



## The Body, Desire and Disability

*Adapted from Living in the Shadow of the Cross*

*By Paul Kivel*

The body plays a pivotal role in Christianity. Genesis is the story of the first human bodies: Eve and Adam are perfect, but they succumb to the temptation of the body, eat the fruit and are banished from the garden. The struggle to reclaim paradise and the pain-free, beautiful and immortal bodies of its initial inhabitants has guided the pursuit of Western science since its inception.<sup>1</sup>

The next key story, of Mary and Jesus, is about the limits and transcendence of bodies. Mary defines the female body and exhibits as much transcendence as a woman can achieve as a passive and virginal (therefore perfect) receptacle for God. Jesus had a human body that was born, suffered and died. But he transcended his body because he was divine, enabling him to join his father in heaven.

While Mary is a bodily vessel for the spirit, Jesus is the spirit incarnate in the body. These are the bodies and spiritualities to which men and women are supposed to aspire.<sup>2</sup> Most Western art, music, architecture and literature consist of stories about these and other bodies and their struggle for salvation. Usually good bodies - physically perfect, white, glowing with light and healthy - represent good people. Bad people are dark, misshaped and associated with evil.

The Inquisitions were based on the torture of the body and the search for signs on it

---

<sup>1</sup> The Eugenics movement, development of genetic engineering and research into bio-enhancement and life extension are more recent examples of this focus.

<sup>2</sup> For elucidation of these relationships see Richard Dyer. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. Routledge 1997, pp. 15-18.





of immorality and evil. Christian men were the standard by which God was assumed to judge everyone. The bodies of all Others - female, differently-abled, Muslim, Jewish, African - almost inevitably indicated immorality and impurity. These views set the stage for the racialization of Christianity in Europe and its colonies. Although the standard was at first a moral one, gradually physical, mental or sexual signs were taken to represent one's moral integrity. Homosexual behavior came to be interpreted as a sign of a moral lapse as were other, non-monogamous heterosexual orientations. Women, as morally weak creatures likely to be seduced by the devil, were believed to be physically marked by this intercourse: bearing a tail, penis, warts, unusual genitals or birthmarks. Almost anything could count as the devil's mark in an inquisitioner's mind.

Since disabilities were seen as an indication of being out of alignment with God, if one prayed hard enough and led a virtuous or pious life, one could be healed of any condition; there was no limit to God's ability or grace: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing; in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert."<sup>3</sup> Jesus was often depicted healing people who were crippled, lame, lepers or had other visible disabilities. Salvation itself was often portrayed as a state people attained in their physical bodies, made whole, pure and perfect in Christ.

With so much spiritual weight attached to one's physical condition, an individual with a disability was no longer a person with leprosy, a person who was blind, a person who'd lost the use of a leg in an accident. They were viewed simply as lepers, the blind and the lame. The Church objectified them and then designated them as objects of charity; their very isolation and suffering became an opportunity for good Christians to perform acts of piety. Charity both increased the dependency of those in need and the social distance and self-righteousness of those performing pious acts.

Eventually the vocabulary around disability and disease lost its explicit theological root

---

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 35:5-6 KJV.





and focused on what was natural (in God's plan) and what was unnatural (abnormal and therefore abhorrent to God). Increasingly civil authorities, including doctors and scientists, determined who and what counted as normal. White, Christian, rational, able-bodied men were still held up as the most godlike, but the standards were judged to be natural, not explicitly spiritual ones.<sup>4</sup> All Others were excluded (and because of their weaknesses "protected") from participation in public life.

The long struggles for abolition and white women's suffrage were waged in substantial part on whether African-Americans and white women were physically, mentally and emotionally able, i.e. equal to white Christian men. Common arguments against extending suffrage to women were that their brains were too small, their bodies too weak and they did not have the emotional/moral discipline to participate in important public matters. In addition, because of their physical and mental weakness, suffrage and education (for white women) would be to their disadvantage. They would suffer ill health, mental breakdown and a wide variety of other ailments.<sup>5</sup>

In their respective struggles for freedom and suffrage, African-Americans and white women often tried to distance themselves from being associated with people with disabilities. However, by claiming they were misclassified as disabled (inferior), they inadvertently inscribed disability itself as an inferior status.

Darwin's theory of evolution put a scientific stamp of approval on what had been a long-standing Christian view of different groups of peoples' abilities as reflected in their bodies. One reason Darwin's theory, popularized as *survival of the fittest*, was accepted (not without resistance, of course) was because it could be used so tidily to

---

<sup>4</sup> The development of standards of deviance gave these judgments an appearance of scientific objectivity and neutrality, but they were based on Christian hierarchies of value and superiority/inferiority.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas C. Baynton. "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds. *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. New York University, 2001. [online]. [cited December 5, 2012].  
[uua.org/documents/bayntondouglas/justification\\_inequality.pdf](http://uua.org/documents/bayntondouglas/justification_inequality.pdf).





justify social inequality based on skin color, physiognomy and other physical characteristics deemed to be less fit than the white able-bodied male standard. In a period of fear of increased immigration by darker Eastern Europeans, Darwin's theories also protected national identity based on a racialized idea of the state.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, US immigration policy focused on attempting to turn away anyone who was abnormal, i.e. of inferior stock. Most of these racially coded, arbitrary physical, mental and emotional criteria carried both material and spiritual implications. Immigration officials at Ellis Island, Angel Island and other points of entry were supposed to look for such things as feeble-mindedness, physical disfigurement, shortness of height, unusual physical characteristics, deafness, blindness, mental illness, asthma, arthritis, bunions, flat feet, hysteria, varicose veins and people with "abnormal sex instincts" (homosexual).<sup>6</sup> The United States was believed to be a strong, vigorous and moral country (body) destined for high achievements. That manifest destiny was paramount. Officials feared letting in anyone who was weak or defective, because a biological weak link was considered a threat to the health of the nation, and a hindrance to its progress.

Western science contributed a great deal both to the practice of reading the superiority or inferiority of bodies and to the definition of the perfect body. The ideal was "A hard, lean body, a dieted or trained one, an upright, shoulders back, unrelaxed posture, tight rather than loose movement, tidiness in domestic arrangement and eating manners, privacy in relation to bowels, abstinence or at any rate planning in relation to appetites ..."<sup>7</sup>

Anthropologists and biologists developed many different ways to measure and judge the bodies of men and women from different *races*, measuring skull shape, noses, ears, body shape, skin color and brain mass. These studies were set up to demonstrate the physical and thus the moral superiority of white, western Christian men as

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dyer, *White*, pp. 23-4.





represented by their bodies, and inevitably did so, even if the scientists involved had to manipulate or even fabricate the data.<sup>8</sup> IQ tests were established to prove the same hierarchy of worth. Theologian Susannah Heschel has described the practice of basing people's eligibility to participate in social and political life based on their bodies:

... My understanding of racial theory is that it's a kind of "incarnational theology." It says that the moral degeneracy is incarnate in the body, in the nose or the lips or the hair, and what a racist tells you is: you have to know how to read the body and interpret it properly so that you know the moral degeneracy that adheres in that body, that's incarnate in that body.<sup>9</sup>

Incarnational theology was instrumental in justifying the Eugenics movement in the US and subsequently in Nazi Germany. This influential movement promoted sterilization, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia and marriage bans to strengthen Christian nations. The Nazis used this framework to implement their program of ethnic cleansing, aimed not just at Jews, but also at the old, the infirm, people with disabilities, Roma, homosexuals and the mentally ill - all groups long designated Other, whose bodies were judged to be a corrupting moral influence and detriment to a perfect society.

In the post-World War II period, the body has become not just a hazard to salvation for some but simultaneously an aid to salvation for others.<sup>10</sup> Millions of people pursue thin, fit, muscular, healthy and so-called perfect bodies for reasons of health, social acceptance, intimacy or love - some kind of earthly salvation that represents grace. The

---

<sup>8</sup> On race see for example: Stephen Jay Gould. *The Mismeasure of Man*. Norton, 1981 and on gender see: Nancy Tuana. *The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Women's Nature*. Indiana University, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Bruce Wilson. "Confronting the Storm Troopers of Christ." *Talk to Action*, September 2, 2012. [online]. [cited September 9, 2012]. Viewed at <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2008/1/28/175235/329> on 9-9-12. See also Susannah Heschel. *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. Princeton, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> For example, obesity is often judged to be a symptom of laziness, greed or lack of control - all traditional Christian vices. See R. Marie Griffith. *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*. University of California, 2004, p. 19.





language people use to describe their efforts to control their impulses and desires to avoid *indulgence* and *temptation* speak to the moral concerns underlying their efforts. After exercising “I feel good” becomes “I’ve been good” or “I’ve done good.” Often people speak of indulgence when they eat things they think they shouldn’t: “I’ve been bad.” In advertisements, images of seductive women are used to tempt men away from worldly pursuits by offering food, alcohol or sex - the very physical things they desire but are supposed to deny themselves. People labeled *fat* are routinely and publicly criticized and ridiculed, believed not to have the willpower to refrain from indulgence. Many diet programs rely explicitly on a Christian framework to help people have faith, give up control to “a higher power” and gain personal salvation through their ability to resist temptation.<sup>11</sup>

Bodies are categorized not only by size, shape and color, but also within a gender binary: all bodies are perceived to be either male or female. Male is normal. Female is *the opposite*, less highly valued. When a baby is born intersex, not readily identified physically as male or female, the attending physician declares a medical emergency. This situation is not really a medical emergency; it is a moral emergency, considered a breach in the natural order of the world, threatening the entire binary framework through which we understand gender identity. Parents are heavily pressured by the medical establishment to decide immediately whether the child’s body should be surgically and chemically altered to be recognizable as a traditional girl or a traditional boy even though premature sexual assignment surgery can result in lifelong medical and psychological difficulties.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, when people meet someone who is not clearly categorized by gender or race they may feel uneasy, vaguely threatened because they need to categorize bodies into

---

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of these programs, see Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*.

<sup>12</sup> Milton Diamond and H. Keith Sigmundson. “Management of Intersexuality: Guidelines for dealing with individuals with ambiguous genitalia.” University of Hawai’i, Pacific Center for Sex and Society, October 4, 2009. [online]. [cited March 6, 2013]. [hawaii.edu/PCSS/biblio/articles/1961to1999/1997-management-of-intersexuality.html](http://hawaii.edu/PCSS/biblio/articles/1961to1999/1997-management-of-intersexuality.html). See especially “Final Comment.”







binary divisions so they know how to interact with them. The anxiety people feel when they don't know where someone fits in these categories indicates how deeply gender, race and other binary hierarchies are naturalized and embedded in people's psyches.

One legacy of Puritanism is the belief that what one does with one's body is a public matter, subject to public scrutiny and censor. Communities no longer mark adulterers with scarlet letters, but eating habits, sexual conduct (premarital sex, adultery, homosexual relations) and public displays of affection are considered legitimate for personal comment and social condemnation.

As gay activist, educator and writer Eric Rofes has written, "Among the most effective ways of oppressing a people is through the colonization of their bodies, the stigmatizing of their desires, and the repression of their erotic energies."<sup>13</sup>

Our bodies are the source of our erotic energy, the root of our pleasure and connection to others and the earth. Author Audre Lorde has defined the erotic as "the sensual ... those expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings."<sup>14</sup> Our feelings, known and expressed through our bodies, are the source of our creative powers. Living deeply in our bodies allows us to know the material and non-material world, to engage, to act in that world. Reclaiming the integrity, beauty, knowledge and vitality of our bodies is central to our being able to develop alternatives to Christian dominance.

Our bodies contain and connect us to sources of wisdom, which no one can take from us. We are not in the world but of the world, and our bodies - in all their complexity,

---

<sup>13</sup> Eric Rofes, quoted in Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Heyduk, eds. *From Act UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*. Verso, 2002, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in Audre Lorde. *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.





diversity and unpredictability - are a source of strength. Unconditionally loving and affirming our bodies is how we regain our ability to live interdependently and sustainably.

Paul Kivel is an educator, activist and writer with decades of experience working on issues of violence prevention and social justice. His books and curricula include Uprooting Racism, Men's Work, You Call This a Democracy?, Helping Teens Stop Violence, Build Community and Stand for Justice and Living in the Shadow of the Cross. Information about his work, books, and other resources is available at [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com) and [www.christianhegemony.org](http://www.christianhegemony.org).





