Globalisation and the Body
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When I was asked to lead a session on ‘Globalisation and the Body’ at the Stop Being Silent seminar in Minsk, it struck me that these are the two main focuses I have had throughout my studies in theology, but I have never thought to combine them.

I will approach this subject as a theologian. I am aware that my studies have had a Western focus and that I am coloured by a Protestant understanding of Christian faith. My aim is not to upset anyone from any tradition but to give a respectful challenge to all of our traditions.

Globalisation
In simple terms I would say that globalisation refers to the growth in the ease and normalcy of transactions of money, goods, and information, and also relates to the way we perceive the world. Nowadays, we take for granted that within a few seconds an e-mail reaches our friend even if this friend is in China or Brazil. At the same time, we might open a package of chocolate, in which the beans are grown in Ghana or the Ivory Coast, but the bar itself is produced in Switzerland by an American-owned company which then distributes it – enabling me and my friend to open exactly the same kind of chocolate even if this friend is in China. It has become a small world, or at least much, much smaller than it used to be.

But globalisation does not affect the world's population equally. Participation in the globalised world varies, often depending upon if you happened to be born in Belarus, South Africa, Indonesia, or Sweden. But the people who are not at all affected by globalisation in one way or another are – if at all existing – an ever decreasing number.

Through the globalisation of goods, money, and information, values are also globalised. This is especially interesting when talking about the body. Our former local ideologies regarding everything from greetings and manners to perceptions of beauty are more and more undermined by a global culture, a ‘lingua franca’ if you like, becoming the mother tongue of many people.

I do not believe that the local traditions will disappear completely but that they will also fit in the scheme of a global self-understanding. When we celebrate the special feasts of our local cultures or uphold our special cultural habits, we will do this with the self-consciousness that we do it because we are Belarussian, Swedish, Azeri, or Armenian. The local traditions, habits, and preferences likely will continue only as choices beside the options of the globalised culture, which in some way we will consider ourselves to own.

Tradition and globalisation
What is the Church’s view on globalisation in light of tradition? Well, the Church knew globalisation far before the word was ever mentioned. The Church is global in its essence.

First of all, the Church is the body of Christ – that is, among other things, the embodiment of God's saving plan for the world, for the entire creation. The mission of the Church is always...
connected to the original 'God saw that it was good' and the wish in God's being to restore creation to this goodness, as shown in the entire history of salvation. That is why the Church always has to refer to itself as global, universal, and Catholic and take the challenges of this seriously.

Secondly, the mission God gives to humanity and the Church has always been to spread and embrace all there is. In creation we read the command to procreate and fill the world. And in Jesus' ministry he tells us to go out and make all peoples his disciples. The Church, all people belonging to God, has from the beginning set out on a concrete globalised mission: to let the light shine all over the world.

Finally, it is about belonging. From the very start, from the first spread of Christianity from place to place – towards the Far East, Northern Africa, and the Roman Empire – we can see how belonging to the Cross and the commandment to keep peace have always kept the Church globalised. Even if it eventually divided, even if some parts of the Church lost contact with others, the prayers for the Church all over the world were not (and are not) silent.

Differing from the globalisation we know in late capitalism, the Church would never accept an end with nobody's responsibility. The Church is, on the contrary, very good at taking responsibility, guilt or sin so to speak, very seriously. The Church is called, in its essence, to acknowledge its trespasses and to express its willingness for repentance. If one part suffers it is the Church's responsibility and even duty to feel affected – as a proper body would – and therefore to act to alleviate this suffering. As the globalisation of money, goods, and information leave people suffering and nobody with apparent responsibility, the Church should form the perfected globalisation of prayer, participation, and struggle to alleviate the pain and if possible change the system of injustice to a new order of love, responsibility, and trust.

Now to the body
The body is an entity with which we express and perceive, feel, get hurt, attract and repel. The body is in one way connected to all that we are, but can also in some way be expressed as something other than our selves. The way the body has been presented and perceived varies through different times and cultures, and also has differences regarding gender, age, race, and class.

What we attach to the body is mostly ideology; our values and the values of our community condensed into habits are marks telling our position within given communities. Outside this ideology, the life-world through which we understand ourselves, much could possibly be expressed by the body. But this would all be meaningless as it would be outside the hermeneutic horizon we use for interpreting ourselves and others. The communication of our body, as all communication we participate in, is somewhat limited by the given references of our particular time and space.

Thus, when we talk about the symbols of our body, I am not sure we always talk about the same things. I somehow rely on our common globalised ideology as mentioned before.

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A body communicates power, or lack of power, through a complex web of symbols. Through symbols such as gender (which we code almost immediately when looking on a person), skin colour, origin, and beauty, we ascribe people different values and therefore places in the power hierarchies and relations we participate in. There are also ways, of course, to affect your role of power through how you present yourself and use body language.

Gender and sexual desire are often the things we first refer to when we talk of the body. Sex and sexuality are indeed some of the things we most clearly communicate bodily. Sex is one of the things we first code when facing another person’s body – we almost immediately know if someone is a woman or a man. When the codes we have for the two sexes are not sufficient, this is often provocative or even upsetting. It is also important to note that concepts of sex and sexuality as we perceive them have historical and spatial limits. This was not once and for all given and understood the same way through all times; even between our local cultures and different Church denominations, we can see differences in this.

The body, communicating a sex, also communicates sexuality and desirableness according to several culturally determined parameters. This is often performed to be in accordance with an ideal heterosexual couple – women performing womanliness and men performing manliness as to attract the 'opposite', thus fitting in the economy of desire provided by society. This does not mean that the feelings of desire would not be 'real', only that the ways we present ourselves as women and men are features in our attempts to sexual attraction. Even non-normative gender presentations and sexual desires, I believe, are in some way connected to these economies by forming counter economies or other kinds of 'alternatives'.

But gender is not only a way of presenting desire but also a way to present power-relations, hierarchies, violence, and fear. Swedish debater and politician, Katrine Kielos has written a book on rape where she concludes that the female gender presentation relies as much on desire and sexuality as on the constant threat of rape, which she is taught to avoid. Because if she is raped 'something' is damaged that she has been responsible for. This something, her body's value, has been broken and defiled. The warnings have been there, of course, a girl hears nothing but those warnings 'don't walk alone in the darkness', 'don't dress like a slut', 'don't follow men you don't know'. And when rape happens, within her own home by her husband or boyfriend or outside on the street, she concludes that the guilt is hers as a way to explain the violence she has experienced.

But, Kielos writes, even if the rape never occurs, the threat, the potentiality of rape and sexual violence is forming and restricting the female presentation of her body. She does not fully trust her body and learns that she is not allowed to use the public space freely. Therefore she does not develop her skills and strength as she might have been able to. If every day is spent balancing between attracting male desire and protecting the body from male desire, this will affect both the body and the presentation of self in power hierarchies.

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Others, such as the theologian Lisa Isherwood using the gender theorist Margaret Jackson, have claimed that marriage is risky business in this aspect—and this challenge is important for us in Church and in religious discussions. She says that there is a dominant agenda in the way we consider sex within marriage in the missionary position as normal and natural. This norm is eroticised so that women, schooled to know how to act and feel in this given situation, by their own desire, will wish for male dominance. This allowance for male dominance and power may also be the first step towards male violence. This is a challenge for our churches, if we wish to overcome domestic violence and continue to communicate marriage as inherently valuable. How can we change the norm for our conducted marriages so that their eroticism will give birth to love and trust and not to violence and dominance?

**A historical illustration**

It is also important to stress that not only the socially presented sex, what we usually refers to as 'gender', is interpreted by ideology but also the biological sex and the sexed body as such. Before the medical explorations of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, the female body was understood as a male body that had not developed to its full potential. The woman was seen as an imperfect version of the man. This was revised when the medical doctors in the 18th century explored human genitals further. Because of their discoveries, common ideology shifted to viewing both sexes as fundamentally different, which in one way engendered the two sexes into even more fixed categories. This ideology shift, I believe, was also part of the reason for a shift in theology towards concepts of female/male complementarity.

When the feminist project started in the 20th century, the strive for equality was very much about equalising the roles and possibilities for women to those of men, enabling women to go from passive roles to the traditional active and creative male roles. Soon feminist thinkers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, were criticised for using a male role model for the feminist project, meaning that the woman had to 'become a man' for completeness. Instead the idea of a feminine subject, equal but different from the male subject, took form. And now, I hear again from people who want to destabilise gender for the pursuit of gender fluid identities that the penis and the vagina are essentially the same organ.

By this I do not want to claim anything other than that the body is ideologically interpreted and that each interpretation may carry an agenda. Thus, if we need a special subject, like the feminine, for a certain purpose—such as for liberation in light of domestic violence—we should let the reason for this be certain experiences and not an essentialist notion of the body.

**Christianity and the body**

Any investigation on the Christian view of the body should start at the Cross, with Christ himself. The Passion—meaning both suffering and deep desire—is the image of the body which cannot be reduced to soul matter. The body on the cross tells us that our bodies have significance. It tells us of Gods enfleshment. God, humanised, being dehumanised into the very bone, on the shameful pole, abused, ridiculed, bleeding, and eventually giving up his breath.


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No Christian theology can escape this. Those who tried – like some Gnostic movements in the first centuries and even some preachers today – must be (and have been) accused of failure to understand the basics of Christian faith. Incarnation and redemption depend on each other, only the word made flesh can, in a Christian understanding, be the word that truly lived among us.

When facing the bleeding head of Jesus, his hands, his feet, the wound in his side, we do not only face him but also every sacrificed, slaughtered, abused, torn, and bleeding body. We see the raped woman, the abused youth, the suffocated child, the elder no one cared for. And we see ourselves, somehow, and our own littleness and our pains. But we also see another side of this: resurrection, vindication, and eternal life. The Christian hope is not only through identification with the torn body but also an eschatological hope of resurrection – of the body!

The body is also in the Eucharist, when we share bread and wine: the body sacrificed for us, the blood shed for us. We receive part of the broken bread, and we become the broken (not the perfect) body. The Church is an image of Christ who, though resurrected, still carries the wounds and remembrances of bodily pain and humiliation. So whenever anyone in Christian teachings wants to set mind and spirit over the body, remember this: the Word was made flesh. God became human, stretched out in a bodily reality, sharing our bodily experiences, and this is what we count as crucial for our salvation. This must mean that matters of salvation in a Christian understanding must have to do with matters of both individual bodies and the body of community.

The body in globalisation

In a globalised world, when we talk about the body as beautiful or disgraceful, when we approach the different symbols and meanings of body, sex, sexuality, and value, we will have increasingly the same opinions.

We must also address commodification. In globalisation, as we face it today, our bodies have become commodities – things to be bought and sold, exposed and exploited. The body has suddenly a price and no intrinsic worth; it can be exchanged in a second. Still the body often seems to be the only thing of value for those who have lost everything else of worth. The body might not give you love but could possibly give you appreciation. That is why, I believe, in the suburban areas where poverty deprives people of honour, worth, morality, and trust, the body is still very well treated, perfected through diets and exercise and then generously exposed.

And what about violence? Globalisation has given us some very concrete issues of bodily violence to deal with, those of trafficking, sex tourism, and the easy spread of pornographic material, including child porn. In the globalised world, this violence comes into our lives and affects our bodies immediately. The body sold and displayed as a commodity in a globalised format is a body submitted to globalised structures. These structures, since they are made

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for buying and selling, are and increasingly will be structures of hierarchical powers as power relations in general are economically generative in a short-term perspective.

Thus, the Church (and other religious institutions) must, as a parallel global system, also play the part of counter globalisation, not in terms of anti-globalisation, making local all what once was. The Church's counter globalisation must be to re-establish values attached to every part of creation, including every body on the earth – female, poor, queer, oppressed, appalling, and disabled bodies. What is poorly valued in the order of the world is known and valued by God, and this should also be visible in Her people.

**Suggested reading:**


K Kielos, *Våldtäkt och Romantik, En berättelse om kvinnlig sexualitet* [Rape and Romance: A tale of female sexuality], Modernista, 2008.


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