

Divine bodies: imagining the anatomy of God

John Launer 

In my office at home I have two statuettes of Hindu gods. One is a bronze I bought many years ago in Varanasi on the banks of the Ganges. It depicts Shiva the Destroyer with his three eyes and four arms. The other is a small marble image that one of my patients once gave me, to bring me good luck. It shows the elephant-headed god Ganesh, with his pot belly. I also currently have on my desk a catalogue from a recent exhibition at the British Museum. On its cover there is a photo of a scary but magnificent effigy of Kali, one of many forms of the mother goddess. In her left hand there is a severed head., and she has a garland of skulls around her neck. Her husband Shiva lies naked and submissive under her feet, symbolising how powerless he would be without her creative force (see [figure 1](#)).

Although I am not Hindu myself either by heritage or observance, I find no difficulty in relating to these vivid images of gods, nor in imagining why believers might pay homage to them. As the historian of religion Reza Aslan has written: ‘what the vast majority of us think about when we think about God is a divine version of ourselves: a human being with superhuman powers.’¹ I may not have the same beliefs as a devout Hindu, but I wonder if the feelings evoked in me by these artefacts are entirely unlike those of a devotee. Such a topic might be suitable for a multicultural course in medical humanities.

By background and affiliation I belong to a monotheistic tradition. This arose around 500 BCE in Jerusalem. It promoted a very different view of divine bodies. There had been forms of monotheism before in Persia and Egypt, but what the priests of the Jerusalem temple did was unprecedented. They revised the scriptures of their people to exclude all deities except a tribal one named Yahweh. They emphasised how this male, omnipotent God could neither be seen nor heard, and they tried to ban their followers from making idols to represent him. This faith, known as Judaism, could not have seemed more

different from neighbouring religions, or other Asian ones like Hinduism. Indeed, it remained rather obscure – until a tiny sect emerged among its followers some 500 years later. Members of the sect became convinced that their martyred leader, a man from Nazareth named Yeshua or Jesus, had been a physical incarnation of God himself, and had returned from the dead following his crucifixion.² Over time, this resurrection cult caught on hugely. The question of depicting God in bodily form then became rather more complicated.

CONTRADICTIONS AND PARADOXES

By three centuries later, the Roman emperor Constantine had declared that the Christian Church – as it was now called – would be the state religion of the entire Empire. He personally chaired the council which agreed that God had taken on the form of three separate beings: the Father (as represented in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament), the Son (whose story had appeared in the New Testament), and the divine spirit of God, or Holy Ghost. So there were now some apparent contradictions and paradoxes in monotheism: most of its followers worshipped a triple deity, and this Trinity came to be represented in human form just as many other Asian gods had been – accompanied by a lamb or dove along with angels and other beings, not to mention images of blood and violence (see [figure 2](#)).



Figure 1 Kali. Bengal, 19th century, © British Museum.

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According to a recent best-selling book, the biblical account of God was shot through with contradictions like this from the very beginning, particularly regarding the way his body was imagined. In *'God: an anatomy'*, its author Francesca Stavrakopoulou aims to demonstrate that the Jerusalem priesthood's attempts – and those of its Christian successors – to write polytheism, idols and the bodily reality of their deities out of history and popular belief were clumsy and ineffective.³ As a

professor of Hebrew Bible and ancient religion, Stavrakopoulou has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Semitic religions that preceded Judaism and Christianity and continued alongside them in that region. As a media personality with considerable charisma, she also knows how to put across a message with clarity, passion and wit.

Stavrakopoulou points out, like many scholars before her, that the Bible preserves the name and many aspects of

the ancient Sumerian high god El, along with a pantheon of other regional gods and goddesses like Baal and Asherah, while it promotes the previously minor god Yahweh to new pre-eminence. As earlier commentators have also noticed, she reminds us that the biblical writers frequently let slip that they were fighting a battle against these rival gods for much of the time. Her unique contribution, however, is to catalogue the hundreds of ways in which the text and language of the Bible emphasise God's similarity to the predecessors he was meant to replace, most especially in his sheer physicality.

To his worshippers, Stavrakopoulou suggests, God was never the abstract principle that either Jewish or Christian priests wanted to turn him into. Instead, he was frequently depicted as a physical being who might be just around the corner at any moment. He walks (with Enoch, Noah and Abraham). He talks (to Moses, the prophets and many others.) He appears to them in person (to Ezekiel and Isaiah, for example). In various books of the Bible he sniffs, snorts, gulps and gasps. Virtually every body part you can think of is attributed to him at some point in the biblical text, including heart and liver. So are most bodily functions including sex and (possibly) defecation. Based on a compendium of his attributes, this is how Stavrakopoulou thinks he would appear :

'A supersized human-shaped body with male features and shining, ruddy-red skin...His biceps bulge. His forearms are hard as iron...His penis is long, thick and carefully circumcised; his testicles are heavy with semen...'

RIVETING AND SHOCKING

'God: an anatomy' is riveting and at times shocking, but is it convincing in its reconstruction of the Bible? Yes and no. I would challenge any reader of the Bible, and probably any churchgoer or synagogue member, to read this book and not be struck afterwards by the echoes in the scriptures and liturgy of the so-called 'idolatries' they thought monotheism had rejected. Stavrakopoulou's insights and the excellent illustrations in the book are also likely to make them more aware of how much – and why – the visual images in Christianity, and even Judaism, are closer to Asian religions than we generally notice.

At the same time, Stavrakopoulou quite often displays a certain rhetorical sleight of hand that is convincing at a first reading but less so on reflection. To take just one example, she alludes early in the book to



Figure 2 The Holy Trinity by Jacomart, 15th century. Palais des Beaux arts, Lille, France.

the possibility that the original temple in Jerusalem built by Solomon may actually have included a statue of Yahweh, contrary to all the injunctions against idols – but she does not present the evidence for or against this. Later, she seems to refer to it as a fact. When there is a choice between reading a bodily expression in two ways, she almost invariably chooses the more provocative one. In the book of Ruth the phrase ‘you shall go in and cover his feet’ is clearly a delicate instruction to the heroine to have sex with her kinsman Boaz, but does this really support Stavropoulou’s claim that the angels described in the book of Isaiah used their wings to cover their genitals rather than their feet? Robert Alter, probably the greatest living translator of the Hebrew Bible, comments on this with more scholarly caution: ‘Some think “feet” is a euphemism for the genitals, but that is not a necessary inference’.⁴ As Freud would have said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

A certain kind of concreteness also appears to limit Stavropoulou’s empathy with religions as powerful systems of metaphors that sustain meaning

and purpose for believers – whether they are monotheistic like Judaism and Christianity or polytheistic like Hinduism and the ancient Mesopotamian religions. To quote Reza Aslan again:

‘No Mesopotamian would have thought that the small idol hoisted up in the air by the priest was *actually* a god. This is a complete misunderstanding of the term “idol worship”. The idol was not itself a god; it was *imbued* with the god.’⁵

Similarly, if you take a typical phrase from the psalms like ‘Let the sea roar’ you can identify the Hebrew word for sea (‘yam’) with the ancient Semitic sea-god of that name, as Stavropoulou generally does. Or you can just enjoy it as magnificent sacred poetry. I suspect that most readers of the scriptures, from any faith background, or with any degree of belief or unbelief, would probably go for the poetry.

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