Christian Flesh
By P. J. Griffiths (2018)
Stanford: Stanford University Press, xviii + 153pp.

Reviewed by Vincent Lloyd

KEYWORDS: CATHOLICISM; FLESH; CLOTHING; FOOD; SEXUALITY; JESUS;
ORTHODOXY

Paul Griffiths is a scholar who sings to his own tune. Those who like his work take him to be a soloist in a chorus of angels. Others hear lyrics and rhythms that conjure a time gone by, a time best forgotten. Indisputably, he has written a book that is smart, clear, pious, and topical. Bodies are in the air, so to speak, and Griffiths offers a guide for how Christians are to talk, and so think, about them. He positions Christian scripture and tradition as authoritative, and he is committed to the posture of orthodoxy, flavored Catholic. Even when he disagrees with Catholic Church teaching, as on the topic of homosexuality, he frames his disagreement in the orthodox category of the *dubium*, a doubt requiring further reflection and investigation, rather than as an outright departure from doctrine.

Why would any secular scholar of religion, or even just a Protestant, be interested in what a Catholic theologian, speaking from the Catholic tradition, has to say about bodies? This is where Griffiths' virtuosity as an author and thinker matter: witnessing the master at work, even in a bygone musical style, has its appeal. It should also be noted that, against the caricature of Christian theology, Griffiths' book does not consist in reasoning from premises about God to conclusions about the world or about how to live our lives. Rather, Griffiths listens to authoritative Christians talking

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about bodies over the centuries, then synthesizes and explicates. All of that work happened before he put pen to paper: his text itself is in his own voice, the prose straightforward, uninterrupted by citations. Appended to the text is a list of a few score 'works consulted,' ranging from Giorgio Agamben, Michel Henry, and Gil Anidjar to Augustine, Aquinas, and Tertullian – to Anne Carson, Charles Dickens, and John Updike.

Christian Flesh is primarily declarative and propelled by subtle reasoning; for example, 'In the devastated world we find ourselves in, there are no caresses entirely free of concupiscence; none, therefore, that do not also in some measure wound' (p. 126). It takes conventional (Christian) wisdom as a starting point, brings it together, and pushes it forward. If Christians talk about a fallen world, and talk about fallenness distorting all of our actions, it must distort our caresses. Christians also talk about being wounded and inflicting wounds. Griffiths brings this language together by observing that all touches wound. Seemingly, there is little to argue with here: every speaker of the language, or anyone with an ear for Christian language – which in the United States is almost everyone, voluntarily or not – should assent; otherwise, they are not a competent language user or not a competent reasoner. Into this conventional (Christian) wisdom Griffiths interjects the occasional scientific fact or earthy example, reminding the reader that bodies sweat and defecate, long for touch, and lose control. And he also interjects scripture and tradition, reminding us of Mary's impregnation without penetration, Saul on the road to Damascus encountering Jesus' ascended flesh, and the white garments worn for baptism.

This is not, exactly, a book with an argument. But it is also not, exactly, a grammar for speaking in a Christian idiom about bodies. Griffiths makes careful choices about how he will explicate Christian talk about bodies, and he pushes this explication in directions that respond to concrete questions about how to live. These pushes sneak up on the reader, who has been lulled by seemingly straightforward description. In the first chapter, 'Flesh devastated,' we learn that flesh is a body alive. Flesh touches and is touched. Unlike other senses, flesh requires contiguity. Flesh exists in space, but also in time. Humans from childhood to adulthood to old age desire fleshly intimacy, touch. Local customs manage the possibilities of touch. Flesh is fragile; it can and will be harmed and, eventually, die. Later, explicitly Christian concerns are introduced. What makes Christian flesh distinctive is that it cleaves to the flesh of Jesus: 'Christian flesh has put on Christ, is clothed with Christ, its (fleshly) members are Christ's' (p. 66). That God became flesh is central to the Christian story, and this means that to be Christian is a fleshly practice, conforming one's own flesh to the flesh of Jesus as best as possible. Griffiths takes advantage of the dual, opposing

meanings of 'cleave' in English. The Christian is to conform (cleave) to Jesus' flesh, which happens most closely in baptism and the Eucharist, but Christians in the world are irreparably separated (cleaved) from Jesus's flesh.

When Christian life is understood as cleaving to Jesus' flesh, other sorts of cleaving, to ungodly flesh, become of paramount concern. Griffiths suggestively calls these other sorts of cleaving 'fornication.' He classes these as idolatrous fornication, where human flesh attempts to cleave to something understood as a good in itself, apart from its creator, and scandalous fornication, where the way that human flesh cleaves causes the attention of others to become less Christian, less cleaved to Jesus. Given the fallen nature of the world, all cleaving is ambivalent, some of it aimed at the good itself, and so at God, some of it aimed at an object or person as a good in itself. Griffiths is offering a framework for discerning right action, the right use of bodies; he is clear that to make specific judgments requires attention to the specifics of local norms and circumstances. (He occasionally offers examples of specific judgments in specific contexts to show how the framework might be put to use.) In all cases, there is one sort of practice that necessarily increases the degree to which one cleaves to Jesus and decreases idolatrous cleaving: attention to the life of Jesus, or to the lives of the saints.

Flesh cleaves in three primary ways, on Griffiths' account, each warranting a chapter in his book. It cleaves to clothes, to food, and to other flesh, in touch. For each of these types of cleaving, the cleaving can be aligned with cleaving to Jesus, it can be idolatrous cleaving, or it can be scandalous cleaving. The holiest sorts of cleaving have to do with the life of the church, for example, clothes worn (or nakedness) in baptism and priestly garments; fasting and the Eucharist; and celibacy and virginity. Scandalous cleaving to clothes does not necessarily mean nakedness or near-nakedness – these can be holy, Griffiths asserts. Rather, he gives the example of Ku Klux Klan robes, garments that cause others to turn their attention away from the good. Griffiths is no advocate of vegetarianism, which he takes to be concealing the violence to flesh that eating plants necessarily involves, but he does take dining on meat from factory farms to be an example of cleaving scandalously to food. In the domain of the caress, Griffiths does not center his analysis on copulation. Just as we use our voices for more than talking to each other, for example, when we grunt and hum, we use our genitals for more than procreation, he declares. Masturbation and non-procreative sexual contact, even between people of the same sex, can be licit in his account; all such caresses are a mix of holy and idolatrous, just like all forms of cleaving in our world.

Liberals tend to complain that conservative Christians are obsessed with flesh, often insinuating that this interest has a whiff of the salacious. Given that there are so many aspects of life, individually and collectively, to which Christian scripture and tradition speak, why this obsession with what seems to boil down to sex? As Griffiths' book leans in to sex, and the dusty category of fornication, he implicitly offers a response to liberal critics. What makes Christianity distinctive is its fleshiness, its commitment to God made flesh, so Christian life requires first and foremost getting our own fleshiness right – and the paradigm cases of this involve sex.

When I described Griffiths' book to my five-year-old daughter, she offered a one-sentence review: 'That sounds like a bossy book.' *Christian Flesh* is, indeed, a bossy book, but its bossiness is indirect. Griffiths does not moralize. But he does present descriptions of the body and bodily things that are meant to have normative force: *this* is how Christians who want to speak properly *ought* to speak about the body. And when those descriptions venture into the domain of bodily things, like clothes and food and caresses, describing what ought to be said also means describing what ought to be done: how to dress, what to eat, and how to touch. Yet Griffiths would want to say that he is merely making explicit commitments that are already implied by Christians' using language as they do, and participating in community as they do. He is not *telling* Christians what to do, he is merely *showing* what Christians are already, by being Christians, committed to saying and doing.

Two problems with this rejoinder echo problems with the ordinary language philosophy that inspires Griffiths. First, his aim to clarify language in order to clarify practice assumes a close relationship between language and practice. One way of putting the problem is simply that practice ought to have primacy over description, but Griffiths puts it the other way round – and doing so necessarily disfigures practice. Griffiths may concede this point but may argue that, nonetheless, heuristics are necessary to orient thinking and living. All he is attempting is to offer a heuristic that is accountable to the tradition as it is lived, and that will need to be corrected as it is shown to mismatch that lived tradition.

Second, Griffiths assumes a homogenous group of language users and practitioners, that is, a homogenous Christian community. The worry here is that by distilling Christian talk about bodies into linked chains of declaratives, Griffiths flattens the rich variety of ways that Christians, even just those identified with orthodoxy, have talked about bodies. For example, are the voices of Christians in southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, or the voices of medieval nuns and mystics, all ingredients in the synthesis Griffiths bakes, or are they overpowered by the taste of North Atlantic

Latin, French, and English-speaking, usually university-based experts? Responding to this worry by falling back on the genre of the heuristic – that this book, with its pragmatic purpose, attends to a certain set of Christians even as it abbreviates them with the unqualified noun ‘Christians’ – does not offer a solution. The languages that are synthesized come predominantly from elite anglophone and francophone Catholic intellectual spaces, and even if Griffiths’ purpose is merely to offer a heuristic it is presumably aimed at aiding a broader swath of Christians than this, and at accounting for Christians as whole people, not just their heads. Put another way, the content of the book, meditating on embodied life, mismatches the method of the book, synthesizing the thoughts of intellectual elites.

But the problem goes deeper. Even if the inputs of Griffiths’ synthesis perfectly matched the desired audience of his output, if it were possible for all the implicit modifiers to ‘Christian’ to align, there would still be a problem. Whether we take the principle from secular discussions of epistemic justice or theological discussions of the epistemic privilege of the poor, any synthesis of ordinary language errs if it weighs each voice equally. We ought to particularly attend to the language of those marginalized, those who have experienced oppression. Given how Jesus self-consciously positioned himself, on the side of the poor and oppressed and primarily attentive to the needs of the poor and oppressed, theological reflection cannot treat every voice equally if it wishes to be pious, and certainly cannot focus on the voices of the privileged. The experts on Christian embodiment are those Christians whose bodies have been ravaged: by illness or disability, by torture or incarceration, by malnutrition or environmental racism or gendered violence. Or simply five-year-olds. What would it mean to synthesize those voices? I suspect the result would not be a triumphal symphony penned and conducted by musical geniuses. Perhaps it would invite us to strain to hear beauty in what some will dismiss as mere noise.