NATURE, BODY AND TEXT IN EARLY MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY: FROM ERIUGENA TO CHARTRES

Willemien Otten

The Body as Early Christian Paradigm

In many ways the twelfth century seems to have been a pivotal era in the history of medieval Christianity. The impact of its urbanization process on medieval society was accompanied by a massive and widespread change of the familiar cultural and intellectual *modi operandi*. Theologically, this change is often expressed as the change from a monastic to a scholastic way of reading, writing and teaching. Philosophically, a similar description of change applies. In addition, it is important to realize that the divide between philosophy and theology as kindred branches of knowledge stems precisely from this era.

Whatever the precise impact of such statements, which are part of the ongoing historiographical process to attain an ever more refined system of periodization, the above consideration of the twelfth century as an intellectual turning-point of sorts—whether or not with the added qualification of ‘renaissance’—has the distinct advantage of bringing

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time momentarily to a halt. Such moments of standstill allow one not just to take stock of the era in question, but to survey with more care and renewed discretion the centuries leading up to it. It is as if what was lying dormant in the shadows suddenly comes out basking in the sunlight, leading to discover hitherto undetected features.

Viewing the early Middle Ages up close in this way allows us to make some interesting observations about the role of the body, which is the topic of the current article. Since the publication of Peter Brown’s masterful study *The Body and Society* in the late eighties, there have been numerous attempts to redraw the map of early Christianity from a corporeal perspective. Bringing out the attraction of the ascetic life—hitherto suffering from benign, if not indifferent neglect from scholars—as an important drive behind the widespread success of Christianity, Brown’s work had a revolutionary impact on the field of patristics. With some justification, this revolution might well be called Copernican, as it involved a paradigm shift in the understanding of the relationship between doctrinal and social concerns. Issues like human sexuality were suddenly brought to bear on intricate and complex theological texts. This was not merely done from a kind of counter-cultural [read: feminist] agenda, challenging conventional views as masculine and orthodox. On the contrary, attention to the body underscored the theological importance of most early Christian authors and texts, with Brown showing how their relevance was based on much more than right conviction alone, touching upon the deepest nerves of late ancient society.

The success of his contextualizing approach has since spread to have a similar impact on the study of philosophy. This can be deduced from Margaret Miles’ *Plotinus on Body and Beauty*. Following on the heels of Brown’s research, it also has affinity with her earlier study of

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4 The literature on the role of the body in early Christianity since the appearance of Brown, *Body and Society*, is extensive. Yet the corporeal revolution in patristics is in recent years giving way to the effects of the linguistic turn, as indicated by D. Brakke in his survey article “The Early Church in North America: Late Antiquity, Theory, and the History of Christianity,” *Church History* 71 (2002), 473–491. See Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text. Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, 2004). Virginia Burrus, “Begotten Not Made” (Stanford, 2000) is an example of how the two strategies can be combined.

5 Clark’s *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, 1999) demonstrates how the art of scriptural interpretation came to serve the ascetic and orthodox cause.