

Richard Kearney

If you are thinking of studying Christian theology, I would recommend you start by ignoring what every theologian has written and addressing Christ's question directly—"Who do you say that I am?" The hermeneutic question *par excellence*.

Then, I humbly suggest, you might ask why Christ never offers an abstract metaphysical solution to the riddle, but *acts*. He acts in the flesh, as word made flesh (not concept). And almost every act is one of healing. Just look at the Gospel narratives where Christ touches the wounded and welcomes embodied strangers as friends. Note how Christ heals himself by healing others.

In short, before you take up any of the great *summae theologiae* (and the best, I submit, are still those of Aquinas and the subtle Celts, Duns Scotus, and Scotus Eriugena), consider closely the stories of how God came on earth to cure the sick in body and soul.

The revolutionary meaning of incarnation was too often muted in mainstream Christianity. But it was there from the beginning. Saint Paul famously wrote in his letter to the Philippians that Christ willingly emptied himself of divinity—his "equality with God"—in order to assume human wounds in his body, offering himself as a healer for mortals. After his emptying descent (*kenosis*) into flesh, Christ spent much of his life curing sick people by touching them—laying hands on the blind, deaf, and dumb, the crippled and the dying. Think of the healing of the twelve-year-old girl: "Taking her by the hand, Jesus said, 'Talitha koum' (Rise up, little girl)" (Mark 5:41; my translation). Or the cure of the leper: "Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean'" (Luke 5:13). Or, more graphically still, the cure of the deaf-mute in Decapolis: "He put his finger into the man's ear and, spitting, touched his tongue . . . and said, 'Ephphatha!—Be opened!'" (Mark 7:32; my translation). It is

significant, I think, that Jesus heals by touch before word and even forbids the cured leper and deaf-mute to speak of it afterward. He enjoins both of them “not to tell anyone.” And we could also cite here the other famous cures of the centurion’s servant, the Syro-Phoenician’s daughter, Peter’s mother, or the blind man on whose eyes Jesus rubs mud before bidding him bathe in the pool of Siloam. Christ came on earth to touch the wounded. And significantly, it is a matter not only of him touching others but of *being touched* by them in turn. Jesus is eminently tangible, and Christianity is a story of “double sensation” throughout—a phenomenon vividly portrayed in the story of the hemorrhaging woman who grasps the hem of Jesus’s cloak while he is not looking, a scene regularly portrayed in religious paintings throughout the centuries, in which the verb *touch* (*hapto*) is repeated four times:

She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. She said: “if I but touch [*hapsomai*] his clothes, I shall be cured.” Immediately her flow of blood dried up. She felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked: “Who has touched me?” (Mark 5:27–30; my translation)

Jesus *feels* the power draining from him even though he does not actually *see* it. He turns in surprise. The contact is carnal before it is cognitive. It is a quintessential reciprocal sensation, as the Gospel keeps reminding us: “Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all” (Luke 6:19 NABRE).¹ Or again, “[They] begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed” (Mark 6:56 NABRE).

One might even say that Jesus is gradually apprenticed to his humanity—it takes time for Word to become flesh—by receiving the humanizing touch of *others*. From the moment he is conceived, Jesus is carried in a womb, fed at the breast, and surrounded by animals in a manger before going on to spend three decades working with his hands as a carpenter. One often forgets that Jesus was a handyman for thirty years, and maybe they were as formative as his last three. For without this basic material labor of hands on wood, Jesus might have been tempted to forget his earthly body and slip back into pure spirit. The lure of Gnosticism has haunted theology since—the great temptation of ex-carnation, denying the corporality of Christ. But it is remarkable how carnal Christ really was. How deeply



The Healing of the Blind Man, Rembrandt (photo by Sarah Kearney)

touched he was, for example, by Lazarus's death—John tells us “Jesus wept” (John 11:35 ESV)—to the point of bringing Lazarus's physical body back to life (several paintings depict Jesus carrying his friend in his arms from the tomb). And how often his gestures of healing, as noted, involve explicit moments of touching and eating. Indeed, his postpaschal appearances almost invariably involve Jesus touching and feeding his disciples: “come and have breakfast” are his words to them on Lake Galilee (John 21:12 ESV). Christ did not say “Believe this”; he said “Eat this!” “Touch this!”² Christ is tactile before and after death.



Healing of Bleeding Woman, anonymous fresco (photo by Sarah Kearney)

The Touch of Thomas

But if you really want to explore a radical theology of incarnation, look to the primal scene where Thomas places his hand in Jesus's side. Thomas was not just an incredulous sceptic, as received tradition has it, but a healer educator. He was the disciple who helped his master resist the erasure of scars in a Glorious Body that would be no body at all.³ He refused the lure of ex-carnation. The risen Jesus heeds Thomas's challenge in the Upper Room to remain true to his wounds, keep his promise of ongoing incarnation as a recurring Christ who returns again and again every time a stranger (*hospes*) gives or receives food and water (Matt 25). This repetition of Christ as an infinitely returning stranger—in the reversible guise of host/guest—is what we might call *ana-carnation* (from the Greek prefix *ana-*, meaning “again,” “anew” in time and space).⁴ It is a story of endless carnal reanimation captured in the verse of Gerard Manley Hopkins:



Thomas touching wounds, detail from *The Incredulity of Thomas*, Caravaggio
(photo by Sarah Kearney)

*Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in eyes, lovely in limbs not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.*⁵

Ana-carnation is the multiple repeat act of incarnation in history—resurrecting not only in the future *after* Christ but also in the past *before* Christ, through countless identifications with wounded strangers, forgotten or remembered. It signals the tangible reiteration of Christ (BCE and CE) bringing Jesus back to earth in a continuous community of solidarity and compassion.⁶ This is the kingdom come on earth invoked in the Lord's Prayer. And by this reading, Thomas ceases to be a "servant" and becomes a "friend," nay even a "mentor," of Jesus—a doctor teacher who holds Jesus to his word made *flesh*, ensuring Jesus remains faithful to his carnality. Thomas, hailed as the patron saint of medicine in India, has no time for supersensible erasure or one-way ascension into heaven. On the contrary, he reminds us that what goes up must come down and that "the last temptation of Christ" was not to marry and remain human—as Kazantzakis has it in his great novel—but to rise too quickly to heaven and lose touch with his body altogether. To disappear into pure air! In short, we might say that Thomas acts in keeping with the Samaritan woman at the well

and the Syro-Phoenician woman at the table—all outsiders from the margins, teachers from the basement, reminding Jesus that his divinity is in his tangible humanity, that the right place for the infinite is in-the-finite. Otherwise, Christian in-carnation becomes ex-carnation, a fundamental betrayal of Word made flesh. Thomas will have none of it: he climbs to the Upper Room to bring Jesus back to earth.

In all these Gospel scenes, Jesus is recalled to his original healing vocation: his mission to bring full humanity to the earth. *Incarnation* means assuming a body that can touch and be touched and doing so with the wisdom of two-way tact. In Christ, as the first letter of John tells us, God became a person we can touch with our hands. To forget this is to forget the basic message: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

The history of Christianity, I am suggesting to you, is a story of being in and out of touch with flesh. It is out of touch when it betrays the truth of Word made flesh, veering toward notions of anticarnal Gnosticism and puritanism. Witch-hunting and the inquisitorial persecution of “pagan” earth religions and carnal sexuality were symptoms of such puritanical zeal. And it was this history of suppressing the body that prompted Nietzsche’s ire: “Christianity is the hatred of the *senses*, of joy in the senses, of joy itself. . . . It leaves others the *body*, wanting only the *soul*.”⁷ The resultant pathologies of sexual repression and abuse, misogyny and repudiation of bodily joy, tell their own story. But it is only half the story, as my admonition to you on the ana-carnational character of Christianity hopes to show—especially concerning the power of healing touch.

So dear aspiring student of theology, once you have taken the flesh of Christ to heart, you should then—and only then—feel ready to take up the great metaphysical summae and inquire how each of them is an attempt, directly or indirectly, to respond to the call of incarnation. And doing so, consider carefully Aquinas’s praise of eucharistic taste and touch, Duns Scotus’s celebration of the unique “thisness” (*haecceitas*) of things, Eriugena’s pantheist embrace of the “running God” (*deus currens*), and Bonaventure’s fascination with the divine fingerprint (*vestigia dei*) in all creatures. When you witness the mystery of Christian ana-carnation, you can take seriously the Augustinian summons—*tolle lege*, take up the book and read.

All good things,
Richard

Notes

- 1 See also Mark 3:10: “He had cured many and, as a result, those who had diseases were pressing upon him to touch him” (NABRE).
- 2 See the radically incarnational claim of John 6:51: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (NABRE). On the claim that God becomes flesh (John 1:14), the Franciscan Richard Rohr writes, “Incarnation is scandalous, shocking, intimate, sexual. Christ did not say ‘think about this, fight about this, stare at this’; he said ‘eat this!’ A dynamic, interactive event that makes one out of two. . . . As Gandhi said, ‘There are so many hungry people in the world that God could only come into the world in the form of food. It is marvelous that God would enter our lives not just in the form of sermons or Bibles, but as food.’ God comes to feed us more than just teach us. Lovers understand that” (qtd. in Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2021], 166).
- 3 See Giorgio Agamben, “The Glorious Body,” in *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 91–103.
- 4 Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- 5 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin, 1953), 51.
- 6 See Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018); and Tomas Halik, *Touch the Wounds* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2021). See also the interdisciplinary work of Jacob Meiring, “Theology in the Flesh—Embodied Sensing, Consciousness and the Mapping of the Body,” *Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): 1–11, where he explicitly engages our project of carnal hermeneutics.
- 7 Nietzsche’s *The Anti-Christ* quoted in Alice Miller, *The Untouched Key* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 112.