

# The Embrace of Eros

*Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*

Margaret D. Kamitsuka, Editor

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## THE EMBRACE OF EROS

Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity

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## CHAPTER 14

### *Promiscuous Incarnation*

Laurel C. Schneider

*What would it look like to speak the language of incarnation?*

*What sound would this moral language make?*

—Darby Kathleen Ray<sup>4</sup>

INCARNATION AND THE RELATIONSHIP of the body to divinity has long been a theme in feminist, womanist, black, and other liberation concepts of God. The very idea that divine essence and will are somehow located in the struggles of the oppressed focuses incarnation in two related directions: the prosaic, everyday dimensions of bodily existence on the one hand, and liberal concerns about the dignity and equality of every human being on the other. The ancient Christian claim that God chose lowly human flesh as a medium and content of revelation finds particular relevance in these approaches to theology—specifically, in their striving to find in the Christian stories of Jesus and in the doctrines of the Trinity theological bases for opposing the sustained bodily assaults that characterize white supremacy, male dominance, and class structures that relegate whole peoples to deep poverty.

To the extent that on this point liberation theologies are right—namely, that the focus of theological reflection should emphasize a materialist concern with the actual plight of the poor and oppressed—then incarnation as a central Christian doctrine of God (perhaps even *the* distinctively Christian doctrine) must also attend to the matter of the oppressed body and its constitutive relation to divinity.<sup>2</sup> The fleshy divine individual body of Jesus and the fleshy divine communal body of Christ (i.e., the church) suffer some incoherence in traditional Christian theologies that manage to honor incarnation in terms of the body of Jesus but force actual bodies in the church, and outside of it, onto the bottom rungs of a tortured hierarchy of being.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that for all of the attention that feminist, womanist, queer, and black theologians have directed toward the status of the oppressed human and earthly body, the ancient and controversial question of divine incarnation in terms of the fourth-century Nicean claim of full divinity in the full humanity of Jesus remains controversial and underdeveloped in constructive theology today. Work on the doctrines of incarnation and creation by theologians like Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Jürgen Moltmann, and Nancy R. Howell has begun to take seriously divinity in the world and the worldly body of God; however, the full implication of incarnation in terms of “full” divinity in the flesh still needs to be worked out in contemporary terms.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of my own foray into the question of incarnation as a basis for thinking about multiplicity beyond the reductive dominance of the logic of the “One,” I have, with the help of postcolonial, feminist, queer, and race theories, begun to interpret the history of Christian thought as a gradual and inexorable erosion of the early Christian testimony of incarnate divinity. Over time and with the growth of an imperial, globally aspiring religion, actual bodies—of tax agents, fishermen, soldiers, prostitutes, carpenters, and children, for example—have diminished in favor of immutable souls and the separation of divinity from world. As a result, Christian ideas of “God the Creator” have tended toward brittle abstraction, only occasionally relieved by the fleshy imaginings of mystics. Apart from such lush exceptions, the history of Christian thought is desiccated by rigid dependence on exclusive monotheism or, more accurately, a logic that requires divine truth to be singular and noncontradictory.<sup>5</sup> There has been a “drying up” of Christian theology.<sup>6</sup>

Within such a monologic of noncontradiction, incarnation is a conundrum. The coming to flesh of divinity completely disrupts the smooth otherness of the divine, its separateness from the changeable stuff of earth, its abhorrence of rot, its innocence of death, and its ignorance of life or desire.

Rethinking divinity from the body, on behalf of a mutable and utterly inexchangeable world of bodies, is a challenging theological task that puts us toe to toe in contest with a tradition of disembodied divinity. To allow “the flesh to show us the divine,” rather than the other way around, requires a certain courage in the face of long-standing theological denials of the flesh that have shaped contemporary cultural assumptions about the relationship of divinity to bodies.<sup>7</sup>

Toward the goal of better understanding the implications of incarnation as flesh showing the divine, there is a deliberate provocation in the title of this essay. “Promiscuous incarnation” links two terms that normally operate at a remove from one another. The adjective commonly refers today to “sexual indiscriminate.”<sup>8</sup> The noun refers to “a body, person, or form in which a soul, or deity is embodied,” which in Christian-dominated English usage is virtually synonymous with “God in Christ.”<sup>9</sup> “Promiscuous” here modifies “incarnation,” and so immediately the question arises regarding the nature of that modification. As a term most commonly used in relation to sexual excess, perhaps my use of promiscuous in this sense “sexes” the divinity of Christ in some sort of gratuitous manner. However, thanks to the colorful and varied history of the usage of “promiscuous” in English, in which its more primary meaning of “mixture” and even its rare occurrence as a “third gender” are allowed to come into play, “promiscuous” offers more to the concept of incarnation than sex alone.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it may describe incarnation better than any other modifier. The point of looking to other, older definitions of promiscuous is not to avoid its associations with sex, however. Sex represents an important challenge to the idea of incarnation, not only because of the obsessive disavowals made about it over the years by theologians (just look at the long history of theological battles over Mary’s virginity) but also because sex can function rhetorically—and promiscuously—as a cipher for both gender and race.<sup>11</sup>

In the cultures shaped by the Abrahamic religions, female sexuality has long been associated with social order or disorder and complicated with notions of purity and pollution. Strict control of women’s sexual lives and of reproduction was tied to the attainment of wealth and status (and still is, in rhetoric about welfare mothers). It defined lines of identity by linking women’s bodies—and so sex—to communal ideas of ethnic purity.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that incarnation indicates divine enfleshment, it has never been able fully to escape these complexities, although since the church council at Nicea, Christians have tried to separate incarnation from sex in order to effect just such an escape. The Roman Catholic tradition’s insistence on Mary’s resilient

virginity serves to preserve divinity from the perceived pollution and ethnic dangers of sexual intercourse. It also indicates more clearly than in any other aspect of Christian doctrine a fundamental anxiety about female sexuality and reproductive potential that has been inherited by modern Christianity. This anxiety still needs unpacking, in part because sex is still a source of deep conflict among religious people and in part because sex is only ever partly about sex, as I have indicated. It is also about intercourse of all kinds—intercourse that threatens social, political, and even economic boundaries.

In part because of the huge metaphoric power of sex, "promiscuity" suggests not only sexual excess and indiscrimination but also the dangerous inabilities of the body to conform fully to abstract theological requirements. Promiscuity gestures toward everything that, in the monotheistic traditions at least, must be excised from the body to qualify it as divine or as an acceptable vessel for divinity. Thus, promiscuity refers obliquely to the criminal body, its failures and exuberances that offend ascetical sensibilities, which are the sensibilities that have ruled Christian theology, if not absolutely, then predominantly. Promiscuity also refers to a refusal of exclusivity, an openness to intercourse with others that, as I will discuss later, poses all kinds of interesting challenges to the dominant, patrilineal social systems of the West. Promiscuity also means "mixture of different substances" and so it refers to that which is not pure, that which is porous and multiple. In other words, "promiscuous incarnation" suggests something distinctly nonascetical and impure about the central revelatory claim that Christianity makes about God. Furthermore it suggests, against theologies that make exclusive claims for incarnation, that divinity might be less than discriminating in its intimacies with flesh.

### PATERNAL PROBLEMS

Promiscuity has typically been a derogatory word, applied to disparage those people (especially women) who enjoy sex synchronically or diachronically with multiple partners. The implication is that promiscuous persons are morally suspect; they have little or no sexual self-control and so constitute a danger to ordered society. Of course, the relation between sexual activity and societal order depends heavily upon the actual role that sex can play in disordering society. For example, in contemporary societies that have inherited their basic social ideas and traditions from the confluence of patriarchal cultures and religions of the ancient Near East, the traditionally close and even obsessive relationship between sex and social order can be traced at least in part to the patrilineal substructure of those cultures. Patrilineal soci-

eties trace descent and, more importantly, property inheritance through the father's name or line.<sup>13</sup> This means that the economic stability of the social order rests largely on the identity of fathers as such. In patrilineal systems, the acknowledgment and accuracy of paternity is therefore a matter of serious concern and historically constitutes no small difficulty. Prior to the advent of DNA testing (and even since then for those without the means to purchase tests), paternal identity depends largely on the word of the mother. Lag times between conception and evident pregnancy, possibilities of multiple sperm donors, and variations in individual maternal gestation patterns that allow for blurry timetables constitute only some of the many difficulties with which patrilineal systems must cope in securing paternal identity for the purposes of economic stability and social order.

Conversely, although subterfuge is possible in any system, the relative ease of accurately establishing the identity of mothers in childbirth is so great that one wonders why or how patrilineality ever took hold in so many societies and for so long. In matrilineal societies, the sexual activities of both women and of men need not be (and generally are not) tightly bound to inheritance and family identity because property and family identity are not primarily affected by the sexual activities and reproductive consequences of either men or women.<sup>14</sup> So long as the identity of the mother can be confidently established, property lines of descent and distribution are clearly delineated and easily verified, regardless of who donates the sperm.

This is not to say that matrilineal societies are without sexual ethics or concerns about sexual practices in terms of health, social welfare, or reproduction. Rather, such concerns are bound to issues other than property inheritance. When money is not involved, in other words, social anxieties tend to soften and diminish. The difficulties inherent in securing paternal identity for purposes of inheritance, even in small communities, means that the only way to be absolutely sure of paternity is to control—absolutely—sexual access to mothers. The sexual purity of married or marriageable women is therefore a matter of public concern in patrilineal systems (while the sexual purity of married or unmarried men is not) because of the economic implications that maternal impurity—or promiscuity—can have on establishing paternal identity and, therefore, on the economic base of whole clans and communities.

Although the issue of property distribution does not account for all of the ways that female identities and sexualities have been traditionally constructed and controlled in ancient and modern patrilineal societies, the simple fact of patrilineality as the dominant traditional form of familial organization in historic Jewish, Christian, and Muslim societies may

account for much of the obsession with female sexual purity and impurity in the religious thought and practices in those cultures. Through the material lens of historical property distribution, the close link that patrilineality demands between the sexual activity of women and the ordering of society stands out in bold. Promiscuity and the dangers it poses to confidence in patrilineal descent is thereby a matter of longstanding and deeply rooted anxiety, which echoes in contemporary cries that link sex outside of marriage (thus implicating homosexuality as well) to societal disintegration.

If promiscuous is an anxiety-producing word in social circumstances, it seems to be a panic-inducing word in theological circumstances. When I used the word to describe divine love in the concluding chapter of my book *Re-Imagining the Divine*,<sup>15</sup> readers communicated enthusiasm for my argument that monotheistic concerns about fidelity to one God expose human rather than divine jealousy, but they expressed objections to my suggestion of promiscuous divinity as an antidote. "Can't you use a different word?" one reader wrote, "'promiscuous' is too provocative, it insults God, and people will miss the point." Promiscuity, it would seem, not only degrades God, it distracts people from anything else within range. Perhaps there is an opportunity lurking in that fact. When the forbidden is distracting, the distracting usually has something to teach. It bears investigation, if for nothing else than to discover what is being (unsuccessfully) repressed or denied for the sake of order.

The order that promiscuity threatens may be the inherited structure of family that relies on the identity of the father (mirrored in the image of God "the Father," whose demands for purity from "His Church" reflect patrilineal anxiety), but it may also be a habit of anxiety about sex tied to paternal dominance that no longer dominates the social sphere in contemporary, globalized circumstances. The rigidly patrilineal orders inherited by capitalist societies throughout the modern West are rapidly disappearing as women gain the economic and legal status of men and are no longer compelled to pass their wealth to and through their husbands. Promiscuity holds less and less power to disrupt the social and economic structure of society precisely because women's sexuality is no longer tied to economic stability in fundamental ways, to the extent that women are free to make, retain, and distribute wealth in their own name.

A "pure woman" is increasingly an anachronism, despite conservative religious efforts to revive its importance to faith, as in the "Love Waits" campaign, or in fundamentalist movements that link women's independence with loss of religious integrity. As virginity and sexual abstinence lose their ability to secure wealth and status, their power to hold meaning has eroded among

the young for whom such limits are difficult under any circumstances. Theologians and ethicists such as Robert Nelson, Mary Hunt, and Kelly Brown Douglas have long been seeking grounds other than the patrilineal inheritance structure for determining sexual ethics, and most feminist scholars recognize that brittle notions of female purity undermine, rather than encourage, mature and loving relationships.<sup>16</sup> Going further, queer theologian Marcella Althaus Reid has taken up the question of "indecenty" (which can claim promiscuity, to be sure) as a grave necessity for theology.<sup>17</sup>

Artists, as usual, are in the forefront of social change. Nelly Furtado, for example, released a hit rap crossover duet with Timbaland in 2007 entitled "Promiscuous" (from her appropriately entitled album *Loose*) that extols the attraction of "promiscuous girl" and of "promiscuous boy" while at the same time suggesting that deceit is bad. Although she never defines the term in her lyrics,<sup>18</sup> Furtado's intent appears to be more than selling songs with a shock-value lyric (though that is clearly part of it). The song is a dialogue between two potential sexual partners who are testing each other for honesty "without games." What is significant here is that, depending upon how one interprets the repeated chorus of longing for "promiscuous girl" and "promiscuous boy," the whole song models a navigation of desire in a way that respects sexual desire and the necessity of a process that disallows coercion or harm. Of course, such navigation in the face of desire is never easy, and the lyrics indicate frustration on both sides at different points throughout the song. Perhaps in acknowledgment of and as an answer to the difficulties of living out new sexual norms, the whole song pivots around a single central stanza made up of "Don't be mad. Don't get mean."<sup>19</sup> Tempering promiscuity with a disavowal of meanness suggests the edge of a sexual ethical platform that could easily and cogently challenge traditional religious sexual norms that remain rooted in anachronism.

Of course, it is easy to read too much into one hit song, but it is easy to read too little there as well. I am suggesting that the artwork of popular music is pushing back on religiously grounded sexual norms, as it has done for decades and is succeeding now not only in shocking the system but in proposing new ethical norms in part because the economic structures that once propped up the religious governance and sexual control of women is truly waning in many societies around the world. Religious traditions and what they believe to be divine legitimation of patrilineal governance and sexual control remain, however, like a hardened shell that cannot seem to expand to accommodate the changing life within.

Certainly sexual anxiety is high in many religious communities precisely because the deep cooperation between economic structures and religious beliefs has stumbled so dramatically on the political and economic changes that have taken place over the past two hundred years, changes that continue to shift the structure of social relationships as well. It is perhaps too soon to expect millennia-old doctrines regarding sex to accommodate to such a brave new world in which women can control their own wealth, let alone their own sexual lives. Fears about promiscuity as a threat to economic security are too deeply rooted to die in a few decades of challenge. Indeed, the notion of divine promiscuity as a positive view of God's relation with the world is not a notion that would "preach" in conservative or liberal Christian churches, although it might fly in a few brave, progressive settings.

The distress that divine promiscuity evokes may be merely an indicator of the slowness and inconsistency of cultural change, with pop music at one end of the spectrum of change and religious congregations on another. Perhaps the notion of divine promiscuity represents a stumble in the painful demise of a once-powerful image of God. Dying behemoths may be nearing the end of their power, but in falling they can still cause a lot of damage. When the behemoth is a long-reigning image of God, the theological challenge is both hospice and midwifery, which in each case requires strong doses of patience and the capacity to translate pain into passage. Female sexual self-determination directly depends upon the shift away from the outmoded strictures of patrilineality. However, it should not surprise us that because patrilineality also describes the central incarnational relationship in traditional Christian theology, shifts there may be the most painful to navigate in the long run.

In traditional Christian theology, divinity itself is an inheritance of the "Son" through the "Father." According to doctrine, not only is Jesus the "begotten Son of God," he is the "only-begotten Son," which makes him the sole heir. Mary's virginity assures the identity of God as the father rather than any human male donor (a sort of DNA test of God, which is funny when you think about it) and so assures the identity of Jesus as God's son in classic patrilineal terms via the purity of the mother. The exclusivity of Jesus as God's heir is presumably the province of God's action alone, or rather lack of action in relation to any other opportunity for intercourse elsewhere in the universe.

The contemporary erosion of patrilineality in favor of more egalitarian structures of inheritance and identity is, in the end, a serious threat to latent patrilineal ideas of God, even among those who understand the limitations

and anachronisms of male dominance today.<sup>20</sup> Promiscuity understood as sexual indiscrimination stands in direct opposition to divine lines of inheritance that place "God the Father" securely in a place of absolute paternity, not only over Jesus but over all of creation as well. Only in this frame is creaturely fidelity, the lack of which is decried by prophet after prophet, understandably essential to the very identity and honor of God. Only in this frame is God's forgiveness of creaturely infidelity required, because only in this frame does creaturely infidelity threaten the very paternity of God. What is more, promiscuity understood as a quality of distinctly impure hybridity stands in opposition to divinity understood as the pinnacle and epitome of purity and immutability. In incarnation "God chooses to entrust the Divine desire for whole-making self-actualization to the warp and woof of the finite realm."<sup>21</sup> Because it explicitly claims that the finite realm reveals God, the Christian doctrine of incarnation directly dismantles the purity, immutability, and simplicity of divinity, undoing both its oneness and its innocence of complex flesh. Incarnation is therefore the principle of promiscuity, in divine terms at least. So why is it such a shocker to say so?

### INCARNATION, THE CHRISTIAN CONUNDRUM

Unlike "promiscuous," "incarnation" is not normally a derogatory term. It is typically applied to the miracle of (chaste) divine love for the world in whose becoming-flesh sex plays no role, or so the story goes. The adjective and noun therefore seem to mean opposite things, sexually speaking, and might even cancel each other out. Placed together in dependent relation—promiscuous incarnation—they form a kind of crass nonsense, a puzzle of contradiction. Like many supposed oppositions, however, the contradiction is misleading; it runs surface-deep only. Incarnation and promiscuity have much more to do with each other than the purveyors of divine chastity would have it—that is, if incarnation means anything at all in terms of actual bodies.

In reality, questions of incarnation and actual bodies are inseparable from Christian thought. Flesh-showing-the-divine lies at the heart of Christianity's complicated origins, which is why questions of incarnation are fundamental to its theology. What is Christian theology, after all, without the person of Jesus, the person who, Christians have claimed since the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, is, or was, "fully divine and fully human"? As Paul announced in his first-century letter to the Philippians, Christ's equality with God makes all the more imperative an understanding of his human likeness (2:7). Paul insisted, in other words, that there are lessons to be learned from this flesh that reveals divinity. He crafted the flesh-revelation into a lesson of humility



and service, though his conclusions have never been the only ones possible. Later on, the writer of the Gospel of John penned the gorgeously memorable line that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have life continuous" (3:16),<sup>22</sup> making incarnation not only a distinctive feature of Christian faith, but an unveiling (an "apocalypse") of intimate and passionate divine love.

In various ways, Christians claim that God, the divine power that created and creates the cosmos, not only has the capacity to become small, particular, and partial in the flesh of a human being, but has done so in history. God became a colonized man under the reigns of the Caesars Augustus and Tiberius of Rome, a man who died the ignominious death of a criminal against the state. That God has such a capacity for temporality and smallness, and can become the incarnate divine, is a fundamental claim shared by Christian communities who in almost every other aspect of experience and belief share little else. God takes on flesh and flesh reveals God, not in a ubiquitous or indistinguishable sense of all flesh all of the time but in the most particular sense of flesh experienced by, in this case, a human being in a particular time and place, which is how flesh is experienced by all human beings. Namely, God takes on this man's flesh, in this first-century Palestinian time-being, under the press and inspiration of these Roman colonial conditions.

It is the very particularity of divine flesh that vexed theological reflections on incarnation in the christological debates of the first three centuries after Jesus' death, and the challenge of that particularity haunts many contemporary theologies today.<sup>23</sup> To give assent to the idea that the God of all the heavens and the earth becomes small and particular in the occurrence of a single man in a particular historical context appears to limit incarnation too much ("Why him?") and, at the same time, threatens to open up incarnation too much ("What's to keep anyone from claiming to be God incarnate?"). Theologians then and now have had to answer the problem of too much and too little flesh in the central claim of divine incarnation.

Early Constantinian theologians and hymnwriters supplied the answer, with which contemporary theology still must contend, by limiting divine mingling with human flesh to one man, one time, one place. In doing so they attempted to answer the question of "Why him?" by focusing on his miraculous virgin birth and thereby establishing his essential distinction in kind from all other human beings. This must have seemed easier than attempting to answer the question of "Why not others?" In the third, fourth, and fifth centuries C.E., when the doctrine of incarnation was first hammered out, church unity was at stake and multiple incarnations could easily have fueled

further internal dissension. At the very least Constantine, Christianity's first sponsoring emperor, benefited from a theory of incarnation that mirrored his own claims to exclusive status as sole ruler, raising the political currency of his likeness to a divine incarnate image. The imperial church leaders went to great lengths to crown the man from Nazareth with every trapping of royalty and exclusivity, in part, I suggest, because that raised the status and appeal of their faith as well.

In effect, by limiting divine incarnation to a single historical occurrence in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, the council bishops made of Jesus and his mother Mary a beneficent model of dynastic imperial rule. Whatever uncertainties persist about the actual faith of Emperor Constantine in his life or at his deathbed, his ruthless and bloody drive to become the sole ruler of the known world is well documented.<sup>24</sup> The development by his bishops of a clear Christology that declared Jesus to be the "only-begotten" son of God certainly gave a divine nod, if not blatant legitimation, for the emperor's own goals. Jesus' exclusive filial claim to divinity was made all the more intelligible across the Roman church by widespread patrilineal assumptions about the nature of inheritance.

Despite the clear and easily documented acquiescence of theological integrity to imperial aspiration in Christian doctrines of incarnation, it is important to remember that such aspirations have never fully determined the course of Christian theology. In contrast to the emergent imperial theology of the post-Constantinian church, the rhetoric of Paul's early Philipian letter centers around amazement that equality with God actually seems equal to human failure. Paul suggests that divinity revealed in the flesh of Jesus is divine equality with the slave, the servant, or (in more contemporary language) the day laborer or undocumented worker (Phil. 2:6-8). Liberation theologians have argued strenuously that this revelation of divinity from the fleshy stories of Jesus, not the gilt exclusivity of kings and emperors, is the proper guide to the meaning of incarnation.

What makes equality with God significant here is not just the revelation of divinity in the flesh of a man from Nazareth, at the Augustan pinnacle of the Roman Empire, but the revelation of flesh in divinity. I insist upon both sides of this equation, not only in pursuit of healing for reviled bodies but in addressing the conundrum posed by Christianity's traditional, albeit arbitrary, claim of exclusivity in incarnation.<sup>25</sup> The conundrum is this: If the Christian doctrine of incarnation insists upon God actually becoming flesh (as it does), then it obliterates both the radical and abstract otherness of God and the absolute oneness of God upon which it also insists. Flesh is

indiscriminate in its porous interconnection with everything, and it is never, at any level, absolutely unified. To insist upon a solitary incarnate moment is to betray the very fleshiness of flesh, its innate promiscuity, pesky shiftiness, and resilient interruptions of sense. A solitary incarnation is, in other words, not incarnation at all but a disembodiment: a denial of the flesh that in its very cellular structure of integration, disintegration, and passage is always re-forming, dispersing, and returning. The ancients couldn't really know the atomic structure of living flesh or the physics of elemental biology, although some, like the Roman philosopher Democritus, had some pretty good ideas about it.<sup>26</sup> Christians today, however, do not have the excuse of ignorance about the fundamental promiscuity of bodies, their mixtures, in-between genders, and indiscriminate interconnections. Incarnation, if it is about divinity revealed in flesh, should at least attempt to be accurate in its dealings with the latter despite the fact that becoming accurate about flesh changes everything about divinity too.

### INCARNATION AS DIVINE EXCESS AND INDISCRIMINATION

Lisa Isherwood, a proponent of "body theology," points out that the

"struggle for embodiment is a hard fought one, and simply being alive is not enough because we have been subjected to alienation within our own skin for far too long. In a desperate attempt to claim our embodiment as positive, feminists have to face the hard questions about their traditions, and within the Christian tradition we have to realize that we may have to move on beyond the neatly packaged Christ to a place of uncertainty, a place of new imaginings."<sup>27</sup>

To claim outsider embodiment—embodiment in the form of those excluded from social privilege—as positive through the incarnate divine means that incarnation cannot look like any one thing, but neither can it be abstracted, once again, away from bodies into some kind of principle. If, in a world of embodied differences, one body is not to be elevated above all others, then the image of incarnate God cannot reduce to a single referent or a single body.

Fortunately for those who find my argument worth entertaining, but who require a biblical basis for their theological claims, the Christian doctrine of exclusive embodiment postdates the biblical texts and cannot be justified there. Even a strict reading of the Johannine claim by Jesus that he is the "way, and the truth, and the life" through which no other access to

the "Father" may be obtained (John 14:6) does not necessitate interpreting Jesus as the only occurrence of divine incarnation. Indeed, Christians have interpreted this passage quite liberally throughout their history. When I was a child, for example, and asked how I was supposed to go "through Jesus" to arrive at God, my Sunday school teacher explained that my baptism and membership in the church constituted my access to God "through" Jesus. This move and others like it, which equate the church itself with Jesus (as the "body of Christ") and so as the bona fide means to the God whom Jesus called "my Father," actually depend upon prodigious theological manipulation. They necessitate the construction of the doctrine of the Trinity and specifically of the Holy Spirit, which forms the basis of the ongoing presence of Jesus Christ in and as the church community. Together these trinitarian developments in effect undermine the exclusivity of the historical individual Jesus as divine incarnation by expanding the notion of incarnation to a vague claim of Christ's spiritual presence in the church as Christ's body. Even more interesting, they constitute an explicit, if perhaps inadvertent, move away from the logic of oneness that otherwise governs the monotheistic traditions.

The Johannine claim that the Christian way to God is through the incarnation changes its meaning when incarnation takes on a more generous, embodied sensibility. "Through me" in John 14:6 could just as easily mean through the body itself, at least if incarnation means anything close to "in the body." A very different story might have emerged had bodies been the doctrinal point of incarnation, and most certainly different practices of the body might have developed in the church, had its leaders read John 14:6 to mean that the path to God runs through the body.<sup>28</sup> Such a reading does not require hermeneutical contortion. It is a simple rendering of the word *incarnation*.

Viewed from the angle of Christianity's implicit and explicit connection to incarnation, the "place of new imaginings" of which Isherwood speaks may therefore not be so far removed from traditional Christian thought as it might appear at first blush. The results of new imaginings, however, may usher in profound changes to the shape and content of the core doctrines. The problem for such imaginings lies less in limitations posed by biblical and narrative sources for Christian theology (they are in fact rich sources for precisely the kind of new imaginings for which Isherwood and I hope) and more in the intertwining social structures that have legitimated—and ossified—particular interpretations. Ancient anxieties about female sexuality, rooted in economic structures of patrilineality, still course through contemporary

interpretations of divine incarnation such that robust sexualities of all kinds are shunned from the body of Christ, the body of the divine, just as that body remains—for many at least—ostensibly male.

How might a notion of promiscuous incarnation shift the lens on divinity enough to open up the already existing places of new imaginings? Promiscuity—whether it refers to mixture, or to sexual openness, or to a third gender between male and female—suggests intercourse and multiplicity, a posture of generosity toward change and of ambiguity toward identity, any of which goes a long way actually to describing the character of Jesus' interactions in the narratives of his life. Incarnation, at least as the stories of Jesus imply and as the long history of the church demonstrates, is neither pure nor unambiguously categorizable. Incarnate divinity consorts with specificity, with individuals under the radar of identity categories, in defiance of identity profiles rather than in obedience to them. It is impossible to say, on the basis of the surviving narratives, that Jesus preferred categories of people to the actual individuals who crossed his path. He simply does not seem to be attentive to identity classifications. He does not seem, for example, to prefer only centurians, or wealthy young politicians (Luke 18:18-25), or even the poor, for he spends a great deal of time with people of means, like Mary of the upper-class Magdalenes. Nor does he seem to prefer only children, or only prostitutes, or only fishermen, or only women. Does he reject anyone on the basis of category? He seems to have tried with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30), but she quickly set him straight. He does not even avoid Romans, or the agents of Tiberius's endless tax levies for imperial expansion, or friends who he knows will betray him. If anything, the narratives of Jesus of Nazareth suggest that the divinity which his flesh reveals is radically open to consorting with anyone. It follows no rules of respectability or governing morality in its pursuit of connection with others, many others, serially and synchronically, passionately and openly.

It is for this reason that I argue (here and elsewhere) that the claims of exclusivity that Christians place on divine incarnation reveal Christian insecurities about a God who loves too freely, too indiscriminately, and too often, rather than jealousy on the part of God. This kind of excess of intimacy and disregard for propriety is the definition of promiscuity in sexual terms. Jesus is a "promiscuous boy" (to borrow Furtado's phrase) whose entire teachings might be reducible to the refrain "don't get mean." The erasure and vilification of sex in Christian theology and in the canonical narratives about Jesus represent a serious error at the core of the tradition. This error is founded not on theological grounds but on economic grounds and cannot be

corrected until the patrilineal economics of Christian sexual morality is fully dismantled. The astonishing revelation of flesh in divinity through the Gospel stories and through the doctrinal affirmations of incarnation cannot fully emerge without that correction, because without it, incarnation is desiccated in abstraction and exclusive isolation, which is the opposite of embodiment. And so, without that correction, ostracized bodies—female bodies, black bodies, queer bodies, disabled bodies, fat bodies, tattooed bodies, diseased bodies, anybodies—can hardly be recognized as the flesh that, if Jesus is the way to God, reveals God.

Promiscuous incarnation suggests excess and indiscriminate in divine love. It puts power and the inexorable pull of gravitational attraction in "God so loved the world." It restores sexual bounty and openness to God, which means that it welcomes the end of racialized hierarchies that depend upon sexualized regimes of control. It dismisses purity as a divine attribute and replaces it with the cacophonous mixture of differences that constitute divine time-being. Promiscuous incarnation refuses the either/or of rigid gender roles in exactly the same way that all bodies rebel against those strictures: it is a third gender, which makes divine incarnation a disruption of every social binary, every structure that would divinize one at the expense of all of the others. It honors the hungers of the body, even to the point of picking grain on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1).

Promiscuous incarnation implies a God outside of human control and even outside of religious rules but not outside of human life and experience, not outside of human hungers and desires, not ever far away from ecstasy or grief. Somehow, if indeed the stories of Jesus are to be the way to divine incarnation, Christians can claim that God always becomes flesh for a purpose and so can be found wherever that purpose is being pursued. That purpose is radical, compassionate, promiscuous love of the world to such an extent that suffering in any person, any body, is a wound in God's flesh, a diminishment of God's own beloved, a gravitational pull on God to come, again. And again.

18. Because of this divine freedom to call forth life in relentless possibility, Christian theological ethics begins not with human freedom but with the "action and freedom of God." Duff, "Christian Vocation, Freedom of God, and Homosexuality," 265.

19. Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 1. See also Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, 198, 222; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 200.

20. Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, 226.

21. I draw this understanding of integrity from Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 35, and *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 15.

22. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, "Love (OT)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 377–80.

23. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Heseb in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula: Scholar's, 1978), 238–39.

24. Camilla Burns, "The Call of Creation," in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, ed. John C. Haughey, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America 2004), 24.

25. Paul Sponheim, *Faith and the Other: A Relational Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 60.

26. Elaine Graham, "Towards a Practical Theology of Embodiment," in *Globalization and Difference: Practical Theology in a World Context*, ed. Paul Ballard and Pam Couture (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic, 1999), 79ff.

27. Martin Luther, "Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 386.

28. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 76–77.

29. Robert Jensen, "Faithfulness," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 196.

30. Williams, "The Body's Grace," 63.

31. *Ibid.*

32. As quoted in Rudy, *Sex and the Church*, 77.

33. Briendenthal, "Sanctifying Nearness," 48.

34. *Ibid.*, 55.

## 14. PROMISCUOUS INCARNATION

1. Darby Kathleen Ray, *Incarnation and Imagination: A Christian Ethic of Ingenuity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 43.

2. See Jürgen Moltmann's argument for the primacy of the incarnation in Christian theology, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993 [1981]). See also Lisa Isherwood, "The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: The Spiralling of Incarnation," *Feminist Theology* 12, no. 2 (2004): 140–56.

3. I am referring here especially to the bodies of the nondominant in society—the bodies of people of color, of the homeless, of women, and of sexual minorities. However, a closer study of the "body of Christ" as a euphemism for the church in its explicit ritual

practices of baptism and Eucharist as well as its latent practices of inclusion and exclusion also reveals deep ambivalence about flesh. I cannot attend to these ambivalences in this short essay but hope to do so in a longer treatment of the topic. A good treatment of the hierarchical "chain of being" and its relationship to Christian theology is available online in the University of Virginia's *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. See Lia Formigari, "Chain of Being," available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-45>, accessed January 19, 2009.

4. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993 [1985]); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Nancy R. Howell, *A Feminist Cosmology: Ecology, Solidarity, and Metaphysics* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity, 2000).

5. Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2007).

6. Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

7. Isherwood, "Embodiment," 149.

8. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Promiscuous" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Incarnation."

10. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Promiscuous."

11. For more on the co-constitution of sex, race, and gender, see my article "What Race Is Your Sex?" in *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do*, ed. Jennifer Harvey, Karin Case, and Robin Hawley Gorsline (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), 142–62.

12. See Judith Romney Wegner, "Leviticus," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 40–48. See also Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998).

13. "Patriarchal" refers to the rule (Gk. *arche*) of the father (Gk. *patria*), while "patrilineal" refers to the paternal line of descent. Societies are patriarchal that place men in ruling positions vis-à-vis women. They are patrilineal when they trace names and inheritance through the father's line. The two most often occur together (as in Roman society) but not necessarily.

14. In the case of the Hopi people, for example, male responsibility for children follows the maternal line, and so individual men are financially and morally responsible primarily for their sisters' children. A mother, therefore, relies for material support on brothers and secures her children's future through them rather than through husband or lovers. As one Hopi friend informed me, "I love my biological son and daughters and am free to dote on them without reserve. But they are my wife's brothers' worry and responsibility for education and proper provision. That is as it should be, since her brothers are their clan elders. My worry is my four nephews, who give me plenty of grey hairs and who will rise up in my clan and carry my name. All of this leaves my wife and me free to enjoy ourselves as English married couples seldom do—we do not fight over how to send our children to college!" Personal correspondence, December, 1999.

15. Laurel C. Schneider, *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash against Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1999), 171ff.

16. See, among others, James A. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999); Mary E. Hunt, *Good Sex: Feminist Perspective from the World's Religions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

17. See especially Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

18. Interestingly, an English-language-testing Web site reported a surge in hits by users who Googled "define promiscuous" directly following the song's release. See <http://www.english-test.net/forum/ftopic15620.html>, accessed August 17, 2009.

19. Nelly Furtado, "Promiscuous" (featuring Timbaland), written by Tim "Attitude" Clayton, Tim Mosley, Nelly Furtado, and Nate Hills, track from *Loose*, CD B000630002 (Geffen: Universal Music Distribution, 2006).

20. What would have happened, for example, to early Christian configurations of Jesus' identity at Nicea had Israel and Rome calculated descent through the mother's line? The fact that there were serious debates at all about his humanity speaks to the cultural presence (although not dominance) of matrilineal assumptions among the bishops gathered from across the nascent Christian empire.

21. Ray, *Incarnation and Imagination*, 44.

22. I have argued that "continuous" is a better translation than "eternal." See Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 117–20.

23. For example, the particularity of Jesus' maleness vexes contemporary Catholic debates over the ordination of women, as do questions of his sexuality in relation to marriage, homosexuality, and so forth. The idea that "God became flesh" once in history is coming under challenge by feminist, ecological, process, and womanist theologians for whom the revelation of incarnation implicates and imbues all flesh with some dimension of divinity but for whom such worldly divinity remains somewhat abstract. See, e.g., McFague *Body of God*, Howell, *Feminist Cosmology*, and Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). For discussion of the early Christian debates on the nature of Christ, see William Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980).

24. An excellent treatment of this period of doctrinal formation in the Christian church under Emperor Constantine is H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

25. I follow Lisa Isherwood on this point. See Isherwood, "Embodiment," 149–50.

26. See, for example, David J. Furley, *The Greek Cosmologists*, vol. 1: *The Formation of the Atomic Theory and Its Earliest Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

27. Isherwood, "Embodiment," 149.

28. A good starting place for thinking about the inherent multiplicity in Christian thought is Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*.

## 15. ECCLESIOLOGY, DESIRE, AND THE EROTIC

1. C. S. Lewis's little book, *The Four Loves* (London: Collins, 1960), is still extremely valuable in distinguishing between eros and plain sexual desire (what Lewis calls "Venus"). But more importantly for our purpose here, Lewis recognizes that eros is not exhausted

by sexual experience and "includes other things besides" (85). "Sexual desire," he writes, "without Eros, wants it, the thing in itself; Eros wants the Beloved" (87).

2. Bernard McGinn, "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1, no. 2 (2001): 157. There is a lengthy and more illuminating discussion of Hadewijch in McGinn's *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 3: *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 200–22.

## 16. SEX IN HEAVEN? ESCHATOLOGICAL EROS AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

1. Margaret R. Miles, "Sex and the City (of God): Is Sex Forfeited or Fulfilled in Augustine's Resurrection of the Body?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2 (2005): 309, 310.

2. F. Regina Psaki, "The Sexual Body in Dante's Celestial Paradise," in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jan Swango Emerson and Hugh Feiss (New York: Garland, 2000), 48, 58.

3. *Ibid.*, 57.

4. Some theologians, especially process, feminist, and ecotheologians raise important theological, moral, and political concerns about how belief in heaven can adversely affect how humans live on earth. For example, an ecotheological perspective would advocate abandoning belief in personal immortality and viewing death as a natural process. This viewpoint emphasizes the interconnectivity of the divine with all that is and points toward an ethic of sustainability. See David Ray Griffin, "Process Eschatology," and Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Eschatology in Christian Feminist Theologies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), esp. chap. 7, "Eschatology: A New Shape for Humanity."

5. Eschatology (from the Greek word *eschaton*, meaning "the end") is the doctrine of the end times or consummation of history when the whole cosmos will assume its final destiny—a doctrine that traditionally includes subjects like the last judgment, resurrection of the body, heaven, and hell.

6. Philosophers are also very engaged with the question of whether there is heaven or immortality at all. For an example of a counterargument by an atheist philosopher, see Kai Nielson's essays in *Death and Afterlife*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (New York: St. Martin's, 1989): "The Faces of Immortality," "God and the Soul: A Response to Paul Badham," "God, the Soul, and Coherence: A Response to Davis and Hick," and "Conceivability and Immortality: A Response to John Hick."

7. My claim about the woundedness of the blessed brings up the issue of disabilities. There is a growing literature in theological disability studies regarding how to speak of redemption and physical disabilities. This is beyond the purview of this essay. For one recent set of viewpoints, see "Women with Disabilities: A Challenge to Feminist Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 2 (1994): 99–134.

8. For the notion of eschatological imagination, I am indebted to John Thiel, "For What May We Hope? Thoughts on the Eschatological Imagination," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 517–41.

9. John Morreall, "Perfect Happiness and the Resurrection of the Body," *Religious Studies* 16 (1980): 29–35.