

‘Theologies of the Body’ *Devotional Fitness in US Evangelicalism*

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents cases of religious embodiment which are concrete corporeal manifestations of ‘theologies of the body.’ Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, US evangelicals have developed biblically based dieting and fitness programs which offer a ‘Christian alternative’ to the ‘secular’ fitness and dieting world. These regimens blend elements of bible study and exercise routines, drawing their spiritual authority from divine inspiration. It is not just in well-known liturgical contexts that the presence of God is made sensually perceivable. The often physically exhausting workout routines are considered as ‘spending time with God’ and ‘taking care of God’s temple, your body’ and will be analyzed from the perspective of the embodiment paradigm.

KEYWORDS

devotional fitness, evangelicalism, embodiment, religion and sports,
American religion

INTRODUCTION

The 19th conference of the ESPR was dedicated to ‘Embodied Religion’ and it was based on the underlying thesis that ‘religion is always embodied in various ways.’ Setting out from this statement, this paper will present cases of

religious embodiment which are peculiar as it is unequivocal for both participants and researchers that they are dealing with concrete, very practical and corporeal ‘in-corporations’ of ‘theologies of the body.’

Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, US evangelicals have developed biblically based dieting and fitness programs which offer a ‘Christian alternative’ to the ‘secular’ fitness and dieting world.¹ These regimens consciously blend elements of bible studies and exercise routines, drawing their spiritual authority from divine inspiration. This fashion of religiously disciplining the body mirrors in many ways commonly accepted body standards of contemporary western societies.

Such programs provide evidence of the assumption that the relationship between God and the believer is not just of a spiritual kind but may be physically enacted. Just as religious frameworks structure issues of sexuality, reproduction and family, they also inform concepts of health and disease. In the case under observation, health is unmistakably associated with a slender and fit body while disease lurks in sugar and fat.

The goal of this paper is to illustrate how religion ‘does not only change the human mind’ but also ‘affects the human body,’² by describing the ‘religious’ imperative of exercising and slimming down.³ I will hence present some first ideas from my doctoral thesis which is supervised in the Department of Religion at Muenster University.

For this purpose, I will start with examples from the field that I observed in the fall of 2011 in the USA (chapter 2). After that, the embodiment paradigm will be introduced (chapter 3). I suggest to distinguish concepts of embodiment *sensu lato* and *sensu stricto* and then apply the latter in an exemplary fashion to the before described phenomena (chapter 4).

Most observers, academics and non-academics alike, when confronted with devotional fitness, immediately criticize these programs for their seemingly naïve attitude towards contemporary slimness ideals and the potential health hazards inherent to every program in favor of slimming down and losing weight. I wholeheartedly agree with this criticism. In this paper, how-

¹ Ruth Marie Griffith has, from a historical perspective, extensively dealt with these groups in *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley 2004).

² As the Call for Papers for the ESPR conference phrased it.

³ Gregor Schrettle has analyzed this religious imperative in Gwen Shamblin’s organization called ‘Weigh Down Workshop,’ see Gregor Schrettle, *Gwen Shamblin’s Dieting Religion and America’s Puritan Legacy* (Essen 2006).

ever, I will restrict myself to referencing influential critics while focusing on other matters of interest.⁴

‘BOD4GOD,’ ‘BODY & SOUL,’ ‘FIRST PLACE 4 HEALTH’

Bod4God is a book⁵ and weight-loss program published in 2009 and designed by Steve Reynolds, Pastor of Capital Baptist Church in Annandale, VA, in the outskirts of Washington, DC. Reynolds raised considerable interest by the media and his program was subject to public debates.⁶ Reynolds, labeled the ‘Anti-Fat Pastor’ by the media, dealt with serious weight and health issues himself before he discovered that the solution to overweight shall be found in the Bible. A keyword search for the word ‘body’ produced 179 incidents.⁷ A subject which is discussed that often in biblical texts, Reynolds concluded, must be of importance in God’s eyes.

In his book, Reynolds developed ‘four keys’ to succeed in weight-loss. These keys are:

- (1) Dedication – ‘honoring God with your body,’
- (2) Inspiration – ‘motivating yourself for change,’
- (3) Eat and Exercise – ‘managing your habits,’
- (4) Team – ‘building your circle of support.’

His book, a ‘theology of the body,’ lays the groundwork for weight-loss oriented competitions called ‘Losing to Live.’ These events originated in Reynolds’ congregation and have been implemented in other churches in the US as well, e.g. in the Independent Bible Church in Martinsburg, WV, the First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Floresville, TX, and The Journey Church in New York, NY. They take place over a period of twelve weeks and include groups competing against each other about how much weight they lose together. Every week, on Sundays, the groups get together in the church to celebrate last week’s winners, to meet their small groups, spend time in prayer and bible study, and learn about healthy living and eating right.

⁴ See, e.g. Mary Louise Bringle, *The God of Thinness: Gluttony and Other Weighty Matters* (Nashville 1992) and Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Christianity and Body Image* (New York 2008).

⁵ Steve Reynolds, *Bod4God: The Four Keys to Weight Loss* (Ventura 2009).

⁶ See e.g. Jacqueline L. Salmon, ‘An Almighty Weight Loss,’ *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2008. Likewise, Reynolds has been discussed on the popular TV show ‘The View,’ hosted by Barbara Walters, Whoopi Goldberg, Joy Behar, Elisabeth Hasselbeck und Sherri Shepherd.

⁷ Reynolds, *Bod4God*, 22–23.

Reynolds cooperates with two large organizations of devotional fitness: ‘Body & Soul Fitness’ and ‘First Place 4 Health.’ The first one focuses on fitness classes and working out. They have developed fitness routines choreographed to Christian praise music, combined with communal prayer and sharing. ‘First Place 4 Health,’ on the other hand, is a Christian diet program based on small group meetings and bible study.

‘Body & Soul Fitness – Where Faith and Fitness Meet’ was developed in 1981 by Jeannie and Roy Blocher from Germantown, MD. Their goal is to ‘encourage you to pursue both physical and spiritual fitness, wherever you are in the world.’⁸ They start from the assumption that ‘[f]itness involves more than just your body’ and that ‘developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle is part of being a good steward of this “physical body” we’ve been given.’ Therefore they place a major emphasis on exercise classes that are designed to ‘help you get (and stay) in shape.’ They assume that ‘there is more to fitness than a great workout’ and hence seek to affect all other areas of life by following a ‘truly holistic approach to fitness because there is a tangible connection between the physical and spiritual dimensions of our lives.’⁹

What are the effects pursued in Body & Soul? First, the program wants to ‘energize’ participants for ‘physical strength and spiritual energy.’ They also intend to help members ‘grow stronger physically’ and ‘discover God’s plan for your life.’ Apart from that, and supporting these effects, the program provides information on how to lead and maintain a ‘healthy and active life.’¹⁰

Lynne Gerber has researched ‘First Place 4 Health’ extensively in a recent publication.¹¹ Style and rhetoric of this program are strongly reminiscent of popular weight-loss programs such as ‘WeightWatchers’ with the exception that, in First Place 4 Health, extensive bible study and scripture memorization play a crucial role. Participants regularly meet over a period of twelve weeks. Getting together as a group and sharing their troubles and worries is considered an important element. Intimacy and mutual trust are nourished and cherished. A central ‘ritual’ is the ‘weighing in’ right at the beginning of

⁸ Body & Soul, ‘Body & Soul Fitness: Where Faith and Fitness Meet’ [<http://bodyandsoul.org/>], accessed July 17, 2011].

⁹ Body & Soul, ‘Body & Soul Fitness: Where Faith and Fitness Meet.’

¹⁰ Body & Soul, ‘Body & Soul Fitness: Where Faith and Fitness Meet.’

¹¹ Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago 2012).

each small group meeting. Participants are required to step on the scales and recite a scripture verse.¹²

One of the first questions proponents of devotional fitness have to deal with is: What does fitness have to do with faith? Among the most common arguments, proponents of devotional fitness programs will often employ the idea that God cares about everything his followers do – ‘everything’ specifically includes issues of eating and weight. Carol Showalter, designer of the ‘3D’ plan (short for ‘Diet, Discipline and Discipleship’), e.g., writes on her homepage, ‘The Bible says that He cares about sparrows, and even about the hair on your head! So why wouldn’t God care about my struggles with eating?’¹³

Besides many other arguments which I do not have the space to elaborate here, founders and leaders of such programs usually stress that our bodies are God’s instruments on earth and that Christians can only fulfill their mission if they are physically and spiritually fit.

An important argument in favor of Christian fitness programs that is more apt to convince skeptic ‘insiders’ is the need to evangelize. Reynolds, author of *Bod4God* does not conceal that this is a prominent intention behind his concept.¹⁴ People that usually would not approach a church might nonetheless feel attracted to fitness and healthy living and thus interact more easily with evangelical milieus than they would usually do.

EMBODIMENT AS A PARADIGM FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Embodiment as a terminological figure has been known for quite some time in anthropology, ethnology and the study of religion, yet on a more general level compared to the approach I wish to focus on here. For instance, Clifford Geertz’s now classical definition of religion as a cultural system understands ‘symbols’ as ‘tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, *concrete embodiments* of ideas, atti-

¹² This ritual has been analyzed by Lynne Gerber, ‘Weigh-In,’ *Frequenci.es* [<http://frequenci.es/2012/01/02/weigh-in/>, accessed January 3, 2012].

¹³ Carol Showalter & Maggie Davis, ‘The 3D Plan: Eat Right, Live Well, Love God,’ [<http://www.3dyourwholelife.com/lovegod.php>, accessed July 17, 2012].

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Bod4God*, 203.

tudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.”¹⁵ Thomas Luckmann, too, thinks of symbols as ‘incorporations of a different reality in the ordinary [reality].’¹⁶

When Luckmann and Geertz talk of ‘embodiment’ or ‘incorporation,’ they harness a version of the concept which I refer to as ‘embodiment sensu lato.’ Quite certainly, they do not associate ‘embodiment’ exclusively with the fleshly matter of being, the corporeal reality of human experience. More generally, they consider symbols as *metaphorically* tangible concepts that have left the world of ‘ideas, attitudes, judgments,’ etc. and have been ‘objectified’ to the extent that they are now a more or less standardized form of everyday communication.

The notion of ‘embodiment sensu lato’ draws attention to the fact that mental or cognitive notions require ‘tangible’ manifestations, metaphorically and, in addition, literally, to impact individuals and society. This idea is fundamental to the emergence of embodiment as a paradigm. In this restricted use of the term – embodiment sensu stricto – the concept refers to the concrete fleshly body, tangible in a very literal sense, and prone to visual, haptic, auditory etc. perceptions. Translating this idea to religion, Matti Kamppinen defines: ‘Embodied religion is [...] something that involves actively engaged religious bodies, performing rituals, or otherwise communicating with supernatural entities. Embodied religion is religion as it is studied in respectable fieldwork-based ethnography. Embodied religion is not a specific type of religion, but rather a research setting, where religious bodies are studied by means of interview and participant observation.’¹⁷ It is noteworthy, I think, that Kamppinen focuses on the corporeal bodies of both actors and researchers in the ‘religious field’ and thus acknowledges the role of the scholar’s physical presence in the field.

With this distinction in mind, it is easier to review the manifold approaches labeled ‘embodiment.’ Albeit simplified and dichotomized, it may be a useful tool in academic discussions where it is not always made explicit how broad the term ‘embodiment’ should or should not be understood. The rather diffuse notion of embodiment as something both ‘metaphorical’ and ‘literal,’ to my mind, impedes efficient inter- and cross-disciplinary communication, let alone unambiguous interaction with non-academic circles.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System,’ in: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 2009), 87–125, esp. 91–94 (italics added).

¹⁶ Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion* (Frankfurt 1967), 175–76 (italics added).

¹⁷ Matti Kamppinen, ‘The Concept of Body in Religious Studies,’ in: Tore Ahlbäck, *Religion and the Body* (Åbo 2011), 206–215, esp. 209.

Indeed, when entering the debate beyond academe, ‘embodiment sensu stricto’ might be an apt point of departure to get across scholarly notions of materialization and objectification of ‘purely’ mental concepts and ideas. The actual physical body, according to this paradigm, is the inevitable locus of manifestations of non-physical entities. Ideas cannot become tangible if not through and by means of the human body. In extension, the embodiment paradigm challenges exactly this notion of the ‘physical’ being separate from the ‘mental.’

In short, anthropological approaches to the ‘body’ following the embodiment paradigm in its strict sense have two major concerns. (1) They try to overcome classic mind-body-dualisms and (2) they focus on materiality and substance rather than on ideas and notions. Opposing older assumptions that the body is a function of mental processes, e.g., erudite rules of ritual, newer accounts entertain the idea that, vice versa, mental notions might themselves be a function of the body.¹⁸

Against older accounts, anthropological work following the somatic turn¹⁹ does not uphold the analytic dichotomy of ‘body’ and ‘soul,’ or of experiences related to the body and those related to the soul. Instead, research inspired by the somatic turn focuses on the fact that these positions are complementary and mutually dependent.

In a new collection on the subject, Anna Fedele and Ruy Llera Blanes propose a ‘comprehensive approach to this key point: the significance and agency behind religious conceptions of the body in their relationship with ideas of the soul. We propose to bring to the forefront of the anthropology of religion the part of the body-soul dichotomy that tended to be neglected or treated as merely accessory in many discussions of religious phenomena: the issue of corporeality in religious contexts.’²⁰

Thomas J. Csordas’ work is often reckoned among the most influential in the field of embodiment.²¹ His seminal article ‘Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology’²² argues that ‘a paradigm of embodiment can be elaborated for

¹⁸ Catherine Bell, ‘Embodiment,’ in: Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek & Michael Stausberg (eds.), *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (Leiden 2006), 533–543, esp. 538.

¹⁹ The expression ‘somatic turn’ (σῶμα = body), in this paper, shall refer to the emergence of the embodiment paradigm sensu stricto.

²⁰ Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Introduction,’ in: Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes (eds.), *Encounters of Body and Soul in Contemporary Religious Practices: Anthropological Reflections* (New York, 2011), x–xxvii, esp. x–xi.

²¹ E.g. by Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Introduction,’ xv.

²² Thomas J. Csordas, ‘Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,’ *Ethos* 1 (1990), 5–47.

the study of culture and the self'.²³ This paradigm states that the 'locus of the sacred is the body, for the body is the existential ground of culture.'²⁴

A paradigm as a consistent methodological perspective, Csordas suggests, should make possible a re-evaluation of existing work and new approaches in empirical research. He explicitly does not try to incorporate the vast multi-disciplinary literature on the body but leans strongly towards phenomenology.²⁵ 'This approach to embodiment begins from the methodological postulate that the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture.'²⁶

Csordas' central intention is to bring about a collapse of dualities between mind and body, subject and object.²⁷ 'This collapse allows us to investigate how cultural objects (including selves) are constituted or objectified, not in the processes of ontogenesis and child socialization, but in the ongoing indeterminacy and flux of adult cultural life.'²⁸ Accordingly, Csordas tries to 'elaborate a non-dualistic paradigm of embodiment for the study of culture.'²⁹

Both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu, whose work Csordas draws on, 'attempt [...] to collapse these dualities, and embodiment is the methodological principle invoked by both. The collapsing of dualities in embodiment requires that the body as a methodological figure must itself be non-dualistic, that is, not distinct from or in interaction with an opposed principle of mind.'³⁰

APPROACHING DEVOTIONAL FITNESS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EMBODIMENT PARADIGM

The contributions to Fedele's and Blanes' *Encounters of Body and Soul in Contemporary Religious Practices* have drawn attention to the fact that encounters of body and soul are central to religious experience and that it is

²³ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 5.

²⁴ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 39.

²⁵ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 5.

²⁶ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 5.

²⁷ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 7.

²⁸ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 39–40.

²⁹ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 12.

³⁰ Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm,' 8.

useful to consider these entities as interwoven and not opposite.³¹ Following this and recurring on the approaches summarized above, I would like to consider devotional fitness as embodied religious practice.

In some cases, where there is a proper ‘theology of the body,’ devotional fitness is highly reflective. In these incidents, founders sometimes think of their programs in terms of embodiment. One has to bear in mind, though, that they apply a concept of ‘embodiment’ which differs from the academic understanding explained above.

‘ActivPrayer’ is such an example. In their somewhat theologized attempt to explain Christian fitness, they start from the idea that ‘Christian fitness (as in physical fitness) is a natural application of the Christian faith to general health and well-being’ and that a combination of Christianity and fitness makes ‘perfect sense.’ The body ‘plays a key role in the Christian faith’ because Christianity is based on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, ActivPrayer concludes, ‘Christianity is an incarnate religion’ and ‘being a body’ is a central element in a true Christian’s life. The body has appetites and desires which should be moderated but it is also an important medium and catalyst of spiritual experience, e.g. ‘when we experience deep love (of God, or even another human person), we can feel it in our very bodies.’³²

The authors conclude that we have to ‘understand the embodiment of the human person or the embodied nature of our soul’ in order to ‘open up a door to an entire world of possibilities in Christian fitness.’³³ Christian faith, in this case, is considered to be existentially grounded in the body; it is ‘embodied’ at its very core. This understanding correlates with scholarly perspectives on the embodiment paradigm which place the body in the center of culture and society. Devotional fitness therefore becomes a particularly adequate testing ground and research field for theories of embodiment.

If we follow the claim that the body is the existential ground of culture³⁴ we will have to understand the body in order to understand culture, or, in Cecil G. Helman’s words: ‘[T]he body is culture – an expression of its basic themes. A full understanding of any human body gives, at the same time, a fuller understanding of the culture embodied within it.’³⁵

³¹ Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Introduction,’ xxi.

³² ActivPrayer, ‘ActivPrayer: Soul Fitness’ [<http://www.activprayer.org/classes/item/273-christian-fitness-explained>, accessed June 23, 2011].

³³ ActivPrayer, ‘ActivPrayer: Soul Fitness.’

³⁴ Thomas J. Csordas, ‘Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,’ 39.

³⁵ Cecil G. Helman, *Culture, Health and Illness* (New York, 2000), 15.

In this case, dealing with evangelical fitness culture, I seek to understand the role of the human body within this culture in order to understand devotional fitness. I would like to demonstrate this approach in a provisional manner with regard to two particular aspects of embodiment.

(1) Somatic representations of individuality and collectivity

Every kind of sports is set in and shaped by its surrounding social and cultural context. What happens to our bodies happens to society and vice versa. Sports and fitness incorporate and enact social patterns of conduct and clusters of values.³⁶

The fact that most evangelical fitness classes are based on routines that require neither partner nor opponent is, I hypothesize, linked to the value of autonomy in contemporary US culture.³⁷ Many of these programs do not even require a group gathering and are designed to be practiced at home individually learning through media such as books and DVDs, working out in front of the TV, and contemplating upon biblical scripture in solitude and stillness.

In contrast to these programs, other designs intentionally incorporate partner exercises. They explicitly encourage group meetings and appreciate the harmony and friendships nourished in their programs. This is, for instance, the case in the above-described organization First Place 4 Health.

The scholar of culture³⁸ may relate these phenomena to experiences of *communitas* according to Turner – events that celebrate togetherness and the spirit of community.³⁹ A central feature of these programs is their attempt to build commitment and accountability toward the group. They also stress equality among the group members; even the ‘leader’ is just ‘one on the journey’ and not hierarchically superordinated. In short, success is not possible when you are on your own.

Yet again, the central goal and motivation of these programs is not a collective one, it is an individual one. Weight-loss can only be achieved by an

³⁶ Thomas Alkemeyer, ‘Bewegung und Gesellschaft: Zur “Verkörperung” des Sozialen und zur Formung des Selbst in Sport und populärer Kultur,’ in: Gabriele Klein (ed.), *Bewegung: Sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Konzepte* (Bielefeld 2004), 43–78, esp. 60.

³⁷ Out of the vast literature on individualization in (post-)modern times, I reference only, for a general account, Louis Dumont, *Individualismus: Zur Ideologie der Moderne* (Frankfurt 1991) and, specifically regarding the USA, Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York, 1997), esp. 275.

³⁸ E.g. Thomas Alkemeyer, ‘Bewegung und Gesellschaft,’ 61.

³⁹ Victor Turner, *Das Ritual: Struktur und Anti-Struktur* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 124.

individual body; it can only become visible in a single body. Programs that, like 'Losing to Live,' arrange competitions based on collective weight-loss (see above) try to soften this ambiguity: In fact, success or failure is shared as groups compete with other groups, yet, in every case, both within the group and in the overall competition, winners and losers are not collective bodies – they are individual bodies.

To sum up, the body in these examples reveals and, at the same time, enacts, a central ambiguity of evangelical fitness culture: the longing for collectivity or *communitas* and for individuality or autonomy at the same time.

(2) Somatic representations of contemporary body ideals

Participants and designers of devotional fitness programs virtually never question the idea that slimness (usually communicated in terms of 'health') is something one should strive for. I cannot go into the depths of the emergence of contemporary slimness ideals here,⁴⁰ but it seems unquestionable that the bodies of devotional fitness reveal commonly accepted body ideals in their quest for fitness and slenderness. Michelle Mary Lelwica, who, in her 1999 book *Starving for Salvation*, has analyzed *The Spiritual Dimension of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* agrees that Christian weight-loss programs incorporate 'prevailing cultural norms of health and beauty.'⁴¹ In bodies, and especially in female bodies,⁴² 'the prevailing social order [is] negotiated and reproduced.'⁴³ However, in the special case of devotional fitness, this is not everything: Social norms are not only reproduced, they are, at the same time, reshaped and re-signified, so to speak. A 'healthy' (i.e., slender) body is not only desirable because of the 'mundane' advantages associated with fitness (being popular, attractive, successful etc.). Also, and more importantly, it becomes 'the visible marker of godliness,' as Griffith concludes in her much acclaimed study on *Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*.⁴⁴ In other words, the bodies in evangelical fitness programs enact a worldview which is underpinned both 'religiously' and 'secularly,' which implements both fleshly and spiritual matter.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Hillel Schwartz's oft-quoted study *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York 1986).

⁴¹ Michelle Mary Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimension of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* (Oxford 1999), 77.

⁴² For the time being, I cannot deal with devotional fitness from the perspective of gender studies, even though this is a useful instrument which will be harnessed for my doctoral thesis.

⁴³ Michelle Mary Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 182.

⁴⁴ Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 180.

CONCLUSIONS

As this paper has shown, the embodiment paradigm *sensu stricto* with its central premise of the corporeal body as the existential ground of culture is a useful perspective when trying to approach devotional fitness. The collapse of dualities, a central feature of the embodiment paradigm, is not only a goal in methodological discussions of scholarly kind, it is also a distinct feature of devotional fitness (as the example ‘ActivPrayer’ has shown, see above). Furthermore, various strands of contemporary spirituality highlight the importance of (re-)uniting body and soul. Actors criticize the outworn dualities of body and soul in Christian theologies and, instead, formulate holistic concepts of body and soul.⁴⁵

As a result, I may notice that this is a common feature of both contemporary spirituality and evangelical fitness. On a more general level, devotional fitness may therefore be seen in the wider context of contemporary spirituality. Take, e.g., Giselle Vincett’s and Linda Woodhead’s idea of spirituality as presented in their contribution to *Religions in the modern world*. Spirituality as a meta-term, in their view, shows seven characteristics:

- (1) ‘a value-laden contrast between spirituality and religion’;
- (2) ‘emphasis on the importance of inner, subjective, ineffable experience’;
- (3) ‘authorization of the individual to be the final arbiter of spiritual truth’;
- (4) ‘high valuation of “seeking;” open and tolerant attitude towards other spiritual “paths”’;
- (5) ‘promotion of practical, often embodied, means and techniques for attaining spiritual insight – e.g. meditation [or, in this case: fitness]’;
- (6) ‘tendency to embrace “progressive” and “anti-establishment” causes, including liberalism, equality, democracy, self-development [...]’;
- (7) ‘universalistic or “holistic” emphasis (i.e., an emphasis on the interconnectedness of things).’⁴⁶

Except for the ‘tolerant attitude towards other spiritual “paths”’ (4) and the ‘tendency to embrace “progressive” and “anti-establishment” causes’ (6) most of these traits are well applicable to describe devotional fitness. It does

⁴⁵ Anna Fedele & Ruy Llera Blanes, ‘Introduction,’ xvi.

⁴⁶ Giselle Vincett & Linda Woodhead, ‘Spirituality,’ in: Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami & Christopher H. Partridge (eds.), *Religions in the modern world: Traditions and transformations* (London 2009), 319–337, esp. 320.

not agree with the evangelical worldview to appreciate non-Christian paths to salvation and most currents within US evangelicalism are politically conservative and do not embrace democracy. Especially the fifth point, however, the 'promotion of practical, often embodied, means and techniques for attaining spiritual insight,' gets hold of a central feature of devotional fitness.

Slightly modifying the concept of Vincett and Woodhead, devotional fitness may nonetheless be considered as a highly embodied form of contemporary spirituality, one that poses specific challenges to the researcher and opens new horizons in the study of embodied culture and religion.

