 26 (1957), 78-103

Mannheim, Karl, *Ideology And Utopia*, trans. by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1954)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology Of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962)

Morris, David, *The Sense Of Space* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004)

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. by Aaron J Atsma, trans. by Brookes More. <http://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidMetamorphoses1.html>

Stigliano, Tony, 'Mircea Eliade And The Politics Of Myth', *Revision*, 24(3) (2002), 32-38

Studstill, Randall, 'Eliade, Phenomenology, And The Sacred', *Religious Studies*, 36(2) (2000)

Rosati, Massimo, 'The Archaic and Us: Ritual, Myth, the Sacred and Modernity', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 40(4-5) (2014), 363-368

Stutley, Margaret and James, *Harper's Dictionary Of Hinduism* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984)

Yoo, Yo-han, 'The Hidden Intentions Of Eliade? Re-Reading Critiques Of Eliade From The Perspective Of Eliade's Expectation Of The History Of Religions', *Religion And Culture*, 11 (2007), 223-244