'YET IN MY FLESH SHALL I SEE GOD':

Culture and Embodiment[1]

By JANE BUCKINGHAM

THE BODY IS A DEFT THING. Ensouled, essential to our personhood, compact or clumsy, our body gives us shape and resonance in the world, proposes our sexuality, expresses personality, connects us with others. It resists stasis. In death it exchanges living change for decay and Christians anticipate the body's glorification and reunion with the soul in God.

But perhaps such affirmations are simply cultural constructs, born of my Australian, primarily Ignatian, Catholic heritage, humanities education and a romantic disposition! Does culture bind me into one understanding of body in relation to personhood and to God? Will my view be different from that of someone from a different cultural background? To some extent the answer to both questions is yes.

I was first struck by the power of cultural assumptions about the body to influence a person's sense of self and sense of relationship with God when, during my post-graduate research in south India, I spoke with leprosy sufferers in the Hindu community. Many had been driven out of their families while others had left freely, not simply out of fear of contagion, but because of a firm belief that leprosy was a sign of God's curse, a punishment for bad action in a previous life. The presence of a leper in the home would inflict not only social ostracism on the family but separation from God.

I discovered here also, however, that cultural assumptions about the body are not necessarily binding. Among the people I met one man, an elderly street Hindu *brāhman*, who had remained within his family and found a deep personal fulfilment through his experience of leprosy. It seems that cultural assumptions may condition understandings of the body in relation to personhood and to God, but they cannot determine the relationship itself. Many leprosy sufferers had felt less than human, and irrevocably separated from God, because of cultural perceptions of their disease. Others however, from the same Hindu culture, had experienced God breaking through their cultural bonds to free them

into a new perception of their diseased bodies and of their value as people beloved of God.

Taking a wider context, in the last twenty years, and on good evidence, a consensus view has emerged in the social sciences that our understanding of the body is in large part socially and culturally constructed.[2] Our understanding and experience of God also has been shown to be culturally defined to a great extent. Steven Katz in his work on the 'conservative' character of mysticism has argued convincingly that, even among such radical spiritual innovators as the mystics, both the experience of God and the language and form in which that experience is expressed are shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to the experience.[3]

Equally, however, much contemporary discussion in the social sciences on the relationship of the body to culture bears out my experience in India. Though our understanding of the body in relationship to the self and to God is socially and culturally conditioned, it is not necessarily socially and culturally determined. Many social scientists now find abstract conceptualizations of the body in terms of 'representation' or 'text' or 'socio-cultural construct' to be inadequate, since such ideas neglect the concrete actuality of the experienced, 'lived body'. It has been found that fundamental questions in contemporary western philosophy concerning the relationship of the embodied person to technology,[4] particularly the ethical and emotional relationship of the embodied person to medical technology, cannot be satisfactorily answered without taking into account embodied *experience.*

Extending this insight, I would suggest that it is also inadequate to see our embodied experience of God as inevitably culturally determined. It is not only an impoverishment but also an impediment to greater insight to discuss personhood and embodiment in ways which neglect the actuality of God's, however understood, engaging in relationship with the embodied person. As we are confronted in modern culture with new opportunities for the body's transformation through the use of donor and artificial organs and limbs and, more controversially, through genetic engineering, there is an urgent need to affirm the reality of God's relationship with the embodied person. Only by seeking the fullest understanding of the relationship between the embodied person and God will we be able to respond truthfully to the challenges of modern medical technology.

I cannot hope to describe the exact relationship between culture and the experience of God. Rather I would like to offer a reflection on the experience of God in two religious cultures, Christian and Hindu, and

in our own modern 'secular' culture of technological medicine. My suggestion is that while different cultures propose and endorse different perceptions of our bodies in relationship with God, these perceptions are not binding. Our understanding and experience of God may be culturally conditioned, but God and our desire for God cannot be limited by culture. The desire to know and experience the action of God in the fissures of body and soul, the desire to *be* known utterly in body and soul by a living and active God and to be touched by that God – these can and do carry us beyond existing culture.

Paul

In the Christian tradition, Paul's sense of gaining life through being 'crucified with Christ' (Gal 2:19) offers a rich opportunity for reflection on the presence of God in human life, and the breaking open of old cultural assumptions about our embodied relationship with God.

In Paul's culture, which still influences us today, the predominant influences were Greek and Hebraic. The Greek tradition understood the body to be the temporary, perishable vessel of the soul which only in death freed the soul into eternal life. By contrast, the Hebraic tradition affirmed the centrality of the body in personal relationship with God. The body is made by God, male and female, in God's likeness (Gen 1:27), infused and animated by the breath of God, of life itself (Gen 2:7). Body and soul are essential to personhood and to relationship with God: the body is the expression of the soul.

The Hebraic tradition recognized a likeness between the divine body and our own and an intimate, life-breathing relationship between the embodied person and God. However, the profound mystery of God's redemptive participation in our physical life through Jesus offered to Paul and offers to us an entirely new relationship between body, soul and God (2 Cor 5:17–18). In Genesis, before the Fall, Yahweh breathes life into the body, an expression of God's creative power in relationship with the person. The body is made in the likeness of a God of strength and beauty and power; the same God whom Ezekiel prophetically describes giving flesh to the bones of the dead and breathing life into them to raise an army (Ezek 37:4–10).

In Christ, life is given to our fallen body and soul through the weakness and suffering of God in physical death. The sin which separates us from God has yet brought God even closer in love. God is no longer distant and supreme, bestowing power and beauty on the human form. God is so close as to be physically one with us, living the same embodied life, sinless yet tormented by sin and death, struggling to love and to

live in God. We are no longer simply in the image of God; God embodied in Christ is one of us.

Paul, burning with knowledge and love of Christ, can still barely grasp the profound mystery of the new, life-giving, embodied relationship with God offered through Christ, and how a divine love expressed in death transforms his sense of life and selfhood:

> I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith; faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake. (Gal 2:19–20)

In terms of Jewish expectation of a powerful Messiah, it is inconceivable that the physical horror and public humiliation of Jesus' slave's death on a Roman cross could be redemptive; for the Gentiles it can only be incomprehensible 'folly'.[5] Yet for Paul, and for us, it is the source of life. Because of our own weakness and vulnerability to sin, the bodily weakness of God as 'Christ crucified', not the power and authority of God as expressed in the Hebraic tradition and embodied in Hebraic law, redeems Paul and redeems us:

> . . . the law of the spirit of life in Jesus Christ has set you free from the law of sin and death. God has done what the Law, because of our unspiritual nature, was unable to do. God dealt with sin by sending his own Son in a body as physical as any sinful body and in that body God condemned sin . . . if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you. (Rom 8:1–3,11)

Through the death of Jesus, living in the body is no longer a sign of failure and separation from God but of life in the spirit.

In Jesus the body is not, as in Hellenic thought, something intrinsically separate from the soul, an impediment to freedom in eternity. Nor is the body simply a source and expression of antagonism to God, as it can seem when felt to be in conflict with an apparently divine Law, whether Judaic, Catholic or any other (Rom 7:21–23). Jesus embodies a new relationship between the whole person, body and soul, and God, which places the body not in opposition to the desire of the soul for God and of God for us but in the heart of redemption.

In Jesus, the body is where we experience both the death rooted in our sinfulness and our life in the Spirit. It is in our body that we feel the

conflict between our resistance to God and our desire for God (Rom 7:14–24). Even harder to bear, it is where we feel the splintering blade of God's loving desire for us, touching 'the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or the joints from the marrow' (Heb 4:12), paring back, healing, redeeming every particle of our embodied self. And it is in our body that we experience rare moments of connection when resistance is gone and mind, heart, soul, body, all that make us in God's image, seem at rest.

The Siddhas

The sense that experience can challenge a culture's understandings of the relationship between God and the embodied self is by no means unique to Christianity. In south India, from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries,[6] Tamil *siddhas*,[7] philosopher-poets renowned for their goodness, wisdom and supernatural powers,[8] offered a profound challenge to the dominant *advaita brāhmanic* Hindu religious culture, based in Vedic literature dating from the second millennium before Christ. In particular, the *siddhas* condemned *brāhmanic* concepts of the relationship between body, soul and divinity, expressed in the theories of *karma*, caste and the reincarnation of souls, which, within the terms of *brāhmanic* Hinduism, excluded many people from God. The *siddhas* proposed a new relationship between body, soul and divinity which, not unlike Paul's preaching of Jesus, affirmed against prevailing cultural understanding the essential role of the body in bringing the person into unity with God.

In the *advaita* tradition, the person was not a unique creation consisting of a single, coexistent and integrated body and soul. The 'true self' was immortal, bodiless and identical with the 'ultimate reality', the 'supreme person', *Brahman*.[9] The 'true self' however, ignorant of its identity with *Brahman*, was bound into the cycle of *karma* (deeds), transmigration and reincarnation until, realizing its true identity, it attained *moksha* (liberation) and, released from bodily form, was absorbed into *Brahman*.[10] The body thus did not participate in final unity with *Brahman* but was part of the 'true self's' bondage in ignorance to the material world.[11] The body into which the soul was reincarnated was determined by its *karma*, that is, how well it lived the life appropriate to its previous incarnation, and the degree of its knowledge of identity with *Brahman*. Those souls with no sense of their true identity as *Brahman* were reborn in animal, bird, fish or reptile form.[12] Only by incarnation into a human body could the soul attain *moksha*.[13]

However, within *brāhmanic* Hinduism, not all human bodies offered the same opportunities for the reincarnated soul to gain knowledge of

the divine. The degree to which the soul could gain access to *Brahman* through contact with sacred Vedic texts and ritual was determined by the *varna* (caste) status[14] of the body into which the soul was reborn. There were four *varnas: brāhman*, the intellectual and priestly class; *rajanya*, later known as *kshatriya* (ruler), the kingly and warrior class; *vaishya*, the landlord and merchant class and *shūdra*, the labourer, artisan and serf class. Although the traditional allotment of specific types of work to each *varna* has meant that social and economic status is often closely linked with *varna* status, *varna* is not simply a social or economic hierarchy. Rather, it is a ritual order, originating in the ritual sacrifice of *Purusha*, the male form of the cosmic being, as described in the *Rig Veda*.[15] *Varna* status specifies a person's degree of ritual purity,[16] that is, their fitness to perform religious rites.

Only the 'twice-born',[17] that is, men of the three highest *varnas*, were permitted access to the *Vedas*, believed to hold the knowledge and wisdom needed to assist the soul to *Brahman*. The *brāhman*, born of Purusha's head, the source of heaven itself, was the purest on the ritual scale. Thus he was the custodian of Vedic religious knowledge and responsible for the performance of ritual. Those reborn into a *brāhman* body had the greatest opportunity to attain *moksha*. The *shūdra*, formed from *Purusha*'s feet, the source of the earth,[18] furthest from the divine and closest to the material world, was the least pure within the *varna* system. Even lower than the *shūdra* were the 'outcastes', mentioned in the *Upanishads* as those with such bad *karma* that they are as impure ritually as a dog or a pig and so, like animals, reborn outside *varna*.[19] Those reborn as *shūdra*, or outside *varna*, were excluded from contact with and knowledge of *Brahman* through Vedic ritual and text. Thus they were impeded by their incarnation from knowledge of their true identity as *Brahman* and thus from *moksha*. Those born into the female body of any *varna* were excluded from Vedic religion because of menstruation and childbirth, both considered sources of profound ritual pollution. Since caste status theoretically could not be changed during a current incarnation, women of any *varna*, *shūdras*, and the vast number of those reborn outside *varna* could only gain access to Vedic knowledge and ritual, and thus to God, through a higher rebirth.[20]

The *siddhas*, most of whom were non-*brāhman*,[21] vehemently opposed the *brāhmanic* spiritual monopoly and despised Vedic learning as the path to God. They refuted *karma* and reincarnation, and advocated knowledge, attention to the care and discipline of the body through yoga and medicine, and good conduct as the means of gaining eternal life and the true liberation of body and soul in God. Though *siddha*

thinking considered the soul as the life force of the body and, like *brāhmanic* Hinduism, held the soul to be identical with the divine, the soul was not seen as the 'true self' and could not exist apart from the body. Body and soul were mutually dependent: both were essential to personhood and both were essential to unity with God. Tirumūlar, writing in the seventh century, encapsulated the concept in one stanza:

> If body is destroyed, soul is destroyed;
> and one will not attain true powerful knowledge.
> Having acquired the skill to foster the body,
> I cherished the body, and I fostered the soul.[22]

In *siddha* thought, as in Paul's experience of Jesus, the prevailing cultural understandings of the body's relationship to personhood and to God are overthrown. The body is no longer the temporary abode of the 'true self', each incarnation signifying different degrees of fitness to approach God through Vedic knowledge and ritual. For the *siddhas*, the person is one body and one soul destined together for immortality in God. The soul can only live in God through the body. In the words of *siddha* Rōma Rishi: 'If you ask what is the sign of true liberation of body and spirit, it is the physical body aglow with the fire of immortality'.[23]

The *siddhas* were not the only critics of *brāhmanic* Hinduism. Their popular contemporaries, the *bhakti* poets, also rejected the *brāhmanic* idea that contact with God was dependent on the body's *varna* status and thus on the person's access to Vedic religion. For the *bhakti* the ardent soul's loving desire for God could overcome all the limitations of *varna*. If the soul yearned for God, God could annihilate the devotee's *karma* and free their soul, no matter what the *varna* status of their body.[24]

The *bhaktis* were, however, less radical than the *siddhas* in their understanding of the body's relationship to God. The *bhaktis* shared with *brāhmanism* the belief that ultimately only the soul, freed from the body, could truly exist in God. For the *siddhas*, by contrast, the body was not irrelevant to relationship with God, but rather essential to it. Body and soul together were destined for God. The *bhakti* poets replaced the Vedic path with ecstatic worship of a personal God in shrines and temples. But for the *siddhas* such worship was as futile as the Vedic path, since God was already present within the devotee's body. The *siddha Sivavākkiyar* chastised both *bhakti* and Vedic adherents: 'If you could learn to know yourself first, the God in temple will dance and sing within you', and urged all to: 'Know well that Godhead is right there within you, and stand still!'[25] *Siddha* refuted not only the dominant

brāhmanic concept of the relationship between body, soul and God but also that advocated by *bhakti*, the most popular and influential protest against *brāhmanic* spiritual ascendency of the time.

The *siddhas*, frustrated by cultural concepts of body and soul which claimed the body to be an impediment to unity with God, reached, like Paul, beyond these cultural limitations to proclaim their salvific experience of God within the body. Although *siddha* philosophy was suppressed by the *brāhmans*, and many writings destroyed, the medicine based in *siddha* philosophy is still widely practised in South India and *siddha* poems are still sung today by India's wandering religious mendicants.[26] Culture, though pervasive and assertive, could not bind either Christian or *siddha* mystics into existing concepts of the relationship between the body and God. For the *siddha*, as for Paul, living in the body was synonymous with living in the spirit.

The culture of modern medicine

In the contemporary world too there are powerful cultural influences conditioning us to deny the importance of the body for an understanding of the human person. These influences come not so much from religious traditions as from the modern culture of technological medicine, which, though originating in the 'developed' West, now exists internationally. Currently in India, as in the West, it is not religious culture but technological medical culture which raises questions about perceptions of the body in relation to personhood and to God. For example, in the south Indian village of Villivakkam, four hundred inhabitants, the majority of them women, have sold one of their kidneys for transplant into wealthy Indians or foreigners, hoping thereby to pay off money-lenders and save their families from crippling debt.[27]

The existence of such a trade in human organs, the rapid progress in the fields of genetic and bio-engineering, and the continuing pressure to find ways of sustaining, transforming and improving the human body are not simply reflections of modern technological sophistication. They suggest also a profound cultural shift in modern understanding of the integrity of the human body, the reality of physical suffering and death in human life, and ultimately of the relationship between the person and the divine.

Modern 'secular' culture no longer sees life as Renaissance Christendom saw it, as a time of preparation for death and eternity during which the soul is tempered and purified by patient endurance of suffering. Few of us hope to learn the art of dying well.[28] In 'secular' culture there is a strong tendency to seek in medicine and technology the promise of salvation and eternal life previously sought in religion.[29] Like the

siddhas we now see in the medical transformation of the body the means to 'quality of life' but, unlike them, we too often attend only to the life of the body without concern for the life of the spirit.

Those who have had the privilege of sitting with a friend as they slowly turn to face physical death have perhaps had a similar experience to myself: surprise, profound relief and joy to find that in the gradual loss of physical and mental capacities, the person I knew was not lost, but simply that the physical expression of her self was changing. Blind, speechless, shuddering in pain or paralysed, unaware and exhausted beyond movement, she was still present. Her self, body and spirit, expressed before in walking, speaking and doing, was now incarnate in stillness and silence, asking and deeply needing a more tender, more subtle attention than ever before in more boisterous times.

The enormous value of medical technology, particularly organ transplants, in alleviating physical suffering and enabling us to live full rich lives and come peacefully to death cannot be denied. However, medical transformation of the human body is often driven by fear that physical decline and death entail loss of self. Yet such experiences as a friend's slow death can show that selfhood may be physically expressed in many different ways, and that the essential value of a person is not diminished by the loss of their physical health. There is a modern tendency to perceive personhood in physical rather than spiritual terms and the consequent anxiety to protect and enhance the physical completeness and strength of the body. This can easily lead to the discarding of any concept of the human person as of intrinsic worth and justify the plunder, and even farming, of body parts from those less powerful in material and physical terms.[30] Such anxiety, coupled with wealth and technological power, makes the poor, the weak, the physically and mentally disabled, profoundly vulnerable to commodification and exploitation by those determined to keep health and life at any cost.

While the challenge to contemporary spirituality is to remember and to affirm the equal significance of the body with the soul in personhood and in relationship with God, the challenge to medical technology is not to forget the soul in the overwhelming concern with the body. In a technological culture, where we are fearful and ashamed of death, it is not easy to face a God who suffered weakness, pain and death and difficult to trust that in death, life can exist most profoundly.

Medical use of donor organs, and of artificial body parts, and particularly experiments in developing animal organs for transplant purposes[31] and in human genetic engineering[32] – all these can seem, as did the first autopsies in the West,[33] an almost blasphemous intrusion into

the body, opening to human intervention a world previously designated for God alone and threatening our understanding of our physical selves as unique creations of God. It is essential now not to be bound by cultural perceptions of the body which deny or disregard the spirit but rather to find where God is most present in the complex relationship of the person to medical technology. In a language accessible and valid for secular culture, we must resist and modify any technologies which persecute the spirit, and assert the need to attend to God in every aspect and at every stage of medical 'progress' so as to ensure that it is truely human in its endeavour.

NOTES

[1] With sincere thanks to Bill and Sue Emilsen and the staff of Camden Theological Library, Centre for Ministry (Uniting Church in Australia, NSW Synod) for suggesting and providing so many books and to Richard White for astute and generous comments on earlier drafts of this article. The title quotation is from Job 19:25–6 but is perhaps best known to many from its setting in Handel's *Messiah.*

[2] Bryan S. Turner, *Regulating bodies: essays in medical sociology* (London, 1992), p 25.

[3] Steven T. Katz, 'The "conservative" character of mystical experience' in *Mysticism and religious traditions* (Oxford, 1983), pp 1–60.

[4] Turner, pp 8, 32.

[5] Lucien Richard, 'The many deaths of Jesus', *The Way* vol 33, no 4 (Oct 1993), pp 289–290.

[6] Kamil Zvelebil, *Tamil literature* (Wiesbaden, 1974), p 55; Kamil Zvelebil, *The smile of Murugan on Tamil literature of south India* (Leiden, 1973), p 228.

[7] In Tamil, the term *siddha* referred to one who possessed *siddhi*, that is 'power, prowess, strength and ability', and had thereby gained supernatural powers.

[8] *Ibid.*, p 225.

[9] Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu religious tradition* (California, 1971), p 39.

[10] R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford, 1966), pp 58–9; *Taittirīya Upanishad* 2.1–6, in Wm Theodore de Barry (ed), *Sources of Indian tradition* (New York, 1958), vol 1, pp 27–28.

[11] *Chāndogya Upanishad*, 8.7–12 in *ibid.*, pp 28–31.

[12] Zaehner, p 60.

[13] *Ibid.*, p 63.

[14] *Varna*, literally 'colour' in Sanskrit, is often identified as 'caste'. However the two terms are not strictly interchangeable. The relationship between the *varna* and 'caste' systems is complex and controversial. They are homologous systems, both describing a ritual hierarchy with socio-economic implications. The relationship is best explained by the introduction of another Sanskrit term, '*jāti*', 'the form of existence fixed by birth', so that *varna* means 'category' in contrast to *jāti* meaning 'caste'. *Varna* is the classical theory of hierarchical ritual relationships; *jāti* is the caste system as it can be directly observed. *Varna* is an ideal rather than an actual model of society which, even today, provides a reference point for actual *jāti* groups in the Indian caste hierarchy, broadly indicating their ritual status. Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications* (New Delhi, 1988), pp 72–3. Dumont's work and M. N. Srinivas, 'Varna and caste' in *Caste in modern India and other essays* (Bombay, 1962), offer a valuable introduction to the complexities of the relationship between *varna* and caste in Vedic literature and in modern Indian society.

[15] Klaus Klostermaier, *The body of God: cosmos-avatara-image*, The 1983 Charles Strong Memorial Lecture (South Australia; Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1983), p 2.

[16] See Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London, 1978) and Dumont, mentioned above, for an introduction to the concept of ritual pollution and purity and its practical regulation in daily life through which the Indian caste system is maintained.

[17] Males of the three highest *varnas* underwent an initiation ceremony which accounted for a second birth and so were considered to be 'twice-born' within the same incarnation. Zaehner, p 38.
[18] *Rig Veda*, 10.90 in de Barry, p 15.
[19] Zaehner, p 59.
[20] *Ibid.*, p 12.
[21] Kamil Zvelebil, *The poets of the powers* (London, 1973), pp 132–3.
[22] Zvelebil, *Murugan*, p 228.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*, p 206; Zaehner, p 126; J. T. F. Jordens, 'Medieval Hindu devotionalism' in A. L. Basham, *A cultural history of India* (Oxford, 1975), p 266.
[25] Zvelebil, *Murugan*, p 230.
[26] *Ibid.*, p 236.
[27] Coralie Younger, 'Kidneys; lifeblood of a poor town', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 March 1991, p 23; Peter Hillmore, 'Blood money', *Observer Magazine* (England), 7 July 1991, pp 14–16.
[28] Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the silences: God, medicine and the problem of suffering* (Grand Rapids, 1990), pp 98–101.
[29] *Ibid.*, chapter 2, 'Theology, theodicy and medicine', especially pp 62–64.
[30] See for example, Anthony Krohn, 'The anencephalic: scrap, spare parts or person?', *St Vincent's Bioethics Centre Newsletter* vol 8, no 2 (Melbourne, June 1990), pp 16–19.
[31] See for example, David Concar, 'The organ factory of the future?', *New Scientist* vol 142, no 1930 (18 June 1994), pp 24–29.
[32] For a cautiously optimistic view of genetic engineering see Max Charlesworth, *Life, death, genes and ethics: biotechnology and bioethics* (Sydney, 1989), chapter 4, 'The ethics of genes', pp 80–95.
[33] Turner, p 50.