Religious Boundaries for Sex, Gender, and Corporeality
By A. Cuffel, A. Echevarria, and G. T. Halkias (eds) (2019)
London: Routledge, 196pp.

Reviewed by George Pati

KEYWORDS: GENDER; SEXUALITY

This edited volume is a collection of 12 essays focusing on different religions, regions, and historical periods, and demonstrating the relational characters of body and religion. The essays collectively argue that the human body is not merely a biological processual system, but also a system producing values and ethical expressions, and that it is inherent in religious narratives. The essays problematize the body, which is often considered as a hindrance in achieving spiritual goals. Drawing examples from various religious narrative discourses, including, Judaism, Islam, Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, the volume succeeds in emphasizing the interdependence processes; that is, the fact that ‘the mind-body co-dependency displays active living surface, a conscious field of sense-based experience’ (p. 8). The essays in this volume can be divided into three broad categories based on the religions under consideration: Judeo-Christian, Asian, and Islamic.

Although Chapter 1 serves as an introductory chapter, it binds the essays with the common thread that the body in inter- and intra-religious encounters do not only manipulate symbols of faith, but also replicate the language of the society and culture. Focusing his attention on biblical literature, Christian Frevel engages in a discussion of sexuality as a delin-eating device and argues that the appropriation of bodies as moral agents reinforces doctrinal agendas and unequal distribution of power through

Affiliation

Valparaiso University, USA.
email: george.pati@valpo.edu

sex. Grounding the discussion on Jewish tradition and literature, Rebecca Lesses, in Chapter 5, examines early Jewish mystical texts and discusses the construction of the ideal human (male) body that allows certain men to enter the divine world, and the relationship between the male human body and divine bodies. In all these instances, Lesses illustrates that women are kept on the outside based on purity rules, while men and angels can dwell together. Examining the Jewish texts, *Toledot Yeshu*, Alexandra Cuffel in Chapter 10 emphasizes the dialogic relationship between Christian and Jewish traditions. Cuffel argues that Jewish narratives of Judas' sexual act in the text reflect Jewish-Christian relations and illustrate early modern European Christian anxieties about same-sex love and its association with non-Jewish and by extension Christian men. From a Christian perspective, Knut Stünkel, in Chapter 6, explores body talk in 'orthodox' Lutheran Protestantism in the eighteenth century, and argues that for Johann Georg Hamann and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger talking about the body was necessary for the salvation of humanity and was a sign of perfection.

Shifting attention to Asian religious texts and traditions, Stephen Eskildsen in Chapter 2 examines Daoist texts and Neidan techniques from China, and argues that sexual body alteration was both a way of achieving spiritual goals, and also a marker for gender demarcation, since the notion of the disadvantaged female body is conveyed and Neidan techniques can make women in some ways equal to men. In Chapter 4, Stephen Berkwitz examines Sinhala Buddhist poetry composed between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, and he argues that the focus of these poetical compositions lies not just on bodies, but on strong men and sensual women. In this way, Berkwitz sheds light on the celebration of the masculine body, and on how in South Asia the sensual bodies of women were supposed to delight and reinforce the masculinity of men. While the previous two case studies examined body, sex, and gender in texts and practices, Adam Knobler in Chapter 7 investigates ethnographic narratives of Europeans in Southeast Asia that challenged gender hierarchy and male dominance based on their accounts of the practice of penis insertion for female sexual satisfaction. Knobler suggests that the depiction of non-European male and female sexuality reflects Christian discomfort toward sexual indulgence and a move by the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition to eliminate sodomy from the Catholic world (p. 108). In Chapter 11, Amelia Hall explores how from the perspective of the Tibetan pilgrim, traversing the internal and external geography of Pemako, the land of 'Lotus Array,' actualizes enlightenment. Additionally, Hall draws a connection between the tantric practitioner's own body, the sacred body of the deity Vajravārāhī, the Diamond Sow, and the sacred landscape. Hall illustrates how the knowledge of the body,

the mind, and the environment informs how tantric pilgrims relate to the landscape of Pemako (p. 173). In other words, she argues that in tantric pilgrimage the subtle interface can bind the body and mind, the external and internal worlds. In the concluding chapter, Vesna Wallace examines Mongolian Buddhist clergy and the institutionalization of sexuality; these monks do not affiliate themselves with Buddhist monastic rules that dictate sexual abstinence, but instead keep wives as per their pastoral culture. Through this chapter, Wallace demonstrates the religious body to be fluid and transgressive.

From an Islamic perspective, Ana Echevarria, in Chapter 3, focuses on the female body in the practice of minority Muslim communities in medieval Iberia, and states that female purity was used as a device for distinguishing Islam from the other Abrahamic traditions and for negotiating Muslim identity under Christian authority. This identity negotiation was based on intra-communal gender differentiation sustained by traditional customs and religious texts. Ulisse Cecini in Chapter 8 surveys Abdallāh's questions that deal with corporeality and incorporeality, the senses, gender, and sex, in order to ascertain their relevance in religious and prophetic discourse in the ninth to tenth century text, *Masā'il 'Abdallāh ibn Salām*. Cecini observes that themes of sex, senses, and gender are used as a language to convey transcendent and religious matters. Yet another example of gender demarcation can be understood in Chapter 9, as Linda Jones explores the relationship between holiness and the gendered Muslim body reflected in the hagiographic accounts of Iberian Andalusī and Maghrebi Sufi saints. Jones argues that the ambivalence in gender identities and gender egalitarianism exemplified in medieval Islamic hagiographies demonstrate that Sufi mystics' bodies serve as public sites and allow them to deviate from normative social boundaries, while focusing on Sufi men as against Sufi women.

Religious Boundaries for Sex, Gender, and Corporeality provides fascinating insights into the discussion of the body in various religions, regions, and historical periods, and it also sheds light on gender and sexuality. In this way, the volume succeeds. The strength of this volume is that it not only discusses religious texts and traditions, but also how in these texts and traditions body, sex, and gender are problematized, and so joins the ongoing discourse on the body and religion.