The body as strategy of power in religious discourse

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ABSTRACT
The objective of this article is to consider the body as a means through which access may be gained into a better understanding of a culture and the processes involved in the formation and changes within cultures. Owing to the rhetoricity of the body, the body may function as an agent of change. This point of departure is illustrated by examples from early Christianity and from the official journal of the Dutch Reformed Church during 1991-1995.

1 INTRODUCTION
Despite the central value of the body for the understanding of religious discourse, studies on the body and bodily experiences have not always been seen as seriously assisting the process of cultural understanding. Religions are primarily seen as systems of thought, abstract in nature and transcendental to the joys and woes of human beings. This is, of course, not true of a variety of religions in which the body occupies a central role. However, the understanding of these discourses has to a large extent excluded the role of the body in our understanding.

The scene is changing; gradually the insight is developing that the body lies at the centre of cultures and its study has become of special concern to the scholar of religion since it functions so powerfully in the formation of religious systems (cf Sullivan 1990a). As a matter of fact, instead of approaching the interaction of body and religion from the way in which the body is incorporated within a religious system and simply forms part of the system, it is perhaps more viable and fruitful to understand religious practices as constituted by the body and its interaction with its realities. It would therefore be possible to understand, for example, cosmologies as extensions of views upon the body (cf Williams 1989:141), or social change from the body as agent of change (Cameron 1995:147; 156-158), or cultural contradictions from the body as source of conflict (Eilberg-Schwartz 1997:34).

Various reasons can be provided for the interest in the body as epistemic source, such as the insistence of postmodernism on a more holistic approach to our acquisition of knowledge, and the persistent insistence of gender studies, specifically from the perspective of feminism and the influence of...
philosophers such as Michel Foucault. Whatever, the reasons may be, the study of rhetoric should also be included, since this field of study emphasises the role of the ‘person’ in strategies of persuasion. From the notion of ‘person’ to the ‘body’ is but a short distance, since ‘person’ expresses nothing but the sociality or relationality of the body. Therefore, although not always consciously cultivated, the interest in the notion of ‘person’ or the emphasis on the enhumanisation of discourses inevitably contributed to the emergence of the ‘body’ as a source of knowledge.

Although Greco-Roman philosophy, specifically that of Plato, is usually accused of causing the dichotomy between body and mind and the consequent devaluation of the body, Martin (1995) convincingly indicates that the dichotomy found in Greco-Roman philosophy should rather be seen as a projection of Cartesian philosophy. Descartes, torn between his loyalty to the church on the one hand and his loyalty to scientific thought on the other, opened a possibility for nature to be scientifically studied, without posing a threat to the divine and the revelation of Scripture. Martin (1995:4) writes: ‘We might excusably exaggerate a bit and say that Descartes invented the category of “nature” as a closed, self-contained system, over against which he could oppose mind, soul, the spiritual, the psychological, and the divine’.

Actually this is by no means an ‘exaggeration’, since Descartes’ ontology consists of a very rigid dichotomy between mind and body. These are two distinct substances that have nothing in common, besides the fact that both can be seen as substances. However, neither the essentiality of their substances, nor their nature, properties or modifications are the same (Nadler 1995:130). In the relationship between mind and body, the mind undoubtedly dominates. Certainty can be achieved only when a person thinks; ‘for perhaps it would even happen, if I should wholly cease to think, that I should at the same time altogether cease to be’ (:88). Hence the well-known ‘I think, therefore I am’. Certainty, or to put it differently, the acquisition of knowledge, can therefore not be obtained through the body or bodily activities, but purely and only through the processes of the mind.

Clark (1995:41) writes: ‘...Platonism is often blamed for negative Christian attitudes to the body.... But these attitudes were not shared by Platonists. Plato does seem to have distrusted, or feared, the needs of the body, and he does seem to be responsible for the discourse of body as opposed to spirit. But late Platonist philosophers did not see any need to torment their bodies or to seek out suffering’. The negative attitude towards the body that characterised so much of Western philosophical and religious systems, is often assigned to Greco-Roman philosophy (cf also Stroumsa 1990). Perhaps the situation is more complex (cf Vorster 1997:454). Clark attempts to locate the origins of the negative attitude towards the body as it manifested itself within Christian asceticism and concludes that this was a ‘radical break’ (:43) and should not simply be seen as a specific point in philosophical development.
Descartes' insistence on the 'mind' underlies the kind of objectivistic philosophy which has for centuries dominated the discursive practices, both in society and the academy. Knowledge and meaning are not obtained through bodily processes, or from the interaction of the body with reality, but rather from the mental representations of an independent, objective, reality. 'Concepts are...general mental representations (Kant) or logical entities (Frege)—in either case, highly abstract and well-defined—that can be used to identify what things or objects there are, what properties they have, and what relations they can stand in' (Johnson 1987:xxii). The rationality resulting from objectivism is consequently disembodied and dehumanised.2

One of the main problems of objectivistic thought is the role of language. Language is seen as the vehicle of information. It is a system of symbols representing reality. From the correspondence between an objective reality and this set of symbols, meaning derives. The closer the correspondence of the symbol to reality, the more objective the knowledge acquired. For that very reason, language has to be neutralised, and formalised as far as possible. Human emotions, imagination, literary techniques such as metaphor and metonymy have to be excluded, since they could contribute to the contamination of our knowledge.

Objectivistic rationality has also pervaded reflection on religiosity and religious discourses. Religious discourses are seen as cognitive or conceptual systems. This can clearly be seen within the Christian tradition in the frequent use of the suffix '-logy', as in 'theology', 'christology', 'pneumatology'. The departure from this rigoristic 'logical scheme' does not necessarily safeguard against objectivistic thought, as can be seen in the case where religions are seen as reflections of a certain 'mentality'. According to this view, what people thought or think, constitutes religious discourse, thereby still ousting the body’s activity from the religious sphere.

In this paper I will argue that, although often ignored in our reflection on religious discourses, the body plays a constitutive part in the creation and maintenance of those discourses. Not only does the body provide us with an

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2 Objectivism should be located within a wider context. In a very interesting manner Leder (1990:3) indicates how the lifestyle of a Western society actually promotes "decorporealised" existence'. He writes: 'Our shelters protect us from direct corporeal engagement with the outer world, our relative prosperity alleviating, for many of us, immediate physical need and distress. Via machines we are disinvested of work that that once belonged to the muscles. Technologies of rapid communication and transportation allow us to transcend what used to be the natural limits imposed by the body. Operations are mediated by the written word or the computer calculation, where once a living human presence was required'. It stands to reason that a rationality, such as objectivism, would find fertile breeding ground in such a context.
insight into cultures, but it also functions as a powerful instrument in the maintenance, change and construction of social reality. If we agree to the embodiment of language, that is, that the bodily experience of our interaction with reality concretises in language, or is linguistically expressed, and if we agree to the interactional role of language, the body occupies a central position as a persuasive strategy.

Since we are dealing with the interaction between the body and religious discourse as one of the discursive practices of society, we first need to consider the relationship between language, power and the body. In this section I will indicate that there is a kind of paradoxical relationship between language and the body, because the body is to a certain extent formed, even 'created' by language. Discourse can be embodied and its embodiment can function as axiomatic in a society. Hence the influence of discursive practices on the body. On the other hand language can also be seen as necessitated by bodily experiences, desires, and the need to cope with its environment. Linguistic entities, often seen as formal characteristics of language, can therefore be directly related to the body itself.

The following two sections will be concerned with the way in which the body is put into discourses within the same religious tradition, namely Christianity. The first of these two sections will deal with early Christianity, whereas the latter will be concerned with a religious discourse far removed in space, time and mentality, yet claiming to be within the same tradition. This tradition is that of the Dutch Reformed Church as reflected within one of its official journals, called the Kerkbode. The objective is neither to indicate, nor to promote a unity between bodily discourses of early Christianity and the Dutch Reformed Church. On the contrary, the objectives are to disclose the diversity, to disclaim the claim on continuity, to emphasise the necessity of diversity and finally to illustrate the contingency of embodied language. The choice to focus on both an ancient and a contemporary religious tradition, is furthermore motivated by the desire to indicate how embodied language may help us in understanding diverse cultures. In both sections I hope to indicate how the body as strategy of power functions in a changing cultural situation.

Methodologically, various objections can be made against the kind of enterprise I am undertaking. It could be asked why the Dutch Reformed Church has been selected, whether Die Kerkbode is in fact representative of what happens within the church; it could be asked whether both traditions are not so diverse and discourses about the body so contingent that there is really no point in bringing these traditions together. However, in modern religious discourses about the body, Christianity in most of its modern manifestations harks back at least to the canonical writings of early Christianity. Not only do various denominations incarcerate the bodies of their members in language produced for the organism, but they also assume the right to extend this kind of body-incarcerating language to society at large, usually using the prescriptions of early Christianity as supporting evidence. This at least legitimates that ancient
2 THE DIALECTIC OR INTERACTION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND THE BODY

I want to argue that the body functions as a strategy of power because of the interaction between the body and discourse. Owing to the ability of human beings to symbolise, the body acquires rhetoricity and it is this rhetoricity, this dialectic between body and language, that furnishes the body with its political power.

From the moment of the body’s birth, the body exists within the discursive practices of a society. The birth of a body activates society’s processes of symbolisation, firmly entrenching the body in the discursive practices of the society. The symbolisation or languaging of the body does not only restrict itself to the birth, but as the body develops, every bodily activity and every phase of the body in its growth, is symbolised. The enlanguaging of the body means that the body is drawn into what Burke (1966) called, the ‘context of situation’. The ‘context’ of the context of situation, refers to those discursive practices that a society regards as non-negotiable; it refers to that network of meanings that function as ‘factual’ or ‘objective’ to a society. By the notion of context of situation an attempt is made to give expression to the reality forming power of language. According to Burke these contexts have been created linguistically and their power is such that ‘things’ can become the ‘signs’ for words. These discursive practices do not simply represent, they form the basis for perception and their power lies in the objective impression that is created. As such they form the conditions for the sensory organisation of meaning. Consequently, when the body is drawn into discourse, or when the body is symbolised, the body as a sensory centre is organised to such an extent within the networks of meaning, that each sensorial experience and every bodily activity acquires meaning. Tribby (1992: 140) writes: ‘Bodies, objects, comportments...do not “have” meanings, they acquire them, and those meanings are contested in social space and social time’.  

We should however also see the interaction between body and its contexts in a reverse manner; it is indeed interaction. Although the body is, on the one hand put into discourse, the discursive practices of a community, on the other hand are also drawn into the body. Leder (1990:30) writes of the ‘incorporation’ of the body. Through the use of the term ‘incorporation’ he refers to the manner in which the body embodies its own history. The body,

and modern, albeit in wide sweeping strokes, be compared.

4 Cf also Gager’s (1982:346–348) discussion of Mary Douglas’ studies on body symbolism.
according to Leder, should not simply be seen as a static entity, but rather as a living process (30). However, as a living process it collects in itself its own history. Leder (1990:1) introduces his book with the claim: 'Human experience is incarnated'. But if we argue that human experience is also constituted by the discursive practices of a community, the implication is that the discursive practices of the community are embodied, or incorporated in the development of the body.

This can, for example, be seen in the acquisition of a skill. The consistent subjection of bodily parts in the execution of movements needed for a specific skill, provides the body with the possibility or ability to perform in an almost mechanical and automatic manner. Leder (31) formulates: 'A skill is finally and fully learned when something that once was extrinsic, grasped only through explicit rules or examples, now comes to pervade my own corporeality'.

The acquisition of a society's networks of meaning pervades the body in a similar manner. From its birth, the body is consistently subjected to the networks of meaning functioning within a community. As the body develops and grows within a community the persistent necessity of adhering to the discursive practices of a community gradually results in its incorporation. Culture inscribes itself not only on our bodies but also into our bodies, to such an extent that it becomes to us a matter of nature, of what is natural, of what is objective. Although death is sometimes experienced as liberating, the end of the body does not mean an end to the invasion of cultural networks of meaning. On the contrary, it is exactly these cultural networks of meaning that carry the deceased body further. As a matter of fact, it is at the moment of the body's end that the persistence of the parasitic public common sense manifests itself in the clearest possible fashion. For a community to retain its communal solidarity, to maintain and perpetuate those processes of symbolisation that ensure its communal bond and enable it to cope with its realities, a community needs bodies. Just as a parasite feeds upon a host, a community feeds upon the body for its continued existence. 5 The end of the

5 A brutal, but appropriate example, would be those earlier societies in which human sacrifice was exercised. Duverger (1989) indicates how various types of human sacrifice functioned to energise the Aztecs. Operating from the assumption that a disturbance of natural equilibrium, 'a break in continuity', evokes a release of energy, events such as birth or death were considered to release life force. Human sacrifice, as a socially ritualised technology, then becomes a way in which surplus energy can be stored for the community. The same applies to the bodies of warriors killed in combat. In a somewhat different vein, also compare de Heusch (1989) who illustrates to what extent the aging body of the African king necessitated regicide in order to avoid the realisation of natural threats for the community.
body therefore threatens the existence and integrity of the body politic. For that reason society does not let go of the body when it dies, but by means of processes of symbolisation continues to feed upon the body, creating different mechanisms, such as funerary rites and rituals, to ensure its continued existence.  

The extent to which society's linguistic networks of meaning and the body interact, can be seen in the studies of Mark Johnson (1987) and George Lakoff (1987). They coined the concept 'image schemata'. Although one should be careful not to equate 'image schemata' with the notions of 'discursive practices', 'context of situation' or the 'facts and truths' level of Foucault, Burke and Perelman, since these notions relate more to the domains of ideas and the power of ideas, the notion of 'image schemata' explores the manner in which bodily sensations and experiences are translated into language. To a certain extent, it would be possible to see 'image schemata' as constitutive of, for example, Burke's notion of 'context of situation', since they are directly related to bodily experience and should be seen as pre-conceptual. Johnson defines an image schema as: 'A schema is a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in, or of these ongoing activities', where the 'these' refer to our actions, perceptions and conceptions (:29). They can be seen as continuous, flexible structures of an activity, by which bodily experiences are meaningfully organised (:30). However, these image schemata should not be seen as idiosyncratic, but owing to recurrent human experiences, they are public and shared. Johnson writes (:14): 'These embodied patterns do not remain private or peculiar to the person who experiences them. Our community helps us interpret and codify many of our felt patterns. They become shared cultural modes of experience and help to determine the nature of our meaningful, coherent understanding of the "world"'. It would therefore be possible to argue that 'image schemata' can be seen as one way in which the incorporation of a community's collective socio-linguistic history takes place.

The effect of the languaging of the body in terms of the discursive practices of a society is twofold. On the one hand, it establishes societal control

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6 In an excellent article Laderman (1995) has, for example, indicated how the death of George Washington and the ensuing burial processes were symbolised to ensure unification of the regions of the United States at the end of the eighteenth century. Another example would also be the death of martyrs, which functions as a powerful mechanism to ensure in-group solidarity and by virtue of its power enables and empowers those communities not only to continue, but actually to grow and prosper. In yet another example, Dupont (1989) indicates how the notion of the immortal imago as the emperor-god's other body was introduced in Roman society in order to prevent unbridled tyrannical power invested in the monarchy.
over the body. Putting the body into discourse does not provide information on the body, but disciplines the body into the value-system of the society. The body is inscribed into the hierarchies, the inequalities, the roles, the norms, the do's and don'ts of society. As such, not the body itself, but what the body should or ought to be, shifts into focus. The so-called 'normal body' is the body that conforms to the conditions for its organisation of meaning.

On the other hand, although this process of languaging the body exerts social control over the body, thereby restricting its power, it simultaneously functions to empower the body, because it is through these acts of social control that the body becomes socialised and learns to realise itself in various roles in society. Sullivan (1990b:57) indicates that the act of social control enhances self-awareness. The fabrication of the individual by society through symbolic control, is simultaneously an alienation process in the sense that a person is alienated from non-human behaviour. According to him 'Culture is reproduced while the individual is being fabricated' (57). Sullivan should be qualified, because the symbolisation of the body should not only be seen as alienation for non-human behaviour, nor only as the 're'-production of culture, but rather as actively involved in the continual construction of culture. Fabricating the body does not result in the creation of human robots, but in the construction of a person. While on the one hand the process of symbolisation of the body censures the body, its experiences and activities, on the other hand its accompanying ambiguities function catalytically, providing the body with the possibility of cultural change and development. Owing to the languaging of the body, the body becomes a locus of political meaning and can as such be seen as strategy that can serve certain interests, can be used or abused, can function as an agency to accomplish a society's or group's objectives, but can also be seen as a source for empowerment.

Owing to the interaction between body and symbolisation processes, and owing to the ability of human beings to symbolise, bodily experiences can be meaningfully structured and organised, giving rise to various types of discourses. It is by virtue of this interaction between body and symbolisation processes that religious discourses have been created and can be created. It is in this respect that we should take note of some of the observations made by Kelsey (1992). Kelsey, following Leder (1990), indicates that despite the fact that our bodies should actually be a primary object of perception, we are to a large extent not aware of our 'bodiness'. All bodily experiences are simply not always, at a given moment, part of our consciousness and are therefore to a large extent relegated to disappear into the background. We become aware

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7 It is this absence of the body that forms the core of Leder's study.
of our bodily experiences when the body malfunctions. Pain, disease, inabilities and the ultimate dysfunction, the process of dying, foreground bodily experience. These phenomena, reducing the body to a 'pitiful, disgusting, and contemptuous object' (:136), create awareness of bodily experience and pose a threat to the body. Furthermore, the body also has a depth dimension, namely its viscera. In the normal body, these viscera have a certain autonomy because they function automatically, without us being aware of their performances. As such they can be characterised by autonomy and automaticity. However, this automaticity creates the perception that the visceral body has an authority and a will of its own (:135). It adds an 'it can' and/or 'it must' quality to our bodily functions. Whether we want it or not, or like it or not, or whether the time is appropriate or not, our visceral body sometimes obliges us to certain activities. Where the dysfunctional body poses a threat to the body and ultimately leads to the total disappearing of the body, the visceral body creates the perception of an alien body, often at odds with the body itself. According to Kelsey (1992:136) it is knowledge of the dysfunctional and ultimately 'dys-appearing' body that 'produces and legitimates anthropological and cosmological systems where pain, disease, and death can be meaningfully located'. Wrestling with the dysfunctional body, activates what gives power to the body, namely the ability to symbolise. On the other hand, it is the interaction between established patterns of social meaning and the independent and automatic quality of the visceral body, that translate certain physiological signals intended to activate visceral functions, into 'passions, lusts, and cravings', thereby giving rise to psychological and moral discourses. Where this alien body becomes an 'occupying' force acting against the will of a person, it can be personified into the 'Evil One', 'Satan', or 'demons' (1992:136–137). The alien body becomes an 'occupying' force resisting the will of the person.

To summarise: The body does not exist independently, but in interaction with other bodies. This interaction is decisively symbolic. The symbolic interaction of the body implies the incorporation of a society's collective history, which in turn implies the incorporation of a society's networks of meaning. As such the body becomes 'enlanguaged' and language becomes 'embodied'. Not only does this ensure societal control over the body, but it also functions as a source of empowerment for the body. The body therefore becomes a locus of political activity, but as a locus of political activity it functions as a strategy of power. How the body may function as a strategy of power in religious discourses will be illustrated in the following two sections.
3  THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

One can well imagine the problem the body must have been for people in the first centuries of the Christian Era, both in its dysfunctional and alien sense. Peter Brown (1988:6) claims that society was 'more helplessly exposed to death than is even the most underdeveloped country in the modern world'. He indicates that the average life expectancy was less than twenty five years of age. Only four out of every hundred men were fortunate enough to live beyond fifty and if we add to this that by far the majority of people were extremely poor, death would perhaps have been more welcome than life (cf Van den Heever 1993:68 on the bodily experiences of hunger, illness and death in the Middle Ages). The bodily experiences of women were even worse. Although care should be displayed not to generalise concerning the status of women in antiquity, the bodies of women were seen firstly as a mechanism for procreation and secondly as a source of male pleasure. Owing to the high death rate in society, the pressure on female bodies for procreation was immense and it has been estimated that the average woman had to bear at least five children simply to keep the population of the Roman Empire stationary (Brown 1988:6).8

It should however be borne in mind that when the ancients, such as the censor Metellus Macedonicus or the emperor Augustus, or philosophers, such as Philo, expressed their concern over the birthrate, it probably did not refer to the population as a totality but rather to that number of bodies that really, according to the social codes of their day, mattered. Premature death was probably even more rampant among the mass of the population, but for the upper classes, the disappearance of the citizen-incorporated body, was of catastrophic consequence, either through death or via the transgression of embodied social codes. In Leder's terminology, not only the dysfunctional body, but especially a fusion of the dysfunctional and alien body, was perceived as a threat by Greco-Roman society.

Besides the problems of the dysfunctional body then, the alien body was also a cause of constant concern. To maintain a 'school of orderly behaviour' was a major concern among the elite of second century Greco-Roman society. The passionate eruption of the emotions in anger, discord or jealousy and unbridled sexual activities were seriously frowned upon. Even sexual

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8 White (1995:43–49) argues that the most likely source for the growth of urban population in Rome and Ephesos, must have been migration since the mortality rate was extremely high, especially infant mortality (49). Approximately 33% of all infants died within one year of birth and 50% before the age of five. If normal mortality tendencies are then added it means that the urban population actually should have shrunk.
intercourse within marriage had to take place with correct decorum since it could have an effect on the character of the child.\(^9\) However, the main reason why bodily activities had to be regulated seems to have been the maintenance and preservation of the social fabric. Owing to the fact that not all bodies were deemed of equal status, the continuation of a ‘city’ of freeborn males, of full citizens, was of paramount importance. Irresponsible distribution of the reproductive activity could have posed a threat to the citizen body. Such irresponsible reproductive activity could have entailed avoiding sexual activity within legitimate marriage,\(^10\) allowing various other types of sexual relationships under the control of the freeborn male, or by contamination through relationships considered as a defilement of the citizen body (cf Rouselle 1989).

It comes as no surprise that the body as problem will to a large extent determine the variety of religious discourses within early Christianity and consequently the symbolised body abounds in these discourses. The languaged body in early Christianity provided a means for empowerment. The numerous stories, whether oral or written, in which the human body was symbolised, could be seen as constructions of power enabling the public via identification to wrest themselves free from the dysfunctional and protect them from the alien body. Although various possibilities may exist for the manner in which the body functioned as a strategy of power in the discourses of early Christianity, one possibility should receive further attention, because it accounts for the rapid and popular rise of asceticism during the second and third centuries. The possibility to have a complete, self-sufficient body seems to have functioned as a rhetorical strategy of empowerment by means of

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\(^9\) See in this regard also Kraemer (1980:303) who indicates in a discussion of the Acts of Peter the manner in which women were seen as posing a threat to the ‘school of orderly behaviour’. Two alternatives were available to women, namely sexuality or death and in order to maintain the values of their society, death was preferred. Cf also Rouselle (1989:317) who indicates that although homosexual relationships were common practice, the feminine position in the sexual act itself was cause for civic degradation. Furthermore, certain sexual activities were also not allowed within legitimate marriages of citizens and were consequently required from the dependants of the controlling, freeborn male (313).

\(^10\) Rouselle (1989:303) indicates that such an avoidance of sexual activity would also have met the approval of the free women, since it could have enabled them to limit their pregnancies. Furthermore, it seems to have been common behaviour to enter into sexual relationships with women other than wives. The main problem was, however, that these relationships entailed the possibility of posing a threat to the continuation of citizenship. Not only could certain sexual acts or certain sexual liaisons be seen as a defilement of the citizen body, but children born out of legitimate marriages were not always regarded as full citizens.
which it became possible to endure the dysfunctional and resist the alien body.

A certain kind of ambivalence seems to have structured perceptions of the body into social patterns of meaning. Despite the problem of the dysfunctional and alien body, the body in the first few centuries of the Christian Era was not seen as something to be hated or rejected, perhaps not even denied. As a matter of fact, it was seen as a creation of God and therefore to be appreciated. Owing to its defective corporeality, to its limitations and deficiencies, qualities have to be assigned to the body transcending corporeal boundaries. It is in this respect that cognizance has to be taken of the observations made by Vernant on the functions of the relationships between human beings and gods among the Greeks of the archaic period.

Vernant also observes the dilemma the failing and ultimately mortal body may have had for the Greeks. Whatever the positive values the body may have, such as beauty, radiance, contours, powers, virtues, strengths, it never succeeds in liberating itself from death and the 'tribe of his kin—Sleep, Fatigue, Hunger, Old Age' (1989:25). Whatever the heights the body may achieve in terms of its 'vital energies' and 'psychological or physiological forces' (24), they can remain only for a brief moment, but have to even out since the body has to recuperate. The body therefore has dazzling possibilities, but these are fleeting and momentary and always in presence of death. Vernant (25) writes: 'Thus, for the Greeks of the archaic period, man's misfortune is not that a divine and immortal soul finds itself imprisoned in the envelope of a material and perishable body, but that his body is not fully one'. The bodies of the Grecian gods on the other hand are

11 Certain Gnostic traditions of the third century seem to have been an exception in this regard. However, even within Gnostic traditions adhering to a radical devaluation of the body, some kind of ambivalence still prevented an outright rejection and functioned as a source for a more positive development of existing traditions. Williams (1989:129) refers us to the Apocryphon of John. Owing to an interpretation that refers the 'we' of Genesis 1:26 to the plurality of archons created by the theriomorphic Ialdaboth, the creation of the human 'after our likeness' plunges humankind into a theriomorphic state. However, there is still the resemblance to the image of God. As such there is a convergence between the divine and material realms. 'The body is supplied by the archons, but somehow bears a resemblance to the Perfect Human' (133). This resemblance to the Perfect Human finds its expression in the fact that the body is not simply theriomorphic, but distinguishes itself from the realm of the animals by its upright position. 'The created body came to possess this uniquely human ability only by divine gift' (139).

12 The idea is not simply to latch perceptions in the 8th century BCE to perceptions of the body in the first three centuries of the Christian Era, but to look at the possibilities one symbolic system may offer for understanding a similar problem.
symbols of plenitude, symbols of the plenitude and consistency to which humans aspire. Their bodies and lives resemble full positivity. When they eat and drink the objective is not to appease a hunger or quench a thirst that is endlessly reborn, but it is for a celebration of the pleasure of dining, taking part in food that is not ephemeral, but immortal (:26-27). It is within this domain of the tension between the dim, human body, and divine, dazzling body that the conditions for perception and the organisation of meaning were formed. Thinking about the bodies of the divine meant subtracting all the incomplete, insufficient, transient tendencies of the human body. Although the early Christians did not have a set of gods to aspire to, something remained of this tension between the dim and dazzling body. It was the possibilities created by the discursive dazzling body and by the possibility that the human body could be divested from its transient, incomplete and mortal properties that allowed for the creation of empowering religious discourses. It would also be possible to venture that it was this tension and the possibility to develop into the dazzling body by the decrease of human 'weakness' that contributed to the transformation of the status of ascetic culture, thereby also providing new opportunities and possibilities for various groups of people.

Miller (1994) extended Vernant’s observations to asceticism. She raises the question why the self-inflicted sufferings of the ascetics proved to be a ‘feast for the eyes’. Exploring the conditions for asceticism’s visual organisation of meaning, she indicates that despite the ascetic’s insistence on withdrawal, visibility was of utmost importance to the ascetic. However, the visibility enabling the observer to see something that was actually a secret, was simply another way of perceiving. Following Vernant, she argues that asceticism’s problem with the body was not with the body as such, but because the body was not a body of plenitude (:140). The ‘dim’ body, therefore had to be exercised, manipulated or coaxed to approximate the ‘dazzling’ body. As such, ‘asceticism...attempts to control the play of the body as signifier; it attempts to reimagine how the body can be read, and what it can say’ (:141).

The observations of Vernant and Miller provide us with the possibility to better understand the power of body symbolism during the birth of Christianity. The dominant elements within early Christianity, such as the incarnation, the resurrection, the virgin birth, the eucharist (Cameron 1991:68; cf Gager 1982), and the organisation of the household communities, are all themes which find their expression in body symbolism. It seems that the human body became medium for symbolic articulation precisely because of the precariousness of the dysfunctional body and the belief in an alien body. The symbolisation of the body in the themes of the incarnation, resurrection, virgin birth, eucharist, the organisation of the household com-
munities, as well as in asceticism, provided the discourses with which the ancient public could identify and which enabled them to integrate their experiences. Concerning the possibility for integration, Cameron (1991:69) writes: ‘...since human society was presented as naturally ordained according to hierarchical principles, in a context in which the same ordering, ...was seen as analogous to the human body, it provided the potential for a totally integrated rhetoric of God, community, and individual’.

Body symbolism provided a means for identification, because in a theme such as the incarnation, the dim and dazzling body are joined in the person of Jesus. Just as it was the case with the ascetics, the suffering of Jesus is perceived as glorious, his blood which flowed from the cross on Golgotha, congealing in the dry dust of Jerusalem, is perceived as having the magical effect of saving the world. Here, in the dirty, suffering, dysfunctional body of Jesus, was also the body of plenitude, sufficiently powerful to heal the sick, resist the authorities, conquer the laws of nature and finally overcoming the ultimate dysfunctionality, namely death. In the theme of the Incarnation, dim and dazzling body integrates and the dazzling body provides the real meaning for the dim body.

It is no co-incidence that Paul reduced the life of Jesus to his death and resurrection, because in his death his early followers were able to recognise their own dysfunctional bodies. But his suffering and death were only apparent reality; actual reality was the dazzling resurrected body. It was the possibility to aspire to this resurrected body that gave persuasive power to the discourses concerning its implications. In 1 Corinthians 15 the problem of an alternative group of Christians was exactly the death of the body. Although they accepted the kerygma concerning the resurrection of Jesus, the practical situation prevented them from ‘adhering to a physical resurrection of the deceased’ (Vorster 1988:304). In Paul’s response ample recognition is given to the deficiencies of the dysfunctional body, but the attention of the audience is directed to the super resurrected body, not only that of Christ, but also of his audience. Although Paul qualified this as a spiritual body, and did not really provide his audience with a clear anthropological account, the qualities of this body amount to a removal of the qualities of the dysfunctional body (cf especially 15:36-37, 42-45, 47, 49, 51-52, 54), and this was something with which his audience could identify.

The power of the ‘languaged body’ is equally illustrated during the second century with the emergence of writings such as the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla. In the story of Thecla, the female body functions as locus of supra-natural power. Owing to its dazzling quality, the body symbolism within the Acts of Thecla succeeds in dislocating androcentricism from personhood, giving expression to an alternative personhood. By putting the body of
Thecla in discourse, a construct of power inviting identification is brought into existence. This provides the possibility for its audiences to transcend their own dim bodies, by perceiving their bodies in a different light and to move beyond the incarceration within an oppressive cultural system. As such the rhetoricity of the body provides the opportunity for the creation of a counterculture (Vorster 1997). Via the power of the 'languaged body', the possibility for change is established.

These are but a few examples of the power of the 'languaged body' in early Christianity, but they are sufficient to indicate how the languaged body could function as a strategy of power in religious discourse. Through its potential to contribute to the construction of culture, the languaged body can function as an agency for change in a community.


If the body occupied centre position in the discourses of early Christianity, and if that position provided the languaged body to function as an agency of change, how did it function in a section of Afrikaner religious discourse during a period of change?

Within the selected passages studied, the impression is that the languaged body seems to function as a mechanism to maintain something of the social control the Afrikaners feel slipping from their hands. Instead of an empowerment of the body, the trend seems rather to be a dis-empowerment of the body, a use of the body to rescue vestiges of the control the Afrikaner once had. I should qualify this again, because there are glimpses of the religious

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13 Cf Corrington (1986) for a discussion of other accounts concerning women from the Apocryphal Acts. Corrington (1986) indicates how the conversion of women to celibacy functioned to establish heterodox alternatives for women in the institutional church. 'Celibacy...became a “problem” for the church only when it was connected with the power for women which it could not control' (:155). The power component in the stories concerning women within the Apocryphal Acts is also expressed in the way in which they were associated with miracles and with authoritative, apostolic figures.

14 The reason for selecting the 'Kerkbode' is simply experimental. A study such as this should obviously be extended to include all the various religious discourses within a particular culture and should also be concerned with those popular publications that are not strictly religious. It should also include the minutes stemming from the official meetings of the institutions within a particular denomination. However, the purpose here is simply to explore the possibility of identifying the body as a strategy of power in discourses that function to inform the public mind. Furthermore, since the 'public' is in focus, not only editorials or specialised articles by experts have been analysed, but also any material stemming from any member of the Kerkbode public.
Afrikaner, ridding herself of the doctrinal baggage which had for so long formed the foundations of their ideology, but these glimpses are neither main- nor malestream.

What is most interesting, is that in the period prior to 1994, almost no attention is given to the body or bodily issues as such. However, as in all religious discourses, bodily parts, organs and functions are symbolised and used in discourses concerned with other issues. It is in this respect that the 'heart' as a symbol frequently occurs.

Why the emphasis on this bodily organ? As we all know, the heart is a vital organ of the body and indispensable for the normal functioning of the body.\(^{15}\) It is, however, also one of those organs providing the body with its depth dimension because it carries the qualities of autonomy and automaticity. There is, therefore, the connotation of self-evidency, ultimacy or 'which is perceived to be the natural'. The centre position the heart occupies is metaphorically projected to the religious sphere and used when ultimacy, indispensability and ultimate control is at stake. For example the 'grace of God' is seen as the 'heartbeat and spinal cord' (Badenhorst 1991:4) of the church. It is this ultimate control which the heart has, that is also expressed in the well-known, 'giving of the heart to the Lord' (‘gee jou hart aan die Here’, Kerkbode 1 Nov 1991).\(^{16}\) Giving your heart to the Lord means to willingly put the self under his control. However, if the symbol 'God' signifies the ultimate values of a community, 'giving your heart to the Lord', means being initiated into those discursive practices that are regarded as absolute, ultimate for a community and non-negotiable. For that very reason, the 'giving of the heart' is most often elaborated with acquainting the initiate, who is often metaphorised as a 'child', with the established social patterns of meaning within the community (Kerkbode 1 Nov 1991).\(^{17}\) That the symbol of the heart transfers us to the well established and non-

\(^{15}\) Le Goff (1989) indicates how the Middle Ages developed and politicised the metaphor of the heart which they inherited from Greco-Roman culture and early Christianity. Used institutionally it functions to signify centrality and superior functions. During the thirteenth century in France, it functioned to assign superiority to the king in his polemic with the pope.

\(^{16}\) It would perhaps be possible to find in the 'giving of your heart to the Lord', some remote vestiges of the human sacrifices that were found in earlier religions. However, in this case the sacrifice that is brought is the sacrifice of autonomy and the objective is not to appease a god, but rather the initiation into the non-negotiable value-system of a community.

\(^{17}\) That the 'giving of the heart' can indeed be seen as the way in which the body is put into the non-negotiable discursive practices of the community is supported by describing their institutional acceptance as a 'coming home' (tuisgekom Kerkbode 1 Nov 1991, p6.).
negotiable social patterns of meaning can also be seen in the opposition that is posed between 'heart' and 'mind' (cf, e.g., Linde 1991:3). To the realm of the 'heart' belong recurrent patterns of meaning established over a long period of time and infusing the emotions of the community. The heart acquires the powerful stability brought about by those discursive practices that are not in need of critical scrutiny, but function to establish in-group solidarity. The 'mind' on the other hand, is not always that favourably connotated, where the heart signifies stability, a steady, pulsating rhythm, providing integration and coherence, the mind can wander around and is more associated with the whims and frills of exegetes and church leaders. The 'mind' signifies discursive practices that are negotiable, because they bear no threat for the community. However, dissenting with the non-negotiables, poses a threat to the community and the experience is expressed as 'painful' (pynlik), a struggle (stryd) or it is sometimes stated as a 'heartache' (hartseer). When the threat is removed, when there is acceptance of these non-negotiables there is 'acquiescence' (berusting) or 'peace of mind' (geruste hart).

The use of the body of Christ metaphor in the ecclesiastical sphere, functioned to establish a different kind of control, namely that of the bureaucracy. The body of Christ is used to motivate the introduction and execution of management programmes within the congregation. As such it serves to safeguard the in-group identity of the community. However, the socio-political changes that took place in the country during 1994, also had an effect on the use of this metaphor, and from the perspective of a woman. Winnie Rust (1994:7) transposes the metaphor from its traditional use in the ecclesiastical sphere to the relationships of social power between men and women (primarily), races, parents and children. During this same period (October 1994) women had also attended the General Synod for the first time in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church.

Sexuality is yet another sphere in which attempts are made to establish control. Before 1994 very little attention had been paid to this bodily activity. But the rise of the porno-industry is seen as an invasion by the alien body, an occupying force that has to be resisted at all costs. The public exposure of human genitalia via pornographic magazines and video-tapes

18 See in this respect again Le Goff (1989), depicting the polemic between pope and king in which the head is used as metaphor for the pope, whereas the heart signifies the role of the king. Owing to the fact that the heart is more closely associated with blood which is the 'vital element par excellence' (:21), the king is given a superior position to the pope.

19 Two articles on the undesirability of teenage sexual activities appear in Die Kerkbode (13 Aug 1993) in the genre of reports.
elicited a response far exceeding the discrimination practices based on skin colour. The discussion on pornography abounds with derogatory terms, like 'only bad' (net sleg), 'decay' (verrotting), 'making animals of human beings' (verdierlisking van mense), 'arms of an octopus' (seekatarms), a danger to the 'psychological welfare' of society, (psigiese welsyn) (Kerkbode 23 Jun 1995; cf also Potgieter 1995:10), 'poisoning the society' (bou gif in die gemeenskap op).

It is linked to social irresponsibility, even criminal acts, such as 'child molesting' (kindermolestering), 'rape' (verkragting), 'drugs' (dwelmmiddels) (Kerkbode 23 Jun 1995), 'serial murders' (reeksmoorde) and its own inevitable decline (Kerkbode 23 Junie 1995). The irony of this outcry on pornography is that the outcry reveals a similar attitude to that of the porn-propagators; it elevates and absolutises a bodily part infusing it with a status far beyond actuality; where the porn-propagators use the human genitalia to secure economic power, those engaged in an anti-porn struggle, use the human genitalia to secure socio-political power. It is therefore no surprise that the outcry against pornography happens within the context of the newly acquired constitutional right to freedom of expression and that this is also frequently acknowledged (cf Potgieter 1995:10; also Kerkbode 13 Apr 1995). The real reason is therefore less the offensiveness of human genitalia, but rather an attempt to maintain social control. Within the non-negotiable patterns of meaning whence the Kerkbode comes, a person shall not have power over her/his own body.

A different approach to sexual phenomena in society has been followed by a group of women in the Cape. Concerned with the increase of prostitution in the Cape Town environment, women of the United Reformed Church (VGK) and the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) formed a commission to tackle the problem. Instead of attempts to infiltrate or even impose non-negotiable, group related patterns of meaning on all sectors of society, finances were made available for a preliminary study in 1992, which was followed by study commissions in 1993 and the formation of a multidisciplinary committee in 1995 to address the problem. The objective seems to be, not the destruction of the alien body, but rather caring for the material, spiritual and health needs of these women (cf Kerkbode 13 Apr 1995).

20 The way in which this group has operated differs markedly from the solutions offered in 1991 concerning so-called escort agencies. In this case the decision of the Synod of the Eastern Cape entails the following: An expression of concern about this phenomenon, especially because it could function as front organisations for prostitution (the typical sequential type of argumentation); it was referred to another commission for study and liaison with the authorities (my emphasis); it was also referred to regional and local councils of the church and finally an appeal on the members of the church to a pure lifestyle (cf Kerkbode 1 Nov 1991).
The problem of securing social control can again be seen in the way in which both abortion and death are treated. We again have the situation that very little attention had been paid to abortion before 1994. Reference is made to a study commission in 1973 which compiled a report that was reflected in an Act of Parliament in 1975, a period in which Church and State firmly embraced each other. However, as the faint outlines of the freedom of a person started to appear on the horizon, the voices against abortion slowly but surely made themselves heard. Abortion is seen as an ‘evil’ (enwel), as irresponsible treatment of sexuality, incorporating a neglect of responsible family planning and a defiance of biblical commandments not to kill. Even more despicable is the suggestion that abortion can be seen as a mechanism for population control (Lategan 1994:6). What is at stake is again not the activity of abortion as such; neither the body of the woman nor the body of the foetus is motivational to the discourse of the anti-abortionist. As a matter of fact, the body of the woman is seen as an alien force that can in some way or the other contribute to the destruction of a community. In the centre is again the desire to regulate, and in this case to regulate what is regarded as normal sexual behaviour. Foucault is quite correct when he claims that power does not only lie in the prohibition, but the prohibition itself is simultaneously a propaganda of power. A network of power relations circumscribes the mere restrictive (1978:42) and in the case of the anti-abortionist the problem is with the freedom of a person.

Related to the problem of abortion, is also the problem of euthanasia. Euthanasia can be seen as a way in which the modern person deals with the dysfunctional body. Where the immediacy and frequency of death prompted the ancients to continue life in one way or the other, the modern person, ensured of three times the average life span owing to the advances of medical technology, desires the power to end the body’s increasing dysfunctionality. To a certain extent the body offered to the modern human

21 Lategan (1994:6) acknowledges that the right to abortion coincides with an attempt to empower women. ‘Dit hang saam met die “bemagtiging van vroue”, die sogenaamde “empowerment of women”’. However, empowerment is interpreted as strengthening their right to protect their own and the lives of their unborn children. One would have thought that this right is self-evident in a civilised society! The suggestion seems to be that the ‘empowerment of women’ must be interpreted as being as reductionistic as possible.

22 Cf the way in which an association is established with the conscience of the medical practitioner, the over-utilisation of natural resources as well as overpopulation. Furthermore, the sexual act which caused the abortion to be considered, is formulated as a form of ethical irresponsibility.

23 Desiring to end life is, of course, not a common human experience and the following argumentation should not be caricatured from that perspective. The problem of the dysfunctionality of the body that aged people have to cope with, is sympathetically
being by medical science is also an alien body, because it possesses the potential to continue its existence contrary to the desires of the person. However, the dysfunctional body is ‘languaged’ in terms of the non-negotiables of the *Kerkbode* community, thereby restricting its power. This can be seen in the way in which the dysfunctional body is projected onto the cosmological sphere and infused with God-speak. However, the moment one realises that God-speak and its accompanying cosmological and anthropological systems represent the ways and means in which a particular community organises its patterns of meaning to retain social control, the argument becomes highly particularistic and paternalistic. Besides the illogicality of searching Scriptures for a solution to this problem, apparently ignorant of the fact that the ancients had exactly the opposite kind of problem, bringing ‘God’ into the argument simply gives expression to what is regarded as the ultimate negation within a particular group of people. The personification of non-negotiable patterns of meaning within a particular community into the person ‘God’ need not be acceptable within another community and therefore excludes any conversation. This type of discourse functions simply to maintain the power of the in-group, who usually, in any case, know what the answer is to the problem.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Owing to the ability to articulate the body in symbols, the languaged body becomes a strategy of power. This discursive body plays a major role in religious discourse. In early Christianity it provided the possibility of identification and integration and consequently contributed to major changes in the flow of history. Gager (1982:361) writes: ‘Body symbols...provide us with a new thread for tracing the transformation of Christianity from an obscure
cluster of sects in Palestine to an institution of unparalleled spiritual and political power in the Roman empire’.

Although it would be possible to trace the manner in which the body infuses contemporary religious discourse, it has not really featured as a topic in the South African context and especially not prior to 1994. As the dawn of a new Constitution drew closer, certain topics concerning the body obtained public prominence. However, within these discourses, the body functioned as a strategy to maintain the power of a segment of the established Afrikaner religious community. Instead of empowerment, it functions as a mechanism to dis-empower in its attempts to prevent the liberation of the person. Since the body is languaged with ‘God-talk’ that functions as a non-negotiable value-system, and since there is no possibility for a return to this kind of social control, the ‘languaged body’ within the Afrikaner religious community is an alien to the body politic which demonstrates far more flexibility in addressing the problems of the modern person. Where the body is ‘enlanguaged’ into this kind of totalising linguistic patterns, the possibility of this community engaging in meaningful conversation with its social environment is severely reduced. However, it must also be noted that a greater sensitivity of the symbolic potential concerning the body seems to be developing among the women of this community.

Finally, despite all the problems diachronic cultural comparison may entail, it should perhaps also be noted that there is almost no continuity between the way in which early Christianity dealt with the body and the ways and means the community of which the Kerkbode is the official journal cope with the contexts in which the body exists. Although in an almost bizarre manner early Christianity struggled to obtain some empowering space for the body in resistance to the dominant culture, the public of the Kerkbode seems to abuse the body to maintain the social and political control which they feel are slipping from their hands. The partial empowerment of the body now seems to operate from what is developing into the dominant culture of the country.

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