

Can even bodybuilding be a spiritual path? An exercise in typology.

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Abstract

Interest in bodybuilding has grown exponentially in recent times.¹ Is it simply narcissistic? This article proposes that the interest in bodybuilding is an attempt to dismiss long-held suspicions regarding physicality and to explore in exciting ways the immense potentiality of the human body. More significantly it proposes that bodybuilding can be, in certain circumstances, a spiritual path whereby union with the Transcendent is ultimately experienced. It refers to Classical and Hindu approaches but focuses on the Christian outlook and makes use of typology. It makes use of spiritual theology to trace eight steps of a process starting from human nature, spiritual inhabitation etc. to arrive at faith and the bodybuilder's identity with the suffering and risen Christ who is now seen as his antitype. If Jesus is to be seen as Universal Lord, whatever is human can be seen as leading to him. Bodybuilding, therefore, cannot be dismissed as foreign to Christianity and unredeemable. The article also points out the many obstacles that can stand in the way of proceeding along the path. If this particular path – preposterous in the eyes of many – is adjudged to be valid, it can help show how other seemingly 'mundane' areas of human endeavour can also become valid spiritual paths.²

Introductory remarks

There are innumerable writings that explore the link between spirituality and athletics. For example, *Zen and the Art of Motor-cycle Maintenance* shows how even 'mundane' activities can develop a spiritual mind, but there are few if any equivalents as regards bodybuilding. Our article proposes to fill this lacuna.

There is a vast body of scientific evidence to show the benefits of 'mindfulness', for example, but this author is not aware of any scientific texts that examine the spiritual effects of bodybuilding. This article draws on observation, experience and typology, and for that reason it is an original piece of work submitted for the reader's consideration.

¹ For a full account of the modern history of bodybuilding see Dimitrios Liokaftos, "From 'Classical' To 'Freaky': an Exploration of the Development of Dominant, Organised, Male Bodybuilding Culture" (PhD diss., University of London, 2013).

² Note that, for lack of space, the article focuses on the male but not the 'average' male practitioner. For an article on female bodybuilding, see Peggy Roussel and Jean Griffet, "The Path Chosen by Female Bodybuilders: A Tentative Interpretation," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17 (2000): 130-150.

In the minds of many, it is gross, offensive, narcissistic and utterly incompatible with the Christian faith or with any spiritual path. Is it, therefore, completely unredeemable? Are there limits to what can be saved by the Universal Lord? It is not claimed here that bodybuilding is necessarily a spiritual path but only that it can be, for which reason the article must often use qualifiers such as 'perhaps', 'might'. Bodybuilding, like any human activity, can be done abusively.

We propose that the starting point for a Christian spirituality of bodybuilding can be the inhabiting and inspiring Spirit who, in leading a man to do bodybuilding might also, unexpectedly, when he encounters the Gospel, lead him to recognise Christ as a fellow 'bodybuilder' in the fullest sense of the word. Indeed, he may come to realise that there is one Body, one Bodybuilder, and through him come into the presence of the One who is the source of all.

This article is also an exercise in typology. The exodus of the Hebrews from slavery is a type of the resurrection of Jesus, which is the antitype; the bronze serpent on the standard is a type of Jesus on the cross (John 3.14). Personages such as 'shepherd', 'judge' and 'king' or items such as 'rock', 'light' and 'lamb' are also used as types of Christ Jesus. Type and antitype are mutually referential. The type is understood to be a type when the antitype is presented; awareness of the type prepares for understanding the antitype; the antitype in turn explicates and justifies the type. Can 'bodybuilder' be added to the list of types of Christ? This is our subject.

While some bodybuilders may depend on "an ideology of gender difference, championing dominant meanings of masculinity through a literal embodiment of patriarchal power" (White and Gillett 1994, 1) the path we are proposing is fundamentally different. While endorsing Louw's description of the integrated man as compassionate and sensitive, empathetic, and hopeful, moved by trust and grace, and with a sense of servanthood, (Louw 2012a, 182) our path leads to further elements such as a sense of physicality, sacrifice, resurrection and glory. That being said, our path does not claim to present a model of masculinity which all men must adopt but only a valid form of it.

Contrasting attitudes to the body

Heracles (aka Hercules), descended from Zeus, was the paragon of masculinity, endowed with immense strength, ingenuity and sexual prowess, the conqueror of dark forces and furious in his anger. He was patron of the gymnasium. (Pausanias 2018)

Although Greek athletes admired Heracles, some of their philosophers devalued the body as such. In their eyes, it had no real substance. The ultimate good, which is to be sought by means of reason and will, could be found only in the contemplation of a higher realm. (Collins 1995, 102) Indeed, in Greek the word for body (*sôma*) resembled the word for prison (*sema*). Plato, in *Phaedrus* 250c, makes the point explicitly, "being ourselves pure and not entombed in this which we carry about with us and call

the body, in which we are imprisoned like an oyster in its shell.” (Irigaray 2018, 1) At the same time, in *The Symposium*, Plato speaks of the contemplation of physical beauty that leads progressively to the contemplation of the beauty of the soul, leading to “the supreme knowledge whose sole object is that absolute beauty.” (Plato 1951, 94) There is a tension between these approaches.

Some of the best minds of the Roman Empire such as Marcus Aurelius and Plotinus saw the natural world as a dream and an illusion. (Collins 1995, 10) This was continued in the Gnostic point of view, which attempted to disembodify religion. (Collins 1995, 99-100) Augustine, whose impact on Western theology has been immense, did not entirely escape the influence of his earlier Manichean and Neo-Platonic views. He states: “...human kind was born into the world of sin, evil, and death and ... salvation was to be found not in this natural world – which was the dwelling place of the demonic – but in the world to come.” (Collins 1995, 119)

This suspicion regarding physicality became deep-rooted in Christian theology and permeated the Western cultural tradition as a whole. (Collins 1995, 104) Yet, along with negativity there was also admiration. The Christ of the Sistine Chapel, for example, was modelled on the Belvedere Hercules, (Barolsky 2010) for Jesus’ powerful physique befits his act of separating the just and the unjust, of receiving into heaven and condemning to hell. There is a tension in the contrasting Christian attitudes as well.

The Hindu mind does not necessarily despise the bodybuilder. For example, the Varanasi wrestler is concerned with muscle bulk, strength and flexibility. (Alter 1997, 97) Indeed, he is considered to be super-virile because of his training and diet, (Alter 1997, 220) with a super-virility comparable to that of the yogi, even though the yogi achieves it by asceticism. (Alter 1997, 220)

The wrestler’s model in this regard is Hanuman, the monkey-faced hero of the *Ramāyana* who is usually portrayed as gloriously golden-red with a muscled body, larger than life and able to strike fear into the hearts of ordinary folk. (Alter 1997, 206) He is the model for the construction of the wrestler’s identity.

Even though Hanuman is himself devoted to the divine Rāma, the Varanasi wrestler focuses his devotion on the Monkey-God (Alter 1997, 209) and wishes to be his living manifestation. The wrestler is, therefore, a religious figure who can be seen to endorse the bodybuilder spirituality that this article proposes.

Yet tensions are present in the Hindu world as well. The term ‘body’ (Sanskrit: *deha*) can refer to what is limited, time-bound and subject to illusion; liberation (Sanskrit: *mokṣa*) signifies freedom from the body and the burdensome cycle of rebirth.

The negativity of some of these ancient views led to the result, Coyle says, that “the Western bias of favouring psyche over soma negatively affects a person’s emotional freedom, development of

consciousness, and the practice of psychotherapy”. (Coyle 2011, iii) She proposes countering the negativity by rebalancing psyche and *sōma*. “Any movement involving skill and concentration – walking, archery, body building, dance, for example – eases access to the subconscious, while toning the body This results in simultaneous transformation of one’s consciousness as well as one’s physical and emotional being.” (Coyle 2011, iv) This article explores one of the transformative activities that Coyle proposes.

Bodybuilding as a spiritual path

The idea of bodybuilding as a spiritual path represents a paradigmatic shift from a spirituality of asceticism and its “mistrust of passions and feelings”, (Blée 2011, 154) to a spirituality implies freedom and spontaneity, the absence of conformism and of self-suppression. It leads to deeper sensitivity and heightened pleasure, to fuller human relationships and a greater capacity for self-giving, and even an increased capacity to broach the paradox of life and death.

Methodology

This article follows the methodology of ‘spiritual theology’, which is contrasted with ‘dogmatic theology’, which consists in the analysis of doctrine. This methodology is significant, for while classical Christian theology did not deny spiritual experience, it largely ignored it. In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas first quotes from the *De Divinis Nominibus* of Pseudo-Dionysius: “Hierotheus is taught (*doctus*) not by mere learning (*discens*), but by experience of divine things (*patiens divina*).” On that basis Aquinas goes on to distinguish between two types of theology. One is by inclination (*per modum inclinationis*) and is due to the gift of the Holy Spirit (*per donum Spiritus Sancti*). The other is by knowledge (*per modum cognitionis*) and is acquired by study (*per studium*) (Aquinas 2017).

That distinction, so briefly described, had an immense impact on Christian thought, for it gives primacy to objective knowledge. Indeed, Melchior Cano’s (c. 1509 – 1560) list of topics for theological discussion (*loci theologici* or *loci communes*) gives no place to spiritual experience. Again, in the 19th and 20th centuries during the Modernist crisis, personal experience was eschewed lest it become detached from the objectivity of dogmatic theology (Robert 2009, 54).

Spiritual theology, however, restores the balance. It values experience yet also holds that the experience is enhanced by reflection upon it. Language, especially that provided by religious traditions, is vital, for it clarifies and purifies, it brings consistency and credibility. The act of reflection is indeed a sort of ‘stepping back’ from the experience but at the same time it allows the experience to retain its force, whereas dogmatic theology does not imply any experience at all (Robert 2009, 68).

The Steps

Step 1: Natural capacity

A man may start bodybuilding out of shame and anxiety, even out of an attitude of narcissism and exhibitionism, but the path this article is tracing starts simply with an individual knowing his strength and rejoicing in it, and for this reason it involves a certain naivety. Progress along the path springs not so much from love as described by Augustine of Hippo, for whom “all love is acquisitive love. To love means to direct one’s longing and desire to an object by the possession of which one expects to be made happy.” (Nygren 1953, 476) Rather, the practice of bodybuilding comes to him as the simple expression of his nature. He experiences not *cupiditas* but *agapê*, the natural outpouring of goodness. He does bodybuilding not in order to become a bodybuilder but because he is already by nature a bodybuilder. He becomes visibly what he is essentially, and this pleases him.

His training in the gym springs from the natural inclination of his body, from the impulse of his very nature. His exercising unlocks his capacities and consciousness. It sets him on a path of accepting and transforming his own reality, of increasing awareness and commitment, of growing readiness for challenges and vulnerability. This is because his vitality is a drive to the fullness of life.

He takes hold of the bar and identifies with the weight. He pauses briefly, waiting till the energy starts to move in him. He acts almost spontaneously. It is a double moment of ‘becoming’ the weight, so to speak, and of ‘exploding’ with it. There is a sense of victory, for he accomplishes what seemed impossible; there is also a sense of danger since the weight could crush him. It is a multifaceted experience.

The path starts from innate energy and personal choice. It involves using weights specifically designed for bodybuilding, as well as using food supplements. However, if a stunning physique relies primarily on chemicals such as steroids, the appearance is a pretense, and in this sense a dehumanization, just as cosmetics can enhance the natural attractiveness of the face but if used to excess produces a mask.

Step 2: Spiritual inhabitation

The path being described here presupposes a number of Christian theological positions which, for lack of space, cannot be further discussed. For example, it eschews the doctrines of ‘total depravity’ or ‘radical corruption’ set forth in some interpretations of Augustine’s writings on grace and free will. It assumes the more frequent Christian view that while the sin of Adam does distort the human nature, it does not wholly prevent the continuing work of the Spirit in guiding and leading, driving and enabling (cf. Ps. 104:29-30), and finally coming to full measure through the redemptive effect of the Paschal Mystery.

This article takes up the point of view of Daniël J. Louw who holds that “a healthy body is due to the inhabitation of the Spirit, which makes for an embodied soul and an ensouled body” (Louw 2012b, 86).

He adds, “Most theologians start with Christology and argue that theology is intrinsically ‘public’ due to the incarnation of Christ and the ‘humanity of God’. My starting point is from the perspective of pneumatology: not incarnation but inhabitation.” (Louw 2012a, 160, footnote 6).

A number of Evangelical websites³ develop a ‘Bible to body’ approach that supports bodybuilding and shows how it can be developed. They quote Biblical texts such as,

I appeal to you therefore ... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).⁴

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, ... glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

While that approach is undoubtedly apposite, this article proposes a ‘body to Bible’ approach that is typological in style. In the path we are describing, the body is the seed bed of the Word, a *preparatio evangelica*, where the Spirit is already be at work.

The Spirit’s preparation for the Word is a constant Biblical theme. For example, before even God says “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), the Spirit is active, hovering over the waters of the deep (Gn. 1.2). According to Orlinksy, the word ‘רוח’ originally meant just ‘wind’ and only later acquired the deeper meaning of ‘spirit’ which was read into it by a process of eisegesis (Orlinsky 1957, 182) as commentators came to a greater understanding of the workings of God. Thus,

The רוח [spirit] of God is usually the divine power or the divine being which produces “demonic” phenomena in a person. Anything mighty and mysterious in human life that exceeds human strength and human scope, especially the mysterious experiences the prophet undergoes, is the effect of the רוח. (Gunkel 1997, 105).

This inhabitation of the Spirit is found in the figure of Samson whose dauntless courage, and prodigious bodily strength marked him out as the champion of Israel. (Gaster 1969, 434) His strength is said to arise when the ‘Spirit of the Lord came upon him’ (Judg. 14:6,19, 15:14),

... literally, ‘leapt upon him’, as a lion on its prey. This expresses simply Samson’s phenomenal access of physical strength and courage, also considered to be the influence of God beyond the natural force of man, as the heroic impulse to lead and hazard all in God’s cause, the wisdom of the sage, the technical insight and skill of the artisan or artist, the insight and courage of the prophet, the frenzy of the dervish and even the madness by which God makes one ‘another man’. (Gray 1986, 328)

³ See, for example: <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/articles/can-a-christian-be-a-bodybuilder.aspx> : <https://biblereasons.com/bodybuilding/> <https://www.compellingtruth.org/christian-bodybuilding.html>

⁴ All biblical quotations in this article are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Samson's strength is brutal and violent. His imperfect character, however, does not negate the fact that the Spirit of God is at work in him, just as the sins of David and Solomon do not negate their vital role in salvation history.

The Spirit that functions continually in creation also inspires the writing of the Word. The Nicene Creed declares: "He has spoken through the prophets". The same Spirit overshadows the Virgin Mary before the Word is conceived in her flesh (Luke 1:35), and descends on Christ at the baptism before the Voice proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved" (Mark 1:11) where the Spirit comes not with the aggressiveness of a lion but with the gentleness of a dove. Strength does not equate with violence and inspiration does not mean brutality. The Jesus who is gentle and humble of heart (Matt. 11:29) is also able to master the storm (Mark 4:39) and curse the hypocrites (Matt. 23:15). The spiritual path we are tracing combines both power and serenity.

Step 3: Emulation

The sight of a bodybuilder is an important source of inspiration. Arnold Schwarzenegger relates, "When I was just getting started I knew I wanted to build the kind of mass and density that I had seen in his [Reg Park's] photos – big, rough and Herculean." (Schwarzenegger 1985, 44) Crossing the vast distance between Arnold's birthplace near Graz in Austria and the USA, he joined the company of bodybuilders. He was inspired by them and bonded with them, for individuality and communality are both necessary to the bodybuilder who becomes closely involved with his peers, being both encouraged and challenged by them. At the same time, he cannot simply be dependent on them, for the personal commitment of the one is necessary for the inspiration of the others. He needs to commit himself 'alone', so to speak, and by his success he draws them on after him. Individualism and tribalism are opposing forces; the bodybuilding world is neither of these; it is individual and communal.

This spiritual path of bodybuilding is not 'Pelagian' in the sense that the ideal is only a model, and that the goal is reached simply by one's own will-power. In the case of Schwarzenegger, the sight of Reg Pak did provide a model, but the Christian viewpoint being presented here goes further and holds that it is not just the example but also the very person of Christ that inspires and enables. We shall return to this.

Step 4: Competition

The focus of the weightlifter is on actually lifting the weight, a feat that spectators come to see. The aim of the bodybuilder we are describing is, by contrast, to manifest the strength that is found within. He publicly displays not the act of lifting but the body that can do so. He rejoices to manifest his inner and outer being, his endurance and prowess, with the resultant admiration and recognition by others.

The bodybuilding contest can indeed be narcissistic. However, display is not the same as vanity, nor is self-declaration merely self-praise. The path we are describing involves not boasting, but a

manifestation of giftedness. False modesty can mask conceit, but the acknowledgment of a gift leads to its demonstration. The spiritual path of the bodybuilder is compatible with a natural wish for others to share in his joy.

Some bodybuilders humiliate others through vaunting their superiority. Our path, instead, involves quite naturally and spontaneously supporting and encouraging other competitors, inspiring them to emulation and greater involvement. The spectators too are shaken out of their complacency as they see the possibilities that lie hidden in their own selves and indeed something of their future, both physical and spiritual. This spiritual path can, surprisingly indeed, lead to the competitor's platform.

If the bodybuilder's motivation is fixated on self-image and self-acceptance, he will be dismayed when at last his body ages and declines.⁵ However, if he moves on to a more expansive form of bodybuilding, and draws on further resources of energy, his person will become increasingly remarkable.

Step 5: "a greater force"

It is not possible to become increasingly massive, for the human body has its limits, but bodily impressiveness can increase. Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the most celebrated bodybuilders, who won a Mr Universe contest at the age of 21, won the Mr Olympia title 7 times, featured in films such as *Conan the Barbarian* and the documentary *Pumping Iron*, and was twice Governor of California, wished to go beyond the limitations of bodybuilding and suggested 'breaking the mirrors'.

Break your mirrors! In our society that is so self-absorbed, begin to look less at yourself and more at each other. You'll get more satisfaction from having improved your neighbourhood, your town, your state, your country, and your fellow human beings than you'll ever get from your muscles, your figure, your automobile, your house, or your credit rating (Schwarzenegger 2013, 601).

And this from a man who frankly admitted to using steroids in his earlier days and who, some say, had to undergo surgery as a result (Gilson 2003).

Joe Weider, a major figure in the world of bodybuilding, goes further. He states that even though the bodybuilder does decide to lift, something greater also makes him want to lift.

A greater force operates within each of us. With that understanding, we can develop the spirituality that creates holistic health, ... to shape our lives in a personally unique way, to paint a mural of well-being that lasts forever (Weider 1996, 12).

The path we are tracing involves obedience to a greater force and even, we are suggesting, to the Spirit such that travelling along the path becomes an ever-increasingly spiritual act. This 'greater force' becomes more evident when training becomes tedious and demanding. Those who are truly dedicated to this path, for whom this is indeed their avocation, will not readily abandon it. Every crisis requires a

⁵ Schwarzenegger has provided strikingly contrasting images of his physique at its peak and at its deterioration in old age. See https://www.google.com/search?q=bodybuilder+schwarzenegger+images&client=safari&rls=en&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjOyfXN5endAhXa7GEKHSZVCHMQ_AUIDigB&biw=1148&bih=893#imgrc=UH2WHMrpLi4jpM:

choice, to simply give up or to be committed in a fuller way. The bodybuilder must face himself and ask if he truly wishes to continue along this arduous path. He must also have the courage to face those who misconstrue the practice or place no value on it; he must choose whether to conform to the expectations of others or to follow the drive of the Spirit who is a 'greater force'. In deciding to follow his avocation he strengthens his will, shifts his awareness from the outer to the inner, and discovers more clearly his true nature, his very substance.

Therefore, he does not replace bodybuilding with a disembodied spirituality; he counters the advice given by St Jerome (347-420 CE) to the young woman, Eustochium, and which has been implicitly recommended to men, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Christian tradition.

Let your companions be women pale and thin with fasting, and approved by their years and conduct; such as daily sing in their hearts: "Tell me where thou feedest thy flock, where thou makest it to rest at noon," and say, with true earnestness, have a desire to depart and to be with Christ" (Jerome 2019).

While Jerome's asceticism has undoubtedly born fruit in the history of Christian spirituality, the bodybuilder refuses to be abstracted from the world, and prefers to project his body into it. His impressive body ceases to be just a fact; it becomes a sign that points to a future reality.

Step 6: Recognition

If we have taken a long time to get to an explicit reference to Jesus Christ, it is because the starting point was the bodybuilder's natural giftedness coupled with the inhabiting Spirit. These two forces have been at work in him and have been leading to a significant change in focus. The Spirit has been developing his body, mind and spirit, conforming him to the Word, and indeed to the Word made flesh. The type has been set. The Spirit who inspires the Word in the Sacred Scripture, as we have seen above, can also insufflate the Word in the bodybuilder.

If at some point the bodybuilder hears the Gospel, there may be a moment of recognition, even more than when Schwarzenegger, on seeing Reg Park, realised his own nature and avocation. The bodybuilder we are describing may begin to realise that he and Jesus are kindred and more than kindred. The knowledge of his self has prepared him for the knowledge of the Christ. What was happening, obscurely and irrespective of the Christian teaching at first, changes when the bodybuilder, on learning of the powerful Christ, recognises him not as something foreign but as essential to his own self. Paul states this explicitly in his own regard, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20) In recognizing the Christ, the bodybuilder realises that he is of one character with the Christ. He recognises himself in Jesus and recognises Jesus in himself. His self-perception prepares him to see Christ in a new light, a light that is more convincing to him than other types such as 'shepherd' or 'lamb'. He realises that he is a type of the Christ; that the Christ is his antitype. He is fulfilled in the Christ; he understands himself in the Christ. This recognition leads to identification. He sees himself in Christ and is enabled by Christ to become himself, even more than he was enabled by the community of bodybuilders at the gym who had earlier encouraged and challenged and affirmed him. In this fashion

the bodybuilder not only realises that he and Jesus are “brothers” (Heb. 2:11) but also that he is enabled to be what he is. By acknowledging Jesus’ power, he assents to that power operating in him too. He is made real by Christ, justified and brought into being by him. Something profound has happened. Indeed, a whole new way of being bodily has opened up which does not undermine but which complements and enhances the aims he had entertained. He is becoming even more fully a ‘bodybuilder’.

Step 7: taking on the persona of Jesus

This idea of taking on the persona of Christ is a frequent theme in the Gospels, as for example “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me” (Matt. 10:40). Note, however, that the bodybuilder takes on the persona of Christ, not the person; they share the same character without confusing their identities. If the Christ can be seen in the prisoner and the sick, the hungry and the thirsty, (Matt. 25:35-36) he can also be seen in the bodybuilder. While it is readily accepted that Christ is seen in the weak, it is not often emphasised that Christ can be seen in the strong. His many manifestations must be held in fruitful tension.

The attentive observer perceives this transformation. Not unlike the Varanasi wrestler who manifests Hanuman, the bodybuilder can manifest something of the persona of Jesus. Two examples follow.

a. Confidence

The impulse that led to grasping the weight and overcoming its inertia helps the bodybuilder understand what it means for the Word to come and take on fallen humanity and change it, communicating his own energy to it. And again, the resulting increase in self-confidence leads to a deeper appreciation of how Christ can speak with authority. “You have heard how it was said But I say to you.” (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39). It is a double movement. He recognises Christ’s confidence and is made more confident by it. There is, indeed, for the Christian, a confidence that is the communication of Christ’s power. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matt. 28:18-19) “As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you.” (John 20.21)

This confidence is not arrogance, for it does not impose or dominate and avoids any sense of self-importance. If the bodybuilder feels assured and determined, confident and assertive, it is because the confidence stemming from his own nature, from the inspiring Spirit and from the revealing Christ come together as one in him. Each leads to the other; each is in the other. His confidence enables him to be gentle for he knows his inner strength. He knows when to act and when to wait, when to serve the needs of others and when to be assertive.

b. Eucharist

The bodybuilder’s acknowledgement of his own body is an expansive emotion; he sees his body as valuable for others. It becomes clearer for him how “the male body can become a life-giving source for spiritual energy.” (Louw 2012a, 178). He appreciates more clearly how Jesus could replace the Temple

in Jerusalem with his own body (John 2.21). The presentation of his physique at contests also helps him understand more fully how Jesus can say “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life” (John 6.54). The Christ wishes to feed his Body, namely the disciples who believe in him, with his eucharistic Body. The Incarnate feeds his Body with his Body.

When some of his disciples refuse to accept this teaching, Jesus does not recant but goes on to intimate how in fact he will give his flesh and blood, namely by being sacrificed. His reply, “what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” (John 6.61-62), refers, with typical Johannine irony, to the scandal of the crucifixion where Jesus begins his ascension by mounting on the cross.⁶

Step 7: Entry into the Passion

Jesus is presented in the Gospel as the Messiah, but one who is crucified. The gospels bring out the multi-dimensionality of this fact. In the Gospel of John, the commanding stature of Jesus is emphasised, for when the soldiers come to arrest him, he declares “I am”, at which point – at this pronunciation of the divine name first heard at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14) – they fall to the ground, overwhelmed. Only then does he allow himself to be taken. The Synoptics, by contrast, emphasise his vulnerability: “I am deeply grieved, even to death, ... remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:35-36). This path of bodybuilding involves both aspects, power and powerlessness.

In reviewing Stephen Moore’s *God’s gym: Divine male bodies of the Bible*, Dale B. Martin notes that “In the last chapter, contemporary body building (“no pain, no gain” ...) is compared to biblical images of suffering and glory ...” (Martin 1998, 737). This bodybuilding maxim, ‘no pain, no gain’, is found in its ultimate form in the sacrificial death of Christ. His obedience to the divine will is not, however, a one-sided submissiveness and self-suppression, for he acts in complete freedom as well. God chooses suffering for him; he also chooses to be sacrificed. His will and God’s will are not opposed. He puts it clearly. “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10.18). This is because the free choice of the Father is also the free choice of the Son. We are at the heart of the Trinitarian relationship, but cannot expand on it here.

The bodybuilder knows full well that there is no gain without pain. Indeed, he wishes to be tested and to experience his essential vulnerability, not unwillingly even if fearfully. It is an asceticism, but its challenging nature makes it all the more appealing. He wishes to experience liability and to rise above it, for power is gained in weakness. He appreciates more fully the emphases in the Gospel of John which stress Jesus freely taking on the agony of the cross and the ‘sin of the world’, so as to triumph

⁶ Some internet photos, trying to make Jesus credible to bodybuilders, show him as superbly muscular, especially on the cross. See

https://www.google.com/search?q=Christ+body-builder&client=safari&rls=en&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj4ssLR-oneAhVUE4gKHKVMBm0Q_AUIDigB&biw=1148&bih=792#imgrc=XYGo1-zKi-uTDM:

They have a point; they show that the inner reality of the crucified Christ, despite outward appearances, is that of physical, mental and spiritual strength.

over every limitation and take humanity with him in his victory. He can identify more fully with Jesus, and acknowledge him as the crucified saviour. It becomes clearer to him how the testing moments of his own training are a symbol of the trials which Jesus endured.

Step 8: Intimations of Resurrection

Roland Boer notes that the bodybuilder seeks to eliminate all 'fat' and to be reduced to his essential self. He also observes how bodybuilding magazines show pictures of "whole human bodies with the skin cut away" as though the "perfect, divine and unattainable body is skinless". (Boer 2007, 35+) It is a sort of 'circumcised body', a 'cut body'. In Christian teaching the utterly perfect body is that of Christ. He is skinless not in a literal sense or in the sense that he ceases to be physical but in that in his risen body he has gone beyond all materiality. Indeed, unity with the dead and risen Christ in baptism is the true circumcision, "putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11).

In experiencing the agony of his training regime and in the perfecting of his body as a result, the bodybuilder has an intimation of how the Christ was raised from death, for he feels the surge of life in every dimension of his being. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom. 8.11).

St Paul contrasts two forms of bodyliness. "Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). "It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Cor. 15:43-44) The term 'physical body' in this text means uninspired, without the Spirit. The term 'spiritual' does not mean incorporeal or disembodied, but fully inspired by the Spirit. The bodybuilder who has allowed full sway to the inhabiting Spirit acquires a 'spiritual' body.

Christianity speaks of bodily resurrection, not reanimation. The Greeks at the Areopagus who wish to be free of the body/prison, misunderstand Paul's statement about Jesus' resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:32) and think he is speaking of a return to the limitations of this world. The Christian teaching is that Jesus in his risen body is more truly bodily, more completely incarnate than before, and thus through his body will transform other bodies. As St Paul puts it, Christ Jesus will in the end "transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself" (Phil. 3:21). The term "glory" has many aspects. St Paul links Christ with the glory of the *shekinah*, (Mollenkott 1984, 39) and speaks of the increasing glory of the Christian. "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

The bodybuilder who has followed along the spiritual path we have described increasingly realises the glory of his own person; he realises above all the glory of Christ as the greatest of bodybuilders and

realises that it is Christ who empowers him to attain the most perfect bodily condition. He also realises that his own developed physique is of value to others. Just as the Christ refashions human bodies on the pattern of his own glorious body, so does the bodybuilder in his own way profoundly alter the human condition.

Conclusion

The idea of bodybuilding as a spiritual path may seem counter-intuitive to many, even preposterous. This article does not say that bodybuilding is always and by itself a spiritual path. It does say that if the bodybuilder is moved by spiritual inhabitation and if he reflects on the process of his training in the light of the Gospel, he may find that his development leads to a profound identification with Christ Jesus, who is understood now not in jaded terms but in an altogether new light. The bodybuilder has discovered an aspect of Christ just as the Christ has revealed the bodybuilder to himself. Type and antitype explain each other.

Therefore, it is not impossible, we propose, for bodybuilding, when seen in this fashion, to constitute a valid spiritual path that leads through Christ to the transcendent Father. In his own glorious physique, the bodybuilder has come to know the ineffable God. He may not object to such a valorization of his practice.

This same pattern – starting from nature inspired by the Spirit, informed by the revelation of the Gospel and by the recognition of the Christ who leads to the knowledge of the Father – can conceivably be applied to many other forms of human endeavour, for the Christian teaching is that all creation can be saved by the redemptive power of the Paschal mystery. Every interest worthy of humanity can be a spiritual path and can be interpreted as a type of the Christ who is sent to give value to all things human.

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