

RELIGION, PSYCHOLOGY & THE HUMAN BODY— A SPELLBINDING UNION

Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality

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From the earliest days of our doctoral research in the psychology of religion during the 1960's, three overriding questions leapt out at us: (1) *“What is the body's unique role within the unfolding process of our spiritual development?”* (2) *“Can science and the Christian religion somehow come together, creating a more effective pedagogy within which our steps into human wholeness and the body-feel of grace become one, unifying, organic process?”* And, finally, (3) *“How can we integrate two, uniquely different ways of human knowing—body-awareness and cognitive-thinking—which both need better balancing together if we are to experience ourselves as distinct living cells within some Larger Body or Greater Living Whole within which, as St. Luke wrote in the Acts of the Apostles, “... we live and move and have our very existence.” (Acts:17:27-28)*

Our first significant clues to the psychological underpinnings behind such questions came from personal contacts with American psychologists, Carl Rogers, Ph.D. and one of his early graduate students at the University of Chicago, Eugene T. Gendlin, Ph.D.—who also brought with him a well-developed background in philosophy. Rogers' work on the development of *congruence (or wholeness)* within the person and Gendlin's observations about how personal-ity change unfolds within each individual's inner *experiencing process* had laid a fresh groundwork for us when introducing the body's knowing into spiritual development. Each of the above-mentioned men had identified significant pieces of a *body-component* as well as a *body-process* which, when brought into the sphere of religion and spirituality, opened the possibility of an entirely new pedagogy for recognizing healthy human growth AS spiritual development.

Meaning is not only thought in your mind, it is *felt in your body* as well. What can this under-explored body-dimension offer to Christian spiritual experience? Beyond the dogmas, doc-

trines and teachings familiar to most Christians, where and how does the human organism itself fit in? What is its *function*? Can it possibly be that the body's role in spiritual development might eventually hold a common key for unveiling a species-wide language, some more fundamental dialect capable of bringing diverse religions and spiritual communions together beyond all their historical differences, interpretations and poisoned histories?

Within the passing of each generation, serious seekers recognize that the human body itself gives voice to its own expression of felt-meaning, thereby challenging every traditional religious pedagogy with an uncertain future unless it can effectively learn creative ways for integrating this more inclusive body-knowing and potential for body-learning into all our relationships and educational efforts. When spiritual communities struggle to be healthy, yet still fail to recognize and integrate a maturing awareness of the body's essential role in spiritual development, sensitive believers feel something critical missing from their experience of religion.

The psychologist, Abraham Maslow, suggested a tantalizing course of action:

A whole school of psychologists now believe that “spiritual values” are in the organism, so much a part of the well-functioning organism as to be *sine qua non* “defining characteristics” of it.⁽¹⁾

Searching for spirit *within* matter—within the body? Preposterous? Or, could this possibly portray a more nuanced rediscovering of *the interactions* between matter and spirit as offering a profound opening into what it really means as a Christian to be human.

Throughout our studies within religion we have found that researchers nearly always seem to be looking for and analyzing *contents*—*body-soul, spirit-matter, flesh-mind*—rather than turning their full, focused attention toward the *transforming relationships or interactions* which provide a far more fruitful point of entry into the subject matter which both science and religion attempt to penetrate.

Our mental efforts easily become preoccupied with feverishly gathering bits and pieces or *parts-outside-of-parts*, as a way of identifying the essential ingredients which make up reality. However, the growing transformational shift from focusing attention almost exclusively upon *the contents* of experience and entering into a more serious examination of data *within process-interactions themselves* has finally forced us to embark upon a whole new paradigm shift. Copernicus and Galileo unleashed a similar revolution when weaning us away from our

orderly, geocentric universe and plunging us willy-nilly into an obscure star system at the outer edges of a run-of-the-mill galaxy lost amongst countless billions of other galaxies—now no longer the center of everything. By rearranging our stellar and planetary *relationships*, everything came to be seen in a totally new light—a transformation that soon would sink even deeper into an exploration of *the inner universe* we now recognize existing *within ourselves*.

After decades of research, our experience indicates that many Christians now find themselves in the midst of rediscovering their faith's essential link to the human body, and that this opens an entirely new way of relating to what their body knows. This is why we have written, *Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality*. Within the workbook we companion our readers into a transformative shift in awareness, introducing an unexpected and largely unexplored cosmos right inside the human organism itself.

Joseph Campbell invited his readers to enter this deeper world of felt-meaning within their body's knowing by saying:

“Let me begin by explaining the history of my impulse to place metaphor at the center of our exploration of Western spirituality.⁽²⁾”

Metaphors aim not at our *mind-thinking* but at our less cluttered and more available *body-knowing*—otherwise they cannot get through to us. Metaphor pulls us into the body's world of *felt-meaning*, symbols interacting with a *felt-sense* which then enables us to cross boundaries that would otherwise be closed to us. Joseph Campbell recognized the metaphoric role of religion within cultures and societies. But in order to appreciate the validity of his insightful comments, one first needs to learn the language of how our bodies grasp *felt-meaning*, even long before we can begin thinking clear and formulated thoughts about it in our minds.

Metaphors introduce us into the world of our own bodies, “... as they are felt from inside.” They help sharpen our awareness of being integral cells or even better—*membranes* within something greater than ourselves.

More than at any other time in human history, religion and science now find themselves challenged to join forces, uniting in a common service to support human growth as spiritual development. Today, the question, “What does it mean to be human?,” clearly demands a maturing sense of *environmentalism* within our modern everyday awareness. Each and every one, we all *go-together-with/in* something greater than ourselves. Environmentalism, in our

time, lies within the bodies' felt-sense of our relationship to the air we breathe. While the mind has difficulty absorbing this as information, our bodies immediately grasp the felt-meanings and felt-connections which arise from inside our interacting experiences—if we can only learn more effectively how to notice, nurture and listen deeper into what our own bodies are trying to tell us!

For Christians, our new workbook provides step-by-step body-learnings and body-exercises aimed at the human organism itself, "... as it is felt from inside." Finally, the methodologies of science and religion can meet and work together for the common good of humankind as well as the ongoing development of a Christian exploration into God! The workbook brings these two worlds together, highlighting our body's physical role in spiritual experience and human growth as well as scientific development.

Just as the human body and not our analyzing mind provides the experience of motion, so too this same body offers an experiential key for physically discovering ourselves as membranes within some Greater Body. In a prayer attributed to Theresa of Avila, the 16th century Christian mystic, she told her sisters, "Christ has no body now but yours." Perhaps with a profound sense for the future of Christian evolution, Sir John M. Templeton centuries later prophetically reminded us that:

The greater part of divine revelation, both scientific and spiritual, may still be ahead of us, not behind us.⁽³⁾

Notes:

(1) Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964) pg. xiv.

(2) Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That—Transforming Religious Metaphor*, Edited with a Foreword by Eugene Kennedy, Ph.D., Joseph Campbell Foundation, Novato, C: New World Library, 2001) p.1.

(3) Sir John M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach—Scientists Discover God*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981) p.12.