The Body in Religion: Cross-Cultural Perspectives

By Y. K. Greenberg (2018)

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 309pp.

Reviewed by Katherine C. Zubko

KEYWORDS: EMBODIMENT, MATERIALITY, SPIRITUAL TECHNOLOGIES, KINESTHESIA,
FEMINISM, TEXTBOOK

Scholars of religion have engaged in a wide variety of theoretical, philosophical and ethnographic work about embodiment, especially during the past two decades, but Yudit Greenberg provides one of the first volumes to serve as a cross-cultural introductory textbook for undergraduate students on this intersection of topics. The book takes a thematic approach, placing information from different religions in conversation across four main areas: representation of divine and human bodies, celebrating and sustaining the body (ritual and health), disciplining the body (gender and sexuality), and modifying, liberating and honouring the body, including asceticism and death. Support materials include brief glossaries, review and discussion questions, further readings, and an overview of several world religions in the introduction. These features make it possible to use this textbook for the ubiquitous World Religions or Introduction to the Study of Religion course directly.

Through the lens of a textbook, Greenberg's ambitious project offers important corrective directions that the study of body and religion can bring to the genre. The intention to foreground the body as the primary lens changes the focus of what to highlight and investigate for students within an introductory survey. The first framework that shapes the overall approach of this text is the premise that 'religious beliefs are embodied in

Affiliation

University of North Carolina, USA.

email: kzubko@unca.edu

religious practice' (p. xxiv). In other words, Greenberg intends her work to demonstrate how particular ideas, like covenant or modesty, contribute respectively to practices such as circumcision and veiling. In these examples, beliefs are assumed to be the starting point for how and why practices are engaged, helping to create many possible new connections for students. While Greenberg consistently relies on this belief-centred approach, when she turns her attention in Chapter 4 to ritual, she does broaden, in brief, her own unidirectional framework by mentioning Manuel Vásquez and Pierre Bourdieu, two key theorists who are noted for reversing this relationship between belief and practice. Both claim practice, embodiment or materiality as the more prominent starting points for understanding religion, including the shaping of beliefs.

The insights of these theorists, and others who go further in disrupting the binary of practice and belief, create a complexity that can be difficult to transfer to an introductory text. The struggle is evident in Greenberg's own glossing of ritual (after she notes these theorists) as 'spiritual technologies, [that] employ the body (and mind) in the performance of our beliefs' (p. 56), thus continuing to communicate the primacy of beliefs within a book focused on the body. While it is challenging to capture the nuance of a processual, interactively constructed embodiedness, Greenberg is most successful when discussing Jewish practices in particular, such as the thickly somatic description of the use of *tefillin* (pp. 66–7), blended well with specific textual analysis of the 'Jewish Body'. As introductory texts are developed, *how* we write about the body is just as important as including information about the body in what we write.

It might be that the condensed overviews of world religions (pp. xxxii–xlvi) that set up the entire volume and that mostly centre on the importance of textual knowledge leave less room for working from a more practice-centred perspective. This may be an argument for resisting editors who want those one-page synopses, as they do not ground equally all traditions that will be discussed in the chapters that follow. For example, while the *Quran* and *ḥadīth* should take precedence in the section on Islam, in the Hinduism section the Bhakti Movement might be a more important category than the comparatively requisite 'scriptural' focus on the *Vedas* for explaining most of today's embodied experiences, unless the kinesthetic methods for memorising Vedic recitation are to be discussed.

It takes steady attentiveness to work against the underlying frameworks that prevent equity of representation in a cross-cultural endeavour, such as favouring text and belief, and yet Greenberg has honourably made strides that will push the field to continue to consider the ongoing legacy of colonial epistemologies that privilege particular categories of what is most impor-

tant about religion. The chapter that stands out for its equitable blending of critical comparison across traditions is the unique inclusion of an entire chapter on 'Erotic Desire and Divine Love', a difficult topic for undergraduates (and some scholars) that is often glossed over. Greenberg cites direct and detailed examples from Plato, *Song of Songs*, and Christian and Sufi female medieval mystics. When it comes to a Hindu example, a quote from the *Bhagavad Gita* to 'love god' (p. 49) falls in line with drawing from a significant 'scriptural' source to round out the chapter. Perhaps directly including, rather than describing the erotic-laden verses from the *Gita Govinda* or countless *bhakti* poets might have captured better the mood of divine passion, and added more opportunity for sensory and emotional descriptive work that would match the depths of St Theresa's arrows more directly, yet overall the comparative work in this chapter highlights how thought-provoking this subject can be when geared appropriately towards an undergraduate level.

A second framework that is transparently acknowledged is a commitment to interreligious dialogue by way of 'illustrat[ing] the common ground' (p. xlvii) of religions. This may be valuable depending on the institutional context and course. Greenberg chooses to start all but a few chapters with Jewish or Christian case studies as a way to create a bridge of familiarity for students, although this also can have the effect of communicating an unintentional hierarchy. While seeking shared commonalities across bodied traditions creates a coherent thread for students to comparatively track, at times this leads Greenberg to transfer vocabulary from monotheistic perspectives, such as 'S/soul' for *Brahman*, *ātman*, *anātman* and *jīva* misleadingly into Hindu, Buddhist or Jain examples, or misrepresenting *Brahma* as 'the son of God, having been born of the Supreme Being *Brahman*' (pp. 20–1). It is a common desire to translate traditions for our students, but some caution is warranted when key differences are elided for the sake of making a tradition seem more familiar or accessible.

A third, and final noteworthy commitment of this volume is Greenberg's feminist commitments. Rather than just a separate chapter devoted to gender, the author's choice of examples across the book tips towards highlighting underrepresented female roles and perspectives and examining how religious authority has controlled women's bodies and sexuality (p. xix). For example, in discussing representations of Eve in the narratives of Genesis, Greenberg includes Phyllis Tribble's 'depatriarchalizing' approach that sees the creation of Eve's body from Adam's rib as a crowning achievement rather than hierarchically derivative (pp. 6–7). A further example is found in the section on divine representation in Christian art which is prefaced through discussion of Francesco Vanni's *Saint Catherine Drinks the*

Blood of Christ (1594) in order to illuminate Christ as a maternal body (pp. 26–8), although a more in-depth analysis of blood and milk as bodily substances, and the queer readings of this image, are opportunities not taken up. The feminist lens provides more information about female and some transgender perspectives, but sometimes to the exclusion of important developments in the religious construction of masculinity, such as discussing the Promise Keepers in the section on Christian marriage or Robert Bly's Iron John wilderness spirituality New Age movement.

Greenberg does not shy away from difficult topics when it comes to gender and sexuality, including information about sex scandals (pp. 156–7), abortion (pp. 171–5), same-sex marriage (pp. 176–9) and gender reassignment surgeries (pp. 196–7). These sections would help initiate discussion on topics students are often interested in learning more about if faculty are prepared to do so with further sources.

Overall, *The Body in Religion* offers an important new foray into making decades of scholarly work on the intersection of body and religion accessible for undergraduate students. Greenberg's vision of cross-cultural perspectives sets up a more inclusive introductory model than seen in other textbooks, and provides a window into the potential for body studies to diversify pedagogical approaches in tandem with ground-breaking research. This textbook has the capacity, paired with a few supplemental materials that would counterbalance its underlying assumptions, to steer courses into exciting new directions within the study of religion.