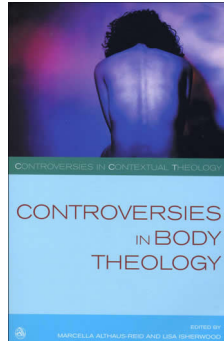


# ○ REVIEW OF MARCELLA ALTHAUS-REID & LISA ISHERWOOD (EDS), *CONTROVERSIES IN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY*

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*Gillian Townsley, Otago University*



A month ago I tried on a pair of brand new jeans. My old pair had become very scruffy and it was time to be brave and look for a new pair. I told the helpful (young) assistant my size and she gave me a pair of nice (expensive) jeans to try on. They did not fit. I could not even get them done up! She graciously brought me several other sizes to try on, and I discovered – much to my dismay – that I am now two sizes larger than I thought I was. In fact, I realised I am not *who* or *what* I thought I was. I left the shop feeling quite depressed – fat and flabby and no longer *myself*. And yet I would call myself a committed feminist. I ought to feel okay about my body/myself; I've read the books, from Naomi Woolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991) to Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and even the classic, *Our Bodies Ourselves* (1973)! But what my mind tried to tell me was no match for how my heart/gut reacted to what my eyes saw in the mirror.

Throw into the mix the diverse ecclesiastical and theological voices one hears in one's head and the situation gets even more complex; while the body is merely temporary and not to be valued too highly (Matt 6.25ff; 1 Cor 15.42ff; 1 Tim 9-10 etc.), it is also the temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of Christ, and a site of God's glorification and incarnation (John 1.14; 1 Cor 6.12-20; Eph 3.17 etc.). For women, however, things are more challenging still. For example, if they are to take the words of Paul as conveying theological truth, then they have to contend with *not* being the glory and image of God, like men, but only the glory of man (1 Cor 11.7); their own glory is their 'naturally' long hair (p. 11; p. 13). For some, this then justifies a focus on 'the body beautiful' as a 'natural' expression of a woman's glory. And yet, as the rest of the passage in 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 implies, a woman ought to cover her 'glory.' No wonder I feel confused when I look in the mirror! Although, clearly my personal body image issues are minimal when compared with other women who suffer from anorexia nervosa or engage in self-harming behaviours such as cutting. Nevertheless, perhaps there is a connection here between a whole range of behaviours – from domestic violence, rape, and genital mutilation, through to cosmetic

surgery, dieting, and body building – that indicate the varied ways in which women’s bodies are sites of construction, be that deconstruction, reconstruction, or – far too often – destruction.

In the Introduction to *Controversies in Body Theology*, the editors remind us that lying behind this construction of women is the ‘insidious and deadly weapon of dualism’ that is deeply imbedded in Western/Christian culture and which ‘sustains patriarchal ideologies’ (p. 2). Women have found themselves on the negative side of this Aristotelian body/mind, or body/spirit divide, being equated with the body, ‘nature,’ chaos, permeability, multiplicity, and the negative moral positioning of these categories as bad, dark, and sinful. Men, by contrast tend to be associated in this dualistic framework with the mind, spirit, stability, impenetrability, one-ness, and the positive moral positioning of these categories as good, light, and godly. Althaus-Reid and Isherwood argue that, ‘the cut, mutilated, battered, drugged and cosmetically altered bodies of women are a reality and Christianity has never been neutral in this carnage’ (p. 1). They point out that Christian culture slices the bodies of women ‘through acts of theological dismemberment’ (p. 2) and suggest that the challenge Body Theology puts to traditional systematic theology is to reconsider how we are to understand the human person and thus ‘overcome the dualism that carries with it a large dose of negativity about the way in which we express our humanness through our flesh’ (p. 3).

The articles in this book therefore all address issues concerning the various ‘cuttings and bruising of women’s bodies’ and do so with the stated aim of seeking ‘to keep faith with the flesh because even when it is getting sliced or slicing itself we believe that profound truths are being revealed about what it is to be human, the pain and pleasure of this divine/human reality in which we all dance and at times scream our becoming’ (p. 3). Incidentally, the *Controversies in Contextual Theology* series to which this book belongs aims to highlight and examine the various divisions and differences within a particular area of contextual theology, usefully highlighting the reality that these are not homogenous disciplines in terms of both content and method. Each book in this series, then, is a forum where the divisive issues are openly addressed although reconciliation is not guaranteed.<sup>1</sup> Curiously, however, for this particular book in the series, Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (who are also the series editors) state that while the issues raised in the various articles may be controversial in themselves, as these issues have not been raised in any sustained theological enquiry before, ‘we have then hardly had time to develop controversies’ (p. 3). I did wonder then at the value of including this collection of essays in this particular series – why not simply publish a book that stands on its own, as they did with *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics* (2004)? If there are no controversies within this field as yet (which seems hard to believe), and it is rather the issues themselves that are controversial, then I would suggest that this confuses the purpose (and diminishes the value) of the series. Perhaps a good option would have been to at least include some responses to some of the articles by some of the other authors. For example, it would be interesting to know how Isherwood, who writes about the (predominantly) American Protestant ‘Slim for Him’ dieting programmes, would respond to the (also predominantly American) issue of female body-building which Paul Reid-Bowen explores, and vice-versa; while Isherwood notes (correctly) that, ‘[i]t is difficult for women to be fully embodied under patriarchy’ (176), Reid-Bowen notes that body-building allows for ‘a powerful modern embodiment of the female’ (223). Such interaction between the authors in this book would have (if you will excuse the pun) put flesh on the bones of the editors’ statement, that ‘This volume

highlights some of the important current themes in the *discussion* of a body theology pertinent for the twenty-first century. It is our hope that with this book, a new *dialogue* will be developed on some of the hard issues of women's bodies ...' [emphasis added] (pp. 5–6). This discussion and dialogue would have been good to see in the book itself; without it, the issues covered appear more diverse (disjointed? disembodied?) than they really are.

It is probably relevant at this point to note another quibble I have with this book. Perhaps it is just that my jeans are too tight and are thus making me irritable, but I do find myself getting impatient when a book seems alert to political, ideological, and economic issues concerning 'women,' states for example that it is concerned with the 'harsher realities of the body and the way in which it manifests and reacts in the *world* and most importantly to the *world*' [emphasis added] (p. 3), and yet only one of its nine contributors is *not* from the UK. Even the many issues covered, as diverse as they may be, still have a distinctly Northern hemisphere focus; from Barbie dolls, Fay Weldon novels, and 'Jesus is the Weigh' diet programmes, to the Holocaust/Shoah, and the Marquis de Sade. Yet here in the Pacific where I live, for example, the third Women Scholars of Religion and Theology conference held in Melbourne in January 2004 explored issues of Body Theology (as well as other topics such as eco-theology),<sup>2</sup> and so it is a little disappointing not to see some contributions to this book from further around the globe. The one non-UK contributor, Martín Hugo Córdova Quero (whose name is spelt two different ways in the book), an Argentinean working in Hawaii, does actually mention Maori and Pacific Island tattooing practices (in a footnote), but the main focus of his article is the French film *Ma Vie en Rose* (pp. 80–128).

These quibbles aside, I found this book a fascinating read. Each author has tackled an issue that fits (comfortably?) with the full title of the Introduction: Slicing Women's Bodies: Christianity and the Cut, Mutilated and Cosmetically Altered Believers.<sup>3</sup> Beverley Clack takes us on a terrifying (yet also titillating) psychoanalytic tour through the Marquis de Sade's depictions of the torture and murder of mothers; as she concludes, 'To read Sade is to journey into some of the deepest and darkest recesses of our own psychosexual development ... In confronting Sade, we confront ourselves' (p. 25; p. 26). Inga Bryden considers the 'otherness' of women's bodies and their relation to the space they occupy in light of two novels; Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She Devil* (1983) and Jenefer Shute's *Life-Size* (1992). Given that the topic of the latter book is anorexia, I hesitate to say this, but this article is a bit like a smorgasbord – from Barbie, Ophelia, and Snow White, to Bahtkin, Lacan, and Barthes; from catwalk modelling and fashion collections, to needles and hospital beds, it's all (delectably) dished up. Elizabeth Baxter then invites us into the world of those who self-harm, and gently explores the imagery of 'witnessing' as a way of making connections between 'cutting' behaviours and rites of passage involving bloodshed found in various cultures, including the wounding of Christ/Christa on the cross. Marcella Althaus-Reid considers the influence of Christianity on women's gender identity by reflecting upon the transgenderism of saints such as Pelagia from a Queer theological perspective; she suggests that the incarnation is 'a classical fetishist act' and that there is thus 'a certain mutilative characteristic in Christian hermeneutics' which limits and prunes women's bodies (p. 73). We have already noted Quero's article with its focus on the movie *Ma Vie en Rose*. His discussion centres on the experiences of transgender and intersex people as they intersect with the doctrine of the incarnation, and explores how theology has intertwined this doctrine with 'body fascist ideologies

coming from a hetero-patriarchal system of domination' (p. 84). In probably my least favourite chapter, Victoria Rollins argues that the worldwide 'everyday' genocide of women – through domestic violence, rape, 'honour' killings, stonings, female infanticide, pornographic practices, etc. – parallels the enormity of the evil known as the Shoah. While I thought the connection was a brave and quite possibly correct one to make, it was the style of writing that I found irksome. I am not sure if this was because the article is drawn from a longer piece of work and was perhaps badly edited in the process, but the poor grammar and sentence structuring were a distraction from the important content. Janet Wootton's article on women and violence in the Hebrew Scriptures tackles some of the 'texts of terror' that Phyllis Trible brought to our attention back in 1984 – a book I expected to see in Wootton's bibliography but one which was surprisingly absent. Isherwood then asks us if we will 'Slim for Him or Bake Cakes for the Queen of Heaven', as mentioned above, providing a fascinating and disturbing exposé of the billion-dollar evangelical Christian dieting industry in the USA. And finally, as also mentioned above, Paul Reid-Bowen takes us into the 'schizophrenic' world of female bodybuilding (p. 215). He critiques this (also billion-dollar) industry/sport, noting how the question of what is 'natural' is visibly on display, particularly with regard to women, who are judged on the same basis as men but with the added criterion of 'femininity'. However, he also suggests that women's bodybuilding can be viewed as 'feminist activism', given its ability to empower women (p. 218). Indeed, my decision to start going to the gym (the pool/the yoga studio) in order to tone this flabby body of mine not only makes me feel more in control of myself (raising issues about that oft-denigrated notion of self-mastery), but is also a healthy choice applauded by my doctor/physio/osteopath. Being able to fit into my new pair of jeans is a bonus really!

Ultimately, this collection of essays alerts us to the many complex issues that Body Theology addresses and is thus worth reading. There are many points that could be explored further, but as the editors state, this book is simply one part of a much-needed conversation that will hopefully continue into the next decade of the twenty-first century.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The two books in the series so far are *Controversies in Political Theology* (2007) and *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (2007), the latter is also co-edited by Althaus-Reid & Isherwood.
- <sup>2</sup> See Elaine Wainwright, 'SeaChanges Land and Living and Loving: Women Scholars of Religion and Theology over 10 Years', *SeaChanges* 4 (Dec 2004), 1, 6.
- <sup>3</sup> In many ways it's a pity the book itself was not given this title, as it is quite provocative. However, all the books in this Controversies in Contextual Theology Series are simply named as *Controversies in...*