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Wellness, Health, and Salvation: About the Religious Dimension of Contemporary Body-Mindedness

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Abstract: Alluding to the enormous investments in wellness, health, and anti-aging by affluent US society today the article focuses on the anthropological and religious implications of this phenomenon by stating that the pursuit of such caring for the body has superseded the quest for salvation. The first section provides a historical background analysis of how the contemporary semi-religious body-mindedness came about, while the second part analyses wellness, health, and salvation from a phenomenological point of view. It shows that any body image which does not address human frailty turns into something utterly inhumane while a religiously informed anthropology, in contrast, not only accepts frailty, dying, and death as realities of life but situates these experiences within a broader frame of reference and meaning thereby setting people free to leave behind at the proper time anxieties and worries about body-upkeep and to embrace life in the face of death.

Keywords: Wellness, Health, Body, Salvation, Anthropology

WELLNESS IS IN, and wellness is big business, as is health-care. As the 2010 Fitness Movement Report shows, “Fitness is a \$ 17.6 billion industry that has doubled in size in the last 10 years.”¹ More than 50 million Americans were members of Health-Clubs in the US who paid—by conservative calculations—an accumulated \$ 2.5 billion in annual registration and membership fees.² In addition: 75% of the population in the United States took dietary supplements, spending more than another \$ 20 billion,³ while the general diet industry stands at a market volume of \$ 58.6 billion in the US today.⁴ Add to these figures the \$ 5 billion spent in 2010 on so called cosmeceutical skin-care products⁵ and the \$ 2.7 billion spent on surgical and non-surgical aesthetic products

¹ *Why the Fitness Industry?*, at URL <http://www.goldgym.com/golds/franchising/facts.php>; (accessed Jan. 11, 2011). See also *Tracking the Fitness Movement 2010* Report, provided by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA). Silver Spring, MD, 2010; also at URL <http://www.sgma.com/press/sgma/>. (accessed Jan. 11, 2011).

² According to the most recent market analysis of the Health Club industry (figures relate to 2010) provided by the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, the fitness industry’s global trade association at URL <http://www.ihrsa.org/> (accessed Jan. 11, 2011). See also the source mentioned in the previous note.

³ Figure provided by the Organic Chemical Metrology Group of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at URL <http://www.nist.gov/mml/analytical/organic/dsqap.cfm>, last updated Nov. 1, 2010, (accessed Jan. 11, 2011).

⁴ According to the U.S. Weight Loss & Diet Control Market (10th Edition), published by MarketData Enterprises, Inc., Farmington, CT., Feb. 2009.

⁵ The neologism cosmeceutical is a compound from cosmetics and pharmaceutical. – Figures according to S. Rose, *Anti-aging skincare industry is more resilient than ageless skin*, FashionIndustryToday.com, May 2, 2008, at URL <http://www.fashionindustrytoday.com/2008/05/02/anti-aging-skincare-industry-is-more-resilient-than-ageless-skin/>. (accessed Jan. 11, 2011).

and therapies,⁶ the entire size of this primarily patient pay market amounts to not less than \$ 103.9 billion or roughly \$ 330 per capita p.a.⁷ Of course, not everyone spends money on wellness, but data show that those who do, as for instance some women with a middle-class income, are willing to pay up to \$ 3,000 a year on average for anti-wrinkle and other skin treatments alone.⁸ The wellness and anti-aging industry serves a soaring market with double digit growth rates in certain segments, mainly thanks to the baby-boomer generation which has now reached retirement and old age.⁹ Keep in mind that all this expenditure is on top of the monies for conventional health-care in the US, estimated to have reached \$ 2.8 trillion in 2010.¹⁰

Wellness and health-care are huge markets, indeed, especially in affluent societies.¹¹ That people are willing not only to pay enormous amounts of money but also to freely give plenty of their time and endure inconveniences to look good, stay well, and be healthy tells a lot about top priorities. I will argue that the focus on wellness and health indicates a fundamental shift in the perception of life as seen by established religious traditions. Emphasizing wellness and health to the extent society does today entices people to cultivate a body-mindedness which heeds randomly constructed ideals of what it means to be oneself as a human, ideals informed by very selective aesthetic standards. These are displayed in movies and advertisements, stimulated in part by medical possibilities and market availability (cosmetics, fashion), and effectively enforced by in-group pressures patronizing distinctive lifestyles and body images (fitness; anti-aging; slimness; tattooing and piercing¹²). The pursuit of caring for the body according to ideals promoted by powerful industries and societal groups has thus superseded the quest for salvation.

This thesis sets the stage for the following reflections. Holding to the conviction that religious and spiritual questions are as vividly present in today's body sculpting culture as they are in the established forms of conventional religiosity, the first section provides a historical background analysis of how the semi-religious contemporary body-mindedness came about (A), while the second part (B) approaches the topic of wellness, health, and salvation from a phenomenological point of view.

⁶ See *U.S. Markets for Surgical and Nonsurgical Aesthetic Products and Therapies*, Medtech Insight, Irvine, CA, September 2007 (contains forecasts through 2011). The figure given above reflects the projected amount for 2011.

⁷ Calculated on a population of 307,226,000; see *Britannica Book of the Year 2010*, Chicago 2010, p. 726.

⁸ See S. Rose (as in note 5).

⁹ See data at URL <http://www.rebprotocol.net/antiagingpp.doc>, (accessed Jan. 13, 2011).

¹⁰ The estimated amount of the National Health Expenditure for 2010 is US \$ 2,879,425,000,000 (see: *Health Guide USA* at URL http://www.healthguideusa.org/health_statistics/national_health_expenditures_projections.htm; (accessed Jan 11, 2011) which is about 19% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The per capita expenditure in 2009 was \$ 8,086 per person. (See: *National Health Expenditures 2009 Highlights*, at URL <https://www.cms.gov/NationalHealthExpendData/downloads/highlights.pdf>, accessed Jan. 11, 2011).

¹¹ The US is by far spending the most on health care compared to other affluent nations as the Comparative National Statistics on Health Services (*Britannica Book of the Year 2010*, Chicago 2010, pp. 810-815) and computations by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) at URL http://www.oecd.org/document/30/0,3746,en_2649_37407_12968734_1_1_1_37407,00.html (accessed Jan. 14, 2011) reveal.

¹² It is extremely difficult to obtain reliable and representative figures of this not properly regulated market. The best surveys of relevant data can be accessed at <http://tattoos-101.tattoofinder.com/tattoo-statistics>. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2006 (URL http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/oc/scienceforum/sf2006/search/preview.cfm?abstract_id=1047&backto=author, (accessed Jan. 15, 2011) 45% of Americans had at least one tattoo. One properly done tattoo is about US \$ 100-200. Dependent on size and complexity, tattoos can be much more expensive.

A – Historical Background Analysis

Today's health, wellness, and fitness craze did not come about all of a sudden. It is, rather, the result of cultural developments which go back to the dawn of human civilization, particularly the emergence of the healing arts as a way to prevent untimely death.¹³ In so doing the various healers in different regions of the world were not only concerned about attending to immediate health-care needs. They also attempted to stave off diseases proactively by advising their clients on dietary and lifestyle matters, as was, for instance, the task of the physician in ancient Greece who also acted as lifestyle adviser (literally: as pilot [κυβερνήτης] of a ship steering it safely through troubled waters).¹⁴ Thus a wealth of medical and health-care knowledge accumulated throughout the millennia, reflecting the biological specifics of the geographical confines of each particular culture. Though they were different in principles and therapeutic detail, there really was no great disparity between the various medical systems regarding failure or success of treatments, since all these systems functioned within culturally distinct overarching worldviews which reflected crucial dependence upon non-human powers—gods, spirits, demons and the like. Healers were experts in communicating with these powers and heeded their directives. As long as healers and clients shared in the same plausibility structure the therapies worked in the way expected.¹⁵

Things, however, changed radically during the nineteenth century due to the advent of scientific medicine in the north-western hemisphere. While Andreas Vesalius (1514 -1564)¹⁶ and William Harvey (1578-1657)¹⁷ had paved the way for modern anatomical and physiological thinking long before, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century with the groundbreaking discoveries of anesthesia (1846/47), of a- and antisepsis (1847/1867), and of hygiene (1865), along with the paradigmatic shift to cellular pathology (1858) and its dramatic impact on the development of efficient drugs for treating (epidemic) diseases, that medicine turned once and for all from the artful craft it had so far been into rational science.¹⁸ Medicine as a science systematically ignores any overarching frame of reference except what is rationally explainable and what meets the eye—in an inspection of a patient, under

¹³ For a concise general history of medicine see E. A. Ackerknecht, *A Short History of Medicine*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, revised ed., 1982.

¹⁴ See H. E. Sigerist, *A History of Medicine. vol. II: Early Greek, Hindu and Persian Medicine*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, chapter IV, esp. pp. 298ff; L. Edelstein, *The Professional Ethics of the Greek Physician*, in: *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 30, 1956, pp. 391-419.

¹⁵ A good introduction to this topic is offered in the various papers in *Social Anthropology and Medicine*, A.S.A. Monograph 13, J. B. Loudon, ed., London / New York, Academic Press 1976. For more updated information and articles see the online *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, at URL <http://www.ethnobiomed.com/>, (accessed Jan. 17, 2011).

¹⁶ *De humane corporis fabrica libri septem* [Seven books on the fabric of the human body], Basel 1543, describing the anatomy of the human body and demonstrating it with numerous illustrations. Though Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) had done sophisticated anatomical drawings before (see C. D. O'Malley, J. B. de C. M. Saunders, *Leonardo da Vinci on the Human Body: The anatomical, physiological, and embryological drawings of Leonardo da Vinci*, Gramercy Books, New York, 1982) these were never published during his time.

¹⁷ *De motu cordis et sanguinis in animalibus* [On the motion of the heart and blood in animals], Frankfurt 1628. On only 72 pages Harvey concisely and correctly described the circulation of the blood and the function of the heart for the first time in the history of medicine.

¹⁸ It should, however, be noted that the debate about medicine as an art or a rational practice was ongoing since the Middle Ages; see R. Toellner, *Medizin: Frühe Neuzeit* [Medicine: Early Modern Times], in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* [Historical Dictionary of Philosophy], J. Ritter, K. Gründer, eds., vol. 5, Basel, Schwabe & Co., 1980, columns 987-992.

the microscope or when looking at data¹⁹; and this formula, the mantra of the Enlightenment era since the 18th century, has been the key to modern medicine's unprecedented success – and not only to hers.

Of course, the telling proverb *Ubi tres medici, due athei*, (Where [ver] there are three physicians there are two atheists [among them]), had been around since the Middle Ages.²⁰ Besides suspicions of witchcraft, this adage mainly reflected polemics against the heathenish authorities of the trade—Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen—rather than a principal critique of the medical profession as such.²¹ Yet, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, medicine completely emancipated itself from religious constraints by declaring the scientific worldview as its sole and only acceptable basis. Employing religious metaphors, early advocates of such monistic scientific doctrine spoke now of the “temple of science” in which researchers officiated as “priests” and in which “worshippers” gathered to celebrate scientific knowledge as the “revelation” of ultimate “truth.”²² Eminent physician and health-care politician Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902) in his key-note address to the convention of German Natural Scientists and Physicians at Hannover in 1865, of which he was president, unhesitatingly expressed the attitude of a hard-core scientist: “I openly admit that science has become our religion.”²³

Broad anti-religious sentiments by scientists and the medical establishment have been present ever since and are still upheld in well-known publications today by such outstanding personalities as French biologist Jacques Monod (1910-1976)²⁴ and American geneticist James D. Watson,²⁵ both Nobel Laureates, as well as in the popular writings of British astrophysicist Stephen Hawking²⁶ and American biologist and entrepreneur Craig Venter,²⁷ to mention only a few. Of course, there always have been—as there always will be—scientists who personally entertain a deep religious and spiritual commitment, bearing impressive

¹⁹ For a detailed survey of the history of medicine see J. Cule, *The Timetables of Medicine: An illustrated chronology of the history of medicine from prehistory to present times*, New York, Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2000; see also Chr. H. Grundmann, *Sent to heal!: Emergence and development of medical missions*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 2005, pp. 45-51.

²⁰ See H. T. Riley, *A Dictionary of Latin and Greek Quotations, Proverbs, Maxims and Mottos, Classical and Mediaeval*, Boston, Adamant Media Corporation, 2006 (originally London 1888), p. 472; *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1935, p. 582. See also T. Browne, *Religio Medici*, J. Vincent, Oxford 1831 (original 1642), note 1 p. 1. Browne wanted to refute this proverb with his book.

²¹ See P. H. Kocher, *The Physician as Atheist*, in: P. H. Kocher, *Science and Religion in Elizabethan England*, San Marino, CA, The Huntington Library, 1953, pp. 239-257; P. H. Kocher, *The Idea of God in Elizabethan Medicine*, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 11, 1 (Jan. 1950), pp. 3-29.

²² D. Hollinger, *Inquiry and Uplift: Late Nineteenth-Century American Academics and the Moral Efficiency of Scientific Practice*, in: *The Authority of Experts: Studies in History and Theory*, Th. L. Haskell, ed., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 147; G. M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: A historical Overview*, in: *The Secularization of the Academy*, G. M. Marsden, B. J. Longfield, eds., New York / Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 17.

²³ According to the official report of the said conference (*Amtlicher Bericht über die Versammlung Deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte in Hannover 1865*, published 1866) as quoted in H. Schipperges *Entwicklung moderner Medizin: Probleme, Prognosen, Tendenzen* [Development of modern Medicine: Issues, prognosis, and tendencies], 2nd ed., Stuttgart, A. W. Genter, 1968, p. 35.

²⁴ See his *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.

²⁵ See the various papers of his in: James D. Watson, *A Passion for DNA: Genes, Genomes, and Society*, Cold Spring Harbor, NY, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001.

²⁶ For instance in his popular *A Brief History of Time*, Ealing, UK, Bantam Press, 1988.

²⁷ See the various references in the autobiographical sketch: Venter, J. Craig, *A Life Decoded: My Genome: My Life*. New York, NY, Viking Adult, 2007.

personal witness within their own profession²⁸; but these do not set the standard of doing science. They cannot do so, because science claims ideological neutrality and impartiality. However, what makes science a science in the strict sense is not ideological neutrality and impartiality—these are impossible to acquire anyhow.²⁹ It is giving critical account of the methods applied, reflecting the insights gained soberly, and evaluating the findings judiciously that makes science a science.

Without further pursuing the science-religion debate here I want to emphasize that the irreligious, technocratic subjugation of life by man-made means, which received an additional boost from outside the medical field by Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) ideas on the evolution of species³⁰ and by what has been termed the second industrial revolution,³¹ entails a certain religious amnesia. Inventions such as the steamboat, the railways, and the automobile (economically manufactured in factories with assembly lines), electric light, the telegraph and telephone were easing and accelerating life and work across the globe. The political stability of the Victorian era (1827-1901), the development of big scale (global) industry, and the reform of the international banking system (establishment of the Gold Standard) allowed the *Belle Époque* to thrive while at the same time the socio-political theory of communism addressed the flip-side of industrial progress: exploitation of workers and impoverishment of rural areas.³² However, the Marxist analysis of society and the means recommended to rectify social injustice by revolutionary uprising were as materialistically informed and focused as was the lifestyle of the well-to-do circles because they all shared the conviction

²⁸ The book by physician T. Browne, *Religio Medici*, (as mentioned in note 20 above) is a case in point, as is the life and work of Sir William Osler (1849-1919) or Richard Siebeck (1883-1965). Another very interesting phenomenon in this regard is medical missions, see Ch. H., Grundmann, *Sent to heal!* (see note 19).

²⁹ See Th. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, 3rd ed. The impossibility to remain a neutral observer of "facts" has been demonstrated by W. Heisenberg in his *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science*, New York, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007 (original 1958), and more recently by N. Luhmann, *The Modernity of Science*, in: W. Rasch, ed., *Theories of Distinction: Redefining the Description of Modernity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 61-75.

³⁰ Darwin's *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, appeared 1859 in its first edition at John Murray's in London.

³¹ See *The Industrial Revolution in Europe*, in: R. Overy, *The Times Complete History of the World*, 6th ed., New York, Barnes & Noble, 2004, pp.234-235.

³² In 1844 Karl Marx's (1818-1883) *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* appeared in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* [German-French Annals] in Paris. Marx states: "The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man* – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle *against that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is religion. - *Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. - The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo*, the *criticism of that vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*." (Quoted according to the online version provided at URL <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>; original emphasis; accessed Jan. 20, 2011) – Some four years later, in 1848 Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) on request of the Communist League published the *Communist Manifesto* in London for which Marx had already drafted a *Communist Confession of Faith* in 1847.

that unrestricted application of rational-scientific principles has made—or will make—progress possible. It seemed that everything—technically, socially, medically, personally—can be achieved if it is only done the right way and not interfered with or irritated by authoritarian objection from outside, political or religious. Life—that of individuals and that of society at large³³—appeared now to be solely a matter of human making. There is no “beyond” any longer, because there can’t be one. According to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) every mature, healthy person has to rise above being religious, since religion is nothing else but an expression of infantile desires for wish-fulfillment which any rational person, having realized it as such, will strive to overcome.³⁴ To be concerned about a “beyond” thus became a matter of personal choice, probably a personally satisfying one, but one which does not matter any longer. The Enlightenment project has come full circle.

Such a rational, positivistic cultural attitude, however, has been seriously challenged. World War I (1914 -1918) and World War II (1939-1945) with the unspeakable crime of the Shoa shook the foundation of all humanistic, cultural, and technological optimism, as do today ongoing warfare,³⁵ growing poverty,³⁶ and the many man-made ecological disasters. While news of these are painful daily reminders of the widespread failure to respond adequately to the challenges of human life, people keep on perfecting sophisticated gear, refining entertainment, and designing fancy lifestyle choices for those who can afford it. Postmodern individuals, lacking the all-embracing consolation which religion once provided,³⁷ are paralyzed, it seems, by the magnitude of the tasks and are frustrated when recognizing what little has been achieved in keeping annihilating forces at bay despite all serious efforts. Recoiling from the trials, people have decided to make themselves the object of concern and devote time and energy to the upkeep of fashionable lifestyles and stylish health-care. Vigorously trying to stay healthy, to stop aging and decay, even to halt death—obviously to no avail—they anesthetize the quest for salvation by permanently caring for body-maintenance, often according to highly questionable standards. People thereby—paradoxically and tragically—miss what they so eagerly want to gain: life!

B – Wellness, Health and Salvation, a Phenomenological Approach

The quest for staying healthy and fit in order to enjoy life and be able to meet its various challenges successfully is quite natural; it actually is essential. If neglected, life wanes quickly and perishes. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and Charles Darwin have made the point that it

³³ Rudolf Virchow once wrote, “Medicine is a social discipline, and politics is nothing else but medicine on a large scale.” (“Medizin ist eine soziale Wissenschaft und Politik ist Medizin im Grossen.”, in: *Die medizinische Reform*, vol. 1, 1, 1848, p., 2)

³⁴ Sigmund Freud’s principal reflections on religion are found in *Totem and Taboo* [1912/13; Engl. 1918; reprinted London Routledge 1999]; *The Future of an Illusion* [1927; Engl. 1928 New York, Horace Liveright]; *Moses and Monotheism* [1938; Engl. 1939 New York, Vintage Books].

³⁵ For the most recent data on current wars go to URL http://www.historyguy.com/new_and_recent_conflicts.html (accessed Jan. 21, 2011).

³⁶ See *Atlas of Global Development: A visual guide to the world’s greatest challenges*, World Bank Publications, 2nd ed., 2009.

³⁷ For this particular aspect in the discussion of Post-modernism see J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Lyotard noticed that the loss of meta-narratives (*meta écrits*) as the general frame of reference for knowledge and experience is one of the decisive features of the post-modern condition.

is the survival of the fittest which has brought about life as experienced today.³⁸ Further, who would disagree that health-care, a sound lifestyle, and hygiene are indispensable for remaining fit for life? The only question is: are wellness and health ends in themselves?

The idea of a Fountain of Youth has been around since the times when humans realized that their life—if not terminated prematurely—withers away in aging, dying, and death.³⁹ Referred to in texts of the *Alexander Romance*⁴⁰ the idea led, among others, Spanish explorer and first Governor of Puerto Rico Juan Ponce de León (1474-1521) to search for it in “Bimini,” which is Florida, where the city of St. Augustine is now home to the Fountain of Youth National Archeological Park created in 1904.⁴¹ The great artist of the German Lutheran Reformation, Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553), painted a famous eponymous picture in 1546,⁴² and a “Fountain of Youth Institute” for plastic surgery is located in Tampa, Florida, where else? Advertised as “world class” and “sought out by celebrities and sports figures” it promises to “make ... dreams of youthful transformation a reality” by offering “a full range of cosmetic services, from non-invasive procedures ... to surgical transformations,” assuring potential clients that the “technology is so advanced that these ... procedures are ... extremely effective and ... lasting.”⁴³

The desire for lasting, the longing to live on and escape annihilation one way or the other found once vivid expression in elaborate burial rites especially for people of authority, well known from the example of ancient Egypt.⁴⁴ Another way to circumvent the wasting away of the body was by drinking from or bathing in the water of life at the mythical Fountain of Youth mentioned before, a still vital ingredient of Spa culture today.⁴⁵ Yearning for rejuven-

³⁸ English philosopher Herbert Spencer coined the term “survival of the fittest” in his multi-volume *The Principles of Biology*. In vol. one (London / Edinburgh, 1864), Spencer remarked, “This survival of the fittest, which I have here sought to express in mechanical terms, is that which Mr. Darwin has called “natural selection”, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life.” (vol. 1, p. 444, quoted according to the reprint made by University Press of the Pacific, 2002). Darwin incorporated the phrase in the 5th edition of *On the Origin of species* (London: John Murray) on pp. 91–92 in this way: “This preservation of favourable variations, and the destruction of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest.”

³⁹ See L. Boia, *Forever Young: A cultural history of longevity*, London, Reaction Books, 2004. Boia titled chapter seven (p. 171ff) of this book “The Religion of Health.”

⁴⁰ See E. C. Armstrong, *The Medieval French Roman d’Alexandre*, vol. 2, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1938; reprint New York, Kraus, 1965 (Explicit reference to the Fountain of Youth pp. 210-213.) The entire project consists of seven volumes—just for the French tradition of *Alexander Romance* alone—by different authors which appeared during 1937-1976, some of these volumes have been reprinted in 1965. For the earliest Greek version of the tradition see *The Greek Alexander Romance*, translated and with an introduction by S. Stoneman, London, Penguin Classics, 1991.

⁴¹ On the interesting history of this topic and how it got linked to Florida see the carefully researched online article by Douglas T. Peck, *Misconceptions and Myths Related to the Fountain of Youth and Juan Ponce de Leon’s 1513 Exploration Voyage*, at *Early Seafaring Exploration Series*, publ. by New World Explorers, Inc., vol. 2, # 2, Dec. 1998, at URL <http://www.newworldexplorersinc.org/FountainofYouth.pdf>. (accessed Jan. 22, 2011)

⁴² A thorough description of this picture is found in the little illustrated book in the series *Der Kunstbrief* by G. F. Hartlaub, L. Sunder, *Lucas Cranach d. Ä.: Der Jungbrunnen 1546. Mit Illustrationen*, Gebrüder Mann, Berlin 1943; see now also M. Proske, *Lu c as Cranach the Elder*, Prestel, Munich / London / New York, 2007.

⁴³ URL <http://www.fountainofyouth.com> (accessed Jan. 22, 2011).

⁴⁴ See W. Grajetzki, *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt: Life in Death for Rich and Poor*, London: Duckworth, 2003. For a cultural history of Western attitudes toward dying and death see Ph. Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the present*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1975; Ph. Aries, *The Hour of Our Death: The classic history of Western attitudes towards death over the last one hundred years*, New York, Vintage Books, 1982.

⁴⁵ For reliable information about spa-culture see E. Dvorjetski, *Leisure, Pleasure, and Healing: Spa culture and medicine in ancient eastern Mediterranean*, Leiden, Brill, 2007; A. van Tubergen, S. van der Linden, ‘A brief history

ation sets in as soon as people begin to notice their wrinkling skin, thinning (gray) hair, shortness of breath, falling sick more often, and an overall lack of strength slowing down their pace of life. But instead of taking these signs as indications of human frailty and finality and thus as challenges to make sense of and give their life meaning in face of death, modern people tend to panic. Fixation on bodily fitness makes them incapable of facing life's realities. Turning anxiously to shallow promises of beauty, wellness, and health, they seek to reverse aging with the help of Botox injections⁴⁶ and manipulation of telomeres.⁴⁷ Whatever time and resources are left they spend in aggressive yet finally futile attempts to conserve life and beauty, the costs sometimes spinning out of control. But having cultivated a robust rational-technocratic, totally materialistic mindset bereft of any overarching frame of reference, where else can they turn? Where else to find salvation?⁴⁸

It is here that the fallacy of the materialistic body-mindedness becomes blatantly obvious. Reducing human life to its physical and technical aspects blots out awareness of vital dependence on forces beyond one's own control—cultural and socio-economic ones, of course, but most importantly life itself. Whatever lives has come about by what was before, and whoever lives has received life from those before, without having any chance of giving prior consent to gender, culture, and the parentage.⁴⁹ Conscious acknowledgement of this dependence, which many religions conceive as creation,⁵⁰ has numerous implications. It points to the link existing among all beings, which in the human realm includes—but is not restricted to—sociality. Geared toward social responsibility from their very beginning in procreation, humans not only nourish and raise infants, they also care for their feeble and old. Creation means likewise that life is not merely an individual physical process or a possession at one's own disposal; life, rather, is a gift received to be cherished and enjoyed as such in order to be handed on to others, a precious insight which religious wisdom in various traditions has

of the spa therapy', in: *Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases*, vol. 61 (2002), pp. 273-275. – For present day spa-culture and its enormous market potential see G. Bodeker, M. Cohen, *Understanding the Global Spa Industry: Spa Management*, Oxford, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008.

⁴⁶ Botox is the registered brand name of the neurotoxin *botulinum* manufactured by the multinational health-care company (USA, India, Europe, Latin America) Allergan headquartered in Irvine, CA. The toxin when injected into muscles inhibits muscle contractions and thereby makes wrinkles disappear as long as the paralyzing effect lasts, approximately up to six month. The FDA approved the drug in 2002. However, Allergan in a court case settled in September 2010 in Georgia pleaded guilty to misbranding the product and was fined US \$ 600 million. (See, besides others, *The New York Times*, Sept. 2, 2010 article by N. Singer [p. A1]: *Maker of Botox settles Inquiry*).

⁴⁷ On Jan 17, 2011 A. McDugall posted an online article (at URL <http://www.cosmeticsdesign-europe.com/Formulation-Science/Anti-aging-telomere-science-covered-by-new-US-patent> (accessed Jan. 22, 2011) in which he reported that Geron Corporation (Menlo Park, CA) has been granted a US patent for its technology to increase telomerase activity for cosmetic products. The company itself terms its respective activities as efforts in "regenerative medicine."

⁴⁸ R. Dresser has titled her study of contemporary medicine tellingly *When Science offers Salvation: Patient advocacy and research ethics*, Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁴⁹ It should, however, be noted that lawyers in Great Britain and the US have repeatedly filed "wrongful life" suits on behalf of children born with severe disability; see A. Shapira, 'Wrongful life' lawsuits for faulty genetic counseling: Should the impaired newborn be entitled to sue?, in: *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 24, 6, (Dec. 1998), pp. 369-375. For a global survey see URL <http://www.bioethicsanddisability.org/wrongfulbirth.html>. (accessed Jan. 25, 2011)

⁵⁰ The classic survey on the creation myths of various religions, not just the Abrahamic ones, is still M. Eliade, *Essential Sacred Writings from around the World*, New York, HarperCollins, 1977, esp. chapter II (pp. 83ff), *Myths of Creation and of Origin*.

tried to preserve by formulating basic “holy” rules of good conduct to warrant the thriving of future generations.⁵¹

Humans live; they do not just vegetate. As the conscious beings they are, humans are aware of their finality, not always and at all times, of course not, but always when death strikes. This gives rise to nagging questions about ultimate meaning, the answers to which will never be provable by rational-materialistic standards. They simply cannot be, because if the human intellectual faculty would be capable of proving the Ultimate beyond doubt, the Ultimate would not truly be ultimate; the proving human mind would be instead, an insight which marks the pitfall at the root of all rational enlightenment discourse.⁵²

Religious traditions have always maintained that life is essentially more than what meets the eye and that life is social. They also hold that what ultimately brought about the universe of being can only be acknowledged as such, but never fully comprehended by those who have been brought into being. That is why various religions urge their adherents to do exactly this and do it faithfully: to acknowledge and adore the Ultimate as ultimate. This defines the whole purpose of their life.⁵³ In so doing, and *only* in so doing, will humans find life and “have it abundantly.”⁵⁴ Recent epidemiological studies of religion and health seem to corroborate this, despite their sometimes highly questionable methodologies.⁵⁵

The Jewish-Christian tradition teaches that humans have been created “in the image of God,”⁵⁶ which is to say that mankind is perceived in these traditions to be not just the contingent outcome of a random process, but that humans are endowed with something akin to the Ultimate itself, the image of God. Scores of scholars have tried for centuries to figure out the precise meaning of this expression without reaching consensus.⁵⁷ But it is beyond doubt that the image of God terminology refers to something quite different from images in

⁵¹ The Ten Commandments of the Jewish-Christian traditions, the ten Silas in Buddhism, or the Five Pillars in Islam represent such basic rules for good human conduct. The ethical teachings of each tradition give a much more explicit and detailed account of the respective codes of conduct, of course. See S. Twiss, B. Grelle, eds., *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative religious ethics and interreligious dialogue*, New York, Westview Press, 1999; D. J. Fasching, D. deChant, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A narrative approach*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2001.

⁵² This topic has been dealt with in the long history of apologetics trying to prove the existence of God; see for instance *Existence of God: Essays from The Basic Issues Forum*, J. R. Jacobson, R. L. Mitchell, eds., Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen Press, 1988; R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, revised ed., 1991; R. Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press, revised ed., 2010.

⁵³ See for instance the study by C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1981.

⁵⁴ This quote is taken from the Gospel of John in the New Testament, chapter 10:10. (*HarperCollins Study Bible – New Revised Standard Version*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1989, p. 2033). There are other places in the New Testament Gospels where Jesus makes a similar point as in Luke 9:24 “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” See also Matthew 10:39 “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (*HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 1976, p. 1876).

⁵⁵ The most comprehensive publication in this regard is H. G. Koenig, M. E. McCullough, D. B. Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press, 2001; T. G. Planke, A. C. Sherman, eds., *Faith and Health*, New York, NY, Guilford Press, 2001. A profound critique of this approach is aired by T. W. Smith, *Religion and Spirituality in the Science and Practice of Health Psychology: Openness, Skepticism, and the Agnosticism of Methodology*, in: T. G. Planke, et al., *Faith and Health*, pp. 355-380.

⁵⁶ See Genesis 1:27 (*HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 7). The Qur’an does not mention anything similar. There is, however, a Hadith maintaining that God “created Adam according to his appearance.” (R. Paret, *La signification coranique de HALIFA* [The Qur’anic meaning of Caliph], in: *Studia Islamica*, 31, 1970, pp. 211-217.

⁵⁷ See W. R. Carr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, divinity, and monotheism*, Culture and History of the Near East, 15, Leiden / Boston, Brill, 2003; J. R. Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2005; J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human persons and the failure of naturalism*, London, SCM Press, 2009.

what serves as master blueprint for the body-sculpting ideology of today⁵⁸ and what informs genetic engineering.⁵⁹

Another aspect which deserves attention in this context is the beauty and wellness culture's obsession with a more or less static body image serving as norm for all body augmentations and manipulations. This image is actually a snapshot of humans as healthy affluent young adults who are independent, self-conscious, and socially disengaged, and, who at the height of their strength are able to command life as they please, an ideal which appeals to wishful thinking and desires. However, even ignoring the dynamics of aging, such visualization does not take into account the broad variety of body-shapes or body conditions which affect people of various ages, genders, and cultures in different degrees.⁶⁰ The attractive healthy youthful body image flouts disability, bodily disfiguration, and mutilation resulting not just from birth defects or hereditary diseases but also from accidents and combats, from work-place hazards, medication side-effects, and lifestyles. For the culture simply to ignore these realities turns "human society" into a cluster of those selfish individuals who, luckily enough, have not yet suffered serious blows but who set out to claim and defend superiority by ruthlessly setting their standards as general norm and marshaling public opinion to their view. Their loss of touch with reality makes them become cruel, merciless, and inhumane.⁶¹

Finally, today's estheticized, one-dimensional body-mindedness is also shunning the imminence of death, the awareness of which former generations kept alive by the cautious admonition *memento mori*, that is, "remember that some time sooner or later you, too, will die" (literally: remember to die). This was not meant to frighten or to spoil pleasure. It was to foster sobriety by making people focus on the really important things in life as long as there is time and opportunity.⁶² Therefore, while the *memento mori* nowadays thrives—not

⁵⁸ James Villepigue and Hugo Rivera published a series of so called "Body Sculpting Bibles", some of which are: *The Body Sculpting Bible for Women*, revised ed. 2001; *Body Sculpting Bible Swimsuit for Women: The way to the perfect beach body*, 2004; *The Body Sculpting Bible for Women: The way to physical perfection*, 2006; *The Body Sculpting Bible for Men: The way to physical perfection*, 2006; *The Body Sculpting Bible for Abs: For women only*, 2007; all: Long Island City, NY, Hatherleigh Press.

⁵⁹ J. D. Watson, *Ethical Implications of the Human Genome Project*, in: J. D. Watson, *A Passion for DNA: Genes, Genomes, and Society*, Cold Spring Harbor, NY, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001, pp. 173-181; *Viewpoint: All for the Good—Why Genetic Engineering Must Soldier On*, *ibid.*, pp. 231-233. The movie *GATTACA* by A. Niccol of 1997 visualizes and plays out some of the possible implications of genetic engineering and eugenics.

⁶⁰ Especially women are affected by this as the abundance of respective literature shows, beginning with the now famous Boston Women's Health Collective and their book *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1984, 5th ed. 1998, to G. Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as intercorporeality*, New York, Rutledge, 1999, and M. G. Hutchinson, *Transforming Body Image: Learning to love the body you have*, Freedom, CA, Crossing Press, 8th ed., 1998; N. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How images of beauty are used against women*, New York, HarperCollins, 2002 (1st ed. 1991); D. L. Gimlin, *Body Work: Beauty and Self Image in American Culture*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2002; R. T. Ridgeway, T. L. Tylka, *College men's perceptions of ideal body composition and shape*, in: *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, vol. 6 (2005), pp. 209–220.

⁶¹ Harvard philosopher P. Singer's *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 2nd ed.) is a prime example of such an attitude.

⁶² Since the topic is much too complex to be dealt with satisfactorily in a short note, some brief hints have to suffice. The *memento mori* motif which is an element of the "art to die well" tradition has brought about the *Vanitas* still-lives in art, one example of which is provided by K. Koozin, *The Vanitas Still Lives of Harmen Steenswyck (1612-1656): Metaphoric realism*, Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen Press, 1990. See also F. Parkes Weber, *Aspects of Death and Correlated Aspects of Life in Art, Epigram, and Poetry*, New York, Paul B. Hoeber, 1918. Today the call "to die well" has turned into the plea for euthanasia; see S. Wanzer, J. Glenmullen, *To Die Well: Your right to comfort, calm, and choice in the last days of life*, Philadelphia, PA, Da Capo Press, 2007.

surprisingly—in the sub- and countercultures,⁶³ the fitness and body-minded world would do well not to shun it either, because such a reminder liberates one from misguided hopes and expectations by putting efforts toward achievement in proper perspective.

Liberation from the annihilating power of death has been at the core of many religions, which call it redemption or salvation.⁶⁴ And while each of these traditions teaches significant differences on the ways and means of how to obtain salvation from death, they all attest to the factual reality of it. Even though they cannot prove it by rational argument, which will fall short of the subject matter anyhow, the various traditions refer to crucial experiences of salvation from death as handed down in their community of faith by word of mouth and sacred texts, experiences also attested to by many who trusted their “cloud of witnesses”⁶⁵ and who dared to risk living accordingly. To probe and authenticate the validity of a religious claim there is no other way than to take the risk of living it “as if;” to live as if salvation from death were actually possible, or, to use more conventional religious terminology, to live in the hope, that is, to trust and be confident that death, which is obvious and ubiquitous, is not the definite end of life.

To live in hope, to live in certain anticipation of that broader dimension of life which transcends what meets the eye and is beyond rational comprehension has a bearing on how people cope with human frailty and decay and how they approach dying and death. The body-focused mind gets scared by every indication of life withering away and becomes desperate, cynical, or fatalistic when told, “Sorry, but there is nothing more we can do.” In contrast, people who entertain the genuine hope that death is not the end of life because it is overcome effectively, have a much broader range of actions and reactions at their disposal when confronted with these challenges of life, possibilities which are simply not accessible to those who, afraid of aging, worship a petrified body-image and for whom death marks nothing but the end and collapse of an individual living system. However, those who confidently trust that dying is no longer definitely annihilating are set free to leave behind at the appropriate time anxieties and worries about body-upkeep and to embrace life in the face of death. As immediately affected individuals they accept it in faith, and as bystanders they do not shy away from pain and fear, from tears and agony, which, of course, affect them, too. Willing and able to focus on the relevant needs, they provide whatever help they can in letting dying become an act of life until the end, offering also comfort, consolation, and companionship. They do so not as experts in thanatology⁶⁶ but try to the best of their ability to witness for that dimension of life which is beyond any comprehension.

⁶³ The *memento mori* tradition received a vivid renaissance today in the gothic, techno, and tattoo counterculture and in circles of respective worldwide internet role-plays, as any quick web search will reveal.

⁶⁴ For a general orientation on this topic see M. Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A theory of religion*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010; *Types of Redemption*, R. J. Z. Werblowsky, J. R. Bleeker, eds., Leiden, Brill, 1970; *Man and His Salvation*, E. J. Sharpe, J. R. Hinnels, eds., Manchester, UK, Manchester University Press, 1973.

⁶⁵ The Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12:1 (*HarperCollins Study Bible – New Revised Standard Version*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1989, p. 2266).

⁶⁶ Since 1969 when psychiatrist E. Kübler-Ross published her study of the process of dying (*On Death and Dying*, New York, Touchstone; see also E. Kübler-Ross, D. Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, New York, Simon & Schuster Ltd, 2005) thanatology has become a discipline in its own right; see: *Handbook of Thanatology: The Essential Body of Knowledge for the Study of Death, Dying, and Bereavement*, New York, Routledge, 2007.

In order not to be misunderstood, I would like to emphasize in closing that as long as wellness and health-care efforts are concerned with righting the wrongs of misguided lifestyles and habits, or much better even, with preventing these from developing in the first place, they don't give reason for concern. But when such efforts become ends in themselves there is serious cause to worry. Promoting an idealized static body-image fashioned on youthful beauty, strength, and affluence of socially disengaged individuals, any such effort popularizes a reductionist anthropology, which, when applied as general norm to all of society, becomes utterly inhumane. The body-image championed by today's beauty, fitness, and health-care industries has lost its touch with reality as so pointedly featured in the Robert Zemecki movie "Death Becomes Her."⁶⁷ Religious traditions speaking of salvation are much more realistic in this regard. While frankly acknowledging human frailty and finality as what they are, namely painful and anguishing experiences, these traditions do not simply leave it there or try to sugarcoat it. They also bestow perspectives of hope for the afflicted by providing a sound frame of reference to ultimate meaning and thereby making accessible entirely new and creative ways of genuine human conduct in the face of aging, dying, and death.

About the Author

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Born in 1950 in Bergheim/ Erft, Germany. After completing theological studies in Germany (1967-1978; M.Th.) and ministerial training at Caracas, Venezuela, I received Lutheran ordination (1978) and thereafter taught for four years at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary (TTS) in Madurai, India (1979-1982). Returning to Germany I became hospital chaplain and theological consultant to the German Institute for Medical Missions at Tuebingen (1983-1991). In 1991 I earned my first doctorate (Dr. theol.) with a dissertation on emergence and development of medical missions (*Gesandt zu heilen!*, Guetersloh, Mohn, 1991; *Sent to heal!*, UPA 2005) from the University at Hamburg, Germany, and joined the staff of the 'Institute for Missions, Ecumenics, and Religions' at that very institution. After completing the second doctorate (Dr. theol. habil.) with a thesis on healing in the African Independent/Indigenous Churches (*Leibhaftigkeit des Heils*, Muenster / London, LIT 1996) I was awarded the *venia legendi* (official academic permission to teach at a university) and became *Privatdozent* (professor without pay) at Hamburg University for the history of religions, being awarded the title 'Professor' in 2001. In 2001 I was inducted into the John R. Eckrich University Chair in Religion and the Healing Arts at Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN, USA.

⁶⁷ A 1992 Universal Pictures production based on a script by M. Donovan and D. Koepp starring Goldie Hawn, Meryl Streep, and Bruce Willis as the main characters Helen Sharp, Madeline Ashton, and Ernest Menville. This serene comedy is ideally suited to start discussion on many of the topics mentioned in this paper for broader audiences in a less academic manner since it not only avails of the mythical Fountain of Youth tradition, the quest for everlasting life, and the incredible amounts spent on anti-aging potions, but also addresses in a somewhat bizarre way the topic of body-maintenance and does so with stunning visual effects for which it received an Academy Award.

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