

Perception, Incarnation, and Transformation:

Sacred Images of Human Corporeality

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Many spiritual traditions portray the human body as a microcosm of the macrocosm. Both Orthodox Christianity (henceforth, Orthodoxy) and Vajrayana Buddhism (henceforth, Vajrayana) maintain that the human body demonstrates that the divine is immanent in nature even while transcending the limits of corporeality. Both Orthodoxy and Vajrayana agree, mutatis mutandi, that the highest goal and possibility of human existence is to become god-like. Insofar as the human body is kin to other terrestrial life forms and is an aspect of the universe at large, so argues one Orthodox theologian, humankind's capacity for deification suggests that all beings are in some sense sacred.¹ The implications of this suggestion for environmental thought and attitudes are obviously profound.

This way of conceiving the sacred dimension of nature presupposes that natural phenomena, including the human body, are not to be understood exclusively in terms of contemporary naturalism, the materialist outlook of which cannot be reconciled with most religious traditions. Religions typically maintain that there are interior domains that cannot be studied by the procedures of natural science, according to which all phenomena can be adequately understood in terms of analyses of exteriors, primarily as revealed through sense data. Spiritual practitioners, including Orthodox and Vajrayana monks, undergo disciplined training, in the process of which they develop new perceptual capacities, which reveal otherwise hidden aspects of ordinary phenomena.

Additionally, the spiritual adept encounters phenomena inconsistent with naturalistic ontology. Arguably, such phenomena are neither figments of the imagination, nor instances of

pathology. Instead, they have an ontological status analogous to that of objects perceived in everyday life. Among these phenomena are the body itself transformed into a being constituted by an unearthly clear light, and ultimately the clear light itself, often identified as the ultimate manifestation of the divine or the absolute. Typically, adepts state that the phenomena encountered in these “higher” states of consciousness are far more beautiful, more significant, and more primordial than the material phenomena encountered by the five senses.

Contemporary naturalism tends either to dismiss such experiences altogether or else to explain them as subjective fantasies related to alterations in brain chemistry. A host of modern thinkers have challenged the adequacy of materialism, especially the eliminativist variety. Most environmentalists, however, accept naturalism’s claim that all reality is nothing more a complex, evolving, spatio-temporal totality of matter-energy that lacks any inherent goal, purpose, or meaning. Naturalism typically concludes that “value” is a fiction that may prove useful in promoting human survival. Hence, environmental philosophers who take their naturalism seriously regard as hopeless all efforts to discover “intrinsic value” or “inherent worth” in nature. Such value is little more than a human projection that may prove useful—as a “noble lie”—in limiting human behavior toward nature. Not only does nature lack intrinsic value, naturalism and materialism remind us, but so does humankind. We are members of yet another species—intelligent and adaptive, to be sure—tossed up by blind evolutionary processes, all of which will be cancelled out by and forgotten after some catastrophe that will eventually make the planet uninhabitable by carbon-based life forms. Far from being the crown of creation, the human being is, as Jean-Paul Sartre once remarked, “a useless passion

Orthodoxy and Vajrayana reject such naturalism. Both traditions, in their own way, distinguish among eye of body, eye of mind, and eye of spirit or eye of contemplation. According to naturalism, human perception is a function of the interaction between the senses (eye of body) and mind (typically defined in material terms). Contemporary technological civilization, capable of controlling and exploiting so many things, results from the ever more

effective coordination of sensation and cognition in the service of praxis. Spiritual traditions, though acknowledging the amazing achievements of modern technology, conclude that naturalism operates with at least one eye too few. In addition to eyes of body and mind, these traditions tell us, humans have access to the eye of spirit, which itself includes multiple perceptual domains, including psychic, subtle, causal, and non-dual. Psychic perception makes possible the “nature mysticism” described by Jonathan Edwards, William Wordsworth, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Corresponding to such higher modes of perception are “subtle” bodies, which are the subject of considerable discussion in many spiritual traditions.²

Both Orthodoxy and Vajrayana have developed detailed iconography of the sacred or transformed body, by contemplation or visualization of which the spiritual adept seeks to transform his or her own body, mind, and spirit. By meditating upon such icons and images, and by visualizing oneself as the divine being—whether Jesus or Buddha, Mary or Tara—spiritual practitioners seek to take on divine attributes. As such “deification” takes place, the body undergoes transformations discernible even by ordinary people. Living saints may manifest an inexplicable light—along with sweet odors—that indicate corporeal changes associated with developing the eye of spirit. Such light is often represented in religious iconography as the nimbus or halo. Moreover, the first internal manifestation of non-duality is often described as an extraordinary clear light, which may help explain the frequent association of light with divinity.

Orthodox Christianity:

Orthodoxy emphasizes that even though God in Himself is ultimately beyond all human knowledge and experience, His uncreated “energies” are at work in Creation, and particularly in human beings. The incarnation of God as Jesus Christ affirms the sacred quality of Creation as a whole, however, not merely humankind. Christ’s transfiguration on Mt. Tabor reveals the possibility of theosis or human deification. To underscore the fact of incarnation, Orthodoxy insists that Jesus Christ had a specific human face, the human face of God become man.³ In Orthodoxy,

therefore, icons have the same status as Holy Scripture. Indeed, veneration, contemplation, and liturgical use of icons are requirements in Orthodoxy. An Orthodox bishop writes:

What the icon does in Byzantine theology is to show the human image (and nature) of God, which is knowable, joined with the divine nature that is unknowable. The symbol speaks of God referentially, whereas the icon touches on the reality of God. Through veneration of the icon, man is brought into contact with the Divine through that which is material. In the icon, the image and its prototype, symbol and reality, as it were, are brought together.

The icon, profoundly related to its prototype, participates in the holiness of what it depicts, although the icon does not directly participate in the essence of the prototype (no “emanationism” here). Because of the hypostatic character of the icon, i.e., because it represents the human nature of the Son of God, second Person of the Trinity, venerating the image allows one to reach up to the prototype.”⁴

According to Orthodoxy, there are two kinds of “nature” (physis) mysteriously unified in Jesus Christ, the human nature and the divine nature, but that there is only one “person” (hypostasis). Were there two truly separate persons in Christ, we would end up with four persons in God (God, Son, Holy Spirit, and Jesus) instead of three (God, Son, Holy Spirit). The Son of God must somehow be both God and man at the same time. If Christ were not fully God and man (theanthropos), then a mere creature (man) could never partake of the uncreated (Divine).

As Eric Perl points out, Orthodoxy affirms that because God is absolutely Other, transcendent, and unknowable, He can be approached only in the via negativa, that is, only in the apophatic tradition according to which one can say nothing of God. Nevertheless, God’s uncreated energies allow God to be fully present and immanent in Creation, as He was as the incarnate Deity. Contemplation of Christ’s image leads one from the human dimension of his

personhood toward the divine dimension, some aspects of which may be discerned by eye of mind.⁵

Because the revelation of God in Creation is the presence of God, to know God by revelation is to enter into communion with him, in such a manner as to be deified without having one's humanity annihilated by the Divine. Not only the body of Christ, but all human bodies, are capable in principle of accommodating Divinity. Crucial for environmental philosophy is the Orthodox conviction that all creation is the self-manifestation of the God beyond being. Perl writes that "for God to cause, or create, the world of beings is to multiply himself into the world so that he truly becomes 'all things in all things' and therefore truly subject to names."⁶ So seriously does Orthodoxy take the sacred quality of all Creation, that the current Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholemew, has asserted that despoiling Creation is a sin.⁷ Orthodox Christianity, then, has a great deal to offer those who seek a way to affirm Creation within a Western religious tradition.

Vajrayana Buddhism

Vajrayana Buddhism, sometimes called Tantra (which literally means continuity or thread), claims that adepts can achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime, in part by contemplating and visualizing sacred images, including mandalas and the deities associated with or housed in them. Vajrayana temples, like their Orthodox counterparts, are filled with elaborate décor and colorful images that seek to recall the light-filled glory of the world perceived by a fully awakened being.

One major obstacle to achieving enlightenment is the low self-opinion that people have about themselves. According to Lama Yeshe, on whose excellent account I shall be relying in what follows, by regarding ourselves as little more than monkeys and by conceiving of the mind as nothing but chemical reactions, we reduce ourselves to "lumps of matter" and dismiss "any notion of a higher dimension of human existence."⁸ Another major obstacle is the tyranny of ordinary perception, including the belief that life problems can be solved by something outside of

us. (47) Enmeshing ourselves in the sense world, we dull our natural clarity and lost touch with our essential nature. (55) For the most part, we are gripped by the everyday hallucination of dualistic perception, which thinks that sensory objects exist from their own side as concrete and self-contained beings. Just because we can encounter them with our senses doesn't mean that they "exist solidly in their own right." (70) Just as the magician tricks us with illusions that seem real, so in ordinary perception we are unaware that our minds trick us about the nature of what we are perceiving. We vainly seek satisfaction from these illusory phenomena. The reader by now is aware of a number of analogies between Tantra and neo-Platonism, the latter of which plays an important role in Orthodoxy.

Also reminiscent of neo-Platonism is Vajrayana's method of harnessing desire or Eros (and other strong psychological states) in the service of transformation. Instead of making people feel guilty about pleasure, Vajrayana emphasizes its inherent goodness. Just as in Symposium Socrates points out that one is gradually drawn upward toward beauty greater than that found in the ordinary body, so Vajrayana teaches that ordinary sense pleasure pales in comparison with the bliss available to advanced states of consciousness. As Lama Yeshe has written, "it is only by the habit of experiencing what we might call true pleasure that we can hope to achieve the everlasting bliss and joy of full illumination." (22)

Tantra uses the energy of human desire to accomplish a remarkable transformation: "evolution from an ordinary, limited, and deluded person trapped within the shell of a petty ego into a fully evolved, totally conscious being of unlimited compassion and insight." (Lama Yeshe, 16) Buddhism teaches that all the problems of the world stem from the fact that people feel incomplete. The sexual union of male and female represented in sacred paintings symbolizes total integration and the overcoming of all duality. The male represents great bliss, while the female represents great wisdom. Following the tantric path is very difficult, because most people are unable to focus and harness pleasure, but instead allow themselves to be overcome by it. "We

should never forget that if wallowing in desire were the same as practising tantra, we would all be highly evolved tantric yogis by now!" (33)

Ordinary desire involves projections that distort and conceal phenomenon. For example, we project permanence onto things that are inherently impermanent. Also, we overestimate the attractive qualities of things, such that actually getting the desire object proves disappointing. (Yeshe, 34) Gripped by desire, "Our mind contracts around its object and, as we grasp at it for more and more satisfaction, we become further and further removed from reality." (38) We sink into a kind of unconsciousness. Upon awakening from this "dull, dreamlike state," any pleasure we gained has vanished. Such experience tends to reinforce our low self-opinion.

Tantra proposes to overcome all this by dissolving ordinary self-conceptions and, from the empty space into which these have vanished, to allow oneself to "arise in the glorious light body of a deity: a manifestation of the essential clarity of our deepest being.... This divine self-visualization empowers us to take control of our lives and create for ourselves a pure environment in which our deepest nature can be expressed." PAGE// Instead of saying that mind arises from body, Vajrayana insists that mind generates body, including not only the coarse natural body, but the subtle bodies associated with higher states of consciousness. (42) The mandala represents how the ordinary world is transformed into glorious beauty as one acquires the perceptual capacities associated with the body of bliss, the diamond-rainbow body. The big challenge is accepting the idea that our visualizations are more real than the objects of gross sensory experience, belief in which is habitually ingrained in us. (109) To break those habits and to achieve the goal of total illumination, the tantric adept must will work closely with a spiritual master, or guru, who alone can grant the empowerments necessary for this transformational work. Book learning alone, we are advised, will not suffice.

There are two major stages in Vajrayana: generation and completion. The generation stage involves deity yoga, in which one visualizes oneself—in enormous detail—as the deity associated with his or her guru's spiritual lineage. The deity might be Green Tara or Haruka or a

Bodhisattva, such as Avalokitesvara. Increasingly, through demanding process of visualization and identification, one acquires not only the wisdom and compassion of the deity, but also the deity's light body. According to Lama Yeshe, "as we train in deity yoga with the proper perseverance we will be able to perceive this self-generated deity with a clarity far exceeding that of our present self-image. Our mind will actually become the mind of the deity, and our ordinary sensory experiences...will be transformed into the blissful enjoyments of the deity." Yeshe adds that "This is not a fairy tale." (43)

According to Vajrayana, there are three bodies of a fully enlightened being, a Buddha: Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya. Dharmakaya refers to absolute non-duality that constitutes the ground for all phenomena. Understood in terms of this "body," Buddha would be akin to Christ as cosmic Logos. Sambhogakaya, the rainbow-like or diamond-light body of bliss, is the transformation body that can be discerned only by advanced practitioners. The body of bliss is analogous to the resurrection body in Orthodoxy. Nirmanakaya is sometimes understood as the coarse natural body, but other times as the subtle body capable of detaching itself from the natural body. Advanced practitioners are said to have direct experience of these bodies by virtue of arduous practices that involve harrowing, but virtual death and rebirth experiences. Such experience is a requisite to the completion stage of tantric practice: yab yum, union with a consort of the other sex. Tantric sexual union not only represents symbolically, but is said actually to constitute the absolute non-dual union of opposites, yin and yang, male and female, bliss and wisdom. Yab yum is not about ordinary sexuality, but instead involves channeling and experiencing the most intense possible pleasure. In highest yoga tantra, one acquires the diamond body of light, which is apparently analogous to the transfiguration body of Jesus Christ or the resurrection body of the saved Christian.

Conclusion.

For both Orthodoxy and Vajrayana, the human body is the sacred vessel necessary for attaining ultimate union with the Absolute, experienced as clear or diamond light. Unlike

Vajrayana, Orthodoxy does not describe sensory phenomena as relatively illusory, despite Orthodoxy's links with neo-Platonisms. Insofar as God has incarnated as Jesus Christ, and insofar as the human is linked to the rest of Creation, Christ's incarnation sanctifies all Creation in a way that goes beyond the mere fact that all things are creatures of God. The fact that an instance of the creaturely realm, the man Jesus of Nazareth, could contain the Divinity elevates material phenomena, even though the planes of soul and spirit stand higher in the cosmic hierarchy. Orthodoxy's reverence for the body undermines the body-despising tendencies of certain kinds of neo-Platonism, and permits Orthodoxy to side strongly with those who seek to protect material Creation from heedless human abuse. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that for Orthodoxy, the existing body pales in comparison with the resurrection body with which the saved are endowed in the New Creation. Indeed, all Creation will be transformed in ways that somehow parallel the light-filled bodies of the sanctified. Orthodoxy, the most environmentally-friendly version of Christianity, rejects naturalism for failing to understand that nature arises from and is pervaded by the energies of the Divine.

Like Orthodoxy, Vajrayana emphasizes that only as incarnated in such a body can one attain enlightenment or salvation. Resisting the otherworldly tendencies of early Buddhism, Vajrayana harnesses human desires and passions in the quest for liberation. Yet, Vajrayana also posits a liberation body of light that parallels Orthodoxy's resurrection body. Unlike Orthodoxy, however, Vajrayana tends to depict the sensory world as more illusory than does Orthodoxy, even though both affirm that through the eye of enlightened Spirit, all beings manifest themselves are gloriously superior to how they appear to eyes of body and mind. Like Orthodoxy, Vajrayana dismisses naturalism as a wholly inadequate account of the origins, nature, and purpose of human existence. Despite the fact that Vajrayana, like all forms of Buddhism, seeks to develop compassion for all sentient beings, Vajrayana also emphasizes that there are no (independently existing) sentient beings. A central aspect of wisdom is recognizing the illusory character of apparently substantial phenomena.

There are, of course, important differences between Orthodoxy and Vajrayana, the most important of which is that Orthodoxy is a theistic religion, whereas Buddhism is not. Moreover, Vajrayana seeks to harness, in a way that Orthodoxy for various reasons does not, the powerful but potentially ego-centric energies of sexuality for spiritual development. For this reason, Vajrayana may succeed in affirming full human embodiment more so than does Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, however, I find that Orthodoxy provides a slightly more persuasive religious basis for an environmentalism, because of its theism, which affirms that God is knowable in his energies, which are manifest in Creation, but unknowable in His essence, which transcends all phenomena. But that is the topic for another essay.

¹ John Chryssavgis, Beyond the Shattered Image (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1999); Chryssavgis, "The World of the Icon and Creation: An Orthodox Perspective on Ecology and Pneumatology," in Christianity and Ecology, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). See also Bruce Foltz's very informative essay, "Nature Godly and Beautiful: The Iconic Earth," Research in Phenomenology, XXXI (2001), 113-155, which I received too late to take into account in the present essay.

² See G.R.S. Mead, The Doctrine of the Subtle Body in Western Tradition (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1967); J.J. Portman, Vehicles of Consciousness: The Concept of Hylitic Pluralism (Ochema), trans. N.D. Smith (Utrecht: The Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, 1978).

³ See Christoph Schönborn, God's Human Face (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984). See also Lars Thunberg, "The Human Person as Image of God," in Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

⁴ Bishop Hieromonk Auxentios, “The Iconic and Symbolic in Orthodox Iconography,” found at: http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/orth_icon.htm

The literature on iconography and theology is vast. Recommended works include: Paul Evdokimov, The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty (Redondo Beach, California: Oakwood Publications, 1990); Hans Belting, Likeness and Presence (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Leonid Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon, Vol. I, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992); Jaroslav Pelikan, Imago Dei (Princeton: Princeton University Press/Bollingen Series, 1990); Mahmoud Zibawi, The Icon: Its Meaning and History (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993).

⁵ Eric Perl, “ ‘That Man Might Become God’: Central Themes in Byzantine Theology,” in Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium, ed. Linda Safran (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Orthodoxy’s spiritual leader, Bartholomew I, has taken a strong position in favor of caring for Creation. For one of his speeches on this topic, see: http://www.goarch.org/patriarchate/us-visit/speeches/Address_at_Environmenta.htm. See also Melba Newsome, “To Have Dominion in the Earth,” The Amicus Journal, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), 15-17.

⁸ Lama Yeshe, Introduction to Tantra: A Vision of Totality (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 41. Henceforth, references to pages of this text will be enclosed in parentheses. See also Reginald A. Ray, Secrets of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2001); H.H. the Dalai Lama, Tsong-ka-pa, and Jeffrey Hopkins, Tantra in Tibet (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1977); Jeffrey Hopkins, The Tantric Distinction (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999); John Blofeld, The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet (New York: Arkana, 1990); John Powers, Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism

(Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1995); Guiseppe Tucci, The Theory and Practice of the Mandala
(London: Rider, 1961).