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Christoffer H. Grundmann
Valparaiso University, Christoffer.Grundmann@valpo.edu

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

Christoffer Hinrich Grundmann
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Christoffer Hinrich Grundmann, Valparaiso University, Indiana, USA

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and religious implications of this phenomenon by stating that the pursuit of such caring for the body has superseded the quest for salvation.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 inhuman 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.” 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. In addition: 75% of the population in the United States took dietary supplements, spending more than another $ 20 billion, while the general diet industry stands at a market volume of $ 58.6 billion in the US today. Add to these figures the $ 5 billion spent in 2010 on so called cosmeceutical skin-care products and the $ 2.7 billion spent on surgical and non-surgical aesthetic products.

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).
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, the entire size of this primarily patient pay market amounts to not less than $103.9 billion or roughly $330 per capita p.a. 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. 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. 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.

Wellness and health-care are huge markets, indeed, especially in affluent societies. 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 piercing). 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.

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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).
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.
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. 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). Thus a wealth of medical and healthcare 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.

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) and William Harvey (1578-1657) 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. 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

17 De motu cordis et sanguinis in animallibus [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 data; 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. 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. 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 “worshipers” gathered to celebrate scientific knowledge as the “revelation” of ultimate “truth.”

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.”

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) and American geneticist James D. Watson, both Nobel Laureates, as well as in the popular writings of British astrophysicist Stephen Hawking and American biologist and entrepreneur Craig Venter, 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


personal witness within their own profession\(^{28}\); 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 sober-mindedly, 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 species\(^ {30}\) 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).


\(^{30}\) Darwin’s On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection, appeared 1859 in its first edition at John Murray’s in London.


\(^{32}\) 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 large—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.

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, positivist 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, growing poverty, 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, 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

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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)


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).


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 metanarratives (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—withered 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 Léon (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 rejuvenation—

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\(^{38}\) 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.”


\(^{45}\) 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 injections and manipulation of telomeres. 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?

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. Conscious acknowledgement of this dependence, which many religions conceive as creation, 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...
tried to preserve by formulating basic “holy” rules of good conduct to warrant the thriving of future generations.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{53} In so doing, and only in so doing, will humans find life and “have it abundantly.”\textsuperscript{54}

Recent epidemiological studies of religion and health seem to corroborate this, despite their sometimes highly questionable methodologies.\textsuperscript{55}

The Jewish-Christian tradition teaches that humans have been created “in the image of God,”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{57} But it is beyond doubt that the image of God terminology refers to something quite different from images in

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\textsuperscript{53} See for instance the study by C. Westermann, \textit{Praise and Lament in the Psalms}, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1981.
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what serves as master blueprint for the body-sculpting ideology of today and what informs genetic engineering.

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. 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.

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 ad- monition 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. 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.


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 (1612-1635): 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. Wanzier, 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, 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. 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” 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 thanatology, but try to the best of their ability to witness for that dimension of life which is beyond any comprehension.

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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.
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.” 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 anguish 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

Prof. Dr. Christoffer Hinrich Grundmann

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.
Editor
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Members of the Religion and Spirituality in Society Community meet at the international conference, held annually in different locations around the world, each selected for the particular role education is playing in social, cultural and economic change. The Inaugural Conference was held at University Center, Chicago, USA in 2011 and in 2012 the Conference will be held at Robson Square, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

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