

Embodied Faith: Spirituality and Corporeality in Early Modern Christianity

Venue

Teaching Grid, Warwick University Library

Timetable

Day 1 (Thursday 12 September)

14.00	Tea/coffee
14.30	Welcome
14.45-16.15	Session 1 (3 papers)
16.15-16.30	Break
16.30-18.00	Session 2 (3 papers)
19.00	Dinner

Day 2 (Friday 13 September)

09.15	Tea/coffee
09.45-11.15	Session 3 (3 papers)
11.15-11.30	Break
11.30-13.00	Session 4 (3 papers)
13.00-14.00	Lunch
14.00-15.00	Roundtable

Outline

In early modern Christian thought, bodies blended material and immaterial qualities. The flux of Galenic humours conditioned ways of thinking and feeling, and early modern scholars offered comprehensive advice about the maladies engendered by humoral excesses or deficits. But humoral balance was not explicable in straightforward biological terms; it depended on wider environmental factors, and could be influenced by occult forces. Human bodies were also governed by souls. Via the mechanism of spiritus, souls extended into the physical world and acted upon bodies. In early modern cosmology the state and powers of the soul could literally transform physiological processes and functions, such as influencing the temper and qualities of humours and organs. Souls were themselves subject to the influence of invisible and immaterial agents; many theologians held that the Devil could insert thoughts directly into human minds and hearts, while salvation depended on the soul's purification by the Holy Spirit. Bodily experience was not only a matter of sensation, but also of imagination.

This workshop seeks to facilitate a conversation about early modern spirituality and corporeality. How did Christian theologians, philosophers and physicians understand the body, and how did medical or ministerial practice respond to humans' multifaceted nature? How did religious or folkloric beliefs mould people's lived experience? Were bodies considered tools or impediments in the quest for salvation? Speakers might also wish to consider change over time. The Reformation introduced seismic shifts in cultural understandings of the body, with some historians arguing that Protestantism introduced a starker delineation between matter and spirit and extricated the divine from the world of flesh. The rise of mechanistic philosophy in the latter half of the seventeenth century similarly challenged traditional understandings of how matter and spirit interacted. The emergence of new denominations, such as Quakerism, reflected diverging ideas about the role of the body in religious practice.

The workshop will also discuss historiography. In recent years there has been a proliferation of work on religion and the body, but there remain methodological challenges. How to conceptualise the relationship between belief and practice, or language and experience, remains a thorny theoretical problem for both social and cultural historians. How to bring the various bodies of scholarship this subject has generated closer together also warrants careful thought. The theme can be approached through the lens of gender history, intellectual history, the histories of science and medicine, the history of emotions, the history of the senses, disability studies, literary studies, and art history, among others, and there is a shortage of conceptual frameworks that can unite these different approaches and perspectives. We invite any reflections on the state of the field, and suggestions as to how the history of the body and religion can move forwards.

We envisage that the workshop will offer a relaxed setting for discussion and debate, and welcome informal papers and work in progress.