

"Embodied Religion"

The 19th conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion

August 30th- September 2nd 2012

Location: [Kontakt der Kontinenten](#), Soesterberg (near Utrecht), Netherlands

Call for Short Papers

The short papers should preferably be related to the conference-theme (and to one of the four sessions). Set-up short papers: 20' presentation time (max. 2300 words), followed by 10' discussion.

Deadline for submitting abstracts of the short-papers to the principal organisers: 1 March 2012.
Maximum number of words of the abstracts: 350

Principal organisers

Prof. Dr. Peter Jonkers (Tilburg University) - e-mail: p.h.a.i.jonkers@uvt.nl

Prof. Dr. Marcel Sarot (Utrecht University) - e-mail: m.sarot@uu.nl

Registration

Deadline for registration for the conference (at one of the principal organisers): May 1st 2012

Main Speakers

Keynote: Ola Sigurdson (Univ. of Gothenburg, Sweden)

Session 1: Jonna Bornemark (Södertörn University, Stockholm)
and Petruschka Schaafsma (Protestant Theological University, the Netherlands)

Session 2: Roderich Barth (University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany)
Mark Wynn (University of Exeter, U.K.)

Session 3: Marcel Sarot (Utrecht University, the Netherlands)
and Aku Visala (Oxford University, U.K.)

Session 4: Ingolf U. Dalferth (University of Zürich, Switzerland / Claremont Graduate School, USA) and John Cottingham (University of Reading, U.K.)

Embodied Religion

Religion has always been interpreted as primarily belonging to the sphere of the spiritual, since for most religious traditions (Christian as well as non-Christian) God is a spiritual being and relates to humankind spiritually. But religions are also typically very down to earth, dealing with issues of sexuality, reproduction and family, with practices about food, offering and sacrifice, questions of birth and death etc. Hence the human body is always involved in the concepts and practices of religions.

Furthermore religions also express themselves in various material ways, such as in icons and (other) works of art, in prayers, songs and the liturgy, which all have a strong physical component, in the inscription of the religious in the human body (e.g. the sacraments, the ritual of circumcision, and stigmata), and last but not least in a religiously inspired disciplining of the human body.

On the other hand, the recent developments of neuroscience have affected the idea that religion is something purely spiritual as well, and thus challenge philosophy of religion to rethink those characteristics of human nature that are vital for religion, such as free will, altruism, morality, and last but not least the human person as a 'self'. Some of the more extreme forms of neuroscience go as far as to suggest that a complete material explanation of human nature is in sight, thus annihilating, together with the spiritual dimension of human nature, the spiritual essence of religion completely. Anyhow, in order to have a fruitful discussion between philosophy of religion and neuroscience it is imperative to avoid such a reductionism, whereas philosophy of religion should at the same time accept the results of neuro-scientific research as interesting material for reflection on the corporal dimensions of religion.

All this offers ample support for the thesis underlying the general theme of the conference that religion is always embodied in various ways. This means that major changes in the basic anthropological concepts regarding the human body inevitably have an impact upon religion, and thus also challenge philosophy of religion to rethink how religions are embodied in the human person.

The conference-theme will be treated from various philosophical perspectives, differing in style, method and as to their relations to culture and science. To give an example, it was in the wake of the rise of phenomenology and its concept of the 'body as subject' that theological anthropology and (continental) philosophy of religion started to pay systematic attention to the impact of religion on the human body in general and to various shapes of religious embodiment in particular. Similarly, analytic philosophy has always been strong in examining the effects of scientific discoveries on the traditional idea of the human person as a free, morally responsible, spiritual being.

The conference aims at fostering a dialogue between these approaches, hopefully resulting in a better view of the promising perspectives, concepts and arguments that philosophy of religion can use in order to answer the questions raised by the new developments in our understanding of human nature.

The Conference is organised in four sessions

1. *Embodied religion: a philosophical reflection on mystical experiences and religious disciplining.*

In all religious traditions there are numerous examples of how religion does not only change the human mind (e.g. through conversion), but also affects the human body directly (e.g. various mystical experiences, including the so-called stigmata as an extreme example) and indirectly (e.g. through the moral and doctrinal teachings of religions, physical disciplining etc.). Can philosophy of religion offer (new) anthropological concepts to understand the corporeal impact of religion. Moreover, do these insights enable philosophy of religion to criticise problematic aspects of religious embodiment?

2. *Rituals and sacraments as embodiments of God: beyond a purely symbolic religion.*

In all religions rituals play a crucial role in making the presence of God or the Divine felt by humans. In the (Catholic) theology of the Eucharist the real presence of God is expressed through the doctrine of the transubstantiation. But other sacraments and rituals can also be considered as material expressions of a spiritual reality. Can philosophy of religion make sense of these embodiments of God and does it influence our view of magical practices?

3. *Neuroscience and Free Will: Can we still say that we 'are called to be free'?*

This session is aimed at various ways to rethink free will in light of recent empirical research that seems to imply that decisions are made in the brain before we are aware of them. Do these scientific insights present an adequate understanding of the philosophical concept of the free will, and, if so, can we still say with Paul that we are called to be free (Gal. 5:13)?

4. *Religion, Morality and Being Human: What about 'Thy will be done'?*

Another challenge to religion comes from psychobiological and etiological research, which suggests that certain degrees of moral consciousness and behaviour are found not only among human beings, but also among animals, especially primates. This seems to suggest that morality is not specifically human. If this insight is true, it obviously challenges the idea of human's unique dignity, which is supported by the religious conviction that humans are children of God par excellence. Furthermore, does the religious commandment that humans are called upon to do the will of God then still make sense? This session aims to examine the consequences of empirical evidence for vital religious concepts like morality and human dignity.