

Divine Lives: Christ, Community, and Divine Embodimentⁱ

Bede Benjamin Bidlack

Introduction

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “Jesus is inseparably true God and true man” (§469) and that “The Word became flesh to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’” (§460). But the understanding of how the infinite, eternal God was embodied in the finite, temporal human Jesus and of how exactly humans continue to share or to embody the divine life remain questions with which theologians continue to wrestle. Christian approaches to divine embodiment require two presuppositions: 1) divine embodiment was a unique, historical event in the person of Jesus Christ and 2) the body of the incarnation was numerically singular and separate from other beings. At the same time, Christian anthropology presents human persons not only as solitary individuals, but also as social beings inseparable from the rest of humanity. The singular nature is attributed to the body because the body, unlike the soul, is definable in time and space. Thus the embodiment of God in the person of Jesus Christ is set as a singular occurrence that happened about two thousand years ago in the country surrounding Jerusalem.

These parameters of divine embodiment arise from observations of theological anthropology. The soul, however, is less marked by time and space and therefore is the more obvious choice as the locale for the social capacity of the human. The soul as the site of psychic processes can more readily join other minds in forming a community of shared ways of thinking, belief, and social mores. The body outwardly expresses these interior dispositions through, for example, standards of clothing or customs of behavior.ⁱⁱ But, can the social and communal capacity of the human person be extended to the body? How is divine embodiment reconsidered if the body itself is viewed as a community of beings? And if the body is a community, what forces hold it together and give it coherence? Reconsidering the nature of the human body will change how one envisions divine embodiment. A comparative reading of French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and Daoist Xiao Yingsouⁱⁱⁱ (fl. 1226) inspires these questions.

ⁱ A version of this article was originally published as “Divine Lives: Christ, Community, and Divine Embodiment,” in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 22, 2 (2012): 134-46.

ⁱⁱ See Karl Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” vol. 17 of *Theological Investigations*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 84; Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations* vol. 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966): 245-52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pronounced “Shee-ow Ing-sō.”