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van den Berg, Mariecke

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## BODIES AND EMBODIMENT

### The somatic turn in the study of religion and gender

*Mariecke van den Berg*

#### **Introduction**

A few years ago I switched from working at a Protestant theological faculty to a department of religious studies where the study of religion from an anthropological perspective is dominant. It was here that I most prominently encountered the paradigm shift within the study of religion in which the conception of religion as a set of beliefs is exchanged for the study of religion in terms of practices, rituals, sounds, smells, foods or pictures—so-called material religion. And within this preference for religion as always mediated by matter or ritual (Meyer 2009), there is also prominent attention to bodies and embodiment, as well as to religion and religious expression in clothing, eating and fasting practices, dance and music performances. Underlying this material turn, I learned, was the need to deconstruct the ‘Protestant bias’. Centuries of Protestant domination in the West and beyond has left us with a tendency, both in the study of religion and in Western society as a whole, to favour doctrine over ritual, belief over practice, faith over the body and the senses.

The ‘Protestant bias’ is now a common expression among scholars of religion and is one of those terms that any field of study needs to find some form of agreement over with respect to its shared points of departure and approaches. It can be casually dropped in conversation and people will nod in agreement. Yet I, with my Protestant body, felt out of place during departmental meetings and discussions. My Protestant body started wriggling in its chair. It sometimes wanted to just leave the room and get a coffee and return when the conversation had moved on to another topic. I started remembering experiences from my childhood. I remembered what it felt like when the organ broke into a psalm, full force. How my entire body seemed to vibrate, my own organs responding to this powerful church organ. I also remembered what it felt like to sit still for an hour and a half, how my buttocks would start to freeze no matter how well I learned to move my muscles in that area so subtly that my parents did not notice. I remember the taste of Mentos in my mouth; I remember how to make half a roll last through an entire service. As I remembered these things, I knew that the Protestant bias could only be partly true. I do not question that it is a useful and necessary concept to address theoretical and methodological blind spots in the Western study of religion, as well as the effects of Protestant hegemony in both Europe and its former colonies. Yet as a concept it might also be too all-encompassing and too rigid, and little attuned to the ways in which Protestantism is embodied

and materialized, to varieties within Protestantism, and to dualist tendencies in other forms of Christianity and in other religions.

Either way, I felt the need to start this chapter with a brief reflection on embodied writing, about what it means to write about religion, gender and embodiment as a person with a particular body. It matters that this chapter is written by an author who grew up in (and still participates in) Calvinist Protestantism in the Netherlands. It matters how my musical tastes and gluteal muscles were constituted, because it provides me with a hesitance towards celebratory academic narratives about the body in which *my* body disappears. However, are these forms of embodiment more important in shaping my perspective and sensitivities than the fact that my body is—for instance—cisgendered, white, and generally not in pain? How does it matter that it is situated in a European country, exposed mainly to European concerns? These kinds of reflections are important, I argue, for any author, as they challenge us to make explicit connections between our bodies, our perspectives and our blind spots.

In this chapter I present these and other concerns that are of importance when studying bodies and embodiment in relation to religion and gender. I will start by offering a reflection on the somatic turn in the study of religion and gender, presenting its most relevant disciplinary perspectives. I then move on to discuss how the study of bodies and embodiment challenges existing ontologies and epistemologies, followed by a section on the limits of and challenges involved in a focus on the body.

### **The somatic turn in the study of religion and gender**

Over the past few decades, the humanities and social sciences have been witness to a ‘somatic turn’: a turn toward the body as a central category of analysis (Hancock et al. 2000, 10). Why have we turned to the study of the body? How is embodied science different from what came before? In the words of religious studies scholar Meredith McGuire, “What might we see differently if we considered also the ordinary, everyday embodied practices by which individuals (sometimes privately, sometimes collectively) accomplish their spiritual lives and, literally, live their religions?” (2007, 188). Different stories are told about the somatic that relate to the body and its intellectual history in ways that sometimes overlap and that sometimes diverge. Unsurprisingly, the body, religion and gender are produced in different ways in these narratives. In this section, I will begin to answer the question of the ‘why’ by exploring the turn to the body from various disciplinary perspectives.

One answer to the question as to why it is necessary to study the body is simply this: because it has gained importance in society, and the job of the social sciences is to understand and explain such trends. According to Bryan Turner, we live in a ‘somatic society’: a society “within which major political and personal problems are both problematized within the body and expressed through it” (1996 [1984], 1). Examples are the ways in which people are shaping their bodies through ‘care regimes’ in terms of dieting and working out at the gym. From the perspective of sociology we need to study the body, because it gives us important information about how society works. Religion and gender feature prominently in this sociological narrative of the social genesis of the body, of which Turner, together with Erving Goffman (1979) and Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), is one of the most important spokespersons. Turner argues that the prominence of the body in contemporary society needs to be located both in a persistent Christian legacy as well as in the secularization of society. Modern, secular ways of disciplining the body, by means of a diet or by going to the gym, reflect Christian attitudes towards the body as “the location of appetite, of sinful desire and of private irrationality” (Turner 1996 [1984], 43). Female sexuality in particular needs to be regulated in this respect (*ibid.*, 11). As Protestant

Christianity has become 'eroded', its influence has declined, but only to a certain extent, since it has heavily shaped its secular successor, Cartesianism. Here, the emphasis is on the individual and secular rationalism. In Turner's account, Protestantism and Cartesianism are two sides of the same coin. Both prefer mind to matter and promote an ascetic lifestyle, leading to "the regulation of emotions, sexuality and the affective life through the regulation and discipline of the human body" (1996 [1984], 10). According to Turner, while Marxism, with its emphasis on the material, and psychoanalysis, with its suspicion of the rational, already formed important critiques of this preference for the mind, the split of mind and body itself became challenged only by feminism, postmodernism and critical theory (1996 [1984], 20). At the centre of these theories and social movements lies a focus on the importance of the body for the formation of identity. As Chris Shilling notes, with the decline of religious authority and at the end of the 'grand narratives' which so characterizes postmodernity, the body provides "a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world" (1993, 3). The body has become a project (Giddens 1991) or the means for performance (Goffman 1956; Butler 1993). The body has become the site of the self, the place where we can 'work on ourselves' in terms of clothing, sports, make-up, food intake or plastic surgery. As Turner argues:

In contemporary society the self is . . . a representational self, whose value and meaning is ascribed to the individual by the shape and image of their external body, or more precisely, through their body-image. The regulatory control of the body is now exercised through consumerism and the fashion industry rather than through religion.

(1996 [1984], 23)

From a religious studies perspective, there is more to say about this representation. One might question, for instance, whether such a rigid change in 'control mechanisms' of the body can be said to be true for all societies, or any society in its entirety, for that matter. Or if religion ever truly had the total form of control over the body that Turner seems to imply. Yet the core of these analyses, that the body has become central in how in Western cultural identity is shaped and interpreted, holds true also from a religious studies perspective. In fact, many scholars of religious studies have also been eager to adapt a more embodied and/or material approach to the study of religion.

Just as in sociology where the somatic turn was welcomed in order to gain a better understanding of society, religious studies scholars have argued that a material, embodied approach to religion results in a more accurate perspective on the role religion plays in peoples' lives. The aforementioned scholar of religion, Meredith McGuire, is among the pioneers in the field, advocating a 'lived religion' approach that moves away from official, authorized religion and focuses on what it actually is that people do when they 'do religion' in their everyday lives. Such an approach often leads scholars to explore the kind of religion that can be found in the margins: religion or spirituality that until recently was not recognized as such (such as gardening) or religion performed by those who do not hold positions of power within institutionalized religion, such as women (McGuire 2007, 191). Indeed, McGuire argues that a lived religion approach encourages researchers to delve into practices of resistance to official teachings and practice (ibid.).

McGuire's preference for researching expressions of religion by individuals previously neglected by religious studies reflects an important concern for the embodied study of religion and gender that supersedes a disengaged interest in understanding how society works, namely the need to understand the circulation of power. The binary between mind and body has affected people differently because this binary, argues Sally Promey, functions in relation to other

sets of binaries: “sacred/secular, image/word, concrete/abstract, material/immaterial, exterior/interior, sensation/cognition, body/mind, emotion/reason, belief/knowledge, nature/culture, particular/universal” (2014, 7). These binaries do not present two neutral alternatives. Rather, modernity has often emphasized a preference for “the right-hand term” (ibid.). This means that while some (white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied men) were claiming modernity and the ‘right-hand’ conceptual framework on which it relies, others (women, people of color, disabled people and colonized people) were relegated to the “left-hand side”, that of the body, the material and the emotional. Scholars from feminist, women’s, gender and queer studies, as well as critical race studies and postcolonial studies, have invested in formulating a critique of these dualisms of modernity. While it is not possible to discuss these academic traditions in depth within the scope of this article, I do wish to briefly review some important critical interventions in thinking on the body and religion.

Feminist theory, to begin with, was characterized by an ambivalent attitude towards the body. According to Elizabeth Grosz, this is understandable. In light of the dominance of dualist thinking, feminists have been reluctant to focus too much on the specificities of their bodies in the formulation of theories on subjectivities and social positions (1994, 10). Liberal feminism, in particular, that is concerned with issues of equality (of women to men), has been accused of “somatophobia” (Grosz 1994, 5). In their attempts to match up to men, also in terms of intellectual accomplishment, bodies have faded into the background. Its counterpart, radical feminism, chose another path and celebrated female embodiment as a positive feature that provided women with a “unique ethical sense” that featured relationality and caring (Shildrick and Price 1999, 4). This, however, has caused some to criticize radical feminists for essentializing the female body. I argue that it is possible to retell the story of the body differently and will explore a number of contributions that help in avoiding both these extremes.

The first of these is the work done by those scholars who emphasize the intersection of gender and sexuality with other categories of identity such as race and class (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983; Crenshaw 1989). The bodies which philosophers like Descartes inhabited *and* the ones they discussed have often been racially unmarked, but implicitly white and male. Yet it is impossible to speak of ‘the body’ in the singular (Grosz 1994, 21). Rather, “there are only multiple bodies, marked not simply by sex, but by an infinite array of differences . . . none of which is solely determinate” (Shildrick and Price 1999, 8). Second, in their introduction to the reader *Feminist Theory and the Body* (1999), Magrit Shildrick and Janet Price point out that many feminist theorists have invested in grasping the ways in which bodies are regulated by power regimes. Using the work of Michel Foucault, they are interested in how the body functions as a site regulated by the government and institutions. For Foucault this meant asking questions about biomedicine, prison regimes and the military. In line with this, feminist researchers have started asking questions about how gender norms are played out on the body. How do women become women, and men become men? How do we learn to behave according to the historically and geographically situated cultural norms of masculinity and femininity? The work of Judith Butler, in particular, has been important in theorizing the concept of ‘performativity’: the repetition of gendered behaviour according to cultural scripts in order to perform gender and sexuality convincingly, pretending this behaviour reflects a core identity while it in fact *constructs* this identity (Butler 1993). In this way, the body in its gendered and sexualized forms comes across as natural and self-evident, while it is in fact the product of social convention. To summarize, feminist theory has developed an intersectional framework that enables critical reflection of and critique on dualist thinking that constructs women, people of colour and sexual minorities as inferior, without reproducing negative attitudes towards the body and emphasizing the fluidity and changing nature of bodies.

What does it mean to bring feminist and intersectional perspectives, that is, perspectives that foreground the ways in which social conceptions of gender, race, class and physical ability mutually influence each other, on the body into the study of religion? According to Ursula King (2004, 5), the 'gender critical turn' in religious studies and (Christian) theology has been received with more reluctance than in many other fields of study and has not been as all-encompassing as might be hoped. Vice versa, Rosi Braidotti (2008) and Sarah Bracke (2008) have pointed to the fact that in feminist theory, religion has for a long time been absent from or, if it has been studied, suspect of necessarily replicating patriarchal structures. These trends are now changing. Issues of body and embodiment seem to function as some form of epistemological and methodological glue that makes firmer connections between religious studies and gender studies possible. A focus on embodied practices makes it possible to bring women's experiences, daily lives and traditionally marginalized practices to the centre of attention. With the material and somatic turn taking place in both gender studies and religious studies, it seems that the future for interdisciplinary research becomes more promising.

It is important to note here that feminist studies of the body and embodiment in relation to religion have not only come from those outside of religious traditions, as the following section on feminist theology will demonstrate. The project of investigating religion as possibly also empowering for women has been ongoing for a while within Christian feminist theology (and, obviously, within other religious traditions too). This has resulted in the development of feminist systematic theology: feminist theologians like Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Catherine Keller tackling the dogmatic belief systems that have been developed throughout tradition from a predominantly male perspective. These systems have left us with conceptions of women's place in tradition based on misogynist readings of the creation story in Genesis and an image of God as essentially male. Over against these dominant (and tenacious) images, feminist systematic theologians started to rebuild Christian doctrine from scratch. Within this project, the body has not always been at the forefront, but this has changed with the more recent generation of theologians, such as from the tradition of liberation theology Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, from womanist theology Carol Troupe and Khalia Jelks Williams, from black theology Anthony B. Pinn, from mujerista theology María Isasi-Díaz, from systematic theology Elizabeth Stuart, from practical theology Nicola Slee and from Jewish studies, theologian Melissa Raphael. What these scholars have in common is, first, that they begin from the fact that theologians have bodies, too, and that these bodies influence their perspective. There is no neutral, disembodied ground from which to do theology. Moreover, as Althaus-Reid and Isherwood in particular point out, bodies have erotic desires and experiences that are theologically relevant, especially since for many groups of women these experiences and desires have been ignored or regulated by religious institutions. Second, they commit to theologizing starting from and speaking to the embodied experiences of real-life, present-day women. This includes experiences as gendered human beings, but also experiences of class distinctions and poverty, being an ethnic or racial minority, and/or being part of a sexual or gender minority. Third, they commit themselves to exploring how human bodies relate to non-human bodies and matter, as is the project of ecofeminist theology (Farley 1985; Radford Ruether 1992, 2005; Van Montfoort 2019).

### **What is a body? Reflections on ontology**

Research on religion and gender from the perspective of embodiment has changed the way the body itself is being conceived, and it will be useful to pause for a moment and see what kind of bodies are brought up by this field of study. In other words, has the somatic turn in the study

of religion and gender lead to a redefinition of the ontology of the body? What are we talking about when we talk about the body? Is it ‘merely’ an object made of organs, flesh, bone and skin? Is it enough to speak of the body by means of metaphor, or should our research (always) be related to actual, physical bodies? Are bodies a tool to express our ‘selves’, and is the ‘self’ in that case to be thought of as separate from the body? Is the body indeed a project, a performance? Does it have an agency of its own? How does a body become a religious body? In this section and the next, I will explore the consequences that a focus on bodies and embodiment has in terms of ontology and epistemology in the study of religion and gender. I include these sections in order to make clear that the somatic turn is not merely a ‘corrective’ to dualist perceptions, but also brings with it its own distinct value that affects the core of academic research. I will start with the first: a reflection on ontology and body.

The somatic turn implies, first and foremost, a critique of the body as the ahistorical, ‘natural’ and universal given, which it had become in Cartesian mind–body dualism. As Shahzad Bashir (2011, 14) notes in his research on Sufi bodies, this is reflected in the still popular idea, illusional though it is, that we have the same body all our lives. It is an idea that helps us conceive ourselves as coherent beings, when in fact our bodies are constantly subject to change and decay. Within the study of religion, gender and the body, the perspective of single or universal bodies has been questioned and replaced by the preference to see bodies as always specific, multiple and contextualized, fluid in the ways they are shaped and move through space, and subject to power relations in different ways, according to these many varieties.

One of the most important questions that can be raised about bodies is whether they should be regarded as a biological entity or as a social construct, whether they are a given by nature or whether they can only be understood through the ways in which they are socially marked. This is also relevant for the question of what constitutes a religious body. As William LaFleur (1998) argues, various cultures and religious institutions tend to place bodies on a continuum: somewhere between the body as a given not to be meddled with and the body as an object that needs to be altered (for instance, through circumcision) in order to become religious. One might argue that in both cases cultures (a rather broad term) or religious institutions mark bodies socially by investing them with meaning, also—and paradoxically—when they claim that bodies are a given (by nature or God) which humans should not alter. A useful perspective on the body as it is situated in biology and culture can be found with McGuire, who suggests, “the human body is both a biological and a cultural product, simultaneously physical and symbolic, existing always in a specific social and environmental context in which the body is both active agent and yet shaped by each social moment and its history” (1990, 285). This seems to be a fruitful approach, keeping open the possibility of studying the body as a biological and a social entity. The task of researchers in the field of religion and gender is to focus on the *how*: *how* are biological and social constructivist ways of reasoning used in academic and societal discussions on the body? What are the effects of favouring and publicly supporting either perspective?

A second issue of importance is how power is played out on the body, how it plays a role in shaping it and even in the articulation of intellectual, ontological statements about the body. Feminist and queer theory has been crucial in pointing out the many ways in which power is involved in how we think about bodies and how bodies can or cannot act in the world, can or cannot present themselves. Often making use of concepts proposed by Foucault, who saw the body as the docile product of discourse and regulations (1975, 138), feminist and queer theory has explored the body as a map onto which different ideologies of gender and sexuality are drawn. Moreover, the body can be the object where class takes shape through a class-specific ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1991). Or, bodies can become symbols of the nation or the state (Çinar 2005, 53). The terminology that is used in the analytical work that seeks to lay bare the relation

between bodies and power is that of the body as a *site* (Censi 2016, 1), a *battleground* (Cooey 1994, 3), or a material or physical *space* (Çinar 2005, 53). This language suggests that the body functions almost as a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet onto which a story of gender, religion, race and class can be written. However, the body is more than the 'docile body' suggested by Foucault (and for which his theory has also been criticized). It may be subject of oppression, but is also the tool to resist oppression (Bordo 1989; Censi 2016, 2). Susan Leigh Foster argues that we should not only consider "the possibility of a body that is written upon but that also writes" (1995, 15). The body can refuse to be disciplined and fail to perform scripts of gender and sexuality correctly.

### **The embodied production of knowledge: reflections on epistemology**

In addition to ontological questions, what does it mean to focus on the body in the study of religion and gender in terms of *epistemology*, that is, what is the role of the body in the production of knowledge? The somatic turn implies a different relation to knowledge in terms of what it is and who has access to it and how. First, as already noted in the section on feminist theology, the study of religion, gender and the body implies that the body of the researcher needs to be taken into account as of importance in the production of knowledge. This has of course already been common practice in more empirical fields of study, in both the natural sciences and the social sciences, where perception is strongly related to the senses: chemical experiments cannot be carried out without the researcher seeing, smelling or hearing the results, and likewise anthropologists cannot do their work without tasting the food, hearing the music and seeing the dress codes of the culture they study. The body, in other words, mediates human experience (Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes 2017, 13). Yet more can be said than merely that the senses are needed in the production of knowledge. The fact that the researcher is embodied also matters for *how* the senses are employed, *what* is seen as of importance and what is ignored as irrelevant. This is relevant in all fields of study, not only empirical disciplines. The fact that the researcher has a body and thus experiences the world in a certain way, one might say, guides the senses in any type of research. The fact that I am an embodied Calvinist Protestant, for instance, is relevant when I set out to study other faith traditions, whether this be an ethnographic study or a text-based approach. Realizing that I have a Protestant body could attune me to the 'hermeneutics of irritation' (Bauer, forthcoming): some statements will make me feel irritable: why is that the case? Which assumptions or comforts are being challenged by the texts I study? Embodied epistemology thus recognizes the participation of the body in the production of knowledge (Csordas 1993).

Second, the study of religion, gender and the body asks what is recognized as knowledge when we study religion and to be critical of the conditions under which something is recognized as knowledge. In an academic setting dominated by the Cartesian dualisms discussed earlier, religious knowledge is primarily recognized when it is presented in a systematic way as a set of beliefs, dogmas or statements. Knowledge in this sense is mainly text. However, for many practitioners of religion or spirituality, there are different types of knowledge they pursue, and some of these types are strongly related to their bodies. These types of embodied religious knowledge need to be taken into account if one wishes to come to a better understanding of religion and spirituality. As McGuire states, "Exploring the somatic component of ways of knowing may give us a better approach for understanding alternate states of reality, religious healing, the effectiveness of ritual, and such spiritual modes of knowledge as 'discernment', 'prophecy', 'anointing'" (1990, 286). These alternative modes of knowing become relevant especially from a feminist perspective, as many feminist theologians have pointed out, since they



often speak to experiences that have historically been relevant to women but have been written out of official religion. The risk of such an approach to epistemology and the body is, of course, that these types of embodied religious knowledge are ascribed mainly to women, once again portraying them as more ‘body-oriented’ in contrast to men, who have been presumed to be more interested in matters of the mind. It would be helpful to keep in mind that these specific embodied types of religious knowledge have certainly not been restricted to women. Men, too, have produced religious knowledge through their bodies. Perhaps the work of aforementioned Shahzad Bashir can be helpful in imagining an embodied religious epistemology that avoids a one-sided focus on women. His study is one of many examples of where men are implied in a religious turn to the body. In the case of Bashir, these are Sufi men exploring their bodies’ sensual possibilities, but other male-supported religious turns to the body can be noted as well, such as that of Hasidic Judaism (Jacobsen-Maisels 2016) and Evangelical Christianity (Kent 2014; Roeland et al. 2012).

### **The body and its limits: some critical reflections**

The somatic turn in the study of religion has been ongoing for a number of decades now. This means that there is, aside from the increasing number of studies on religion and the body, also a more or less established scholarly narrative about how this shift came about and why it was necessary—not unlike the account given in this chapter. There is so much talk about the body that it, paradoxically, has become once more a ‘story’. This gives reason to pause. If a new story of the body emerges, then what is its plot, who are the important characters and antagonists? How is the story of this turn told, and what are its effects on the study of religion and gender?

It is evident, at least to me, that the study of religion and gender has benefited from the somatic turn: a focus on the body enables researchers to critically review the politics of the dualisms that Cartesian philosophy handed down through the centuries, resulting in the acknowledgement of the embodied production of knowledge both about religion and within religious traditions and spiritual engagements. There is, however, more to say about the somatic turn and the way in which it is typically told. Most importantly, a focus on the body is not a magic wand that will make all the biases and prejudices present in the study of religion miraculously disappear. I would therefore like to present seven points of critical reflection on the study of religion, gender and body.

First, it is important to address the way in which religion figures in this story; in particular, the risk of making sweeping statements about how various religions relate to the body. It has been customary, especially in the public domain but also in academia, to construct over and against the ascetic teachings of early Christianity a more body-positive account of Judaism and Islam. Supposedly, in Judaism and Islam ritual is more important than it is in Christianity, sexuality is appreciated for its own sake (and not just for reasons of procreation) and food is an important marker of religious identity. However, I agree with Donald Boisvert and Carly Daniel-Hughes when they argue that there is no simple dichotomy between “body-affirming” and “body-denying” religions (2017, 13). This is important to note: the question of affirmation or denial of the body is much too restricted when it comes to the study of religion and the body. Rather, we need to ask a different set of questions: how is the body perceived? How is religion produced through the body and the senses? How, why and when is the body regulated? And, does the body have agency, if so, how?

Second, it is important to keep in mind that the departure from a dualist worldview has been significant for how we perceive the Christian legacy, but this dualism does not necessarily characterize other religions, or not in the same way. Daniel Boyarin (1993) has pointed to

the fact that Rabbinic Judaism was more interested in the body when other formations (such as Christianity and the Hellenistic *umwelt*) were more interested in the soul. He views Midrash as a genre of religious text that proposes alternate 'techniques of the body'. Likewise, Barbara Holdrege has pointed to the fact that religious studies, because it adopted terminologies from a variety of disciplines and not from traditions themselves, is left with a conceptual toolbox that in some cases is inadequate in addressing specific constellations of the body. This she finds to be the case in her own study of the body in Hinduism, where "the body is the instrument of biological and sociocultural reproduction that is to be regulated through ritual and social duties, maintained in purity, sustained through proper diet, and reproduced through appropriate sexual relations" (1998, 341). The concepts of religious studies are incapable, Holdrege argues, to thoroughly investigate the complex Hindu teachings on embodiment.

A third point of critique is offered by Constance Fury in a noteworthy contribution to the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in 2012. According to Fury, religious studies' research on the body has forgotten its own *raison d'être*, which she understands to involve acquiring a better understanding of subjectivity. In the many attempts to overcome Protestant biases, the subject, she argues, has become imagined as isolated and individualized, at the expense of a view on the subject as always also relational: "attention to practice, performance, authorizing discourse, and subjectifying power has focused attention on the subject in relation to society but not on the relational subject, formed and enacted through sustained affiliations and intense encounters" (2012, 9). Instead, Fury argues for the embodied subject as always relational.

Fourth, in much feminist scholarship on the body, the body is presumed to be whole and functional, and it departs from a body-positive attitude. For many feminist scholars the body needs to be restored from dualism and rescued from the power structures that mean to regulate or exclude it, and this project of restoration and empowerment needs an affirmative approach to the body. However, Sharon Betcher (2013) argues that in theology the turn to the body, when carried out in this manner, has often left 'disability abjection' intact. In the same vein Elizabeth Stuart (2000) asks questions about the presumption present in much body theology that embodiment is inherently good: what if a person experiences pain and/or disability? It is therefore necessary to keep asking questions about the body: whose body, what can it do and how might it be limited? What kind of body is taken to be the default when 'the body' is evoked?

Fifth, in the study of religion, gender and the body there seems to be a lack of shared methodology or even much reflection on this topic. As Holdrege (1998) noted, there seems to be a pick-and-choose set of concepts, such as the lived body, the sexual body and the medical body (p. 343), deriving from a vast array of academic disciplines. Consequently, a wide range of methodologies are applied, such as ethnography, ritual studies and textual analysis. Attention to methodology, however, seems to remain more vague than does attention to the conceptual framework, especially in research carried out in the humanities. Here, it seems to be sufficient to announce a focus on the body or embodiment. It is often unclear, however, what this focus entails and how it affects the methodologies used. Often the promise of embodiment is, in fact, a way of announcing that the research in question is about practice rather than faith or belief, and it consequently turns out to not address bodies, or to do so only in passing. It has proven to be very difficult to stay focused on the body when researching the body. As Bashir argues, "no matter how hard one tries to stick to the particular limbs and organs that seem to constitute it, the physical body dissolves into webs of symbols, laden with historical and social baggage, from virtually the moment one decides on it as a point of concentration" (2011, 14). And even if the focus remains with the body, the bodies discussed are often those of research participants, not that of the researcher themselves. Or, bodies are addressed in terms of discourse, but not in terms of their physical reality (Rivera 2015, 8). In other words, research on the body is often in

fact research on how the body functions in discourse, not on the reality of limbs, sinews, muscles, organs, sweat, blood, saliva and so on. This raises many questions. Should there be a shared methodological approach in body studies, and if so, what should this methodology look like, and how might it ensure that the study of the body and embodiment is not limited to discourse? Or is it sufficient to have a multitude of methodologies, depending on the discipline one positions oneself in, and a separate body-methodology is unnecessary? How might the body of the researcher/author be inscribed in the process?

My sixth point of concern is that research on religion, gender and body tends to focus on *women's* bodies and embodiment in particular. On the one hand, this is a necessary corrective to the previous focus on male-dominated religious traditions. It enables researchers to study women's religious practices and affirm these as legitimate forms of religion. On the other hand, this one-sided focus risks reiterating society's fascination with and tendency to regulate women's bodies in particular. Moreover, there is a risk of, once again, disembodying men, maintaining the fantasy that men's bodies are uninvolved in their religiosity.

The seventh and final point of attention is that we need to be careful not to be blinded by the 'Protestant bias bias', meaning that the study of religion develops an allergy toward anything to do with texts, ideas and abstraction. While it is important to counter the historical neglect of the body by bringing it back into focus, this does not mean that texts are no longer relevant in religious traditions, nor that texts should be studied in isolation from bodies. For many believers, whether they be clergy or lay people, and whether they be Protestants or something else, texts matter in many ways. People relate to the narratives of their tradition as told and remembered, they relate to the books and scrolls in which these texts are written down. They relate to the calligraphy of a Qur'an text they inherited from their parents, to the Bible in which they have underlined meaningful verses, to the siddur they have had since their bat or bar mitzvahs. Texts are more than their meaning: they also take shapes and have forms that people see, touch, smell and hear.

## Conclusion

The somatic turn has had, as I hope this chapter has demonstrated, an important impact on the study of religion and gender. It is an emancipatory turn in that it questions the dualisms that have been underlying the intellectual sense making of the phenomenon of religion in such a way that the practices of women, people of colour, and less-abled people have been neglected and written out of definitions of 'proper' religion. But apart from being emancipatory, or, I would like to emphasize, *because* it is excitatory in this way, it simply leads to better science. It turns the gaze to those people whose religion has not been recognized as such. A focus on the body and embodiment addresses the study of religion in its core, in its ontological and epistemological standpoints. It is critical towards the idea of disembodied religion and disembodied research and replaces this with a firm dedication to study religion as it is lived.

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