

## Religions and the Body

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## Introduction

The relationship between body and religion is full of philosophical and theological implications in all religions, assuming a fundamental importance for its link with specific cultural considerations on the human person in the various religious traditions of the world. The problems concerning the bond that unites matter and spirit revolve around the body, the value of this earthly existence and the hope in another life. **Each religious tradition has in fact elaborated a specific conception or vision of the body** in order to answer questions such as, "What is the nature of the body?", "What is its destiny after death?", "How can the individual achieve spiritual states through the conditions of the body?", "What is the normal religiously correct attitude towards the body?". The various cultural responses elaborated therefore consider the body from a purely moral and ascetic perspective to the assumption of the body as a symbol of a higher reality.

## Why and how to study the body. Methodological introduction

### Hinduism and the body

The Hindu tradition has elaborated a complex conception of the body, according to which the embodied beings are the result of a **combination of material and spiritual elements**: the material substratum pervading all existence (*prakriti*) and the Supreme Being as eternal consciousness (*Atman*, the spiritual "Self", the sparkle of eternity in every being). The physicality of the body would also manifest itself through three different modes (*guna*), each of which would express a different characteristic of the body: divinity (*sattva*), desire and attachment (*raja guna*) and illusion (*tama guna*).

The **body is also at the center of a rather complex ritual system**, generally adopted by all Hindu communities. Some of these body-centered ritual practices are, for example, haircutting of *upanayama*, householders daily ablutions and dead body prescriptions. **Haircutting during male initiation** is a ritual that marked the entry of a young boy into the community of the three higher classes of society. The ritual procedure consisted of shaving, washing and dressing with new clothes the young initiate, who was then led to his teacher (*guru*). Today, this ritual can be done at any time before his wedding. **Private rituals, such as bathing and praying**, belong instead to the observance of the daily obligations, including the care of bodily purity and professional duties, in order to obtain earthly rewards and the state of sanctity which allows to come into contact with the divine. **Dead body prescriptions** require specific rituals that precede and accompany cremation. These rituals may vary depending on many factors, but generally the body of the deceased is washed and dressed in new traditional clothes and laid first on the ground, where it is commemorated and then placed on a wooden stretcher, which is carried on the shoulders. to the place of cremation. Finally, the **religious role of dance** must be mentioned, since dance in Hinduism is an expressive form which is considered a refined spiritual language able to connect the body with the sphere of the divine. Codified symbolic meanings of gestures and movements, the **posture of the hands** (*mudra*), and the rhythmic movements of dance induce the experience of the divine in the dancer as well as in the spectators.

### More information on:

- [Hinduism and the body](#)
- [The Hindu way of life: the four stages of life, rites of passage and everyday cult](#)
- [The figure of the Master \(Guru\)](#)
- [The Upanishad and the Hindu shared worldview](#)



Hinduist ablution in Alagarkoil, near Madurai (Tamil Nadu, India). Photo by: [Claude Renault](#), CC-BY-2.0.

### Hebraism and the body

In Judaism the **soul and the body are considered a single entity** that constitutes the personality of man. In the Bible, the body is represented as a statue made with soil that comes to life thanks to the divine breath of God (*rûach*) or as a temple of the Lord. According to Judaism **body is then the material location of God's breath** that must be respected and guarded through rules and corporal practices which define the state of purity and impurity of the believer. **Positive and negative prescriptions** regarding the state of purity are accepted to keep the covenant between God and his people. Although within the various currents of Judaism (Orthodox, ultra-Orthodox and Reformation) there are different ritual customs centered on the body (for example the Orthodox currents have a strict dress code), there are **some common bodily practices**. Judaism is a system of life in which all moments are lived also on a ritual level: circumcision at the beginning of life, religious majority in the transition from puberty to adolescence, marriage and the creation of a new family in adulthood and finally death. **Circumcision** (*brit milà*) is the **covenant** that binds men of Israel with God. The circumcision is the covenant that binds the men of Israel with God and the obligation of circumcision falls on the father who generally delegates this task to a circumciser. Corporal practices are also involved during the wedding ceremony: in **Orthodox and Conservative** communities the **woman is obliged to immerse herself in the mikwe** (ritual bath) at the end of menstrual impurity or before wedding. **Jewish ritual ablutions** take on two main forms: *tevilah*, which consists in a complete immersion of the body, which has a decisive importance in Orthodox and Conservative communities, and *netilat yadayim*, that is, the ritual of washing of hands with a carafe. **Ritual preparation of the body of the deceased** also plays an important role for Judaism. When a person dies, the closest relatives immediately take care of the deceased: the body is covered by a sheet and always watched by a relative and never left alone. It is then washed with

water poured according to a purifying rite and then wrapped in a simple white shroud, as a sign of purity. The body is then wrapped further in a shawl with fringes on which precepts of religious origin are placed. The Jewish religion, believing that the body of a deceased returns to the land of origin and his soul reaches the divinity, provides for its burial and expressly prohibits embalming or cremation.

More information on:

- [Hebraism and the body](#)
- [The main Jewish rites and practices](#)
- [The main Jewish rites and practices: The daily cycle](#)



A brit milà ceremony. Photo by: Eliel [Joseph Schaffer](#) CCSA 3.0

### Buddhism and the body

The Buddhist tradition has developed a complex doctrinal system centered on **body and mind, which is understood as a single human entity**. According to Buddhism, the material form would consist of five impermanent components called *skandha* (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness): the **human being is formed by a series of interdependent elements** that compose the emotional, physical and cognitive state of each individual. In relation to the body, the historical Buddha also taught the need to avoid the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, which are excessive behaviors that do not lead to spiritual liberation. This path, also known as the "middle way", **avoids the two extremes**: that of happiness through the mere satisfaction of **sensory pleasures** and that of the **self-mortification** with different forms of asceticism. **The body is central** to many currents of Buddhist thought, in particular, **in the case of esoteric Buddhism** which teaches that it is possible to realize one's Buddha nature during this lifetime, without having to wait for an incalculable number of rebirths, thanks to some initiation consecrations and to the practice of disciplines of the body, speech and mind. The



body is also central in the **rituals of consecration of novices**: the ritual of **tonsure** is a way of denouncing the vanity and worldly ways represented by hair, introducing the novice to a new path of religious development or activity. In some cases, although rare, the body can be not only a means of consecration to monastic life, but it can also be used as a means of political protest. There have been **also cases of self-immolation** of Buddhist monks and nuns to protest discriminatory treatment, or war. Although these episodes of extreme violence may be in open contradiction with the main teachings of Buddhism, in particular with the principle of non-violence, they must be considered as an act of forgetting oneself, sacrificing oneself for others. Self-immolation embodies compassionate love for one's neighbor: it is about claiming rights to protect people, but at the same time it is nonviolent towards enemies.



*Monument in Vietnam commemorating a monk who set himself on fire to protest against the oppression of Buddhism in the 1960s. CC BY-NC 2.0. [Credits](#).*

#### More information on:

- [Buddhism and the body](#)
- [Introduction to Buddhism. A brief overview](#)
- [Main doctrines \(1\). Karma and Samsara](#)
- [Main doctrines \(2\). Four noble truths, illumination and Nirvana](#)



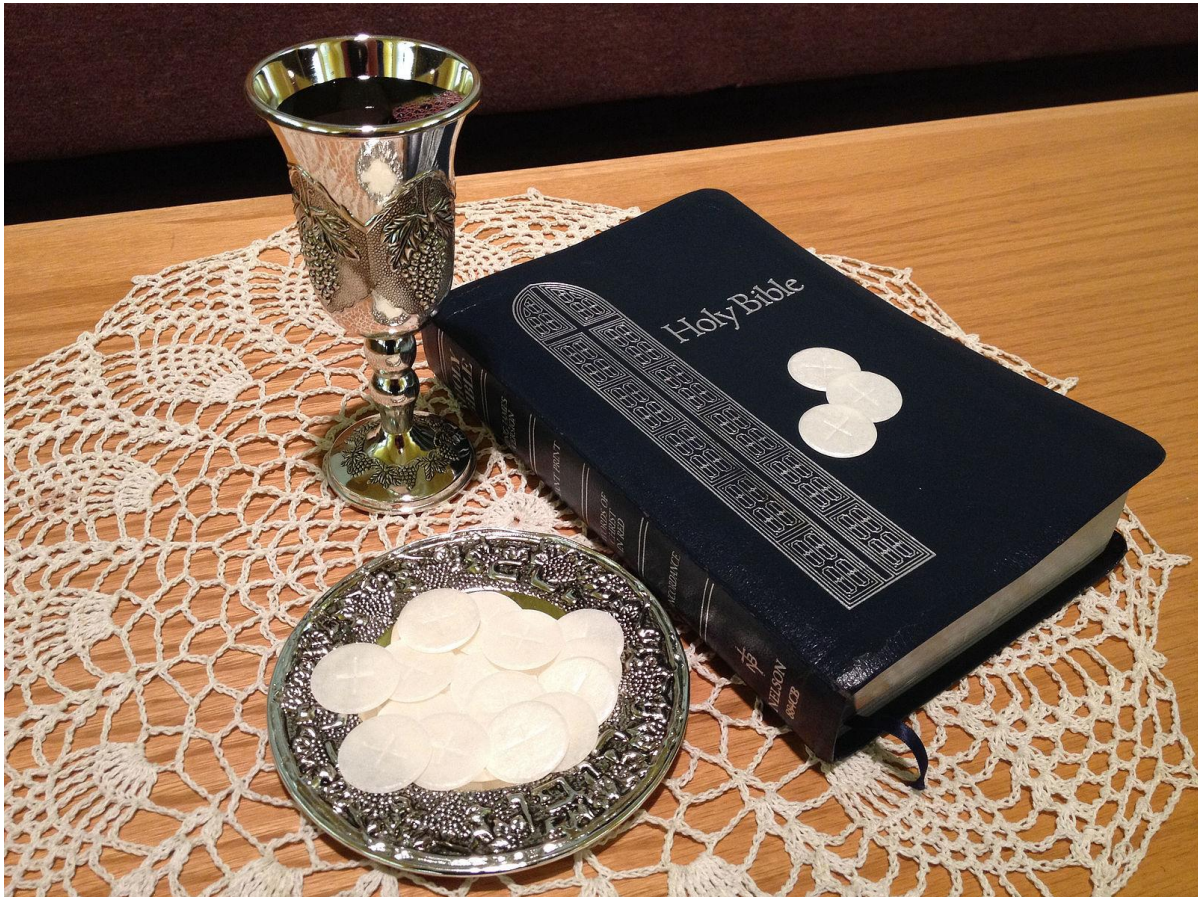
Left: Tonsure of a Buddhist novice in Thailand Photo by [Tevaprapas Makklay](#), Public Domain.  
Right: Buddhist monk in Myanmar, Photo by [Niels Steeman](#), CC0 1.0

### Christianity and the body

In Christian tradition, the body is seen as a place of spiritual knowledge, morality and hope of resurrection. In the **Old Testament**, the **distinction between soul and body**, between spirit and matter, is completely **foreign** to the biblical message. These distinctions are rather the result of a reflection of religious and philosophical nature, which can then be placed in **Greek philosophy**, where the devalued bodily dimension was contrasted to the **spiritual dimension**, in which the authentic essence of man consisted. According to the Bible scriptures, soul and body are considered as two complementary elements which constitute Man. Christianity therefore considers the bodily dimension as an essential dimension of the person: **resurrection**, according to the Christian faith, **takes place through the body**. Even in Christian religious activities the body plays a very important role in various aspects of the life of believers. Baptism, or the sacrament of entry into Christian churches, was and is administered through **immersion of the body in water** (even if nowadays common forms include pouring water over the forehead). Another important Christian practice involving **symbology of the body** is the **Lord's Supper**, also called **Eucharist**, designated to commemorate **Jesus's corporal sacrifice for universal salvation**. According to the Gospel, he shared his final meal with his Apostles in Jerusalem before his crucifixion saying "This is my body", "This is my blood". Some (Catholics) believe that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ, others (e.g. Calvinists) believe in a spiritual presence of his.



In Christian belief chastity (i.e. sexual abstinence) was and still is considered a great virtue. Other **moral aspects involving the body** such as women's status, birth control within marriage, abortion, homosexuality, clergy celibacy, are **subject to different opinions** among Christians.



***The Lord's Supper:** the host is a wafer of bread exclusively made of wheat and freshly prepared, usually of circular shape. It is unleavened bread, according to the prescriptions contained in Old Testament (Exodus 12). Photo by [John Snyder](#), CC-A-SA 3.0*

**More information on:**

- [Christianity and the body](#)
- [The emergence of Christianity](#)
- [Liturgies and places of worship](#)
- [Scriptures, the canon and apocrypha](#)
- [Creeds and dogma](#)



## Islam and the body

According to Islamic tradition God created man from clay and breathed the spirit of life into him. Subsequently, man received three gifts from God: intelligence, will and the power of speech to worship. Because of these gifts, humans are considered the noblest of God's creatures. Even though composed by matter and spirit, in Islam **man is an indivisible unity**, and many Muslim practices pass across the body. **Ritual purification of the body** is particularly focused on the **preparation of the ritual of prayer** and is **recommended** whenever certain acts occur, for example: sleep, contact with the opposite sex (depending on the school of thought) or loss of consciousness. Ritual purification takes the form of **ablution**, in a minor form (*wuḍū'*) or a larger form (*ghusl*), depending on the circumstances. Another important aspect of Muslim religious life is the practice of **circumcision**. Although there are no historical sources that attest to the origin of this practice, Muslim traditions recognized it as a **pre-Islamic custom rite** among the Arabs.

Among the five important practices known as the "Five Pillars" of Islam there is **fasting during the month of Ramadan** to commemorate God's revelations to Muhammad. Devout Muslims **abstain from food, liquids (even water), tobacco, and sex from dawn until dusk**. This corporal self-denial is believed to focus the devout on God's presence and increase their sense of the abundance of God's blessings.

The body also plays an important role in **Islamic funeral practices**: the washing of the body, for example, is a fundamental moment and constitutes **the last purification**, a sort of obligation without carrying out which the body cannot be deposited in the earth.

### More information on:

- [Islam and the body](#)
- [The "wonders" of the creation of man in Islamic stories](#)
- [The image in Islam](#)



A Muslim funeral entering the Old City via the Damascus Gate, Jerusalem, 1900 ca. British Mandate period or earlier. Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA.