Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology

By M. V. Roberts (2017)

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Reviewed by Bede Benjamin Bidlack

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In the May 17, 2019 issue of *Commonweal*, Jo McGowan describes the sad experience of burying her daughter Moy Moy. Against all the odds, Moy Moy far outlived the few months the doctors had predicted for her at birth. As she grew, she developed in some ways, but her condition deteriorated at the same time. When she was 16 years old, she needed a feeding tube because she could not swallow. Motivated by Moy Moy, her mother started a school for her where they lived in India. At the funeral, the priest addressed the mourners by speaking of Moy Moy as ‘not normal, not like us,’ and continued to speak disparagingly of her and her condition. He somehow missed the fact that she inspired a school that still serves hundreds of students, attracted over 400 mourners, and was deeply loved by her parents, brother, and sister. In many ways, Moy Moy was more able and powerful than many so-called ‘normal’ people. McGowan writes: ‘She drew people to her in ways we couldn’t understand or explain – things happened around her and because of her that one could only call miraculous.’

The story brings forth two very different people: Moy Moy and the priest. Moy Moy was unable to speak, walk, or swallow. The priest was presumably able-bodied, educated at a seminary, and socially privileged. Although the priest took his own position as normative, Moy Moy was created in the image of God, too. Hierarchical anthropologies place the *imago Dei* in the soul as the seat of reason. If reason cannot express itself or

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is impaired, do these anthropologies in some way render disabled people in relation to abled people 'not like us,' diminished, and created less in the image of God? Based on ability, some people would appear to be more human than others. History tells us about the darkness that follows such thought. Hierarchies of racism, sexism, and abled-bodied-ism have led to injustices and bloodshed. In *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology*, Michelle Voss Roberts wants to challenge hierarchical anthropologies and present a sound, Christian anthropology that eschews ranking groups of people or placing the *imago Dei* in any one location such as the soul.

Voss Roberts finds inspiration in the Hebrew term for the human from the creation story of Genesis: *nefesh* ('living being'). Originating in a different time and place than the Hellenistic period, the hylomorphic definition of *nefesh* is an understanding of the human person that is more holistic. The person is a unified bodyperson, undivided into soul-body dualism with the *imago Dei* located in the soul. Yet the simplicity of *nefesh* is perhaps insufficient to explain the complexity of the human person themselves or in relation to others. To nuance *nefesh* without losing its holistic value, Voss Roberts places Jewish and Christian anthropologies in conversation with non-dual Saivism, as found in the *Paratrisika-Vivarana* and the *Paratisika-laghuvrtti* attributed to Abhinavagupta (ca. 950–1025) of northern India (pp. xxxiii–xxxvi). Thus, *Body Parts* is a theological anthropology drawing upon a comparative theology method.

Body Parts is impressive as a work of comparative theology in that it allows Abhinavagupta's anthropological categories to take the lead. Historically, interreligious conversations tend to adopt the thinking of the dominant tradition. That early attempts to study non-Christian religions or religious theory made all religions sound like some version of Christianity is no secret. Rather than trying to dress Abhinavagupta in Hellenistic robes, Voss Roberts insists that Western anthropologies must try on Indian garments. She does this by structuring the book along the lines of Saivism's *tattvas*, 36 anthropological categories described as types of bodies, or *body parts* (p. xxxix). The chapters correspond to body parts as Abhinavagupta has grouped them: (1) Conscious Body, (2–3) Limited Body (4) Subjective Body, (5) Engaged Body, (6) Elemental Body. The order of the body groups reflects the order in which they appear when emerging from Siva. Each chapter presents challenges and opportunities that the group presents for an expanded, non-hierarchical anthropology. The Conscious Body, for instance, acknowledges the importance of consciousness for anthropology, but raises the problem of people who are unconscious. Voss Roberts offers the image of a coma patient for consideration (p. 1). If the *imago Dei* is

seated in reflective consciousness, is the coma patient only a functioning organism and not human?

What is particularly creative about the structure of Voss Roberts' book is that each chapter concludes with a practice exercise. Her arguments might be persuasive, but they will only motivate a hermeneutical change if they are put into practice. Again, using Chapter 1 as an example, the exposition on the conscious body concludes with a presentation of consciousness awareness exercises, in order to get the reader to try to see for themselves that there are different levels of consciousness which can be unified in simple awareness (pp. 25–8).

The student of non-dual Saivism may wish to see a richer engagement with *Paratrisika-Vivarana* and the *Paratrisika-laghuvrtti*, but Voss Roberts makes it clear that her aim is a non-hierarchical, Christian theological anthropology. Her use of Abhinavagupta is simply to ground her thought through interreligious learning, so as to upset and expand traditional categories. Working from the margins where Christianity meets Hinduism, she is aware of the objections that her approach is insufficiently Christian made by certain theologians or guilty of cultural appropriation by postcolonial critics (p. xxxii). The latter will find a respectful engagement that is disciplined with respect to her non-Christian interlocutor. The former will find their accusations difficult. Voss Roberts demonstrates her command of the Christian corpus by drawing on an array of sources from Protestant to Catholic, from liberationist to Eastern Orthodox. As ambitious as her reading is, she skillfully holds her sources together persuasively.

The argument expands the *imago Dei* from its location in the soul to extend into the body. It not only includes consciousness and reflective consciousness peculiar to humans (Chapter 1), but also includes the material of the body – even the ‘“Less Respectable” Members’ (pp. 109–13) – as reflecting the *imago Dei*. Indeed, reflection is a critical metaphor in both her and Abhinavagupta's anthropology. Voss Roberts wishes to fold the two-dimensional mirror of substance anthropology into a multifaceted jewel, so that the *imago Dei* is reflected in every aspect of the human person and all members of the human family without ranking or judgment. Moy Moy and the priest, disabled and abled, woman and man, white, black, brown, and red are all a reflection of the *imago Dei*, even while reflecting very differently.

The work also takes the liberty to draw upon theological language as metaphor. Metaphorical language is itself constituted by symbols – dynamic signs that point to meaning. These symbols, words, can change. If a symbol is used to point toward something meaningless, we call it *non-sense*. If a symbol is used to point to something different or a new meaning,

as words often historically do, then we may judge whether or not the word is helpful for the meaning we hope to indicate. One word that liberationist theologians like Voss Roberts have an allergy to is *hierarchy*. However, what word is there to replace it? In theological anthropology, the location of the *imago Dei* in reason has privileged the soul over the body, a privileging that finds its extreme expression in the mind–body dualism of modern philosophy. Not remaining there, the implications of this hierarchy find their way into the social order with the consequences that liberationist theologies have tried so vigorously to correct. Voss Roberts offers her anthropology as an alternative to the injustices created by a hierarchical ontology, such as sexism, racism, and anthropocentrism. But hierarchies of injustice are not representative of hierarchy in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, a source Voss Roberts draws upon. Her jewel-like anthropology is in fact hierarchical, at least as it is properly understood by Pseudo-Dionysius.

As Eric Perl pointed out in his 1994 essay ‘Hierarchy and participation in Dionysius the Areopagite and Greek Neoplatonism,’ Pseudo-Dionysius imagines God as the ultimate, transcendent source of all being. Outside of God, nothing exists. God creates by emanating divinity to creatures appropriate to their being. God is present in all beings, and not present in any being (according to Pseudo-Dionysius). The error comes when one interprets the hierarchy of being as levels of being that mediate God’s presence to lesser and lesser degrees as one considers lower levels. In such an erroneous scheme, lower beings would contain lesser and lesser degrees of divinity according to the capacity of mediation of higher beings. However, God’s access to beings does not go through higher beings, in order to reach lower beings. Instead, Pseudo-Dionysius argues that each being is equally full of God’s presence in accordance with its location in the cosmos. Thus, each being reflects divinity uniquely. Human beings likewise reflect uniquely, like a multifaceted jewel to use Voss Roberts’ image (p. xxxvi).

Understood correctly, even using terms such as *higher*, *lower*, or *location* are only helpful to the degree that they draw some distinction which accommodates the delight God takes in diversity. They should not be taken to indicate a value judgment (as proponents of the erroneous understanding of hierarchy would have us believe). Theologians must either become comfortable with the term hierarchy as properly understood, or arrive at new terms and metaphors to indicate order outside of value judgments that privilege certain orientations as foundational. One could simply refer to human beings as ordered, but not provide any content for the term. Alternatively, different, more descriptive words and metaphors could be used. Voss Roberts makes a persuasive argument for a jewel as the theological metaphor for the human being, with facets along the lines of Abhi-

navagupta's body parts. Such an anthropology does justice to the many ways of being human and the integral nature of people as bodypersons. *Body Parts* is an excellent work of comparative, theological anthropology accessible to area specialists and theorists alike.