

The concept of the body in religious studies

The concept of the body is central in religious studies for one obvious reason: religious contents are dependent upon the material existence of human bodies. Recently it has become fashionable to speak about embodied religion, religion as bodily processes and embodiment in general. In what follows I analyze the different uses of the concept of the body and clarify the different contexts in which the concept can be used in coherent and systematic ways, and furthermore in such a way that it enhances the methodology of religious studies.

Religious bodies

I presume that the concept of the body refers to a human or other animal body, that is, the self-maintaining biological unit that starts in fertilization and transforms into a corpse in biological death. Bodily processes are what bodies do; for example, walking, sleeping, praying and singing. The related notions of embodiment and the embodied are usually trivial, as when for example one talks about embodied social interactions, or about embodiment in general. Humans are biological creatures, and therefore their bodies are involved in everything they do. There is no social interaction where bodies are not involved, nor is there embodiment that is somehow additional to the very fact that there are bodies.

Bodies are relevant in religious studies first and foremost for the reason that (1) some bodies support religious beliefs, desires and actions, or for the reason (2) that they are ascribed religious meanings.

In the first case we have examples such as priests in the Catholic Church or members of the organizations of charismatic Christianity. Religious experts as well as religious lay people are bodies that sustain religious beliefs, desires and actions, and therefore their bodies are relevant in religious studies. If we want to predict the dynamics of these bodies, we have to take into account their beliefs and desires, among which there should be some religious mental states as well. Religious bodies are thus actors with religious representations.

In the second case we have bodies that are ascribed religious meanings. That is, in addition to a human body *x*, we have one or more religious actors who ascribe religious meanings to this particular body. We could have, for example, an atheist Catholic priest—that is, a person with no religious beliefs or desires, but one who is working as a Catholic priest in the organization of the Catholic Church. His body would be a religious body for the reason that as a part of that organization, he would carry and act out religious meanings, when for example interacting with other actors in religious rituals. He would be treated as a bearer of religious meanings even though he would not have religious beliefs or desires at the steering wheel of his behaviour. Another case of a religious body that is religious due to the fact that it is ascribed religious meanings, is the situation where human bodies are believed to have been created by the Creator God. This belief is prevalent in charismatic Christianity, and it transforms bodies into religious bodies by means of assigning them supernatural origins. The human corpse is often ascribed religious meanings and also other fundamental meanings, and thus the cultural systems surrounding the dead bodies form an exemplary object for religious studies.

Thus we can distinguish the following cases:

1. religious body *x* is a body that has religious beliefs and desires ‘at the steering wheel’;
2. religious body *x* is a body that acts according to the rules of religious organization;
3. religious body *x* is a body that is ascribed religious meanings by other actors and treated on the basis of these religious meanings.

By means of distinguishing these cases of religious bodies that are relevant for religious studies, we have the exemplary cases of

1. bodies that are guided by mental states with religious contents;
2. bodies whose religiosity is due to the fact that they act according to the norms of a religious organization (that is, an organization that is constituted by religious contents);
3. bodies that are conceptually constructed and treated by means of religious contents.

To sum up, religious bodies in the threefold sense described above provide the central object of study for religious studies.

Other bodily activities

Since we humans are biological creatures, bodies are relevant in all areas of life; eating, reproduction, aesthetic experience, sports, music and dance, to name a few. These bodily activities involve specific mental contents and cultural models by means of which the bodily participants can engage in these areas of life. Eating or sports as such do not involve religious content and are not primary objects of research for religious studies. What is meant by the expression 'as such' can be elucidated by means distinguishing between primary and secondary theories (cf. Horton 1993). The primary theory of eating is a collection of mental contents that enable the actor to distinguish between different edible items and to consume them in an appropriate manner. By means of shared primary theories of eating, actors from different cultural backgrounds can share a meal together. Secondary theories of eating are composed of those mental contents that attach further interpretations and meanings to eating. For example; what is the culturally appropriate manner of eating, which foodstuffs are 'hot' or 'cold' and what are their health effects. Furthermore, the question as to whether eating or foodstuffs are related to supernatural entities is a question handled by secondary theories.

My claim is that even though bodily issues are important for biological creatures such as human beings, they are not relevant for religious studies if they do not involve secondary theories that attach religious contents to them. Therefore eating, reproduction or other bodily activities are not religious as such.

How about extreme areas of bodily activity, such as fanatic bodybuilding? There are groups of bodybuilders who devote almost their all waking hours to that bodily activity, who worship built bodies and share collective rituals. There may even exist a group of bodybuilders who would claim that bodybuilding is a religion to them. If we take the mental contents that postulate supernatural entities to be the hallmark of religion, we should react by saying that they are simply mistaken: the bodybuilding activities, no matter how intense or ritually coordinated, do not amount to religion. The same goes for music, dance, sports and other bodily activities: being bodily does not imply the presence of things religious.

Embodied religion, emotions and fieldwork

As Ivan Strenski (2010) has noted, the traditional philosophy of religion has investigated religion by means of studying the religious texts, not 'lived' religion. Texts host systems of arguments and they are therefore suitable objects of study for philosophical analysis. Other fields in religious studies, such as anthropology, history, or the sociology of religion have been accused of being too abstract as well. The counterpart for this textualized abstract religion is lived, embodied religion. But what is the meaning of embodiment and how is it related to bodies? The examples of embodied religion provided by Strenski include materiality, practices, emotions and bodies. Embodied religion is therefore something that involves actively engaged religious bodies, performing rituals, or otherwise communicating with supernatural entities.

Embodied religion is religion as it is studied in respectable fieldwork-based ethnography. Embodied religion is not a specific type of religion, but rather a research setting, where religious bodies are studied by means of interview and participant observation. In my ethnographic study of Amazonian folk religion, I observed a healing ritual where the patient was treated for snakebite. It was a magical snakebite and therefore the healer woke helping spirits by means of magical songs. He also addressed the spirit of the snake for the purpose of healing the patient. I observed the healing session and conducted interviews with the healer, the patient and other participants. I studied embodied religion, carried out by human beings who used their bodies to do things. Healing ritual is embodied religion at its best: religious contents steering the conduct of human beings and their bodily interactions.

The ethnographic study of embodied religion utilizes the same methods as any other ethnographic study. The study objects are conceptualized as intentional systems that have mental contents as parts of their beliefs and desires, and the contents as well as the complex systems of contents (cultural models) are traced by means of interview and observation techniques. Even though embodied religion is not a text as traditional books are, its propositional and argumentative features are studied and, by the same token, it is transformed into a text-like entity, or textualized.

Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010) have claimed that bodily emotion and feeling are central in religious action, and that they should be studied instead of the propositional knowledge traditionally studied in religious studies. According to them, thoughts can be expressed in words, whereas emotions are expressed in embodied presence, movement, music, dance, dreams, images and symbols.

Once again the concept of the body appears to block the analysis of propositional contents, which is the central project in the ethnography of religion, based on intentional systems theory (Kamppinen 2010). But as a matter of fact, it does not. When we study emotions by means of using materials like movements or aspects of bodily presence, we try to figure out the propositional contents of emotions: what it is that the informants are afraid of, what it is that they hope for, and what they are feeling when they listen to the sermon or music. In order to make scientific sense of emotion we have to trace their propositional contents: feeling joy because god loves you is different from feeling joy because the dinner is ready. Also the bodily schemata like container model that lies behind various emotions are explicable in terms of their implied propositional contents, as we will see in the following section.

To place the concept of the body and the related notions of emotion and feeling at the centre of religious studies does not exempt us from the analysis of propositional contents. Rather, it challenges us to identify the propositional contents embedded in emotions. Take, for example, the emotion sorrow. In order to understand the particular variety of sorrow we need to find out, by means of interview and participant observation, what are the antecedent and consequent mental states (with propositional contents) that make up the functional environment of this sorrow. What the actor believes has happened and what he believes is causally responsible for the sorrow; how the sorrow is expressed in his further beliefs, desires and actions. Thus we have a schema where sorrow is functionally individuated by means of other mental states, beliefs, desires and actions (BDA for short):

BDA at time t_{n-1}
 Sorrow & BDA at time t_n
 BDA at time t_{n+1}

From the current time t_n where the case of sorrow exists as the object of our investigation, we identify the surrounding beliefs, desires and actions, and extrapolate on the basis of ethnographic and other material the contents of past beliefs, desires and actions. If, for example, our informant is sorrowful because his health (that he used to take for granted) is deteriorating, then we can trace the past beliefs about health status as well as past valuations of health. By means of forecasts we can guess at his future beliefs, desires and actions, and if he, for example, will start exercising, we will have confirmation for our hypothesis that the sorrow in question is a mood that stems from his belief that his health has worsened and that is not what he wanted.

As Ivan Strenski (2010) has noted, the philosophy of religion should keep up with the progress that takes place in the empirical study of religion. The ethnographic study of religious activities where bodies are involved by default, offers good cases for conceptual analysis.

Inferential schemas related to the concept of the body

Scientific concepts allow us to make inferences that, with the aid of theories, can be tested by means of empirical material. In other fields of research such as, for example biology, the central concepts are well systematized, operationalized and backed by theories. The concept of the ecosystem, for one, is composed of further concepts, such as nutrient cycles and prey–predator relationships, each of which is linked to various operationalizations, by means of which their presence and dynamics in the ecosystem can be assessed.

The theory building for the concept of the body should start with inferential schemas that can be constructed on the basis of *x* being a body. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Lakoff 1987, Johnson 1988, Lakoff & Johnson 1980), the human body is generically a container. Therefore we can infer that

x is a body
∴ *x* is a container

The concept of container enables various inferential schemas that are applicable to the concept of the body as well. *Qua* container, a body

- is a bounded entity,
- is an extended entity,
- involves a distinction between inside and outside,
- can contain other entities and be itself contained,
- can involve heterogenous inside area,
- has specific areas for interaction with its environment.

As a special case of container, the human body furthermore

- is a biological system,
- reproduces,
- communicates,
- seeks well-being,

- has self-steering mechanisms related to well-being,
- is an intentional system, that is, has beliefs and desires, and acts.

If we utilize the concept of the body in our study of religion, we acquire first the above inferences that together tell us that we are dealing with human beings. The logic of beliefs, desires and actions is a complicated and rewarding object of study, and much of general ethnography studies this area on the basis of the assumption that the study object is an intentional system.

A natural continuation in using the concept of the body is to investigate the culturally specific, more detailed concepts of the body that are built upon the generic concept of the body. In various cultures bodies are conceptualized as containers of souls, for example. In the folk religion of the Peruvian Amazon, the body is seen as a vessel for at least two souls, one of which is responsible for bodily functions, and the other for thinking, personality and other mental characteristics (Kamppinen 1990a, 1990b). A parallel culturally specific concept of human body can be found in charismatic Christianity, where the human body is assumed to contain soul and spirit, each of which serves different functions during the course of human life and in interactions with supernatural entities. The material body, furthermore, is assumed to be reassembled at the resurrection and transported to heaven as a material entity. Therefore it will retain its container-based properties in the afterlife, and can interact with similarly embodied relatives and friends, can move from one part of the heaven to another, can have feelings of joy, and so on.

Therefore the inferential schemas that constitute the concept of the body are utilized not only at the beginning of the research process when we are tracing the culturally specific concepts of the body, but also after the culturally specific concept has been identified. Starting from the assumption that bodies are constructed as extended containers even in the afterlife, we can study the particular ways in which extended bodies interact in the constructed world of the afterlife.

The body as a source model

Functional equations of the form $f(x) = y$ are common in science. What they tell is that the value of y is a function of x . The function is something that transforms the variable x into y . In the humanities a parallel function is served by the concept of context. Religious context transforms entities into study objects that are relevant in religious studies. When bodies are placed in re-

ligious contexts, they are transformed into study objects of religious studies. In the preceding examples, the bodies are in religious contexts and therefore they are of interest in religious studies. Bodies as such are not relevant, no matter how intensively used or manipulated.

But what happens if we think of the body as a function or context that transforms objects into new kinds objects? This

is exactly what happens when our informants use the concept of the body as a source model (or metaphor) that they apply to different entities. The body as a source model is a kind of container metaphor with more specific properties as we saw above. What the body model does is that it imposes bodily features into objects, transforming them into body-like entities. When the object to be transformed is a supernatural entity, we have a case that is relevant for religious studies.

Let us take an example. Years ago I was studying the belief systems pertaining to an Amazonian supernatural entity called *yashingo*. It is a forest spirit that has a human appearance and relates to human interests in various ways. It is a guardian spirit that has its own garden in the forest; it controls hunting and extracting activities, and so on. It is a fictitious entity, and it is constructed as having a human body, that can be at times transformed into animal appearance. The body as a source model transforms this supernatural entity into an anthropomorphic supernatural entity, and its constructed bodily properties consequently can be studied. The fact that it is constructed as a body helps us in explaining why its patterns of interaction are of a certain type—why, for example, it can be seen and heard (in the constructed reality where supernatural entities reside).

When conducting interviews on the forest spirit and asking about its appearance, couple of informants said that there is no need to guess its appearance, since they have a photograph of forest spirit.



Amazonian forest spirit in a tree. Photographer is unknown.

The older man I was interviewing looked at the picture and said that it is not a forest spirit, but rather a vagabond evil spirit. Since most people are taxonomists only when under pressure from the ethnographer, there is no way to settle the identity of the creature. But what is clearly seen is that the supernatural entity has been molded by means of using the human body as a source model. Consequently its further properties can be investigated—whether, for example, it can move from one place to another in an instant.

Conclusion

Bodies are relevant in religious studies for the obvious reason that religious entities are dependent upon material human beings who can confer religious meanings to different things. The concept of the body can be used in a precise fashion by distinguishing the material bodies placed in religious contexts from the use of the concept of the body as a source model. In the latter case the constructed world of supernatural fictions is given bodily properties, as in the case of anthropomorphism. Current fashionable terms like embodiment, embodied, or bodily, do not add information to these basic uses of the concept of the body.

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