***Body of Christ Incarnate for You:
Conceptualizing God's Desire for the Flesh***

By A. Pryor (2016)

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Reviewed by Emily Holmes

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One of the more startling ideas associated with Christianity is the notion that God has a body, and not just any body, but the very particular body of Jesus of Nazareth in whom, Christians believe, God's Word was made flesh. Theologians refer to this notion as incarnation. The term conveys an enfleshing of something beyond flesh, as that which is transcendent to materiality takes on the matter of creaturely humanity. While some theologians have viewed incarnation-talk as a slightly embarrassing mythological holdover, for others, incarnation names the way in which the divine overcomes the divide between creator and creation, unites humanity with God in one person, and accomplishes salvation. Rarely have theologians paid much attention to the flesh itself that God becomes.

But this theological emphasis is starting to shift. Thanks to increased scholarly attention across the humanities over the past several decades to bodies and embodiment, the incarnation is receiving renewed attention. What does it mean that Christians affirm a God made flesh – not just for beliefs about God or salvation – but for our understanding of human flesh? The most recent example of this line of inquiry is Adam Pryor's *Body of Christ Incarnate for You: Conceptualizing God's Desire for the Flesh*. As a concept at the heart of the Christian narrative, the incarnation invites a number of questions: what is the relation between Jesus' incarnation and

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salvation? How does his incarnation affect other human and non-human bodies? How does the incarnation differ from other ways God is present in creation and to human beings? What is the legacy of the incarnation for Christian communities and for discipleship? Pryor's book does not aim to answer these questions definitively, but it does help us think through them more thoroughly in dialogue with multiple thinkers, both historical and contemporary, and both theological and philosophical. His book reminds us that the richness of the Christian scriptures, read in the context of contemporary writings on bodies and embodiment, give rise to new ways of interpreting the incarnation: each Advent, each Christmas, Christians are invited to enter into this mystery once again. While Pryor's constructive theological gestures could benefit from (forgive me) additional fleshing out, this ambitious book will provoke further reflection on a timely topic.

Pryor proposes a constructive account of the incarnation with particular focus on the ideas of flesh and body as these terms are used in contemporary philosophy. Drawing heavily on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Pryor explores a relational ontology of the flesh as it is distinguished phenomenologically from the dermal borders of the body. Rather than view incarnation as a precursor (and therefore secondary in importance) to crucifixion or resurrection, he is interested in the soteriological significance of the Christian affirmation of God's embodiment in itself. In brief, Pryor describes incarnation as a transformative event making God present through the flesh; he both affirms the exemplary nature of Jesus as the incarnation of God and also extends the incarnation to other bodies insofar as they are 'attuned' to the way in which Jesus enfleshes the divine through love. The body of Jesus (and the way his flesh is intertwined with the world) then serves as a model for the ways in which Christians live out their own embodied flesh in discipleship and through sacramental praxis. Pryor describes his account of the incarnation as a Christological panentheism that is both 'deep and promiscuous' because it extends the incarnation to all creation and recurs in other bodies and other instantiations of flesh.

The book is divided into three parts that approach this thesis in different ways. Part I is a thematic overview of the history of Christian theology meant to set up the constructive argument that follows. Pryor creates a typology of four broadly different ways of thinking about the incarnation, beginning with the two-natures legacy of the Council of Chalcedon and proceeding through three alternatives, which he terms *prolepsis*, *kenosis* and *plerosis*. *Proleptic* approaches to the incarnation (such as that of Pannenberg and Moltmann) interpret it to refer to the essential connection of Jesus with God that anticipates the future resurrection. In contrast, thinking about incarnation in *kenotic* terms (Kierkegaard, David Jensen

and Sallie McFague) refers either to God's self-contraction of divine attributes (allowing room for the freedom of the other) or God's self-emptying of power and privilege. This self-emptying is imitated in discipleship that makes incarnational love present. Plerosis refers to the overflowing of God's erotic power, goodness and desire for creation that manifests in the incarnation; this approach is exemplified by theologians (Bonaventure, Tillich, Rita Nakashima Brock and Wendy Farley) who understand relationality and desire to be fundamental to the divine nature and to human beings made in God's image.

The strength of Part I is its clear organisation of theologies of incarnation into broad typologies or categories. This approach has advantages (grouping historical thinkers with contemporary theologians) as well as disadvantages (inevitable gaps in the survey). Overall, I found this thematic grouping to be a fruitful way to read theology that highlights commonalities across different contexts. Pryor's approach yields the following claims: while rejecting the static metaphysics of Chalcedon and its legacy in Anselm and Luther, he affirms the soteriological effect of the incarnation and its impact on Christian discipleship. In other words, the incarnation matters, it matters for salvation, and it matters for Christians as followers of Christ and in community. Pryor's examination of proleptic, kenotic and plerotic interpretations also hints that incarnation might extend beyond the body of Jesus the Christ. However, what is meant by the 'body' cannot be readily assumed, and this implication is more fully taken up in the third part of the book.

Part II promises to be the constructive heart of the book, and indeed, I found Chapter 5, a theological interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, to be one of the most important contributions of the book as a whole. Pryor argues for an expanded understanding of the incarnation based in the flesh. He begins with the distinction between body and flesh made by Merleau-Ponty and the near-elemental connotation of flesh in his later work. Bodies are, in our everyday thinking, isolated by the boundaries of the skin. In contrast, flesh is contiguous with the world. It is porous, sensible, both sensed and sensing, and the way our flesh is entangled with the world through perception challenges us to rethink assumed boundaries between self and other, between subject and object. To describe Jesus the Christ as the Word made flesh in a contemporary philosophical context requires thinking through this expanded notion of flesh. Each of us is a particular instantiation (or incarnation, according to Pryor) of elemental flesh, located within our perceptive world. Pryor holds out the possibility that Jesus' incarnation of the divine may yet be distinctive in his own lived-

experience. He clearly affirms, however, that Jesus' body is made of the same flesh as our own; this is the primary meaning of incarnation.

Immediately following this, Pryor proposes a reading of key events from the life of Jesus that demonstrate the incarnation as flesh. However, Pryor first takes a long detour through Wisdom Christology and a justification of limiting his focus to Luke–Acts (over other gospels). While these methodological choices make sense, the space and effort needed to justify them distracted, I felt, from the momentum of the constructive argument. The sudden shift to Wisdom Christology felt like an unexpected revival of Nicene-Chalcedonian metaphysics. The choice to limit focus to Luke–Acts because of its eschatological, ethical, and political orientation exemplifies the challenges constructive theologians face when we wade into the highly specialised field of New Testament scholarship. It is, of course, necessary to carve out the boundaries of the texts under consideration, to explain their historical context, and to justify the hermeneutical method used to read these texts, and Pryor ably fulfills these obligations. But it is also easy to lose sight of the stated theological goal – a fresh interpretation of the flesh of the incarnation through the lived-experience of Jesus – in the midst of these methodological weeds. In the second half of the chapter, however, Pryor returns his focus to three events from the life of Jesus: the temptation (a rejection of self-serving power), the transfiguration (a transformation of the flesh) and select healing miracles (an extension of divine power to liberate others for service in the reign of God). Pryor argues that we see the meaning of the incarnation through these events, which 'transform the flesh – transform the way in which other lived-bodies incarnate and advent the flesh – so that they might take up the flesh in a way of imitation to the Christ: a rejection of self-serving and self-directing power by which they demonstrate participation in the divine as it is revealed emanating from the Christ' (p. 110). In other words, the Galilean ministry of Jesus sets a standard for incarnation; the presence of the divine in the flesh is revealed as a rejection of self-serving power and as a liberation of others for service in the reign of God. Followers of Christ participate in the incarnation when they imitate this model.

Part III expands and applies Pryor's interpretation by relating the flesh to three different theological loci: theological anthropology (with particular focus on technology, hybridity and disability); Christology (drawing on additional descriptions of incarnation as both deep and promiscuous through an ontology of love); and ecclesial practices (sacramental imagination, hospitality and liturgy). Pryor's discussion of the human–technological hybrid that Donna Haraway called the cyborg incorporates the insights of disability theory in order to establish theological criteria for the use

of technological enhancements. In expanding his discussion of Christology, Pryor combines Niels Henrik Gregersen's 'deep incarnation', Laurel Schneider's 'promiscuous incarnation' and Jean-Luc Marion's ontology of love, using the flesh as a bridge concept to affirm 'the relational quality of the incarnation' (p. 143) as found in all three thinkers. The incarnation affects all of creation in an evolutionary framework (it extends 'deep' in time and space). At the same time, the incarnation cannot be limited to one occurrence; because the flesh is a porous extension between a particular body and the world, the divine can bubble up promiscuously in other bodies. Linking these two points to Marion's erotic ontology, Pryor concludes that God is incarnate wherever the flesh is instituted in love. Each of us is potentially, imperfectly, Christ to one another; Christ's incarnation remains distinctive in its completeness and duration, and it is soteriologically significant in its revelation of God in the flesh. This chapter logically supplements Pryor's arguments from Part II, but it also raises the question of how these thinkers (Gregersen, Schneider and Marion) might fit into the typology of Part I. The final chapter extends the incarnation to ecclesial practices. Drawing heavily on Richard Kearney, Pryor here argues for the way sacramental imagination can shape our everyday experience of flesh through encounters with the other in acts of hospitality. Sacramental imagination and hospitality can be formed through ritual practices, such as Eucharist, that both reveal and extend the incarnation.

Pryor has chosen a topic that is relevant to a world in which the treatment of bodies, particularly marginalised bodies, is a pressing concern. Different ways of being socially othered are marked on the body as socially constructed forms of difference intersect with the flesh. These differences manifest as disparities of power and privilege that are both felt in the lived-bodies of people on the margins and policed by those in power. Pryor is at his best in this domain in his account of Jesus' ministry of liberation and in his discussion of disability; I believe his argument would have been enhanced by closer attention to the ways in which bodies are also gendered, raced and queered. Given the suspicion with which the flesh has often been viewed in Christian tradition (which Pryor notes), I also found myself wondering how sin fits into his perspective. Many Christians would suggest that sinlessness is what made Jesus' body qualitatively different from our own, and that sin affects the way we experience our flesh. Theological concepts such as corruption and concupiscence have tried to capture these effects, but Pryor does not address these. This lacuna doesn't negate his constructive argument, of course, but some account of the effects of sin (whether personal or structural) on the flesh would deepen his argument for a Christian audience. In the end, I also remain confused by Pryor's repeated use of the

phrase 'to incarnate the flesh.' Perhaps the etymological redundancy simply indicates the difficulty of escaping received interpretations of incarnation that are encoded in hierarchical, substance-oriented language. Focusing on the way the flesh makes the divine present is, I concur with Pryor, the right approach, but at some point we might ask whether 'incarnation' is still the best term, or whether the flesh is something that can be enfleshed at all. Greater attention to this problem might also help clarify whether or in what ways Jesus' incarnation is different from our own.

Aside from these brief critiques, there is, nevertheless, much to learn from here, and particular chapters will no doubt appeal to different audiences in the areas of continental philosophy and theology, constructive theology and historical theology. The chapters are thoroughly referenced, and the typology of Part I may be particularly helpful for seminary or graduate students in theology. Pryor's theological interpretation of Merleau-Ponty will help expand our understanding of the flesh that the Word was made. The concept of the flesh itself is malleable enough to expand the Christian imagination, particularly when enhanced through sacramental practices of hospitality. To claim that Christ is the incarnation of God is not just to make a claim about God; it is to make a soteriological claim about human flesh with implications for anthropology, discipleship, ethics and liturgy. Invoking an ontology of the flesh instituted as erotic love further gives us some indication of how extensively the incarnation might appear.