
BOOK REVIEW

Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology, by Michelle Voss Roberts. Fortress Press, 2017. 228 pp., \$29 USD. 978-1-5064-1856-8

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Intellectually, human beings tend to search for The One Thing. The One Thing is that unifying insight, fundamental reality, or singular intuition that organizes the ten thousand things into a comprehensible unit. It renders simplicity of sprawling multiplicity. It also flattens and blinds.

This tendency has been particularly pronounced as Christian theologians attempt to articulate the *imago dei*, or image of God, in humankind. Theologians have located the image of God in the human capacity for reason, relationship, or dominion. They have also located it in our ability to create, choose, or imitate Christ. Most often, these locations of the *imago dei* have been singular – the location of the image of God, not a location of the image of God. They have usually subordinated or even excluded other interpretations. And by amplifying certain aspects of human existence over others – usually, spirit over body – these reductive anthropologies have diminished our self-understanding.

Michelle Voss Roberts offers a corrective to such eliminative anthropologies in her book, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology*. Voss Roberts, formerly of Wake Forest School of Divinity, has been recently named Principal at Emmanuel College of the University of Toronto. She is the author of several books in comparative theology and is an ordained United Church of Christ minister.

Voss Roberts argues that, like a diamond, human beings are best appreciated for the totality of their facets (xxxvi). Any understanding of humankind should be multiple, not simple. It must not celebrate one aspect of human existence at the expense of another, or insist that certain capacities are more important than another. Instead, any Christian theological anthropology should celebrate the totality of human experience: body and soul, reason and emotion, sentience and volition, consciousness and instinct. It should also celebrate embodiment, reject hierarchy, and include the marginalized (especially, in this particular book, the disabled).

In order to propound this new, polyvalent anthropology, Voss Roberts does not simply retrieve and expand the Christian tradition. Instead, she turns to the Hindu tradition as an interlocutor, specifically Kashmiri Shaivism and its most consequential theologian, Abhinavagupta. Abhinavagupta offers an interpretation of reality as an emanation of Shiva consisting of 36 different aspects, all of which are real, and all of which are divine. Since difference is of and from Shiva, difference is real. Yet, since all difference is Shiva, all difference is unified. So, Abhinavagupta offers a variegated, nondual ontology.

Voss Roberts then utilizes this ontology to offer a variegated, nondual theological anthropology. According to Voss Roberts, and in my own empirical estimation of the book, the turn to comparison secures tremendous theological stimulation and allows a breakout from the ever-circling tradition (xxx). But it does not produce a synthetic Hindu-Christian religion. Instead, it produces a Christian interpretation of the *imago dei* – relativized, challenged, and transformed by Hinduism, yet remaining distinctly Christian.

Abhinavagupta organizes the thirty-six aspects of reality into five categories, and Voss Roberts organizes the chapters in her book according to these categories, albeit with Westernized appellations. We should pause, momentarily, to note the significance of this organization: a 10th century Shaivite ontology has provided the systematic scaffolding for a 21st century Christian anthropology. In other words, Voss Roberts' constructive theology is not only transformed in *content* by her encounter with Hinduism; it is also transformed in *structure*. Comparative theology can do more than stimulate new thoughts; it can also provide a new apparatus by which those thoughts are organized.

Chapter 1, "The Conscious Body," considers the various ways in which various consciousnesses – including disabled consciousnesses – can image God. Voss Roberts notes how certain consciousnesses, such as Augustine's psychological image of the Trinity, have long been associated with divinity. But how can we find the image of God in a disabled consciousness or intellectual disability that never rises to the level of self- or other-consciousness (6)? Voss Roberts, drawing on previous work in the theology of disability, argues that different abilities reflect different ways of experiencing the divine. Considering the case of a child severely disabled with cerebral palsy, she observes that this child draws no distinctions between self and others, responds to others wholly and entirely, without reservation or intention, and

senses its environment immediately. This, too, is one way that a human being can image God (24–25).

Chapter 2, “The Limited Body (Part 1),” attempts to destigmatize our natural limitations such as finitude and situatedness, as well as accidental limitations such as physical disability. Echoing Reinhold Niebuhr, Voss Roberts asserts that *limitation* does not compromise the *imago dei*, the *denial of limitation* does (31). We are all differently abled, there is no universal, perfectly able human form, and theology should start from this recognition (35).

Chapter 3, “The Limited Body (Part 2),” continues this argument and further develops a limits model of humanity as imaging God. First, God has chosen limitation in order to relate vulnerably to humankind and the cosmos (60–61). Moreover, in Christ divinity has assumed limitations and a range of particular abilities (62–63). For this reason, Christians should never dehumanize anyone limited in faculties.

Chapter 4, “The Subjective Body,” discusses the body as experienced by the subject. Voss Roberts notes that Abhinavagupta places the mind here, halfway through his thirty-six categories of reality. This placement offers Westerners an opportunity to reconsider our traditional elevation of the mind over the body. He also celebrates the multiplicity of the subject, every aspect of which is vital, thereby repudiating eliminative monism (81).

Chapter 5, “The Engaged Body,” celebrates our sensations of and interactions with the material universe, and argues that this, too, is an aspect of the *imago dei*. Voss Roberts retrieves Irenaeus to argue that our bodies themselves are molded after the image of God (103). Moreover, they are our means of relation with one another, including sexual relations, which are to be celebrated in their entirety (112–113).

Chapter 6, “The Elemental Body,” asserts the presence of God in the cosmos, an all-pervading presence that repudiates any hierarchical ordering of spirit, mind, or matter (132). God is everywhere and in all things, and salvation bequeaths us this recognition, as well as an ethical call to care for creation (141–142).

We should also note that, at the end of each chapter, Voss Roberts suggests a practice of attention that can activate the ideas presented. This move dovetails with her entire agenda: ideas alone cannot animate multifaceted, embodied beings. We need to enact ideas with our whole person, and Voss Roberts provides this opportunity.

Of the many virtues of Voss Roberts’ book, I was perhaps most enthused by the shelving label: Constructive Theology. I believe that this label suggests the maturation of another discipline, Comparative

Theology. Voss Roberts is offering a new, creative theology using an eclectic methodology, drawing from disability studies, her own teaching experience, and Abhinavagupta, amongst others. Yet, according to the shelving label, the comparative, Hindu-Christian aspect of her method need not be singled out. Instead, comparison has become just another tool for constructive theology. This move suggests that interfaith comparison has become mainstream.

I also appreciate Voss Roberts' willingness to take risks. She conceptualizes both constructive theology and comparative theology as processes of play, as opportunities to "spark the Christian theological imagination" (6). Theology need not be agonizingly scrupulous or stultifyingly solemn; it can explore, experiment, and dream.

Finally, this constructive theology is pastoral theology, as is all good theology. Voss Roberts' work is of the highest academic caliber, yet relevant to pastors attempting to understand themselves and their congregations better. Better understanding produces better ministry--better preaching, visitation, and leadership. In this book, Voss Roberts establishes that she is an academic for the church.

There were a few places where I disagreed with Voss Roberts. Her intent to valorize the disabled, along with their disabilities, is well received. Nevertheless, as the uncle of a quadriplegic and a pastor to parents of children with severe disabilities, I occasionally experienced this valorization as overstated, perhaps even celebratory. To a certain extent, Voss Roberts' observation that the *disabled* are also *differently abled* is true: my nephew's spinal cord injury has made him an unusually mature, strong, deep young man. But in my relationship with him, I also sense an ongoing experience of the tragic. His injury denies him some of the most basic pleasures in life. He remains positive, cheerful, and hopeful, but he cannot do many things that he would like to do. As much as I celebrate his many abilities, I feel called to also lament his disability, in solidarity with him. At times it seems that Voss Roberts' overlooks this tragic aspect of so much disability, even as she works for the inclusion of the excluded.

That being said, this book is a fine example of constructive comparative theology. Abhinavagupta provides a reliable scaffolding for Voss Roberts' insightful and thorough theology of disability. Through her latest book, Voss Roberts establishes that Hindu theology can inform and organize Christian theology. Perhaps, we may infer, religions need each other intellectually. And if we need each other *intellectually*, perhaps we need each other *simply*.