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Book Review

Elke Pahud de Mortanges, *Bodies of Memory and Grace*

Der Körper in den Erinnerungskulturen des Christentums

Zürich: Pano 2022, 238 pages

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In the beginning was the word? Yes, perhaps. But in the beginning was also the body – and it was and still is the central place of memory in Christianity. This thesis, as clear as it is revealing, is the basis of this work by Elke Pahud de Mortanges. The central Christian themes of remembrance and commemoration – of the incarnation, the passion, and the resurrection, for example – take place in flesh and blood. Different moments can be highlighted. The body of Jesus is a foundation of Christian memory cultures, prominently depicted from childhood to the cross and resurrection and located at the core of various rituals. Additionally, the bodies of believers play a central role in religious acts, in prayers, in vestimentary habits, in strong emotions, for example, but also in more “violent” acts such as self-mortification. And finally, the body in Christianity is part of a wider network of remembrance culture, on which art and popular culture build. The book emphasises the complexity and interrelations of these different moments, skilfully guiding the reader through historical and contemporary examples to demonstrate the centrality of the body to the formation of cultural and religious memory.

The three-part book is held together by the artwork *Gaby* from the series *Virgenes de la Puerte* by Andrew Mroczek and Juan José Barboza-Gubo. This artwork also adorns the cover of the book: it shows Gaby, a transgender woman, sitting upright on a red sofa and looking at those watching her. She

is wearing a white bra and a long patterned skirt. A huge crown of thorns hovers above her, hanging halfway down her face. Early on (p. 15), the book argues that the crown is a “memorial icon”; it awakens within us memories of Christian imagery. With its connections to the body, imagination, representation, and religion – and the interconnectedness of these four – the cover image is an ideal introduction to and guide through the book.

Following an introduction, Part A, “Grundlegung” (Foundation), is dedicated to locating the concepts of “memory”, “body”, and “embodiment” in previous research and to explaining the theoretical framework of the study. Pahud de Mortanges defines religion as a system of communication that creates identity by asking fundamental human questions (p. 29). Remembrance is thus important in forming community and tradition. It is a performative act and creates a religious (and cultural) memory based on the body. From this perspective, religion is always plural, both material and bodily. Christianity is thus to be understood not as a homogeneous entity, but as part of a complex of processes with the body at its center (p. 30). As a medium of communication, as a place of memory, as a space for the construction of social and religious reality, and as also a moment of emotion and experience, the body plays the central role in this Christian plurality. “Doing Christianity” and “doing memory” are therefore useful concepts for grasping this bodily foundation of Christian cultures (p. 35). The body can be a writing surface as well as an object of discourse and a platform for negotiation on which fundamental questions are performed and religious worldviews are developed and mirrored.

These thoughts are elaborated in the second and main part of the book. Part B, “Erkundungen” (Explorations), is dedicated to how bodies are shaped and transformed in different Christian cultures of remembrance, with a focus on the *memoria passionis*. This section is a rich and exciting journey through the history of religion and brings insights into a variety of religious environments, groups, individuals, and perspectives – with great pictures, by the way. From bodily painful appropriations of the memory of Christ (by the medieval Flagellants, for example, pp. 115–120) to mysticism and art, the journey leads us into the plurality of cultures of remembrance in Christianity and considers the deep connections between the body, ideas, practices, and religion. Gender is thereby a central topic, especially the body that transcends gender borders. Christ as birth-bearer or as mother is thematised, as is the crossing of gender boundaries by believers. This investigation produces a revealing grasp of Christian memory cultures and their interrelations with the body.

In Part C, “Lehrstück” (Lesson), we find a reflection on the scholarly approach to the interrelation of the body and religion. The author also changes her perspective on the artwork *Gaby*. In parts A and B, this image functioned as a stimulus to further reflection. In this final section, by contrast, the author seeks to do justice to the artwork itself, freeing it from its role as “eye opener”. The artwork, the person it depicts, and its artists are not simply “objects” for scholarly analysis; they each have their own agency, and in this case these agencies are intertwined. *Gaby*, the protagonist of the artwork, has a right to her own story: the artwork refers to Christian cultures of remembrance, but it also tells the story of *Gaby* and her transgender sisters. In this final part, Pahud de Mortanges focusses on the complex internarrative of this artwork. She takes us back to religious history and combines this journey with reflections on art, and the political activism of the transgender community.

The book ends with a contribution in English by Andrew Mroczek and Juan José Barboza-Gubo, the two artists behind the artwork that guides us through the book – they too have a voice. Their reflections on *Gaby* bring a new perspective on the subject of the study.

The paths followed by this book provide various perspectives: they take the reader into the history of religion, elaborate theoretical reflections on body and religion, and invite the reader into the multifaceted world of art, but the book is also a reflection in itself. It asks what happens if the body is taken as central to understanding religious memory. The author calls for the plurality of Christianity to be recognised and acknowledged both historically and systematically. That approach includes the self-empowerment of the transgender community in Christianity.

Bodies of Memory and Grace is a remarkable book. It is singular, innovative, profound, and refreshing. Starting with a single work of art, it explores an ever-widening circle of questions both theoretically and empirically, opening up a fascinating world for the reader. It does precisely what a good book should do: it stimulates reflection.

This work is particularly insightful in demonstrating how looking at the body questions, alters, and reflects our understanding of religion. Emphasis on the bodily basis for remembrance and memory provides a unique perspective on Christianity (or better: Christianities) and the people within it. This multifaceted approach brings phenomena, perspectives, and questions together, instead of separating them. After all, people are bodies – in all their complexity.

I recommend this book to anyone who wants to reflect on the interplay between religion, memory, and the body and is prepared to question their own assumptions as well as traditions of thought and of memory.