

Towards a theology of the body

“God created man in the image of himself; in his own image he created him. Male and female he created them.”

Even when those words were first written down, probably somewhere in the sixth century BC, their authors knew that God is profoundly different from humanity; the reverse conclusion (*God is in a human image*) is sternly forbidden at every point in the evolving story of Israel's faith. The first commandment is against “the making of an image of God to worship it, in the shape of anything known in the heavens, the earth, or the underworld”.

Even the least scientifically- or philosophically-trained of us will feel great tension at this point. Thomas Aquinas reminds us: *there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses*. If what we sense around us were unable to teach us the nature of God, how could we claim to have any knowledge of it?

The Scriptures unbend at this point, and begin to speak of the God's will to make himself known. This results in the phenomena which make up *the sacred history of the Universe* – as opposed to the unfolding of a blind process of evolution: in the first place its *creation*, in which God not only forms intelligent beings with whom he can communicate, but expresses himself in the mode of his making. The notion of “creating wisdom” gives the cosmos the power of communicating the nature of the Creator: God, as it were, is prepared to sign his work of art.

Secondly, in the details of history, the Maker of the Universe is implicated in complex ways: his appearance as an active presence is attested in powerful terms throughout the human history of the world. Here too the notion that human beings are simply *projecting* their own ideas onto the face of the heavens, thus (rather pathetically) worshipping their own desires, fears, or prejudices finds determined and constant rejection; the awareness that the demands of *truth* and *justice*, the vulnerability of *goodness*, and the overarching, mysterious realm of the *holy* bear witness to a dominant reality which goes beyond human understanding, the realm of God. This realm differs from the cosmos in that it is governed by the divine

power, utterly personal, self-sufficient and invulnerable, omniscient, omnipotent, unconditionally free.

Thirdly, the Judaeo-Christian tradition recognises privileged moments where the Creator's decision to reveal himself becomes plain in an identifiable experience at a particular place and time. Furthermore, the choice of those who are to receive such knowledge is inscrutably and unpredictably made, in keeping with the distance between human perception and the divine mind. (The areas where God is wont to be perceived often have to do with the margins of human competency: where human powers fail, the revealing God is encountered.)

The Body

The senses, which are the ports of the intellect and thus of all personal experience, *reside in the body*, which is archetypically vulnerable and prone to distortion. The human personality, in its power to reflect on itself, knows that there is a distance between itself and the body. The personality is capable of perceptions that seem limitless; but the body proves itself constantly incapable of corresponding physical experiences. Bound by time and place, it harbours all kinds of limitations on the soaring of the spirit; this introduces doubt as to the value of the spiritual (what is the point of limitless aspiration, which the body contradicts with growing authority?). There has been a long contestation about the primacy between two modes of understanding humanity. There is a huge spectrum of responses to this debate: the philosopher, the theologian, and the saint at one end of the scale, the pragmatist, the hedonist, and the criminal-against-humanity at the other. Each proposes a different way of understanding the relationship between the body and the spiritual self. Note that the mind can go either way: the most intellectual have displayed the power to turn on the body with disgust, or to espouse it with tenderness. We are not speaking simply about degrees of intellectual apprehension.

Catholic tradition proposes a unified understanding, based on the spiritual possession of free will, and the possibility of divine redemption of the physical world. In the aspiration of the human spirit we share in the likeness to God, who made us to know him as our Maker. In the acceptance of bodily reality we receive gifts with which to exercise our freedom generously and creatively, thus participating in the creation of the world. At every point we are to bear witness in faith to the goodness

and love of the Maker, and our destination to share in the fulness of his life, where all that exists has its origin and its terminus.

It's in this context that the revelation of God reaches its climax in the appearing of Jesus Christ - born into the problematic state in which we struggle to find meaning, but living the life of the self-revealing God. In his nature, unencumbered by the world's understanding which leaves the divine life out of its account (briefly, sin), we apprehend the resolution of our quandary. For this divine response to our questions to fit our condition precisely, it is not enough for him to come into the world as a philosopher, theologian, or saint, casting abroad the light of perfect wisdom. He has to engage the brute force of evil, and to suffer its dominion, the alternative "wisdom" of the world, and *because of the body's enslavement to the world*, he has to go down before it. His own body has to become the scene of a total enactment of the human condition: he has to go (albeit trustfully and sacrificially) into the mystery of death. Without this, we would not be able to receive him as the register, or measure, of our understanding. In the history of the body of Jesus we contemplate the eternal meaning of our own bodily reality, and he does not fulfil this rôle by delivering a selection of new ideas, but precisely by incarnating – embodying – a new kind of life.

In preparation for this rôle, Jesus dies to all alternative interpretations of his life. When these have all been refused, removed, and annihilated, his true life can be seen for what it is. God the Father displays this life to us when the law of death has had its say in Jesus' life. This is the ultimate revelation of God, in which all previous revelations are subsumed, and all future questions are answered. It is called the Resurrection.