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How The Human Body Interacts with Religion: Religiously, Artistically, and Politically

Portia Brackley

Woodyard Summer Scholars 2024

Religion/Civic Duty

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Abstract

This paper deals with the consideration of the human body as an integral aspect within religion, and the study of religion. The body is a symbol for our beings and our livelihoods within society, but also an outlet for communication with the divine. The sacred and secular point to the ways in which our bodies function outside of the normal and mundane (sacred), yet still have a place within the normal. Ritual shows us how the body is site for religious meaning, because rituals create a specific space that becomes religious, and therefore separate from the secular. What can the religious qualities of the human body show us about the fabric of society, and therefore the existence of our being? I point to three aspects of society: Religion, Art, and Politics. Not only do these topics deeply intersect with one another and connect our worldviews, the body is implicit in these spheres.

However, notions of power historically and contemporarily dictate Who/ What Religion, Art, and Politics is for. By not separating everything from religion but rather exploring all of the connections, we are actually tied together as people.

The Religious Body

The Importance of The Body in the Study of Religion

The human body fosters knowledge about religion. In fact, embodiment within religion is about the body being where religious experiences can be found and felt. The body aids us in connecting to the sacred; what some people might call the source of our being—or God. There are expansive relationships that can be created between the sacred and the human body, yet this is an area of academic research that is fairly new, starting in the past couple of decades. In the study of religion the word “belief”, is the primary association with the definition of religion. However there is just as much, if not more, importance to the word “practices.” Meaning, our bodies adapt and change with time, and so therefore our expressions of religions change.

Expressions of religiosity done through our bodies is how we practice religion, rather than only pertaining to a cognitive approach within textual beliefs. Religion is embedded in practice, the movements of our bodies in real time is just as relevant as historical scripture. Kimerer LaMothe writes that in order to “advance” the agenda of attending to bodily dimensions within religious life, “scholars must develop ways of acknowledging the role that their own bodily being plays in the study of religious life.”¹ The human body only adds to and diversifies all that the study of religion can be, adding enrichment and variety to the ways that people experience/practice spirituality. The body directly translates to how we interact with social movements and within the collective society at hand. Bodily identity, agency and autonomy are

¹ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

extremely important to our lifestyle, yet are defined by our socio-political landscapes. Hence, the body and all that it is capable of provides deeper insight on how we do art and politics, which religion is also involved with. Prioritizing the aspects of religion that pertain only to text-based beliefs can take away from the importance of embodiment in religious practices, and how our bodies move “us”.

Shared Experiences

The Judeo-Christian tradition is very popular and is associated with the western world’s perception of religion. The Hebrew Bible, as in any orally based cultural tradition, has established ways to describe certain events and experiences, understandings of a governance, language that describe a deity's appearances, the devotees response, and etc.² The Hebrew Bible weaves a tale in which the world is created, ordered, and populated by God. The tradition provides detailing about how religion corresponds to societal movement. Our worldviews cannot be inflexible and static, or we cannot adapt to our fullest potential. The natural changing ebbs and flows of nature’s effervescence prove that humanity was never meant for stagnancy. Susan Niditch, discussing ancient Israelite religion, writes; “Rituals may grow in various ways; systems of symbols evolve. The earliest Israelites, for example, had no king, whereas by the tenth century B.C.E. The monarchy developed. One would expect such a change in social structure to relate to changes or alternate options in worldview.”³ The evolution of history shows that we have no reason to prevent the evolution of our own society, one that fits with our bodies in the here and now.

² Niditch, Susan, “Religion and the Ancient Israelites.” *Ancient Israelite Religion*. Oxford University Press, New York 1997.

³ Niditch, Susan, “Religion and the Ancient Israelites.” *Ancient Israelite Religion*. Oxford University Press, New York 1997.

The vessels that house our soul and spirit are as complex as the minds, both serving a communication/connection. Our bodies are connected to nature, linking us with the divine—for we are part of creation. Everything we “do” corresponds to the scientific nature of the body—fulfilling our basic needs through eating, sleeping, drinking water, exercising, etc. When we nourish our bodies, and devote attention and care to them, we are taking care of our ‘self’, and our spirit. We are in alignment with the spiritual side of our bodies, to be able to connect to the transcendent. Niditch references Ninian Smart, who defines studying religion under a “worldview”, which read as the “experiential; the mythical; the ritual; and the ethical”⁴ Symbolically, this explains how our bodies are the very thing that allow us to go into the world and establish ourselves, the individual or groups orientation to life.

We can make personal outspoken statements about the world via art, politics and spirituality, which can connect to how the collective feels as well. This goes hand in hand with our experiential, mythical and ethical, because it highlights our shared experiences. Niditch further explained that the experiential is direct experiences with God, indications of a divine presence. The Exodus story represents a fearful and tyrannical pharaoh that enslaves people, and makes them vulnerable to the rage of the empire.⁵ This experience has translated to themes of liberation from oppression and fighting for justice present in the Bible. The mythic captures the group’s notions of the workings of the world. The ethical, pertains to moral actions. Israelites experience God's power and law, which they disobey frequently and are stuck in a pattern of sin, punishment, and forgiveness, which characterizes the relationship with God.⁶ Symbolic narration present in the Bible, creates the essential aspects of the worldview, as templates for patterns of

⁴ Niditch, Susan, “Religion and the Ancient Israelites.” *Ancient Israelite Religion*. Oxford University Press, New York 1997.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

our existence. Without other people completing this narration, we cannot fully understand our shared experience within the context of God, as well as the impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is quite an exciting one to study because it depicts the universal expressions of human challenges, threaded together by recurring patterns in language and content that is very much purposefully historiographic.⁷

Our basic needs being fulfilled are essential, but the body is not simply meant to be sustained. Our bodies are who we are, we have the ability for artmaking, creativity, and play. Political statements are often done in the form of art, with a cartoon or skit, or chanting/singing at protests to provide commentary on the state of the world. Significantly these activities are often done in groups, or perhaps individuals making personal statements that reach the public's shared emotions. Communal ceremonies and songs, and rituals that bond, are all shared experiences that can happen within religion. Others think of religion as the spiritual development of the self, connection with the suprahuman being, individual petitions and personal faith, or perhaps temptation and conscience.⁸ The fact of the matter is that religion is all of the above. The body is most involved with religion in the context of ritual, where our bodies become the site for religious meaning. David Whitley writes about emotion and ritual, that altered states of consciousness (ASC) are essential to the emotional reactions that constitute religious experience. To Whitley, group rituals are desirable because "humans commonly seek ASC not because of any desire to alter their consciousness—ultimately, an intellectual proposition—but instead, as any teenager could tell you, because of the way ASC make you *feel*."⁹ Niditch adds to this point by explaining; "patterns of ritual action help to establish or reestablish a community's sense of the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Whitley, David S. "Cognition, Emotion, and Belief: First Steps in an Archaeology of Religion." *Belief in the past* (2008): 85-104.

⁹ Whitley, David S. "Cognition, Emotion, and Belief: First Steps in an Archaeology of Religion." *Belief in the past* (2008): 85-104.

social and cosmic order, resolve tensions that have arisen, and mediate between the flawed realm of humankind and the consummate perfection of God's realm."¹⁰ The biblical tradition is valuable in showing that our worldviews can in fact be changed, and to remain close-minded is dangerous.

The World as God's Body

A unique aspect of our human experience is that our bodies enthrall religious knowledge, yet the sacred is something we can never really get right. We are deeply connected with the sacred, yet we cannot really say what "it" is. Yet, we tend to do so with metaphorical descriptive words and their designated actions/behaviors familiar to us. The body aids in the expression of the sacred/human relationship. According to Sallie McFague, a scholar of metaphorical theology, she imagines "The world as God's body."¹¹ This metaphor creates an inherent God/human relationship, because as part of creation, it is our duty to treat all other forms of creation equally. Additionally, many people are hesitant to include scientific knowledge within the study of religion, but biology is like a religious study in itself. Science is part of God's creation, and we ought to view the complexity within nature and science as indications of the divine presence in our world. Seeing the world as God's body is also accepting the deep connection between humans and the natural world, where science lives. She raises awareness that "the anthropocentrism that characterizes much of the Judeo-Christian tradition has often fed a sensibility insensitive to our proper place in the universe."¹² Discussing our age of nuclear

¹⁰Niditch, Susan, "Religion and the Ancient Israelites." *Ancient Israelite Religion*. Oxford University Press, New York 1997.

¹¹ McFague, Sallie. "Imaging a theology of nature: The world as God's body." *Liberating life: Contemporary approaches to ecological theology* (1990): 201-27.

¹² McFague, Sallie. "Imaging a theology of nature: The world as God's body." *Liberating life: Contemporary approaches to ecological theology* (1990): 201-27.

destruction power and conflict, the alternate view that McFague brings is realizing that what we witness in real time, must evolve upon the historical models that still dominate our ideologies.

Another part of her scholarship is developing models for God that have relevancy and motion in today's time, with a particular ecological sensibility. To quote McFague; "The Christian faith is, it seems to me, is most basically a claim that the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent, but that there is a power (and a personal power at that) that is on the side of life and its fulfillment."¹³ Quintessentially, our imaginations are vital for producing theology that is significant. Nowadays we may be more inclined to see McFague's God as a presence we are in connection with, (She says Mother, Lover, Friend, as a replacement for Father, Son, Holy Spirit.) rather than a fearful transcendent presence. Nature embodies God, and so do we.

Niditch asks a very important question with the biblical framework, "can one be filled with a supramundane spirit or be transported to a metahuman realm of condition?"¹⁴ As aforementioned, the frameworks that Niditch works with, such as the mythic, deals with a group's beliefs about how the world is, including fear of chaos and hope for order. The ancient world seemed to have events that showed the extremity of the natural elements—resulting in the Bible providing parables for how we can be in connection with God. Comparing this to McFague's ideas; international leaders who possess mass weapons of destruction which have the power to obliterate the natural world, may self-proclaim a position of a supramundane spirit. However, it is but a farce if God is brought into it. The modern sensibility of the world as God's body, would mean we should never seek to kill the earth, and never use God to dominate fellow humans. In a time when science can be used by humans as something capable of destroying our

¹³ McFague, Sallie. "Imaging a theology of nature: The world as God's body." *Liberating life: Contemporary approaches to ecological theology* (1990): 201-27.

¹⁴ Niditch, Susan, "Religion and the Ancient Israelites." *Ancient Israelite Religion*. Oxford University Press, New York 1997.

earth, perhaps some of our values must be reworked. We must learn from the mistakes of our predecessors, but ultimately remain mobile and progressive.

Science, however, gives us insight into the way that religion functions in society. The nuclear age discussed by Mcfague, connects to LaMothe's explanation of a dualism in religious studies. As LaMothe puts it, the "tendency to think of religious studies as either scientific or interpretive—and the accompanying pressure to resolve the debate to one side or another—reinforces attachment to linguistic models, and metaphors in defending one's position." She also adds that this particular attachment prevents scholars from devoting attention to embodiment and engagement in studying religion. If we consider the vital role of our own bodies within religion, the earth as God's body shows us just how holy the body really is. LaMothe discussing the paradox and tension in religious studies between "reason and experience"¹⁵, is similar to how Whitley wrote about cognition and emotion as being vital to the archaeology of religion."¹⁶ This can be compared to the way that our sentience, defined by our consciousness, can never seem to fully understand the workings of our mind in body. Our thoughts are influenced by our realities, yet sometimes it seems like we must forfeit control of our body in order to get in touch with our 'selves', or the mind. The mind, body, and soul work together to sustain the self, and staying in touch is something that one must practice.

The dedication to "be in the body", tells us a lot about how our practices are correlated to the health of the mind, body, and soul. LaMothe, further adding on to the subject of straying away from text-dominant approaches, wants us to stray away from seeing the body as something that functions like "a text, whose signs, codes, and grammatical structures scholars can "read."

¹⁵ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

¹⁶ Whitley, David S. "Cognition, Emotion, and Belief: First Steps in an Archaeology of Religion." *Belief in the past* (2008): 85-104.

Yet a body is not any object; bodies are *movement* by virtue of which all humans, scholars of religion included, live.”¹⁷ Instead of switching the focus back and forth between either the mind or the body—only having control of one, the third aspect, our soul/spirit, is the thing that works to mediate and moderate a balance. A practice approach to religion aligns with the ideology that the body does not function like a text or fixed object.

The Body as a Site for Religious Meaning

Paul Hedges; in *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Understanding Religiously Diverse Societies*, includes discussion about the topics of Embodiment and Material Religion. In Chapter 9 titled; ‘Bodies’, he states that historically, many religions have underestimated the physical world. The physical world is seen to be “dependent upon a transcendent power”, or as a barrier that keeps us from contemplating ‘higher’ matters.¹⁸ Hedges adds that this view can be paradoxical; “for spiritual matters are always embedded in material artifacts.”¹⁹ In other words, the material world is essential to religion. It is counterintuitive to remove embodiment as a primary aspect of experiencing religion. Transcendent, as defined by Hedges, “is something that cannot be seen, touched, or otherwise perceived and acts outside the normal course of human and physical laws.”²⁰ This can explain why the body is not popularly considered as a site of religious meaning, because in this view the sacred exists external to human nature. There is difficulty to see the sacred within the physical world, if it is so far in both distance and conception. In reality, the sacred and the body are meant to be in alignment, and

¹⁷ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

¹⁸ Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt. 9, “BODIES: Material Religion, Embodiment, and Materiality.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Understanding Religiously Diverse Societies.* 209-231

¹⁹ Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt. 9, “BODIES: Material Religion, Embodiment, and Materiality.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Understanding Religiously Diverse Societies.* 209-231

²⁰ Hedges, P. 2016. Setting The Debates In Context. *In Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue.* 14-35.

transcendence does not have to prohibit connections that arise from the normal course of human life.

In Chapter 3 of Hedges book entitled *Life: Lived Religion, Syncretism, and Hybridity*, Hedges discusses the WRP (World Religions Paradigm), which originated in the Victorian Era under European colonialism. This model is still the leading framework in the pedagogies of religious studies, and it exemplifies the way that the study of religion started off as literary and was dominated by the elite groups. The aspects of religions such as the “big five” (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism), are prioritized this way due to their historic conventions; written texts, buildings, and founding figures. The WRP established an ideology that the Protestant Christian model is “definitive of religion”²¹ The problem is, the paradigm lacks in consideration that there is religion experienced by the minority which do not associate with the “big five.” According to Hedges, “Scholars have often dismissed what they see as non-textual or non-elite traditions as “lesser”.²² He highlights the point of diversity being needed when it comes to conversations about religion, because though religious practices are embedded in us humans, there is no “one way” to do it. Eurocentrism and Christocentrism in the way we conceive the sacred has been imposed upon us by ideologies like the WRP, which essentially display religion as something that can be ranked and cataloged. In reality, religion has been concerned with the exercising of power. “Popular religion”²³, the idea that is responsible for deeming other traditions as inferior, is tied to pedagogies of power and authority.

William Dever, Like Niditch, discusses the religion of Ancient Israel. However, he emphasizes the propagandic aspects of popularized religion, and in his view religion reflects a

²¹ Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt. 3, “Life: Lived Religion, Syncretism, and Hybridity.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Understanding Religiously Diverse Societies.*” 67-90.

²² Ibid.

²³ Dever, William G. "Did God have a wife?: archaeology and folk religion in ancient Israel." (2008).

timeless dimension of the human experience. Popular religion is likened to the idea of state religion, that is responsible for dictating what is considered sacred and what is profane. There is a distinction between this and folk religion, or minority groups practicing religion despite what the state says—as a form of resistance. There are a plethora of ways that humans experience religion, of which cannot be mediated by the state. If textual authorities are taken seriously, then we accept mythological paradigms as truth and with ultimate authority. Religion can be used to oppress people and dominate the sense of what is “pious” or “ethical.” This is why religion is also tied to politics. It is not only art and spirituality—historically, people have had to fight to defend the practicing of their own religion despite what the state power says/dictates what is sacred and profane. This can be done with art, protesting the right to practice one’s religion through art makes a political statement. The three go hand in hand. The dichotomy between sacred and profane, and specifically the idea of the profane, is used to categorize religions to prove that Christianity is the standard for how other religions must be ranked accordingly. Hedges makes the argument that religion is not about a reality of spirituality or transcendence that is separate from our ordinary everyday life. Rather, “whatever we imagine religion to be, it is often about the mundane—everyday things and our practical experiences in life.”²⁴ The presence of the sacred makes things “special”.

Embodiment and Practice

The shift that Hedges is outlining about the study of religion is that it must involve the material and the bodily, religion is “embodied, emplaced, and enacted.”²⁵ Cognitive or linguistic approaches are still important to understand religion, but bodily practices provide a vast notion

²⁴ Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt. 9, “BODIES: Material Religion, Embodiment, and Materiality.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Understanding Religiously Diverse Societies.*” 209-231

²⁵ Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt. 9, “BODIES: Material Religion, Embodiment, and Materiality.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Understanding Religiously Diverse Societies.*” 209-231

of all the substances that religion possesses. Consideration of the material world acknowledges the centrality of human embodiment in our knowing and thinking. Bodies can tell us one thing ancient texts cannot, and that is how people in the modern day practice religion. Religion is embedded in us, and that is evident by the religious practices of people. Hedges said, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.”²⁶ This quote pertains to the way that the “lived religion” that is discussed, is about how ancient texts are translated and heavily edited, so we cannot rely on only those quantitative aspects that may contradict the textual “beliefs” but nonetheless say a lot about how people experience religion in the here and now. Our bodies as they exist in the “ordinary” physical world help us to relate to the sacred, the unknown, the divine. Embodiment in religion is a human response to the sacred, and how we receive information.

The physical world does not distract us from the contemplation of these higher matters, rather the opposite. What is meant by the term “higher matters”, is paying attention to the very life force we all have in us, and can also be called the sacred or God. The matters that seem to exist separate and far, or “higher” away than the earthly of the world. It may seem that way because the sacred, especially in Christianity, is perceived as transcendent. However, that doesn’t mean that the sacred is far away. Elizabeth Culotta points out that “All cultures have religious beliefs, though they express them in diverse ways.”²⁷ However, in this statement there is a divide between belief and practice, and the word “belief” doesn’t exactly connote the human body as “practice” does. The use of the word “express” by Culotta indicates that these beliefs need an outlet of bodily display or action, in order to fully express the part of religion that lives inside the

²⁶ Hedges, Paul. “RELIGION: Language, Law, and Legacies.” In *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*, 1st ed., 19–43. University of California Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1h1vbz6.7>.

²⁷ Culotta, Elizabeth, 2009.. “On the Origin of Religion.” *Science* Vol 326. *Published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science*. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.326_784

mind. Prayer lives inside the mind, but it is with our bodies that we kneel down on the ground, or put our hands together, orienting upward and outward. Yes, it may seem impossible to understand what is sacred, when life is so unpredictable and mysterious, and simultaneously divine, magical and exciting. What surrounds us is intimately connected with said “higher matters”. That is how we as humans, develop practices for ourselves in order to honor the sacred, as a response to the way the sacred makes us feel.

Hedges also discusses the interconnectivity of our bodies in the physical and material world, as they are sites of religious meaning. Our bodies are composed of natural matter, and we are living beings that are biologically connected to the natural world. Doctrines or beliefs often exist in text and doctrine form, which is to be manually scribed on paper, papyrus, or stone tablets. People who “practice” Christianity “believe” that Christ was the embodiment of God, and therefore “practice” the Eucharist ritual in order to honor the body that God chose. These practices done with our bodies, exemplify how important the body is to religion. It is how we commune and connect to the sacred. We respond to the presence we feel from the sacred and it also responds to us, for example our aspirations as human. There is a relationship, a deep connection in the purest form, a call and response that flows both ways. Since the sacred is present in the body, we can possess something seemingly normal or mundane like a piece of paper, and transform it with words that now make it a prayer card. However, the role that humans play in “activating” the sacred, does not mean that the sacred is a human construction. The sacred is something that some humans devote their entire lives to understanding, dedicating a lifestyle to the way they personally feel connected to it. “Every human society has had its gods, whether worshipped from Gothic cathedrals to Mayan pyramids. In all cultures, humans pour resources into elaborate religious buildings and rituals, with no obvious boost towards survival

and reproduction.”²⁸ This quote represents how religion is an inherently human thing, we don't participate in it for a selfish benefit, but simply benefiting others because it feels good. Again, religion is done best communally.

Atheism as Helping to Understand the Sacred.

The sacred is hard to conceive of by the human senses. Some describe it as a feeling, or perhaps seeing it in other people/plants/animals, etc. No matter what the perception or agency may be, the sacred is never hit on directly. It is beyond our ability to conceptualize it, and thus diverse religious culture must exist. We use our bodies to make religion mean something to ourselves, our communities, and the places we inhabit. The essence of religion is community, and communities are composed of individual bodies, each hailing from different walks of life. When individuals are brought together the experience of community produces a united identity and goal. The special effects are seen when people become dedicated and empathetic to each other. In a world where discrimination and hatred exists, religion can be seen as something that (also historically) divides people and makes them fight, and start wars. Yet, it is deeply human and exists everywhere, and has a profound power of bringing people together. Interestingly, something that adds to studying religion is Atheism.

Hedges outlines this idea by trying to obtain a “sympathetic understanding of atheism”.²⁹ When talking about religious people, it is unfair to make assumptions about ‘religion is’..., or ‘all religious people are...’, it is not clear what that could possibly mean given the diversity of traditions we typically call religions.”³⁰ It can be helpful to understand religion in terms of people who don't believe in religion or practice any. As Hedges writes, it is fair in “recognizing that

²⁸ Culotta, Elizabeth, 2009.. “On the Origin of Religion.” *Science* Vol 326. *Published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.* https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.326_784

²⁹ Hedges, P. 2016. *Setting The Debates In Context.* In *Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue.* 14-35.

³⁰ Ibid.

every aspect of human culture is deeply underpinned by religious belief.”³¹ The reality of religion in our contemporary world is that it may or may not be declining depending on the context, but it is changing and evolving with life’s natural processes and cycles, and such circumstances seem to be inevitable in the world.

Inclusivity

The sacred and secular can work together to create a public sphere that involves everyone. Laurie Patton helps us to come to an understanding of an “inclusive public space” in order for religion to exist in the wider and secular spheres of society without religious communities being unintelligible. The importance is that it translates to how the religious ideas aren’t always accepted within the secular, and if there are public spaces that remain unbiased then that won’t be a problem. But why might some people want to disregard the importance of religion in society? One popular reasoning is the association with oppressive power structures, and a fearful presence of god that is losing popularity with the majority.³² However, if we are to accept each other and coexist with people who are different to us, understanding the diversity in perception of the sacred is essential. Togetherness is essential for any community. Therefore the sacred must survive, otherwise we may lose connection to each other. The point is that the existence of religion adds to the fabric of society just as much as the secular spheres do. She addresses religion in the twenty-first century, referencing Jürgen Habermas, “the idea that religion could be a source for more secular ideas of human dignity, and that the resurgent fundamentalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is worthy of investigation and critique.”³³ Patton is investigating the different social and historical conditions, and how they affect beliefs and practices of the secular age we find ourselves in. She questions if critique is

³¹ Ibid.

³² Brackley, Portia. "The nature of a Small Town Church in Granville, Ohio." (2023).

³³ Patton, Laurie L., 2019. *Introduction: Who Owns Religion?* 1-16.

secular, and perhaps our biases may get in the way of accepting all that religion can be. The lived religion theoretical approach³⁴ exemplifies how rich and diverse cultures are in the “outskirts” of popular religion. Especially when religion has served as a basis for revolution and protesting injustices. If we are to understand the rich beauty of cultures and arts and philosophies of the world, we understand them in the context of their underpinning religious beliefs. As well, doing away with atheism may limit us from the most creative qualities of the world.³⁵ The lived religion approach calls us to see that practices show us how real living people experience religion, rather than the authority of written texts limiting the minority experience.

There cannot be a catalog-esque view to study religion, people experience their own “spirituality” in all kinds of ways or not at all, with books or not. Studying religion can help people to understand atheism and its place in contemporary society, and atheism helps us understand more about how religion functions today. The world is not divided by those who are “rationalist/atheist/scientific”, and those who are “faith-based/belief-based/anti-scientific.”³⁶ Seeing religion vs. atheism as entirely polarizing and conflicting concepts only divide our unity. We cannot exclude people from their rationalities, simply because they might be self proclaimed believers or not. To see it like this would be to strip away our rights to shared community and inclusive public spaces.

Atheism can add a deeper layer to what is perceived to be “belief”. A devotee “believes” the same way an atheist “believes” there is no God. This also is a shift from the notion that morals are superior when backed by religion, you can be dedicated to your virtues without affiliation to religion. There is a view of togetherness, that whether they believe in a transcendent

³⁴ Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt.3, “LIFE: Lived Religion, Syncretism, and Hybridity.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies.*” 67-90.

³⁵ Patton, Laurie L., 2019. *Introduction: Who Owns Religion?* 1-16.

³⁶ Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt.3, “LIFE: Lived Religion, Syncretism, and Hybridity.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies.*” 67-90.

reality or deity(ies) or in something else that one way or another it is still “belief”. He asks for consideration of “when belief is rational and what kind of things make it so... and to imagine what it is like to believe something for which we don’t have proof”. He talks about Descartes, how his belief is that we cannot really ever prove that of which the things in front of us are actually real, if we cannot tell we are dreaming anyways. Or, how one can still “believe” that their partners love them even when they have affairs and say they want to leave for somebody else. “Is religious faith different from the faith I have that somebody loves me?”³⁷ His point is that when we say we “believe” something, we are perhaps relying upon some distant force that cannot be seen to the naked eye, felt or touched tangibly. Therefore, allowing space for what it means to “believe” in religion in relation to those who don't. However, “Enlightenment concepts...tend to be particularly simple and sweeping. Dramatic simplicity tends to be one of their chief attractions and is also their chronic weakness.”³⁸ This perspective provided by Mary Midgely is particularly interesting because it can be seen in Descartes' view about the world being either materialist or idealist, rather than a combination of both.

The Sacred’s Presence in the Body and Secular Expression.

The human body informs us about how we experience and feel religion. The body has a designated significance within religious spaces. Especially in a ritual setting—where the actions of the body are special, the vessels we inhabit are not merely that, they represent communication between the earthly and the divine. The sacred and secular have the ability to convert a space, or create such notions within a space. According to both Sarah Coakley³⁹ and Abou Farman⁴⁰, the

³⁷Hedges, Paul 2021. Chpt.3, “LIFE: Lived Religion, Syncretism, and Hybridity.” *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies.*” 67-90.

³⁸ Whitley, David S. *Cognition, Emotion, and Belief: First Steps in an Archaeology of Religion.* 2008. *Belief in the Past: Theoretical approaches to the study of Religion.*

³⁹ Coakley, Sarah, ed. *Religion and the Body.* Vol. 8. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁴⁰ Farman, Abou. "Speculative matter: Secular bodies, minds, and persons." *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 4 (2013): 737-759.

subject of the body had been neglected within the swell of scholarship until the recent decades past. Coakley says we don't have “one regnant definition of ‘body’ now available to us. Yet each is, in its way, already laden with ideological freight.”⁴¹ There can be a setting where there is no talk of religion. Interestingly, when people are brought together they can experience phenomena that religion brings.⁴² Think of places where bodies and music are involved; parties, concerts, even sports teams, or dancers in a community. Religion thrives when it is done communally, and that is why groups of people are able to connect secularly. The feelings of collaboration and partnership that are characteristic of our humanity can be done religiously, but it is not essential. In other words, when one describes that they do something “religiously”, that having a coffee is part of their morning ritual, the qualities of religion cross over into a secular setting. There doesn't need to be implications of religion in order to be in connection with something larger than life, what some call the divine, the universe, or God.

The Interconnecting of the Sacred and Secular

The sacred and the secular are popularly seen as two separate areas that are present in society, and function outside and apart from each other. Durkheim, who will be discussed later, describes religion as “an eminently social thing.” Therefore, do we involve the sacred in the secular, or is it inevitable? As a result of this societal effect, it can feel like they function as things that cannot and should not mix, as two opposing forces they could be seen to impose and bombard upon each other. The way our bodies function and move bring forth a great deal of information on how we conceptualize the sacred, whether we necessarily believe in spirituality or not. We aim to take care of ourselves and each other, our health represents the states of

⁴¹Farman, Abou. "Speculative matter: Secular bodies, minds, and persons." *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 4 (2013): 737-759.

⁴² Whitley, David S. "Cognition, Emotion, and Belief: First Steps in an Archaeology of Religion." *Belief in the past* (2008): 85-104.

mind/body we are in. The saying “Cleanliness is next to godliness”, shows how we have a desire to remain in a healthy stable state. Morning routines could be like rituals, brushing the teeth, eating, dressing. Anything could be a “ritual” if you think hard enough, but rituals have designated meanings that separate them from everyday life. Rituals highlight the spectacular aspects of society, and separate that from the ordinary mundane. An everyday meal for dinner is not the same thing as when people have holy feasts to commemorate a spiritual importance. The “body is a temple” is another one, showing that the characteristics of religion cross over into the secular in order for us to function healthily everyday.

People use religious language to separate something from the mundane, because that is what makes the divine aspects special. There does not need to be an implication of religion for the special aspects of life to be felt, but that is characteristic of religion. The sacred and the secular have a deep interconnected relationship that only better and colors our worldview. Praying and meditating could be likened to simply pondering or contemplating, that can be done on a walk in the woods. However, we have a commonality within the experience of being human, and many characteristics of human relations are involved in religion.

To express the ways that the sacred and secular add depth to our lives, W. Watts Miller’s research on Émil Durkheim provides insight and historical context on how the sacred and secular are perceived to be dichotomic—especially in the western world. Inquiring about the potential existence of an idea labeled “secular religion”, Miller introduces secularism and how it is juxtaposed next to religiosity; it “involves, whatever else, a worldview that gives up on gods, souls, supernatural powers, an afterlife, etc...it gives up on beliefs to do with religion in a core traditional sense. This is why secularism and religion can seem opposites and the idea of a

secular religion a contradiction in terms”.⁴³ The sacred and secular are radically different, but that does not mean that they do not interconnect deeply. Additionally, this view has encountered hostile aversions. From religious-minded people criticizing secularism, and secular-minded people criticizing religion, this very idea traces back to at least the French Revolution and preached a popularity in nineteenth-century France. This is how Émil Durkheim would come to question the idea aforementioned, laying a precedent for contemporary sociological and phenomenological thought.

Understanding Popular Religion with Durkheim

Lars Fogelin said, “Religions are not simply disembodied metaphysical concepts, they are embedded within human actions. People do religion as much as they think about religion.”⁴⁴ His words point to how archaeology of religion is “easy” when taking a practice-based approach. Religion will always reflect the culture where it resided. Therefore, religion is embedded in practices, and such placements upon the world by humans can reveal what a particular society regards as sacred when it comes to the actions of the body. Sonja Hukantaival discusses the shifting attitudes towards ritual, religion, and whether it is separate from everyday life. She wants to move away from placing actions into strict dichotomies, for example Durkheim, because it allows for a “more comprehensive insight into past life.”⁴⁵ Fogelin was referencing his point about the archaeological agreement that ritual shows a specific form of action or behavior, but disagreement on the relationship between ritual and religion. Introducing the concept of a structure-based approach within archaeology, those who align with it see religion as primary, and

⁴³ Miller, W. Watts. "Secularism and the Sacred: Is there Really Something Called "Secular Religion"?. In *Reappraising Durkheim For the Study and Teaching of Religion Today*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004379152_004

⁴⁴ Fogelin, Lars 2008. Chapter 8: DELEGITIMIZING RELIGION: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RELIGION AS ... ARCHAEOLOGY. *Belief in the Past: Theoretical Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion*.

⁴⁵ Hukantaival, Sonja. "Understanding Past Actions – Changing Attitudes towards Ritual, Religion, and Everyday Life." *Today I Am Not the One I Was Yesterday: Archaeology*, 2015.

ritual a mere enactment of underlying religious beliefs.⁴⁶ A practice based approach regards ritual as the primary aspect, and the religious beliefs “conform” to actions.

Emile Durkheim's view of religion was that its practices and beliefs are ultimately relative to the sacred, and distinctive to the profane. Ritual actions are intentionally different from other kinds of action. In this view, connection between ritual and practice does not lead to a situation where nothing is sacred and everything can count as ritual. It is just that there are natural categorizations between things, and it can provide deeper meaning to our lives in order to perform deliberate ritualistic behavior. There is another component to Durkheim's definition, concerning a strict distinction between magic and religion, though he admitted they were similar.⁴⁷ Durkheim added that magic is private and lacks the communal, binding aspect that religion has. This dichotomy connects to that of the sacred and profane, and Hukantaival outlines the history that “superstition” has in Europe, as something that is inherently profane and sacrilegious.

Durkheim in his condemnation of magic; calling it a mockery of religion, alludes that magic cannot be dictated by power and authority the way that religion gets scooped underneath authoritarianism. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, theologians were already trying to divide what is magic and what is “true” religion. What they could agree on about superstition, was that it was disapproved of as being “demonic” magic. Afterwards, the assumption was emphasized that magic was inherently demonic.⁴⁸ Religion has been associated with values of respect and submission, while magic does not have hierarchy or formal organization, and importantly can be practiced by everyday people. No prestigious clergy is needed. Therefore, that was the real danger of magic. It was a practice that threatened the dominant consciousness (Walter

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 184-6.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 186.

Bruggemann), and blurred the line of people who could have access to God. It can be argued that magic could in fact bind people together in that way. You could be poor, or illiterate and experience God the same way as the priest who has been put on a pedestal. It contested the notion that those at the tip of the social hierarchy and/or clerical privilege were closest to or favored by God. Culotta identifies that symbolic behavior is proof that cultures of the past have always had spiritual beliefs, “the literate societies of Mesopotamia and Egypt, some 5000 years ago. Those early empires had both secular and religious hierarchies, with priestly elites and sometimes a God-king who ruled both the temporal and spiritual realms. In this view, full-fledged ‘religion’ develops hand in hand with organized social hierarchies. The powers that be seek to mirror God, because the people not in power feel small, and distant. Jesus was popular for preaching that God is not the empire, or someone in power, but the power lies in the people.

The two terms, “sacred” and “secular” do not have to limit or contradict each other, though their definitions might seem to do so. Durkheim had a preference for classifications and made an argument that was contradictory to the idea popular at the time, that religion can be substituted with ethics of the enlightenment rhetoric and thinking. For him, the sacred and profane dichotomy was at the heart of religion. The study of religion in effect were his views on the sacred, secular, and profane, which will be discussed to portray the way we come to understand our bodies and ourselves in the context of society. In the context of the sacred, Durkheim’s arguments conveyed religion as the “heart of social and moral life.”⁴⁹ Miller questions how religion can continue to live in society when God doesn't have an active role within institutions and our lives. In other words, at times when people like Durkheim were analyzing religion, society was turning to secularism, and therefore God was not associated with

⁴⁹Miller, W. Watts. "Secularism and the Sacred: Is there Really Something Called “Secular Religion”?". In *Reappraising Durkheim For the Study and Teaching of Religion Today*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004379152_004

institutions. People were wanting to deviate from the norm of the church authority that had previously been so present. However, according to Durkheim, the sense of what the sacred is must survive. When secularism grows and thrives, how does religion fit in? Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, says that “eternal” aspects of religion are faith and the cult. This can be viewed in a larger context of “beliefs, symbols, rites and practices that have a special authority.”⁵⁰ According to Miller, what diffuses these and provides that authority, is the definition of Religion provided by Durkheim as a sensibility of the sacred. A cognitive approach to religion supports the idea that Religion derives from the human mind itself. Therefore, religion as we know it is very plausible that our psyches would construct something like God. Culotta quotes Renfrew, “you don't necessarily have belief in deities until you have persons of enormously high status, who themselves are close to the divine like a pharaoh.”⁵¹ The sacred is not a human construction at best, but a reflection of human consciousness.

It is necessary to establish in Durkheim's view, the “transfer of sacrality from god to man.”⁵² Miller explains that there has been a failure to discern what this implies, and that it involves not the passing down of the idea of the same sacred. It is but a change in the idea and nature of the sacred itself. Durkheim viewed the sacred as essentially transcendent, this quality of above and beyond as the main aspect of the sacred. This is why feelings of awe in religion can be used to make people submit, because it can also make people more prone to do things for others, called prosocial behavior.⁵³ Durkheim might have liked this view, that religion proves altruistic behavior is natural and feels good. It represents the very essence of transcendence, and that

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Culotta, Elizabeth, 2009.. “On the Origin of Religion.” *Science* Vol 326. *Published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science*. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.326_784

⁵² Miller, W. Watts. "Secularism and the Sacred: Is there Really Something Called “Secular Religion”?". In *Reappraising Durkheim For the Study and Teaching of Religion Today*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004379152_004

⁵³ Piff, Paul. Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior, 2015. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 108. American Psychological Association. 883-899.

individualities between the sacred and secular is recognized by the nature of transcendence. Miller asks, “But if we give up on God, what can replace him as transcendent? Is it society?”⁵⁴ Durkheim’s thoughts are particularly influential in this argument because he insisted on the idea that the person, the human, is at the center of the sacred. Our activities and thought processes as a society reflect our religions. Miller adds, “It is the idea of the person that helps to define and constitute modern society, just as ideas of God help to define and constitute traditional societies. As a social symbolism, ideas of God are not a mere varnish that can be stripped off to leave a way of life the same.”⁵⁵ Ideas of the sacred are very important to how we live out our lives. He saw it as transcendent to the individual body, and wanted to separate the individual to the person, because it is the person that establishes transcendence in relation to the individual. This is why we can see our bodies as the center of the sacred. We are allowed to have our own individual practices and perceptions of the sacred, our identities affirm who we are, “we still very much need identities as members of particular groups”⁵⁶, but we are all part of the same idea of humanity and decency. Transcendence of the sacred is able to extend past the ways that people perceive as sacred.

Coakley also raises an important quote from Mary Douglas, “Just as it is true that everything symbolizes the body, so it is equally true that the body symbolizes everything else.”⁵⁷ She is interested in settling the “mind-body” debate by stating the importance of reflecting on the pre-Enlightenment religious background and how it relates to the contemporary controversies of the ‘body’. In today’s society, there has been even more of a magnified lens placed on the body

⁵⁴Miller, W. Watts. "Secularism and the Sacred: Is there Really Something Called "Secular Religion"?. In *Reappraising Durkheim For the Study and Teaching of Religion Today*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004379152_004

⁵⁵ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁷ Coakley, Sarah, ed. *Religion and the Body*. Vol. 8. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

perhaps more than ever in history. Corporate industries of mass beauty, health, dieting, skin care, and pharmaceuticals, also promote the idea that our bodies are unable to be understood by us, and we need to depend on consumerism to understand ourselves. It is harmful to see ourselves as consciousness that operates individually, our bodies do not have a “mind of its own”, but instead work with our mind to connect.

It is profound to view religion through the lens of the body, because it shows how real people in real life are practicing religion. Coakley says, “It is no wonder that these ‘body’ matters so exercise us; for the quest seemingly encoded in them is for a unifying, and socially cohesive, point of reference.”⁵⁸ The doings of our bodies provide information on how people, whether in any religious/ethnic groups or individually have a special and culturally relevant position of what religion and spirituality is.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 7.

The Artistic Body

Religion as the Arts

The connection between religion and the arts is not ignored or underappreciated, but they are seen as separate. They are connected, for example music's place in religion is seen with a choir, organ music, praise dancing, etc. However—in the mainstream, the importance of the arts within religion has not really been associated with the body itself. The body is the communication between the arts and spirituality. The relationships that are created between the human body and the arts also exemplify the communion of the sacred and humans in the earthly realm. Themes of creation, faith and practice, etc. have significance in both religion and the arts. As already discussed, the body within the study of religion should be considered more as a site of religious meaning, rather than prioritizing fully the quantitative aspects of religion. This idea has been supported within academics, with “A chorus of scholars of religious studies has been calling for improved attention to the bodily dimensions of religious life.”⁵⁹ The body through movement, may it be walking, running, praying, meditating, dancing, playing— all of these words are verbs that call for an expression of action. The act of moving our bodies is a gift from the divine, and something we should never take for granted. Gratitude for the ability to stand up in bed in the morning, to use two legs and walk to a coffee shop. Whether religion is involved or not, there is something out there to thank for the ability to use our bodies.

Ursula Rao proposes that a “focus on the body as medium for religious communication draws attention to the relational quality of sacred space. Sacred space emerges in between

⁵⁹ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

landscape, object, and body.”⁶⁰ We find that taking a walk around, perhaps near the trees, helps us overcome stress and feelings that are overwhelming. High intensity body movements such as a run or other intense workouts, people use to stabilize themselves mentally.⁶¹ It helps us remain calm and grounded rather than anxious and erratic. LaMothe writes about the style of Modern dance, also called contemporary dance as something that was part of the “rift”⁶² in the study of religion. She describes that the scholars who pioneered the area of religious studies, who were “digging for the origins of religious life, encountered traces of dance everywhere—in drawings, sculptures, and written accounts, as well as in longstanding practices.”⁶³ I include a bit of an anecdote in order to provide personal experience on the ties between religious studies and dance.

Dance has many ties to religious rituals and ceremonies. Dance is an artform, or perhaps a celebration method. We dance when we are happy, and sad too. Dance can be an expression of any of our range of emotions, or a political statement. Dance can be solo, partnered, sacred, secular, and so much more. When we dance with others, we are unified within musical rhythms. The movement style of modern dance is about abstraction. There can be in modern dance a significant aspect of improvisation, which is about expressing the inner workings of the human soul, body, and mind that harmonize to produce art. We can express many things through dance, whether it be socio-political awareness, or perhaps our human emotions and circumstances. As an academic and dancer, I have combined dance with my religious studies. Throughout this combination I have understood my own personal relationship to the sacred, as well as my relationships to other people within a group. The environment of a dance class is like no other

⁶⁰Rao, Ursula. "Sacred Space." *The international encyclopedia of anthropology* 10 (2018): 5334-5340.

⁶¹ Sharma, Ashish, Vishal Madaan, and Frederick D. Petty. "Exercise for mental health." *Primary care companion to the Journal of clinical psychiatry* 8, no. 2 (2006): 106.

⁶² LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

⁶³ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

environment I have experienced, perhaps if I grew up in a church I would be able to compare those two experiences. Dance is a vulnerable art form, and though the main focus of the art is the body, the component of the mind is just as important. My peers have seen me in some of my most vulnerable states, and I them. However, the lack of judgment in the right dance setting, really shows the amazing capacity that humans have for empathy. We grow and evolve together, but that does not interrupt the importance of the artist's solo journey.

The Religiosity of Dancing

LaMothe diligently writes, "To this day scholars are inclined to assume that dance is religion for those who have yet to master the mental skills required to read and write. Dance is "proto-text" for those without texts. For scholars who work with this analogy, there is little sense that the *practice* of dancing might have a distinct contribution to the "religion" they seek to study".⁶⁴ Harnessing my creative side through activities such as dance, showed me how the body interacts with religion. My identity as a dancer has deepened my sense of community and teamwork, because anything that can be done can often be done better with other people.

It is no coincidence that the words create, creative, relate to the "creation" we associate with god, or the divine. LaMothe references Immanuel Kant, in saying "We have no direct sensory experience of "religion" (i.e., the divine), he insists, and can never know whether the claims of religion are true or not. As a result we may reason only within the limits provided by our sensory experience, and then postulate the existence of an "absolute" as an enabling condition of our knowledge and happiness."⁶⁵ LaMothe also delves into the scholarship in the early twentieth century, that of Duncan, St. Denis, and Graham. She highlights their concern for

⁶⁴ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

⁶⁵ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

the importance of learning to read and write in western Christian culture, “had so colonized the sensory experience...that people were no longer able to experience and know (divinity) through their bodies.”⁶⁶ She further adds how these scholars were able to find solace in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, who used dance as an “alternate value system to what he and they perceived as the antibody, anti-life, anti-dance bias of Christian beliefs. In Nietzsche’s work, to dance is *to affirm life*; dancing is the practice and the fruit of loving life. A person who dances, as he (Nietzsche) envisions it, awakens his senses, boosts his energy, hones his instinct, and opens a space for discerning wisdom in his warring desires. Such a dancer, Nietzsche claims, can create values and ideals that “remain faithful to the earth.”⁶⁷ This breakdown of Nietzsche by LaMothe is extremely relevant to the conversation of religion and the body. Personally, I feel that my identity as a dancer has made me understand the dynamics of the world. Learning how to surrender to the forces of life, but to simultaneously remain close to a sense of self control, in order to bring forth a feeling of inner peace or a “flow state”. This is the comparison between dance and religion that LaMothe details, because the activities that attune to working simultaneously with both the mind and the body can be likened to the essence of religion as a self mediation.

Creativity and Creation

The creative forces of energy that lie within us is the same life force that many people attribute to God, the creator of all life. This is one of many things that reflect our relationship to the divine and the earth. There are musicalities and art in nature, a sunset is the perfect thing to replicate in a painting, and the birds sing songs for us in the morning to let us know a new day

⁶⁶ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

⁶⁷ LaMothe, Kimerer L. "What bodies know about religion and the study of it." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573-601.

has arrived. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona discusses a Michaelangelo painting on the ceiling of the sistine chapel that “moves her”. The famous panel depicts the classic God the Father image, creating both the sun and the moon simultaneously. What stands out to Cappadona however, was the depiction of the front and back view of God. To her it is “Michaelangelo’s attempt to visualize the *dynamis* of God. It is that *dynamis* which I believe is at the root of the human desire to create: to move, to chant, to sing, to rhyme words, to image images, and to write dramas”.⁶⁸ I remember being a child, and talking to the sky. I didn't understand why this was something that I did, but it proves a natural desire to communicate with something we intuitively feel is out there.

The creative force within us is a divine force. When we are in touch with our creativity, we are in touch with God. It is generated within us, and it is grounded in that feeling of oneness that unites us all in a divine consciousness. There is a saying “there are no mistakes in art”, and this statement points to art being without error in our humanity, we were created to be creative.

Religion helps us understand why we might exist on this earth, therefore giving many people a sense of profound meaning. Within the study of religion, emphasizing the body and the amazing artistic qualities it possesses helps us see that people actually do practice religion in their own ways, outside of the privatization of religion. Kate Ravilious writes about graffiti writings and drawings on the wall of a medieval church in England. One of them being Margaret’s church in Cley-Next-the-Sea, which was central in a very busy English port where many goods were imported and exported. The “period of prominence” to Ravilious explains why a small village attains this church with “cathedral-esque proportions.”⁶⁹ She includes how in today’s time, this would be sacrilegious and profane. Especially when the word “graffiti” is used,

⁶⁸Apostolos-Cappadona, Diane. “On the Music of the Spheres: Unifying Religion and the Arts.” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3, no. 2 (1995): 63–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40327093>.

⁶⁹ Ravilious, Kate. “Writing on the Church Wall: Graffiti from the Middle Ages provides insight into personal expressions of faith in medieval England.” *Archaeology Magazine, Letter From England*. Sept/Oct 2015.

there is a tone that is negatively connotated, as if it was a disrespectful vandal. In actuality, the last decade of research has shown that this activity was “condoned, and sometimes even encouraged, by Church authorities. The finds are changing the perception of how medieval worshippers viewed religion and interacted with their churches.”⁷⁰ The fact that actually many of these English churches were covered in “riots of graffiti, scratched into what were once boldly colored walls.”⁷¹ This was a way for people to express their religion “personally”, that didn't involve texts or an activity that was regulated by the priests. Not only this, but the detail of the boldly colored walls points to an attention to aesthetic and artistic vision. We have a natural affinity and appreciation for aesthetic beauty as humans, and we see that in the world around us. It is only natural that it becomes reflected in our religious practices.

Matthew Champion, who is a director of the Medieval graffiti surveys, the stone panels are extravagantly inscribed with scene depiction of baptism and priestly ordinations. There were found remains of paint in the carvings that show that the medieval carvings were brightly colored and decorating. According to Champion, “the blue color was made from lapis lazuli pigment...which was very exotic and expensive then.”⁷² If nothing else, this exemplifies the way that art had significance within the way that these people worshiped. Champion finds a stone wall that is seemingly blank, but when he points a flashlight to the wall from the side, he saw carved into the wall “a series of perfect circles filled with six-petaled flower patterns.”⁷³ He had thought that these drawings were rare or uncommon, especially because they were not documented in literature. In reality, he searched another church— All Saints in Litcham, Norfolk, and found that there are hundreds of these markings. They were just invisible unless viewed in a

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ravilious, Kate. “Writing on the Church Wall: Graffiti from the Middle Ages provides insight into personal expressions of faith in medieval England.” *Archaeology Magazine, Letter From England*. Sept/Oct 2015.

specific lighting. Through his research, Champion has found that this graffiti was a phenomena wide- spread that was found in many other countries, such as Norway, Germany, Spain, and Malta. To quote him, “Everyone from the lord of the manor to the lowliest commoner was making these marks.”⁷⁴ Clearly, there is some semblance of hierarchical structure, but the important takeaway is that they used these symbols as protection as they were thought to trap malevolent spirits. “Christianity was not the warm and fluffy religion that it is today...People believed in the power of evil, and would do everything they could to ward off the ill forces that lurked outside the church door.”⁷⁵ An important detail was that the church doors were not locked, so these drawings took place during the services. However, the blasphemous things can sometimes point us to what things we may have been taught to believe are sacred or profane.

⁷⁴ Ravilious, Kate. “Writing on the Church Wall: Graffiti from the Middle Ages provides insight into personal expressions of faith in medieval England.” *Archaeology Magazine, Letter From England*. Sept/Oct 2015.

⁷⁵ Ravilious, Kate. “Writing on the Church Wall: Graffiti from the Middle Ages provides insight into personal expressions of faith in medieval England.” *Archaeology Magazine, Letter From England*. Sept/Oct 2015.



Circular floral designs (highlighted here to show the shape clearly) are the most common motif in medieval church graffiti, and were thought to trap malevolent spirits.

Europe's medieval period, and their church walls being "covered in riots of graffiti," were really just artistic carvings, drawings, words. This would typically be seen as sacrilegious, profane superstition! Everything that is supposed to oppose religion. However, particularly fascinating about these interactions with the church walls was that they were condoned, and perhaps even encouraged. The churches were locked outside of services, and so the people were doing the graffiti during worship time. Epigraphic evidence is seen as the primary authority when studying religion, but evidence of ritual culture matters just as much as the scriptural texts. The line between magic and religion becomes blurred, as Hukantaival noted, because both involve ritualistic behavior.

In the medieval period, many people could not read the bible and writing materials were expensive, thus the church walls were an adopted place to express one's deepest hopes and fears.⁷⁶ Prior to the Protestant reformation the hierarchical structure made it so that people's relationship with God was mediated via a Pope. After the reformation Ravilious writes that religion became "more personal", you could read your own bible and therefore the church walls were not necessarily needed.⁷⁷ This provides a lot of insight on how practice based approaches reflect true experiences of people living at the time. It reminds us that we are not so different from our predecessors. The reason archaeology of religion can be made "simple" is that the evidence of what people were doing does not need to be affirmed by functionality, life can be abstract and problematic. Having these conversations helps us see life in a deeper way, that it is not so black and white. Just because the bible does not particularly say to draw on the church walls does not mean that past humans weren't worshipping their God. When the black plague was killing half of Europe, an inscription 1348, reads "God help us, God help us."⁷⁸ This article by Ravilious is so important because it shows how the body is involved in a version of religion that can be personal and unprecedented, unregulated by authority.

The dichotomy of religion and magic being about power connects to how these church drawings indicate the way ordinary people experience spirituality. What graffiti and magic have in common is profane connotations, yet these Medieval people made their religion seem magical. If they could not read they could draw. It becomes complicated when magic is seen as the antithesis to "true" religion, because then ritual art becomes villainized rather than hopeful. In essence, what the church drawings exemplify is the human spirit's rebellion to privatized

⁷⁶ Ravilious, Kate. "Writing on the Church Wall: Graffiti from the Middle Ages provides insight into personal expressions of faith in medieval England." *Archaeology Magazine, Letter From England*. Sept/Oct 2015.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

religion. Durkheim said magic lacks community, but this is religious art and it connects people, evoking deep feelings. The graffiti reflects people coming together for a common purpose to worship, making art in the process. A building is merely a physical structure, but the powers that be say we are not free to impact it artistically with something like graffiti. It is like when we draw on the walls of the kitchen with crayons as kids. That may not be considered a religious ritual, but it is an artistic human behavioral practice. When art takes place in a designated worship space, it is inherently connecting us to the divine.

Bodily Culture and Music

Through movement, one can navigate the complex intricacies of the Mind, Body, and Spirit relationship. This can be perceived to be the “inner” and “outer” workings of the day-to-day human experience. The human body is a site of religious meaning; it acts as an instrument for religious experience. While our bodies exist on this immanent physical plane, our mind’s infinity represents the transcendent. We are the bridge between the spirit and physical world, “we communicate with the work of art through our individual bodies.”⁷⁹ Bodily movement and ergo dance, produces religious knowledge. Lamothe’s article is about how art fosters the creative energy that exists in us humans, the same energy we associate with God's creation. Create, creativity, creation is all words associated with bringing things to life, into existence.

Music has the power to evoke strong feelings within us. It can transport us right into a memory or a particular feeling. The physical and emotional state of our bodies are affected, it can make us dance and sing passionately, feeling the range of our emotions from pure joy to melancholy or anger. It is not surprising the ties that music has to religion, because music is

⁷⁹Apostolos-Cappadona, Diane. “On the Music of the Spheres: Unifying Religion and the Arts.” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3, no. 2 (1995): 63–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40327093>.

something that can so easily bring us together. Apostolos-Cappadona references Gerardus van der Leeuw in order to talk about the way that a harsh distinction made between art, life, and religion, led to a situation where the arts “became the realm of the cultured elite and on their lowest levels as entertainment for the masses.”⁸⁰ She goes on to explain how due to this distinction aspects of our everyday lives concerning creativity were separated from religion, “stripped of its primal ability to bind and/or release sacred power.”⁸¹ Interestingly, for van der Leeuw, music will never lose that primal power, but the argument is that music can still elicit this power through secular music. The article states, “The ‘powerful sound’ van der Leeuw and Eliade would assign to music and which has that mystical power to transform, to exalt, and to soothe has flourished outside ‘the church’ but it is nonetheless ‘sacred sound’.”⁸² In essence, the themes discussed of power and regulation on art cannot reach religious practice, and also cannot reach creative practice. It seems impossible to retain that transformative sacral power of music under religious regulation, and with Apostolos's argument we see how the “secular” music can be like a hidden sacred even if it is seen as purely entertaining.

Apostolos mentions how art is essential to the history of humanity; “Works of art can be discussed in terms of cultural, economic, ethical, religious, and sociopolitical values.”⁸³ Such as a political cartoon, or protest songs and chants. Art, like religious practices, should not be boiled down to old historical customs and elective classes, but regarded as essential to how our existence plays out. The reasons we make art today is the same reason generations prior always did too. It is to say something about who we are as people, and expressing our experiences.

⁸⁰ Apostolos-Cappadona, Diane. “On the Music of the Spheres: Unifying Religion and the Arts.” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3, no. 2 (1995): 63–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40327093>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Apostolos-Cappadona, Diane. “On the Music of the Spheres: Unifying Religion and the Arts.” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 3, no. 2 (1995): 63–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40327093>.

Evidently, rituals and ceremonies, celebrations and rites of passages involve music and the arts, bringing us closer to one another and with cultural significance. As we celebrate another we reflect on ourselves and our own specialties and uniqueness, Apostolos mentions how art is essential to the history of humanity. With all of the complexities that come with having a human consciousness within this world, religion and the arts encapsulate our lives. Apostolos writes, “Although they may be deemed separate entities, religion and the arts are not simply related between themselves, but with all the other aspects of human experience—from horticulture to agriculture to science to medicine to politics and to economics—that compose and support a culture.”⁸⁴

Music can really connect us to our emotions and therefore connect us to our own bodies. In today’s culture, the body is so easily separated from us via consumerism, we have been conditioned to believe that we cannot control or receive intuition from our own bodies, that we need to be sold a product or a complete fantasy to replace the information from our systems, that naturally and biologically work to keep us going. The problem with consumerism is objectification and commodification of the priceless things in life, the human spirit and its ability to create art. “Art imitates life” is an expression of how our creations are manifestations of our human experience. We express art through our bodies, and therefore implicate that into our expressions of religion, to oneself and one another. Paul Simon and Art Garfunkels’ hit 1964 song ‘The Sound of Silence’ on the Album *Sounds of Silence*, is significant to the conversation of consumerism’s effect on society. The song connects to the theme of how we have become very disconnected from our own bodies and then in turn from each other. Art Garfunkel discusses the song, saying “This is a song about the inability of people to communicate with each other. Not

⁸⁴Ibid.

particularly internationally, but especially emotionally. So what you see around you is people who are unable to love each other.”⁸⁵ In a world where we are constantly being pushed to be consumer-driven individualistic people, the song has just as much relevance today, not to find “solace in the silence.”⁸⁶ Consumerism is another way that we lose the ability to communicate and connect with each other. It is even more interesting to analyze this song, written in the 60s, and compare the engulfing effects of consumerism today that have practically seeped into all areas of our life. When people are so focused on the ideals that consumerism teaches us, such as individuality and competition, we lose the ability and the passion for human interaction, even the simplest of small-talk connections. When there is a dominance of scripture, especially in Christianity as “the word of god”, there still needs to be a consideration of how important the body is to understanding religious practices. Simon and Garfunkel in the song say, “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.” What can commonly be found on subway walls is graffiti. A practice-based approach to religion is exemplified in this song lyric, meaning that the people closest to God are those underprivileged and exploited. Not the ones in power. Art is human, and not for certain people with lots of money and “taste.” Art can not be regulated, or labeled as vandalization.” The modern day prophets are the graffitiists, the street artists. The prophets speak for the people at large, transforming our consciousness, and graffiti transforms our notions of what art is.

⁸⁵ Patton, Alli 2023. The Profound Meaning Behind Simon & Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” June 28, 2023. *American Songwriter*.

<https://americansongwriter.com/the-profound-meaning-behind-simon-garfunkels-the-sound-of-silence/>

⁸⁶ Ibid.

The Political Body

Intersection of Religion and Politics

It is not uncommon to hear the phrase, “Religion and Politics should never mix!” However, there are many aspects of our political sphere that are imposed upon by strong religious beliefs. This is very evident, but it is more important that we see religion can be a motivator—a reminder that the world is always changing and therefore our political ideologies can too. Politics is more than differing views and debates, it represents the ways our society is constructed and oftentimes fabricated. Religion has been discussed to symbolize where we are as a people, policies are the essences of that as well. Pursuing virtue means fighting for justice, avoiding stagnance and maintaining mobility. Simply put, the body “moves.” It symbolizes movement within society, the forward thinking we need to avoid the mistakes of the past.

The America we presently find ourselves in, it is in a state of intense political turmoil and division. The intersection between religion and the body has a significant place within the political sphere, as explained by Meredith McGuire. She emphasizes that the social sciences of religion could be evolved and changed by seriously accepting that evidently, humans are embodied. As she puts it, “Our research strategies need to take into account that believers (and nonbelievers) are not merely disembodied spirits, but that they experience a material world in and through their bodies. Greater awareness of the social and political uses of human bodies should guide our research and theory.”⁸⁷ Discussed previously was the importance of the mobility of the body, in the artform of dance. Art is not merely for entertainment purposes, art sometimes has to be inherently political because it is the essence of the human experience, and

⁸⁷ McGuire, Meredith B. “Religion and the Body: Rematerializing the Human Body in the Social Sciences of Religion.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 3 (1990): 283–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386459>.

that includes the “difficulties” within politics. Being an artist means you must consistently maintain or practice your art form within the body, as the saying “practice makes perfect” exemplifies. As a dancer, you must not stop stretching beforehand, stagnant and inflexibility is how injuries follow. Therefore, the “body” of society must continue to be mobile and avoid stagnant ideas and norms. If so, we cannot evolve our consciousness with the evolution of time; our perception within society must be flexible too.

The Importance of Mobility

Monica Casper and Lisa-Jean Moore add to the importance of bodily focus by saying; “If one conceives of the intellectual history of sociology as different strands of thought, one tendency is to treat the individual as a rational, disembodied, decision-making agent, a kind of talking head with no recognizable body...this line of inquiry against the biologically determined notions of social order meant that corporeality—or the flesh, bone, functions, physiology, sensations, and materiality of the body—was for over a century ignored or merely taken for granted.”⁸⁸ The body, and the associated vocabulary fits perfectly into that of the political sphere. For our bodies are an important part of ourselves, but all bodies add up to the composition of a society, and we have the ability to change the circumstances. All bodies, including nonhuman ones, must be included in the fight for justice, compassion, and love. This is why major events in the socio-political sphere are called “movements.” They spell out particularly where we are as a society, and where we must proceed forward.

Social change, whether it may be in the form of people protesting, or lawmaking policy, corresponds to the inherent mobility within our minds and bodies, and our universe at large. Our cosmos is constantly expanding, our nature constantly evolving. Monolithic beliefs need to be

⁸⁸ Casper, Monica, and Lisa Jean Moore. *Missing bodies: The politics of visibility*. Vol. 2. NYU Press, 2009.

avoided. When we go out for a protest, we are doing a very human thing. We are “exercising” our right to assembly, and trying to bring about a “movement” of change. There is no coincidence that the words describing the mobile actions of the body are the same ones used to describe the way our bodies move within the political sphere. Mobility is key, if we are immobile in our bodies and minds, we are in turn unable to grow and expand upon our beliefs about what is fixed and what is true.

In order to “re-materialize” the body, McGuire establishes an argument that the social aspects of religion are in connection with the body to make the body “matter.” In two understandings of the word, the body “matters.” Firstly; to say that bodies matter to the people who inhabit them and we strongly tie the idea of our “self” to that corresponding body. “We experience things done to our bodies as done to ourselves.”⁸⁹ To expand she references Maurice Merleau-Ponty; who reminds us that our consciousness does not firstly manifest in that of the “I think that”, but rather the “I can.” In turn, when we lose that autonomy and agency—such as slavery or oppression, is a “fundamental assault upon our selves.”⁹⁰ McGuire wants to stray away from seeing the mind and body being seen as separate, and towards the notion that they are intimately linked. Effectively, the fact that people’s bodies matter to them, gives social scientists deeper insight into the relationship between the individual and the collective society.

Secondly, bodies are composed of physical “matter.” This has a place within religious scholarship though people tend to attribute the mind/spirit component to the social scientists and religion scholars. Meanwhile the “really real” aspects of the body component goes to the biological and medical scientists.⁹¹ Similarly to LaMothe’s argument for religious studies to not

⁸⁹ McGuire, Meredith B. “Religion and the Body: Rematerializing the Human Body in the Social Sciences of Religion.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 3 (1990): 283–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386459>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

be divided into scientific or interpretive, McGuire argues for a representation of the body within material reality. Socio-political factors affect the bodies themselves; “As material reality, human bodies also vividly experience the material conditions of social existence.”⁹² Her ideas provide a concrete framework on the relationship between the body and politics. Similarly to Paul Hedges writing about lived religion and experience, McGuire interprets our lived body as not only the method by which we perceive our world, but how we come to understand our existence within it. Due to our bodies being connected to the material world, they are also linked to other material “realities.” This is the primary idea of which she diligently proposes an argument to re-materialize the body;

Real bodies conceive, bear, and nurse children. Real bodies suffer illness, pain, chronic disabilities, and death. Real bodies experience hunger and cold. Real bodies also experience pleasure—aesthetic pleasures, sexual pleasures, and sensuous pleasures, such as the embrace of a friend, a view of a breathtaking sunset, the sound of a lullaby...Real bodies labor and are shaped by their work, whether by toxic chemicals or the stressful workplace. In addition...let us remember that real bodies are victims of abuse, torture, and war. As social scientists of religion, we could greatly expand the depth of our understanding of society if we “re-materialize.”⁹³

Body Politics

Understanding religion in the world today is made evermore helpful when the body is brought into account, because everything we do can be interpreted within a deeper spiritual context. Our bodies are not as separate from our minds, but in a symbiotic relationship. McGuire reminds us that our bodies are manifestations of ourselves in our everyday worlds (perhaps the sacred and secular); and embodiment is how we understand and associate with those worlds. We

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³Ibid, 284.

use our bodies to perceive and touch, smell, hear, and with that we “hold our everyday worlds.”⁹⁴ Our experiences with our bodies are “mediated by learned roles and other expectations; it is shaped by the immediate social context, as well as by historical antecedents of which the individual may not be aware.”⁹⁵ This quote raises awareness to how the factors of society affects the way we are perceived, and then in turn how we experience the world based on the learned expectations.

Recognizing the reality of how our actual bodies are affected by the socio-political sphere, is also to acknowledge the increasing prominence of intersection between religion and politics, especially here in America. It is not that religion cannot interconnect with politics, it is that the ways in which it is done cannot be oppressive and theocratic rather than democratic. As Talal Asad puts it, “The contemporary salience of political-religious movements across the world seems to represent a challenge, in some even to constitute a threat, to the project of modernity.” He adds that the “process of secularization” had added to the project of modernity, and takes away from the popular and dominating idea that “modern society assigns to religion.”⁹⁶ When religion becomes concerned with notions of power and authority rather than an aid for social mobility, then religion divides us rather than unifying us. Ironically, trying to reach a “universal” definition of religion, such as the WRP, may actually be more dividing than not. Asad, write about how the seventeenth century was significant to this modern conception of “religion” in post-enlightenment Europe. During “Christendon’s internal sectarian wars and Europe’s voyages of discovery and conquest overseas”⁹⁷, what followed was the first effort of a systematic manner, to produce this universal definition of religion.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 285.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ ASAD, TALAL. “Religion and Politics: An Introduction.” *Social Research* 59, no. 1 (1992): 3–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970682>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

What he labels “natural religion”, is defined yet again in terms of beliefs, “(regarding ‘transcendental power’), practices, (ordered ‘worship’), emotions (a sense of the sacred’), and ethics (a code of conduct based on ‘rewards and punishments after this life’)- was now said to exist in all societies.”⁹⁸ Asad further adds that in the eighteenth century Western Europe, a new pattern of sensibilities, beliefs, and ceremonies emerged, quintessential to their idea of liberal “civil society.”⁹⁹ In a teleological view this new “religion” was widely accepted. “Reason” and “civil society”, Asad writes, came to be sacralized. Translating to modern day politics, the argument Asad wants to make is that “according to our modern construction ‘religion’...consists precisely of those beliefs-sentiments-practices which are not essential to our common politics, economy, science, and morality.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, this is why religion seems to be something that divides us and prompts us to be intolerant toward each other's differences. He reassures, however; “it is not the locus of “the sacred” that I want to emphasize here, but the normative process of defining what is integral and excluding what is marginal to the modern state.”¹⁰¹ Hence, the idea of privatized religion being the most holy or ethical, wholly due to the fact it is of state-approved status.

What is Civil Society?

Asad details the politics of the modern state being closely associated with the idea of a “civil society”, of which our rights are secured as citizens. But who/what is civil society intended for? It is for those who intend to conform, and those who go to church as perhaps a form of escapism from the political and social turmoil. However, a church setting could actually be the perfect setting to discuss the things we can do to further the growth of our communities. I spent

⁹⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

the last summer of 2023 interviewing in small-town American churches and spoke to their pastors about the relationship of religion and politics; to which they would respond with something along the lines of, “We try not to involve that in here.”¹⁰² Following these interviews, I reflected on the state of the church in today's society. I questioned why church people did not want to involve politics in their sermons. The answers they had given me were that avoiding conversation topics pertaining to “controversies”, was to “keep the peace” of sorts; to make sure that no matter who showed up to church people would feel comfortable. However, the reluctance to preach about things that are relevant just because they are controversial, promotes stagnancy and monolithic beliefs. As previously discussed, it is not characteristic of the human body and spirit to not be in motion. Motion is what drives us towards fluidity of mind, away from bad ideas and toward good ones. Stagnance only allows us to loath and resent. Asad writes that “massive inhumanity and destruction,...are ever present possibilities against which we must be morally and politically on our guard.”¹⁰³ Religion has to be political, that Jesus was inherently political in his behavior and rhetoric, and to avoid being “political” is in a sense to avoid being human.

You have to be willing to shake things up to be anything like the kind of person Jesus was. “Shaking things up” is also another symbolic way to describe societal conditions in vocabulary that pertains to the actions of the body. Shaking of the limbs and muscles helps ease tension and immobility. Shaking of the circumstances introduces newness and fluidity into the fixed, always reminding us that the possibility of change is always present. As McGuire states, “Our discipline has been aware, since at least Durkheim, that human bodies are important symbols of cultural and social structural meanings....imagery drawn from the body—its parts, its

¹⁰² Brackley, Portia. "The nature of a Small Town Church in Granville, Ohio." (2023).

¹⁰³ ASAD, TALAL. “Religion and Politics: An Introduction.” *Social Research* 59, no. 1 (1992): 3–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970682>.

postures, its functions—is linked with conceptions of the self and its relationship to a larger social and material environment.”¹⁰⁴ In history we must pick sides, because if we do not then we will not stand for anything, therefore we will fall for anything. It is okay for humans to disagree when it comes to political things. However, what we cannot disagree on is the equality of all life— all forms of creation, human or not. When our governments with their policies are taking actions that support violation of human freedom, to sit in silence and complacency would be sinful. Sally Mcfague educated us on viewing the world as God's body, and so destruction, abuse and exploitation of creation is therefore sin. In politics, this is what we need to be working towards fighting; violation of human rights, with a particular focus on outlawing the disregard for the human body. The body plays a role in the things that define our reality, vitally. We use our bodies to show what we stand for, and what we will not tolerate. It is up to us to use our autonomy and our right to fight. Autonomy is something that is taken away from us, but to remain connected to God is to do what we feel is right. Disagreement on politics can be healthy, because again we don't want to sit in stagnance and nonmotion. How will we learn from each other otherwise?

Religion and Authority

Jesus is important to bring up, because there is a distortion in the perception of christians in modern society versus the actual historical Jesus. Religion obtains aspects of community, and passing of information and traditions, of which effectively can shape individuals' values and beliefs. Virtuosity and compassion, inspired by Jesus for example, can inspire people to care for one another, and care for justice and compassion as expressive of their humanity. However, the Puritans of New England and their “attempts to institutionalize righteousness in religiously grounded commonwealths”, were the earliest attempts to mix the political and the religious in

¹⁰⁴ ASAD, TALAL. “Religion and Politics: An Introduction.” *Social Research* 59, no. 1 (1992): 3–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970682>.

American culture.¹⁰⁵ Looking back to Puritanism is particularly interesting when comparing modern day society to their perceptions, from the religious “outsiders” (Salem witch trials), and the town hall meetings designating American public life, and the ethos of their self-understanding of political legitimacy.¹⁰⁶ Relating to the topic of the body, religion informs individuals and their communities, this type of idea assumes that some bodies are able to have control over other bodies, to say that their actions are ordained by their God. When a large group such as the Puritans who enforced their culture upon people when settling, decides they are able to move however they decide because it is holy, it creates the linkage between a sense of religiosity and power in national identity.

Bivins references John Winthrop, who wrote “A Model of Christian Charity ” in the seventeenth century. Winthrop provided the quintessential basis for linking religion and national identity, because he associated the Puritan escape from England to that of Moses and the Pharaoh. Their flight would be likened to a sacred plight that established their “providential God and a ‘New Israel’, his belief that this new country would serve as an example to the nations, a place privileged in the eyes of God, would preoccupy Americans well into the cold war.”¹⁰⁷ The Puritans set a precedent for what it meant to tie your belief in God to the national politics of one’s country, based on the idea of providence. This mindset still stands today, American exceptionalism prevents us from religious diversity and tolerance when Christianity dominates the political scene. An excerpt from Bivins explains the way that citizens can start to feel constricted by strict religious authority;

¹⁰⁵ BIVINS, JASON C. “RELIGION AND POLITICS.” In *The Columbia Guide to Religion in American History*, edited by Paul Harvey, Edward J. Blum, and Randall Stephens, 136–53. Columbia University Press, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/harv14020.10>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

“This institutionalization of righteousness demanded that government and education be guided by religious precepts. With religion “established” by the state, it was thought that not only civil magistrates but the citizenry as a whole should submit to the will of God. Yet despite the fact that religious authorities of the day generally insisted that only they knew the divine will, and despite efforts to condemn heretics (not simply those perceived to be “witches” but political heretics like the Baptist Roger Williams, who criticized the admixture of religion and government), there was religious pluralism of the sort that thrived as political and economic independence loosened the constraints of the Puritan theocracies beginning in the late seventeenth century.”¹⁰⁸

When religion is mixed with state authority, it is probable that the line between the sacred and profane is made stronger. Durkheim held the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane at the heart of religion. He was influential in his philosophies of religion being “an eminently social thing.” Brill discusses how religion is not a lie, and it is rooted in the reality of being human. “The word, religion, is our modern word for the very good reason that the sheer differentiations of functions and roles in modern life force us to distinguish between politics, labor, commerce, leisure, art, religion, etc...religion acquired its own distinct meaning when the forces of secularization became so dominant in western culture that religious belief and practice became distinctly human acts. For once secularity became fully evident in society it was possible to speak by contrast of the religious way of life.”¹⁰⁹ There can be no sole way of religious thinking or behaving when ritualistic expressions are woven in a society. He also said we cannot speak of a religion when mythology and ritual touch communal organization, family relations, hunting, building and planting, cooking and eating, play, language and art. Brill’s long list of attributes adds to how the sacred and the secular truly are involved in all areas of life. This is why it was such a big deal to be able to speak in such a way that contrasted the dominant view of religion, because at the time of Durkheim’s life the rhetoric was so dominating. The “domination” of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹

secularism, really created an irony, a space for diversity and religious tolerance to function in society. When there are secular spaces that are respected the same way religious ones are, society can be more cohesive.

Religion has the power to bring people together on the basis of shared values, practices and beliefs, but we have also seen the way religion can really separate people from their humanity. A person does not necessarily need to align with a religion in order to practice ethics and be involved in community, but those are indubitably aspects of religion. Maoz and Henderson discuss the idea of Religious homogeneity and heterogeneity. The dichotomy that exists represents how religious beliefs and practices are distributed within society. When societies are homogeneous, “religion is more likely to become a visible marker of national identity. Religious adherence may be viewed as a principal determinant of individual loyalty to the community.” They then go on to say how individuals are affected in their willingness to contribute to the “public good”, by defending or spreading the values of the dominant religion to the public.¹¹⁰ Due to the aspects of religion that involve morality, it gets complicated when mixed with politics, which is something like a secular moral system.

If you are someone that “believes” that political leaders should be dedicated to protecting the rights of citizens to food, water, shelter etc., then that will inform the way you perceive politics. We can construct a political system that protects religious freedom yet prevents the overstepping of boundaries into the secular spaces of society. When heterogeneous, “religion can be a powerful divisive force. Religious diversity creates loyalties to subgroups. There is potential friction among groups when religious loyalty supersedes other loyalties—even to the state.” The

¹¹⁰ Maoz, Zeev, and Errol A. Henderson. “Religion and World Politics: An Integrated Theoretical Perspective.” In *Scriptures, Shrines, Scapegoats, and World Politics: Religious Sources of Conflict and Cooperation in the Modern Era*, 62–114. University of Michigan Press, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11353856.6>.

prevalence of religious diversity highlights these tensions, which threatens society's ability to be cohesive, the state as a whole.¹¹¹ The authors describe this as "primordial sources of tension", and that leaders of states that are religiously diverse may overcome them by separating religious and political spheres in order to advocate religious freedom.¹¹² However, when policies are not created in order to repair the societal division, the "likelihood of political and social strife increases substantially."¹¹³ When displayed divisively, religion in politics historically has fueled conflicts, colonization, and discrimination, undermining the extensions of human freedom in society. In navigating this complex relationship, it must be ensured that both religion and politics contribute positively to the advancement of humanity, respecting diverse beliefs while upholding fundamental rights and liberties.

The Inclusion of All Bodies

The intersection of the body with politics is multifaceted and profound, touching upon issues of health, autonomy, and identity. Politics are a part of the secular, influencing the ways in which bodies are governed, regulated, and cared for within society. In a November 2011 issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, Farman references the issue in his research of the "secular body" and its "contingent ways in which a body is brought into a secular discursive arena, rather than being secular as such, since at any rate the secular is not an identity in itself but a relationship to religion, a relationship of negation and overcoming."¹¹⁴ In other words, the secular body is hard to define outside of the context of religion, and the healthcare crisis we see today could perhaps be a result of that. If everyone is created in God's image, then why don't some people have access to the same resources and care as others do? Policies related to healthcare, reproductive

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Farman, Abou. "Speculative matter: Secular bodies, minds, and persons." *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 4 (2013): 737-759.

rights, disability rights, and public health initiatives all directly impact individuals' bodies and well-being. Access to healthcare services, including preventative care, treatment, and medication, is often determined by political decisions regarding funding, insurance coverage, and healthcare infrastructure. Furthermore, political ideologies and agendas shape discussions around bodily autonomy and personal freedoms. Debates surrounding reproductive rights, such as abortion and contraception, highlight the tension between individual agency and state intervention in matters deeply personal to one's body. The Majority of our government is still white men as well, which says something about who politics is for. We cannot hold on to the same notions of power, that only white men can make the laws that directly disadvantaged minority groups such as women and people of color. The intersection with body politics and Religion highlights that bodies shouldnt be discriminated or held back from proper treatment rights, if “everyone was created in God’s image.” The narratives of Jesus healing people attests to the way that cleanliness is next to godliness, and everyone deserves to be clean and free of disease and sickness.

Identity politics as defined by John Protevi, pertains to the way that one’s experience is defined by oneself, and their bodily autonomy remains in possession of them. This plays a significant role in the political landscape, with marginalized groups advocating for recognition and rights based on their identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Protevi says, “we make our worlds by making sense of situations, but we do so only on the basis of the world in which we find ourselves.”¹¹⁵ The way the world introduces itself to us is ultimately how we come to define ourselves and our surroundings in our own terms. However, it is not that fair that some people are told that their natural attributes such as skin color, or their ability to control their

¹¹⁵ Protevi, John. “Bodies Politic.” In *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic*, NED-New edition., 7:33–58. University of Minnesota Press, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttswhd.6>.

own body is detested politically. Policies addressing discrimination, hate crimes, and access to resources are central to shaping the lived experiences of individuals within their own bodies.

Complications arise when the sacred is inserted into spaces where it is inappropriate and/or nonsensical. The January 6th insurrection of the capitol building in 2021 is a very recent and intense example of the way Christian nationalism blurs the lines between religious freedom, and the human right of autonomy. This protest could have been a secular one, but the people scaling the walls and raiding the building were loudly outspoken with God-talk. With a message delivered via the internet by President Trump, citizens that were majority Evangelical Christian were provoked to storm the capitol in protest of the recent election results. President Trump had publicly claimed that there was electoral fraud being committed against him. The people had stormed the capitol all while dressing themselves in the American flag, praising God, and doing what they thought was their version of the American revolution. The body has a place in how “social meanings” are produced, and also exist as the “subject and object of power relations.”¹¹⁶ The way they displayed their bodies expressed something to the general public about who they were and what they believed in. Using the religious rhetoric they wanted to convey a message that they thought was inherently “American.” Studying religion in relation to the body has importance in our own self-experiences and our experiences of others. There was an intent for violence to be enacted on politicians, and the event lives on as an example of the American turmoil. How can we be expected to be united with one another when a large quantity of the population aligns this behavior with religion? Are we expected to accept that as a display of religious belief? Political division affects our experiences of each other, in a way where it can be

¹¹⁶ McGuire, Meredith B. “Religion and the Body: Rematerializing the Human Body in the Social Sciences of Religion.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 3 (1990): 283–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386459>.

hard to feel empathy or understanding for political beliefs that differ from our own. Are inclusive public spaces attainable?

Riot vs. Protest

Americans have a constitutional right to assembly, to protest when injustice is happening. During the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, citizens were met with brutal violence from the police forces who are supposed to be “protecting” them. There was a divide present of how this movement in society was perceived, (especially in comparison to the insurrection), and it was a time of civil unrest and tension. I experienced the protests as they happened in New York City, and I remember seeing how negatively people viewed the BLM protests, when the civilians were not hurting anybody. These protests were about the imminent horror that is police brutality, and systemic racisms. There is an interesting comparison to be made with the authentication of protests when they are supported by the elite. Such as the insurrection, the narrative to “Make America Great Again”, was used and involved religion as a way to authorize violent protest. The BLM protests were fighting real life evils, the insurrection was plain entitlement. There was no violence enacted on the capitol stormers, but BLM protesters were met with heavy violence from the police; rubber bullets, teargas, assault, and more. Such cannot be compared to a media spectacle frenzy by the former president, directing his supporters to disrupt the public sphere.

The sacred and the secular mixing in this way puts the body in a trivial position, in between the connection to God and the act of taking political strategy. If the body is in a space where religious rhetoric and the word “God” or “Jesus” is being thrown around, the people at the insurrection more likely than not could have viewed their fight to storm the capitol as one that they did religiously. Could the insurrection be seen as a sacred space then? Certainly not, but it could be considered one to them. It is interesting to delve into how Trump supporters likened

their agenda in the capitol to that of a spiritual mission. Donald Trump has been made by his supporters into a messiah figure, especially with his slogan to return America to greatness it once had, or in other words lead the people to the promised land. Bond is talking about the Presidential “Eschatological rhetoric, specifically with regard to Christian interpretations, uses religious stories, allegories, figures, and themes to construct a picture of what the world will look like when Christ returns and ushers in the apocalypse.”¹¹⁷ This is how Donald Trumps’ garnering support of the Evangelical communities in America enabled him to sway such a large mass of people into crusading for him.

People use religion to justify all kinds of hatred, fights, and division. However, religion has a profound power to bring people together toward a common goal. This can manifest in distorted ways such as insurrection. This event proved how much control Trump had over his supporters, that they immediately listened to his encouragement to fight for him, and not even something that would benefit themselves. They too, expressed the idea of putting their bodies on the line, but these people were majority white, and nothing really happened to them. Again, these people were not stigmatized, arrested, or met with guns and gas. They were left alone pretty much to do as they pleased, destroying property and entering the space with the intention to kidnap congress members. They were not arrested right away or shot at, though they had bombs, guns and other weapons strapped onto them and ready to use.

The irony that the protestors who actually intended and went through with using violence, were somehow respected and even praised. It was even taken as a joke and turned into a laughing fest on the internet. The BLM protests weren’t taken seriously as well, but in the way that they became demeaningly labeled as riots, takes a racist undertone against people fighting true

¹¹⁷ Bond, Bayleigh Elaine, and Ryan Neville-Shepard. "The rise of presidential eschatology: Conspiracy theories, religion, and the January 6th insurrection." *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 5 (2023): 681-696.

injustice. Racist people would try to reverse the fight for black justice by saying things like “All Lives Matter”, or the police-supporting phrase “Blue Lives Matter.” There was no combative language used against the insurrection the same way that police brutality was being glossed over, its existence ignored by the public. When the state possesses too much power, our citizens are very much threatened, because they are even able to come up with ways to authorize religion, our connection to the divine. Bond discusses “Congresswoman Jackie Speier of California...who nearly died in Guyana in 1978 during a Congressional investigation of the Peoples Temple, declared, ‘Jim Jones was a religious cult leader, Donald Trump is a political cult leader.’ She warned, “We have got to be wary of anyone who can have such control over people that they lose their ability to think independently”¹¹⁸ Speier's first hand testimony adds to the point of the dangers of how one body can assume direction and control of large body masses. When people lose control over their own bodies they are put in danger, and unfairly tossed into the line of fire for someone else’s agenda or beliefs. People want to believe that they are doing good in the world, for themselves and for others. But people can be swayed into abandoning their humanity. Secular spaces in society are necessary because it adds a dynamic layer to how we experience community outside of a religious setting. It also means that there can be a recognition of how notions of religious dedication are used to manipulate civilians. Trump’s political slogan; “Make America Great Again”, contradicts the idea of societal mobility and evolution. We have made immense progress in society so far– but there is still more to be done. We were never meant to regress, only to progress.

In essence, the body is deeply entwined with politics, especially when it comes to the idea of a divine power. A divine power can have the ability to be involved in the authorization of

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

bodily policy such as the heavy policing on abortion. We cannot liken the attributes of a divine presence to a political leader, because when injustices are happening it cannot be seen as sanctioned by religion. The affirmation of a particular God's power and presence that dominates society is unfair and takes us away from enjoying inclusivity in secular spaces, the public sphere. The divine power comes from above, and “is expressed not simply as the desire to rule, but more insidiously as the longing for the strong leader to rescue us from the chaos into which our bodies politic have descended.”¹¹⁹ Political systems shape the ways in which individuals experience and navigate their physical existence within society, and therefore affect people’s choice of a leader that they think will help bring about their ideal society.

Activity and Change as Religion

In conclusion, the body is an intercepting unit for communication with the sacred. The body interacts with spirituality, arts, and politics—three subjects that go hand and hand when it comes to sacred and secular spaces. What also ties the three together is the attempt by the powers that be to regulate and control our ideas of what is sacred, what is art, and what is just. Our bodies need to be considered much more when it comes to spiritual endeavors. The emphasis on the mind as separate from the body takes away from all that we are. We are not just individual bodies who exist and think, our bodies help us relate to one another, our bodies make a collective. We use our bodies to show love, to communicate with one another. We use our bodies to fight and to make change. Our bodies create and do art that moves one another. The most vital aspects of life cannot be done without the body, so in the study of religion we need to be focused on maintaining the body as an aspect of our cultural, and socio-political landscapes.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 50.

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