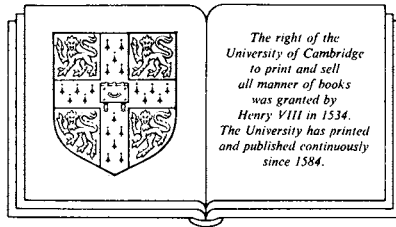


THE BODY DIVINE

*The symbol of the body in the works of
Teilhard de Chardin and Rāmānuja*

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney*

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

First published 1992

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Hunt Overzee, Anne.

The body divine: the symbol of the body in the works of Teilhard de Chardin and
Rāmānuja/Anne Hunt Overzee.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in religious traditions: 2)

ISBN 0 521 38516 4

1. Body, Human – Religious aspects – History. 2. Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre.

3. Rāmānuja, 1017–1137. I. Title. II. Series.

BL604.B64094 1992

291.2'2 – dc20 91-11363 CIP

ISBN 0 521 38516 4 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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Introduction

Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand: the making is really a re-making.

(Nelson Goodman)

This book is about worldmaking. It is concerned with two very different men who sought, in their own ways, to create new worlds, new ways of seeing things. They were both deeply committed to their respective religious traditions and worked within the frameworks of those existing worldviews¹ to revision their sense of the divine in relation to the cosmos. Rāmānuja (c. 1017–1137)² was a religious teacher in the Śrīvaiṣṇava community in South India. Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)³ was a French Jesuit priest, who, as a palaeontologist, travelled extensively throughout his life. Both men drew upon symbols to model their worldmaking, symbols which have a rich heritage in their respective traditions. The symbols they chose, however, were fundamentally similar. For both of them the worlds they perceived were symbolised by ‘the body of the divine’.

The question arises, ‘What did Rāmānuja and Teilhard de Chardin understand by “the body of the divine”?’ And in order to begin looking for answers to this question I spend more time at the beginning of the book ‘locating’⁴ the divine body symbol in the specific religious contexts of Rāmānuja and Teilhard. After all, religious experience does not arise in a vacuum,⁵ and the very term ‘body of the divine’ has a wealth of associations, memories and meanings, some of which apply to the Hindu tradition of Rāmānuja, and some to the Roman Catholic tradition of Teilhard de Chardin. To explore the ways in which these two thinkers ‘saw’ things we need to start with the religious alphabets they used to describe their experiences.

It may occasion surprise that many religious beliefs and doctrines are formulated in metaphorical and symbolic language. Thus part of

the task of one seeking to understand religious thought-systems is to study the symbolism inherent in discursive material. Such a study broadens out immediately to involve psychological questions ('Where does this metaphor come from, and why?') and questions about religious practice ('Why does this symbol prove valuable to this group of people, and how does it work?'). Immediately, therefore, the enquiry has become an inter-disciplinary quest for understanding. In seeking to understand what 'the body of the divine' meant to Teilhard de Chardin and Rāmānuja, I have been involved in relating their use of symbolic language to their theological⁶ worldviews, and also to their didactic purposes.

It is interesting to find that when describing something symbolic it appears necessary to use symbolic language,⁷ that is, language which is not direct but suggestive and evocative. But by analysing the function of the term 'the divine body' and responding to it as it is expressed in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin and Rāmānuja respectively, it is possible to cut through this problem: it is not just a question of describing 'the divine body' but of exploring how it 'works'. When I go on, for example, to look at 'the divine body' in the context of religious practice, the question I am seeking to address is basically, 'How do Rāmānuja and Teilhard de Chardin understand the divine body to function in the religious traditions they represent?'

One indication of how 'the divine body' functions in these particular Christian and Hindu traditions is to be found in the roles each of these two theologians adopt in relation to their respective traditions. Both were innovative teachers within mainstream traditions, with a strong sense of spiritual purpose. Rāmānuja integrated classical teachings with popular beliefs and practices in highly sophisticated systematised theological works. He argued that non-Vedic texts support and elucidate the Vedic tradition, and he evolved an inclusive methodology which developed into what is now regarded as one of the main schools of Vedānta, namely, *viśiṣṭādvaita* or differentiated non-dualism. His role as theological innovator is expressed in the way he draws upon a powerful symbol, the body of Brahman, to help him integrate the spiritual path of devotional love (*bhakti*) with Vedic tradition.

Teilhard de Chardin's influence in Christian theology is arguably less significant than Rāmānuja's in Hinduism. However, he represents an authentic tradition which, from the earliest times in

Christian history, has sought to integrate traditional and popular belief with current thinking. He was, like Rāmānuja, a theological innovator, even though for most of his life he was not allowed to teach or write about his theological ideas. He sought to expand current conceptions of Christ and even of human life, to measure up to contemporary understandings of the cosmos.⁸ In this endeavour he used Pauline symbolism and that of the early Greek Fathers to create a synthesis of Christian doctrine and modern evolutionary theory. In particular he drew upon the symbol of the body of Christ.

From what we know of Rāmānuja it is clear that he worked as a religious teacher (*ācārya*) within the Śrīvaiṣṇava religious community (*sampradāya*) at Śrīrangam. His lineage was through Yāmuna, who was a person of considerable stature spiritually and intellectually. In this tradition, such a teacher who is both experienced in the religious life and learned in terms of Vedāntic knowledge – in practice these two cannot be separated – actually brings the received tradition (*śruti*: literally ‘that which is heard’) to fulfilment in the hearts and minds of people. The fact that Rāmānuja wrote so systematically about aspects of knowledge of Brahman⁹ (*Brahmajñāna*) suggests that he was aware of his responsibilities as Yāmuna’s successor as spiritual guide and teacher. In the opening words of one of his major works, the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, he writes:

The crown of the Vedas, i.e. the Upaniṣads, which lays down the good of the whole world, enshrines this truth: a seeker, after first acquiring a true understanding of the individual self and the Supreme, and equipped with the performance of the duties pertaining to his station in life, must devote himself to the meditation, worship and adoring salutation of the blessed feet of the supreme Person. This done with immeasurable joy leads to the attainment of the Supreme.¹⁰

This extract shows us the spiritual purpose underlying Rāmānuja’s philosophical and theological writings. In the context of the Vedāntic notion of *ācārya*, we may, perhaps, conclude that he saw himself as a transmitter of given truths, and as one whose task was to assist in their realisation. We shall see in the following chapters that the ‘body of Brahman’ was inherited and developed by him as a tool for self-realisation.

Teilhard de Chardin’s self-understanding was fundamentally related to his priestly vocation. He believed that his task was to participate in Christ’s work of universal salvation.¹¹ He saw himself

as a kind of apostle or evangelist in a secular world. Through his job as palaeontologist he sought to integrate a devotional Catholic outlook and experience of the religious life with contemporary scientific research and neo-humanistic¹² philosophy. He speaks in his writings of teaching people how to ‘see’¹³ the divine presence within the world. He, in fact, equates this perception with knowledge of God. He writes:

I would wish, through my meditations, speech and the practice of my whole life, to disclose and preach the bonds of continuity which make the Cosmos, with which we are involved, a milieu divinized through the Incarnation, divinizing through Communion, and divinizable through our co-operation.¹⁴

Teilhard clearly believes he has a specific vocation to make known the universal Christ, perceived as a divine milieu.¹⁵ It is in trying to communicate his particular vision that he draws upon New Testament references to the body of Christ and interprets them from within a new philosophical framework. In the succeeding chapters we shall see how he uses the ‘body of Christ’ to reveal his vision of a divinised world.

So the symbol ‘the divine body’ speaks of worlds ‘already on hand’. It discloses Rāmānuja’s and Teilhard’s own worldviews, and it uncovers sacred ways of ‘knowing’ and ‘seeing’ which belong to the original visions of the traditions which they espoused. To explore this symbol is to engage in religious interpretation which, like any other form of interpretation, involves listening to what is being said, identifying patterns of meaning, and translating these for a given audience. I am interested in the inherent structure of the divine body symbol, and the form this takes in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin and Rāmānuja respectively.

Paul Ricœur speaks of the theologian as a hermeneut, whose task is to interpret the multivalent, rich metaphors arising from the symbolic bases of tradition so that the symbols may ‘speak’ once again to our existential situation.¹⁶ Certainly this can be one aspect of a theologian’s task, but in today’s pluralistic world, many who work with metaphors and symbols in this way would not align themselves with a confessional stance in the way that a theologian does. An anthropologist, philosopher, or historian of religion has much to contribute to the task of interpreting traditional metaphors. Perhaps such an undertaking requires the collaboration of people

from different disciplines, representing a variety of approaches which together could provide ‘multivalent’, ‘rich’ interpretations of symbols for today.

Eliade once suggested that dialogue between peoples of different cultural backgrounds needs to be conducted in a language which is ‘capable of expressing human realities and spiritual values’, not, he argued, in the ‘empirical and utilitarian language of today’.¹⁷ In our contemporary multi-cultural society, and particularly in those communities where inter-religious encounter is not a luxury for the specialists but a necessity for mutual co-operation, there is a real need for languages which communicate directly between people. The language of symbolism is, perhaps, of particular value in this context, where the interpreting and revisioning of symbols can be explored together and thus ‘lived’ into existence.

The tools which I use to explore the divine body symbol in Rāmānuja and Teilhard de Chardin are those of any ‘hermeneut’ or interpreter. The tool of listening and reading with an open mind is a prerequisite for the job. This ensures that the approach is relatively value-free because judgements are suspended while the world of the believer is consciously entered and explored.¹⁸ This does not mean the interpreter has no feelings, no beliefs of his or her own. It signifies rather an ability to see things through another’s eyes as well as your own.¹⁹ This involves knowing where you yourself ‘stand’, and then listening until something resonates and you can feel a response to what is being said by another. At this point there is a possibility of empathy, from which understanding can arise.

An ability to see ideas as pictures or patterns which can then be presented as ‘wholes’ to others is also important. This requires a sense of structure and relationship between things being communicated. A phenomenological or systematic approach is not enough to really grasp what is being communicated by the symbol or idea as a whole, which needs to be taken on board and allowed to find its own ‘shape’ inside a person. It can then be expressed through a personal sense of its own inherent ‘character’.

Obviously there is the need for critical evaluation and reflection in the ongoing task of creating meaning. It is necessary to be able to step back and view the material from a position of non-involvement. But often this comes later, since the attraction towards a thinker, an idea or a symbol is usually quite strong. However, the attraction is necessary for establishing interest and contact in the first place, so

both involvement and non-involvement are necessary on the part of the hermeneut. Ninian Smart refers to ‘a kind of passion for evocative dispassion’ in discussing the approach of a student of Religious Studies to his or her subject.²⁰ I would say that the person seeking to interpret religious symbols needs to feel both ‘passion’ and ‘evocative dispassion’, and to be able to integrate the qualities of the right and left hemispheres of the brain in order to engage fully in the task.

In my exploration of the divine body symbol in Teilhard and Rāmānuja I have used these tools of listening and then identifying the patterns or ‘wholes’ of meaning, as part of the process of relating these back to the historical traditions out of which they arose, and to the theological worldviews of their creators. This locates the symbol in its religious and philosophical context while enabling the symbol’s own structure to provide the framework for theological and reflective enquiry.

Having done this I have also chosen to relate the divine body symbols one to another in order to see if there are any overlaps of structure or form. At the outset I expected little in the way of correspondence between the two, since the religious worlds of Teilhard de Chardin and Rāmānuja could hardly be more contrasting. I chose to undertake this task of relating the divine body symbols one to another not as an exercise to compare disparate symbols and thinkers, but rather to explore a new way of looking at the encounter between, in this case, Śrīvaiṣṇavism and Roman Catholicism, or between Christian and Hindu expressions of truth.

I make no apology, therefore, for focusing more on the similarities, the overlaps of meaning, in the encounter. My objective is not to ‘compare and contrast’, as I have said, but to allow the symbol’s in this case inherent integrative structure of wholeness to continue ‘working’.²¹ Chapter 8 begins to show the context in which this symbol could be encouraged to make its presence felt today, although really this is the subject of a book in its own right, and deserves to be addressed by specialists from many different fields. This relates, as I see it, to the final task of the hermeneut: enabling the symbol to ‘speak’ once again to our contemporary situation.

The original Greek word, *symbolon*, came to denote the veiling and unveiling of hidden things or of secrets.²² In the Pythagorean Neo-Platonic tradition, for example, symbols were methods of instruction in the form of symbolic modes of speech. They guarded secret things

‘in an enigmatic form’, revealing their truths ‘unambiguously’ to those able to perceive them.²³ For the purposes of this book I shall look on them as functions of the human power to relate things one to another in a way that is not always obvious, and to structure reality. They are able to teach us how to see things according to the patterns of associations and experiences they embody.

Throughout the book I shall continually be talking of the divine body as a metaphor. This is not in any way to belittle its value. Rather it is to recognise its disclosive and evocative character. I am drawing upon the network of association and nuance connected with each thinker’s experiences and concepts of the ‘divine’ and the ‘body’, in order to allow us to be challenged to see the world through their eyes and to respond to what they disclose to us.

This metaphorical language stems from symbolic tradition. Symbols are strange creatures. They represent things to us, indicate things to us, associate things one to another in a way that is meaningful to us, and evoke reactions in us. They ‘speak’ to us in a ‘language’ which communicates to our whole being, not just to our intellect, and reveal ‘secrets’ to us about the way things are. It has been said that we, as humans, are symbolic beings: we create symbols in order to function as perceiving, thinking people.²⁴ The fact remains that symbols are important to us, particularly in terms of our self-understanding.

If symbols stand for, represent or denote something other than themselves, and religious symbols function in relation to things divine, then we can be sure that ‘the divine body’ when viewed as a symbol ‘hides’ and ‘reveals’ knowledge that is regarded as sacred. And as religious concepts often involve reference to spiritual transformation,²⁵ so religious symbols often provide the means to attain that transformation. It is through appropriating for ourselves a new way of seeing the world in the light of our sense of the divine that the divine body symbol can really be said to ‘work’ for us.