A Plea for Embodied Spirituality: The Role of the Body in Religion
By F. Watts (2021)

Reviewed by Rebekah Wallace

A Plea for Embodied Spirituality is Fraser Watts’ entreaty for a more holistic view of the human person that accounts for the inextricable interconnectedness of body and soul. The book outlines the effects that embodied religious practices have on the religious life (and spiritual life in general). It also examines the effect of religion on various aspects of embodied existence, such as our ability to contextualize body dissatisfaction, deterioration, and death. Watts achieves his goals by looking at the burgeoning field of cognitive science called embodied cognition (EC). Embodied cognition theory reveals the body and so-called ‘higher’ faculties as being intimately connected.

The book is a welcome clarion call to see the body not as something which inhibits the soul, but instead as not at all separate from our spiritual lives. Watts argues that, in fact, religion began as embodied practices, not primarily intellectual beliefs, and that discursive dogma was a later development in human evolutionary history. In 12 diverse chapters, the book offers a survey in which Watts outlines the contours of various religious themes such as the foundations of religion, Christian views of the body, and the ways in which body and mind (here often equated with soul) are integrated in a robust spiritual life.

He addresses, for example, particularly Christian positions toward the body, especially fear of or disgust with the body (Chapter 2). By looking at biblical texts, he argues that the ancient differentiation between flesh and body could resolve some of Christianity’s hesitation about addressing the...
body as a positive and necessary aspect of religious life. Watts then turns to spiritual practices in the history of human evolution, arguing that religion from its earliest beginnings channeled intense group bodily experiences which have observable physical effects such as the ‘collective endorphin release’ (p. 29) of trance dancing (Chapter 3).

The claim that religion emerged from embodied practices, with discursive, dogmatic religion as a later evolution, has gained attention from other scholars at the intersection of science and religious studies. Donovan Schaefer, for example, in his book *Religious Affects* (2015), has argued for an animal basis to religion based on affect theory. However, Watts never clearly defines religion, and therefore in discussions of embodiment and religious practice it is unclear what makes something leap the boundary between animal action and what we would now call religion, even retrospectively.

Next, he examines overtly religious practices such as asceticism, as well as what he calls other forms of ‘extreme spirituality,’ which include practices both religious and non-religious (Chapters 4 and 5, respectively), ranging from pilgrimage to snake-handling to extreme sports. This type of bodily rigor need not, indeed should not, he argues, deny the body in order to glorify the soul; rather, such practices train the body and use it in particular ways to achieve spiritual goals. Watts does not engage in depth with the already quite robust literature both ancient and modern on ascetic practice, but rather argues against more popularly held beliefs and practices which prioritize the subjugation of the body. He helpfully points the way toward some interesting future topics of exploration from the scientific perspective. For example, is there any quantifiable way in which use of the body in ascetic practice leads to so-called spiritual benefits, such as increased willpower, self-regulation, or pain tolerance? It seems that the group ritual aspects of extreme spiritual practices such as firewalking enable the walker to get into a state of mind that allows them to do so effectively. Anointing, as well, is something critical to those undertaking snake-handling, and the effects manifest themselves in detectable differences in EEG brain recordings while in the anointed state.

The claims, while interesting, could be strengthened by a clearer definition of the way in which both the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’ are being used. For example, although snake-handling ‘seems to be found exclusively in the context of religious belief’ (p. 59), it is unclear whether the actual anointing or the context of the anointing (or something else such as belief in its efficacy) is what leads to specific physiological effects. As Watts gives examples of other spiritual practices which are non-religious, this begs the question, what makes something an effect of a religious practice rather
than a spiritual practice, and what is the relationship between the two? At certain points, the book dips seamlessly in and out of religious and non-religious contexts. This highlights the importance of defining spirituality, especially as it is often equated with mind, and therefore could leave open the door for excluding religion from the question entirely. It also brings to the fore the question of what makes something religious. If EEG recordings of anointed snake-handlers ‘confirmed that a religious experience was taking place, though it was more similar to hypnosis than to meditation’ (p. 60), there is still an open question of what makes an experience a religious experience.

An important aspect of the book’s scope is that it examines the bidirectional nature of the body and spirit in religious life. For example, our religious framework, namely, our views of the body, can contextualize bodily experiences such as sickness and death. Equally, the use of the body in worship, not least in the form of different bodily postures, has an effect on certain moods or attitudes such as receptivity and devotion (Chapter 7). To support this, a more comprehensive appendix by Sara Savage surveys different world faith traditions and various postures and attitudes within such traditions. In fact, enactment of rituals and liturgies is itself a type of enacted cognition, Watts argues, a position supported by new studies in the cognitive sciences that show cognition to be enacted (Chapter 8).

He finally elaborates on theological beliefs regarding the resurrection of the body and begs for a renewed view of the body as that which is not just physical matter, but matter transformed by the spirit (Chapter 11). In other words, ‘Spiritual bodies are derived from mortal bodies but are not the same as them. They are the results of the spiritual transformation of the body of flesh and blood’ (p. 145). This claim leads to the overarching question, which is not openly addressed in the book, as to what body and embodiment mean. That a body is not just a physical body is a fascinating and important theological claim, which opens the door to rich discussion surrounding the very definition of body as it is used in religious studies today.

Watts’ book serves as a necessary introduction to a quickly growing area of interest in EC and religious studies, and hints at potential areas of future research in science and religion in light of new empirical evidence. Although EC has gained popularity in a host of fields, there are still relatively few theologians and religious studies scholars looking at this intersection. As Watts notes, and I think his assessment rings true, ‘Intellectually, we seem to have become entirely persuaded that people are integrated wholes, with embodied minds or ensouled bodies. However, this official philosophical rejection of dualism seems to be accompanied by a good deal of residual,
implicit dualism among the general public’ (p. 2). His book helps to point out these inconsistencies.

This being said, the book would benefit from a more rigorous introduction of what makes EC specifically the paradigm of choice, rather than other areas of embodiment and thought such as affect theory. Indeed, throughout the book, EC seems loosely to mean anything that makes thought and action more embodied. However, as a research paradigm there are things that are quite specific to the science of EC which are particularly interesting for the questions Watts raises. For example, although EC is a vast research paradigm with little agreement on basic definitions, including ‘embodiment,’ more radical EC theorists eschew a distinction entirely between abstract and bodily thought. If there is no such distinction, this would support Watts’ early claim that ‘recent psychological work on embodied cognition points towards seeing the different facets of the human person as so highly interconnected that we can move on from tired debates about causal processes’ between the two (p. 12).

However, sometimes commitment to this model is not played out in the way in which the body and mind are discussed in the work. For example, Watts comments on a ‘growing recognition in psychology that humans, probably uniquely among species, have two alternative ways of doing central cognition’ (p. 19). But non-representational EC theorists deny a central processing model entirely (see Barbara Webb, 1996, and Rodney Brooks, 1991, for interesting experiments in EC in robotics which address this issue). Likewise, Watts claims that ‘the cognition involved [in serpent-handling] is enacted rather than mentated’ (p. 60).

If I am correct in understanding that ‘mentated’ means some form of discursive or abstract rather than embodied thought, radical forms of EC deny that cognition is mentated at all, but rather claim that it is always embodied and enacted. Even such seemingly abstract thinking as mathematics, as George Lakoff and Rafael Núñez (2000) illustrate, is embodied. So, when Watts states that ‘Cognition and embodiment weave together, each supporting the other’ (p. 62), an argument could be made from the perspective of EC that this retains traces of dualism, because it sees two distinct entities acting together instead of his pleasingly radical earlier claim that they are ‘so highly inter-connected that we can move on from tired debates about causal processes’ (p. 12).

While Watts’ claims are certainly in keeping with less extreme lines of EC, as EC grows in popularity in theology and religious studies, it will become increasingly interesting for this field to engage in a more technical exploration which includes radical versions of EC. This, I think, could be especially fruitful in light of Watts’ stated goal of circumventing dualism.
In conclusion, I believe that the book achieves its goal in raising awareness of wide-ranging issues surrounding popular acceptance of the body in religious life, and as such it is a necessary and welcome project which opens space for further dialogue. The conclusion is a plea to those who practice religion to take more seriously the role of the body in such practice, as well as to develop a deeper understanding of the way in which embodiment affects and is affected by the religious life. In other words, Watts encourages his readers to consciously use and integrate the body as a way of enriching personal spiritual experience. As such, A Plea for Embodied Spirituality does vital work by raising awareness of EC as a tool for self-knowledge which can ultimately deepen our understanding of religion and the spiritual life.

Notes
1 For an enlightening discussion on defining ‘embodiment,’ see Lawrence Shapiro (2012:119–46). Studies on abstract and bodily thought are particularly interesting in the work of Esther Thelen and co-authors (2001) on infant perseverative reaching.

References