

Broken Bodies in a Broken World

Frank Regan writes about suffering bodies and the political eschatological vision of a New Humanity 'in Christ' on its well cared-for Earth.

Upon being invited to contribute to this issue of *Sofia* my memory jumped back a few years to the unforgettable photo of Alan Kurdi. Alan, barely four years old, boarded a boat along with his mum and in the arms of his father to emigrate 'illegally' to Europe, a promised land. The boat capsized and all were thrown into the water. A strong wave swept Alan from the arms of his father. Hours later his body was washed up on a beach somewhere in Turkey.

What is Embodiment?

Or what do our bodies embody? Chemically, we are a compound of chemicals one could buy for very little. Our Christian tradition has had a certain reticence regarding the body when faced with the importance of the soul. It was the soul which was saved, redeemed and brought to heaven.

Our biblical tradition does not distinguish between body and soul, which is a Greek dichotomy. Psalm 8 says we are 'little lower than the angels...crowned with glory and honour'. Somehow we are related to the cosmos over which we have dominion. In Psalm 139 we thank God for the wonder of our being. Deep in our biological and cultural DNA there is a chromosome which tells us we are special and we are related to the grandeur of the cosmos, which is to say with the Greeks, 'we are beautiful', or with the Hebrews, 'we are good'.

Bodies Illegal and Imperilled

Alan's tiny, fragile body, his face turned away from us as though somehow shy of being seen, opened our eyes to the plight of millions of refugees having to flee their lands and everything near and dear to them in the hope of finding safe harbour among a people not their own. His tiny form somehow embodies and symbolises the reality that from Nigeria, Mali and Niger in West Africa east to Chad, Uganda and Somalia and on to Syria, Lebanon and Iraq more than 65 million

people have been displaced by war, ecological disaster, religious persecution and cultural ethnocide. In the Middle East the war in Syria still rages. The situation in Yemen is of life or death proportions.



Alan Kurdi's body washed ashore. Photo aljazeera.com

From the first moments of the human story we hear God's voice, 'the blood of your brother cries out to me'. The first sin was the sin of fratricide, a fratricide of genocidal scope as there were only four persons involved. A sacrilege has been committed, in that God is sensitive to the blood of the creature that is made in God's image and likeness.

Bodies Trafficked and Enslaved

From out of that same human cauldron come thousands of women who have arrived in Europe with a promise of employment and find to their surprise that they are prostitutes. Maria was 21 when she first ran away. She had been

trafficked for years, had become hysterical and slashed her arms and legs and face. She received treatment in a psychiatric hospital for nine months, and then ran away again. There are thousands of Marias.

We often shrug our shoulders regarding prostitution as history's oldest profession. In modern times there is a movement to 'professionalise' prostitution, making it a job like any other. This risky strategy will only cover up the real soul-searing tragedy of prostitution, especially that arising from the trafficking of human bodies, women and men both.

The Christian patriarchy has been traditionally contemptuous of prostitutes. Figures like Mary Magdalene have been vilified as a prostitute with no Gospel textual evidence to sustain the identification. The patriarchy has opposed the figure of Mary the virgin to the Magdalene, thus obscuring the role of Mary Magdalene as the 'Apostle of the Apostles', the first witness of the empty tomb and first evangelist to the disciples, first to embrace the risen Christ.

It is only recently that the Catholic Church has opened its eyes to the reality of trafficked women. Indeed it has canonised a woman, Josephine by name, born in Darfur around 1877. Just a child she was made to walk over 600 miles to a slave market in El Obeid. There she was sold and for the next twelve years was bought and sold over a dozen times. She was sold to an Italian consul and arrived in Italy. She was left in a convent, converted, and became a sister. Her outreach was to women like herself. She spent her life in their service. Today they call her Saint Bakhita, Arabic for 'fortunate'.

Jesus spent much time in the company of tainted and ritually impure women. When he healed the woman with an issue of blood he called her 'daughter of Abraham'. Theretofore Abraham had no daughters, only sons. Thus Jesus recognised their equal God-given dignity, even in the synagogue.

Jesus showed by example that we are called to honour our bodies and those of all human beings. He loved bodies: leper bodies, possessed bodies, widow and orphan bodies, foreign bodies and hostile bodies. The flesh he touched, almost always ritually tainted, was the flesh of those held in contempt by polite, religious society. He could

say to them, 'Your body is my body'. Later he will bring that truth to the Eucharistic table to be transformed and transfigured.

Bodies Queer and Indecent

Biologically we are male and female. Socially and culturally we are man and woman. Socially and culturally men ruled society and women managed the home. He could own property, vote, receive an education etc. She managed the home.

Up to now the question of sex was taken for granted. But the question of gender has become a serious question. To become a man or a woman nowadays is a complicated and demanding undertaking.

We have come a long way from the 1850s when scientists first started to study same-sex attraction. They invented the word 'homosexuality', which arrived here in 1903 and was recognised by the Oxford English Dictionary around 1934. Who would have thought that on March 31 this year was observed the International Day of Transgender Visibility? Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood has written that 'gender is a complex and deeply personal thing, and is about so much more than outdated ideas of biology.'

The speed at which the cause of homosexuals and of sexual minorities (LGBTQ) has advanced is downright bewildering. Their struggle for acceptance as citizens, as members of society, as human beings has accelerated beyond the Women's Movement. Of course, the principal obstacles for both are the churches and the mosques.

Is it possible to speak of God and do theology in one's underwear? These are words of the late Marcela Althaus-Reid, who proposed to do 'indecent' theology. She wanted to shake up the implicit theological paradigm of decent heterosexual theologians doing theology to the exclusion of indecent sexual minority theologians.

Liberation theology has not broken free of its patriarchal, male domination parameters. It was born of the irruption of the poor onto the stage of history, as a result of the passing of colonialism and the rise of liberation movements in various parts. It was startled by the 'irruption within the irruption' caused by women liberation

theologians in the early 80s. But indecent theology is rarely heard within the realm of liberation theology.

Is God queer? Was Jesus gay? Indecent theology arises out of a radically different experience of one's body. Is there a radical difference between a heterosexual theologian and a LBGTQ theologian, if both are loved by God and wish to speak of the God they know and love?

The churches do not recognise the full humanity of the LBGTQ, much less their suitability for doing theology. How can a deviant speak of God? How can a body be considered a temple of the Holy Spirit if it is a body polluted by a sinful sexual identity and practice? What is the Good News as announced by Pope Benedict when he says that the LBGTQ person is 'intrinsically disordered'?

To do Queer theology will demand a huge amount of sexual honesty by which stories can be told, off-colour jokes cracked and sly innuendo tolerated. Gay it will most certainly be! There will be little of the academic there. In her book *The Queer God* Althaus-Reid wrote, 'The Queer God may then show us God's excluded face, which is the face of a non-docile God, a God who is a stranger at the gates of our loving and economic order.' Are we ready for a God who is LBGTQ?

Bodies Ecological

The last line of the Book of Psalms reads, 'Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.' We have centred our gaze on our human bodies and have wanted to know about their significance and sacredness. Human flesh is the privileged place of our encounter with God. We are one and we dwell in the Spirit of Christ in holiness and wholeness. Holiness is not an out-of-body experience.

But we cannot narrow our gaze to the human exclusively. There are many means of breathing, be it through lungs, gills or osmosis. God's loving gaze takes in all of creation. Ours can too. In the words of one ecological activist: 'I try to remember that it's not me trying to protect the rain-

forest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting itself.'

We are Adamic priests of creation and as creation's conscience we are responsible for all our fellow-creatures. As priests we represent creation as it gives praise to God. As prophets we protect, nurture and defend a creation defenceless before a marauding and destructive humanity which has proven itself to be a menace to creation.

Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit prays and worships from within us groaning, sighing, speaking a language we do not (yet?) understand. And we hear also the singing of sad alleluias as we mourn the loss or elimination of thousands of species which we cannot recover.

We live in an age of apocalypse, an unveiling of what we as a race, a capitalist system and a consumerist culture have done to our ecological surround. Blinded by our ignorance and immersed in our greed, we know not what we do. Jesus from the cross we have laid on the creation will forgive us. But will Gaia?

Beneath the outer layer of our neo-cortex there is an unremembered story of how we emerged from the primaeval muck and mud along with our fellow creatures, from the humble amoeba to the terrifying tyrannosaurus rex. Lynn Margulis has warned us saying, 'Our tenacious illusion of special dispensation belies our true status as upright, mammalian weeds.'

Is there a sense in which the creation completes something lacking in God? God has always been a being utterly 'other' from us. Yet if that were accurate, would we even exist? God defines the Godself in relationship. The only way God can relate to us is in loving us. Jesus intuited that when he said he had come that we might have life in abundance.

Traditional orthodoxy condemns the idea of the creation being in God as pantheism, recalling Spinoza's *Deus sive natura*. There is another position which has emerged and that is Panentheism. God is all in all, distinct yet related to all of creation.

Bodies Ascending

Carl Jung declared that the papal definition of the mystery of the Assumption of Mary (1954), body and soul into heaven, was the most significant religious event of the 20th century. By that definition, the human body assumed its proper place as united with and indwelt by the divine.

Mary's body was the vessel of God's Son, conceived in the Spirit. Our religious patriarchy convinced us that Mary was a sexually innocent girl, a virgin. Yet in her Magnificat she sings not of sexual innocence, but rather of the power of God physically and historically operative and effective in her. She will pass that power on to her son since her substance, her body and blood, will 'transubstantiate' into her son's body and blood. Every day of her pregnancy, as she gazed upon her belly burgeoning with the life of her son, she could say: 'This is my body. This is my blood'.

Years later, as she stood at the foot of the cross, her son's blood dripping down on her, did she think back to that fateful moment when she said Yes to her God's mad proposal? She stood there to the end. As the soldier drove his spear into the side of Christ, a sword pierced her own soul. And from Christ's pierced heart flowed blood and amniotic water.

From the pierced side of Christ we were born Body of Christ. It was born for the life of the world, sensitive to the pain of all suffering humanity, immersed in the muck and madness of the world's messiness. That body groans in the praying Spirit and in the weeping of a humanity which suffers. We are that Body marked with the wounds of the suffering Christ that we might know how to give witness of a New Humanity in Christ.

Bodies Transforming and Transfiguring

The human experience of the divine finds tabernacle within, where 'deep speaks unto deep'. Insofar as the human has a *telos*, it is felt as a



Ceiling of the *Assumption of Mary* in Santa Maria Immacolata a via Veneto, Rome. franciscanmedia.org

gentle urging by the divine energy flowing towards the fullness of life. Joining it is not easy. We are disjointed by our false dualisms. We are blinded by our 'spiritualisms'. We are deceived by our sexism, by our misogyny, our patriarchy, our racism and our imperialisms of various sorts.

Only recently are we discovering our bodies as sacred vessels, temples of the Spirit. Those who celebrate the Eucharist pray that they become Body of Christ as they receive what they already are. We do indeed live in a universe 'charged with the grandeur of God'.

Many years ago Gustavo Gutiérrez, reflecting on eschatology and politics, wrote in his *Theology of Liberation* of an 'anthropophany', an epiphany of what the human person really is. Now we live our history in deformity and disfiguration of what that person is. But that history is no longer a remembrance, a chronology of shame and guilt. Rather it is a thrust towards the future. That future – if the Resurrection means anything – is one of transformation of the Earth, a new creation; and the transfiguration of the person, a new humanity. Then all will be through, with and in Christ. Our bodies nurture the seed of something impossible to describe, seen in our dreams and glimpsed in our visions. We hope that the words we read in Revelation 21 are true: 'Look, I am doing something new. Write it down, for my words are true'.

Frank Regan is the former editor of *Renew* (Catholics for a Changing Church).