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Faithfully Embodied: Religious Identity and the Body

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Two Errors: 1. to take everything literally, 2. to take everything spiritually.
--Pascal, *Pensées*

BODY PIERCING SAVED MY LIFE
--T–shirt worn by Promise Keeper at 1999 PK *Choose This Day* Conference

Introduction

Social research and theory on the body has proliferated in the last two decades (see, e.g., Brownell 1995; Davis 1995, 1997a; Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner 1991; Hancock et al. 2000; Lupton 1996; O'Neill 1985; Scott and Morgan 1993; Shilling 1993; Turner 1996; Wallace and Wolf 1999: ch. 8 for excellent overviews and anthologies). Examinations of the body as a site for the negotiation of identity, power, and social relations are now commonplace in disciplines as diverse as sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, as well as in interdisciplinary fields such as gender studies and cultural studies. Yet, the body has received remarkably little attention from scholars of religion studying identity.[1] The paucity of research on the embodied dimensions of religious experience is striking in light of the fact that Meredith McGuire (1990) called for a "rematerializing" of the human body in the social scientific study of religion fifteen years ago. Regrettably, McGuire's visionary invitation has gone largely unheeded.

In this paper, I attempt to advance the scholarship on religion and the body, paying particular attention to the ways in which symbolic representations of the body and embodied practices are implicated in the negotiation of religious identities. To do so, I draw together insights from Emily Martin's (1994) work on symbolic representations of the body and R.W. Connell's (1995) theory of body–reflexive practice. When utilized in tandem, these perspectives highlight the semiotic representations of the body in social life, as well as the materiality of bodily practices in everyday interaction. These scholars reject deterministic and voluntaristic perspectives on embodiment and

identity in favor of more complex approaches.[2] And, finally, both explore the multidimensional character of identity[3]—the multifarious ways in which corporeality, subjectivity, and sociality bleed into one another, intersecting as they do with an array of negotiated social statuses (gender, race, sexuality, and so forth).

After drawing together these theoretical insights, I turn my attention to an empirical exploration of religious identity negotiation. To that end, I focus on the body's significance in the Promise Keepers (PK), an evangelical men's movement that peaked in visibility and membership during the late 1990s. The movement remains in existence, though it enjoys considerably less popularity and media attention than in its heyday. Stadium conference attendance has dropped from over one million attendees annually during the movement's peak to a respectable, but hardly overwhelming, 175,000 attendees during a typical conference season in recent years (www.promisekeepers.org). Field data featured here were collected from 1996-1999 from the movement's peak to its initial decline (see Bartkowski 2004 for methodological detail on the broader ethnographic study). I begin by analyzing representations of the body—specifically, constructions of the male body—embedded within elite PK media. PK deploys a broad range of discursive depictions and visual images of the body. As such, this evangelical men's movement presents itself as a flexible body composed of multiple identities.

I then examine the relationship between PK men's quotidian bodily practices and their religious identities. At stadium conferences and in their everyday lives, PK men engage in body–reflexive practices that simultaneously reify and destabilize social structures such as religion, gender, and race. In the pursuit of godly manhood, PK men collectively "perform" gender even as they challenge many aspects of hegemonic masculinity (cf. Butler 1989; Connell 1995). And, through their efforts to promote racial reconciliation, the Promise Keepers affirm the continuing significance of race while they challenge pervasive ethnic stereotypes. In the end, these embodied antinomies proved unstable, leading to the diminishing status of PK and, effectively, the "dismemberment" of the godly man. In short, this study underscores the complexity of religious discourses, images, and practices centered on the body. Yet, because it is a critical resource in

the construction and negotiation of religious identity, the body requires careful and sustained investigation by scholars of religion.

Religious Identity and the Body Reconsidered: From Semiotics to Social Practice

It is indeed remarkable that many of the reigning theories in the study of American religion neglect the importance of the body as a site for the production of religious identity.[4] Rational choice theory privileges human reason—the cognitive capacity to weight costs and benefits while maximizing utility—in confronting the problem of religious identity (e.g., Stark and Finke 2000). The body is wholly absent from such treatments of religion. Embodiment is even more conspicuously absent from cultural theories of religious identity. Within this tradition, culture wars are waged largely through the disembodied rhetoric of religious elites (Hunter 1991). Even grassroots identity work in religious subcultures does not render an account of embodied religion. Subcultural identity perspectives have instead privileged theological ideals and religious symbols as key cultural tools in the fashioning of religious identities (Smith 1998). Religious strategy and action involving the body—that is to say, lived and embodied religion—is undertheorized in current paradigms (Bartkowski 2004).

Existing scholarship on the body provides a useful starting point for "embodying" religious identity, but is not without its own perils. Rival perspectives on the body have emerged that either privilege the deterministic effects of culture on the body (best exemplified in Foucault's [1979] "docile bodies" thesis), or treat the body as an extremely malleable tool in the crafting of identity (as found in Butler's [1989] exposition of embodied "performance" as improvisational theater) (see Connell 1995; Davis 1997b for reviews and critiques). Such work is valuable in that it underscores the significance of the body to social life, and analyzes the intersections between embodiment and other forms of difference (e.g., sex, gender, and sexuality [Butler 1989, 1993]). Yet, beyond such valuable contributions, these perspectives risk "achieving theoretical closure" rather than "exploring the tensions which the body evokes" (Davis 1997b: 15). Exploring these tensions entails not settling for accounts of the body that exhibit an overarching tendency toward either cultural determinism (Foucaultian

"docile bodies") or subversive voluntarism (Butler's "performativity"). The very best work on the body traces the ongoing interplay between structure and agency, force and choice in this important domain of social life (e.g., Davis 1995, 1997a, Connell 1995; Hancock et al. 2000; Turner 1996).

In addition, much prior scholarship has ignored the materiality of the body and instead has treated the body as metaphor. In this vein of scholarship, bodies dissolve into discourse and are constituted through linguistic trope (e.g., Butler 1993; Foucault 1978)—as if bodies that are solid can "melt into air." While recognizing the importance of interrogating the symbolic (semiotic) dimensions of embodiment, Kathy Davis has called for a more holistic and materialistic rendering in what she calls "embodied theory":

> Bodies are not simply abstractions...but are embedded in the immediacies of everyday, lived experience. Embodied theory requires interactions between theories about the body and analyses of the particularities of embodied experiences and practices. It needs to explicitly tackle the relationship between the symbolic and the material, between representations of the body and embodiment as experience or social practice in concrete social, cultural and historical contexts (Davis 1997b: 15).

My perspective on religious identity and the body is informed by these admonitions, and the more holistic rendering of embodiment that emerges from them. In theorizing the relationship between the body and religious identity, I posit that identities are constructed through the interplay of corporeality (the physical materiality of the body, along with its attendant social meanings), subjectivity (beliefs, values, and practices pertaining to the self), and sociality (forms of social interaction ranging from face–to–face encounters to mass movements). What's more, particular social groups set themselves apart from others by developing distinctive forms of body culture (Brownell 1995)—that is, group–specific symbols (semiotics) and actions (social practices) that draw force from the body as both a collectively imagined entity and a stubborn material substance. Researchers of religion have much to gain from exploring two key

dynamics of body culture—the *semiotics of the body* produced by religious communities and *bodily practices* undertaken by religious actors in everyday life. Both of these dimensions of body culture are intimately intertwined with identity negotiation.

As I define it, body semiotics are produced through discursive representations and visual depictions of the body. Here corporeal forms become invested with symbolic meanings through language (e.g., spoken words, written texts, songs) and visual images (e.g., photos, films, memory traces). Among the most instructive work related to this topic is that of anthropologist Emily Martin. In *Flexible Bodies* (1994), Martin identifies the ways in which immunologists have become the expositors of contemporary culture through social metaphor and symbolism centered on the body. Given the privileged status of medical experts in American society, "immunophilosophers" (as Martin calls them) do much more than produce culturally embedded understandings of the body.

Even more notably, immunologists, physicians, and other scientific body experts legitimize particular assumptions about the "nature" of social life itself. The dominant perspective in immunophilosophy emphasizes the adaptability of the body in self–maintenance, disease prevention, and recovery. According to this paradigm, immune cells are capable of memory, learning, and innovation. And through carefully coordinated action, the immune system is seen as capable of "waging war" on "foreign organisms" that invade the pristine and formidable "fortress" that is the body. Such depictions of the body are disseminated into mass culture through popular science and mainstream media. These representations, such as the 'castle–body' fighting 'germ–invaders' with 'antibody–soldiers' (see Martin 1994: 34–35), deploy metaphors that resonate with social and cultural currents. Through a complex series of social processes, then, the body becomes a (re)producer of cultural meanings and legitimizes particular organizational forms and strategies for social action.

Martin demonstrates that the immunophilosophical vision of bodily flexibility has been embraced in the corporate world, where organizations are measured by the degree to which they are "lean" and "agile." These ideologies are not innocuous in their social effects, as the language of the flexible corporation can be used to justify massive

layoffs and firings. This same ideology of flexibility was adopted in the computer industry and, later, in workplace hiring. "Multi–tasking," a concept that initially referred to flexible computer technology, is now viewed as the measuring stick against which workers themselves—preferably, with "flexible skill sets"—are gauged.

Scholars of religion have much to gain from examining the way in which a religious community defines itself through symbolic representations of the body. Symbolic depictions of the body can produce "intuitive" systems of religious meaning and powerful bonds of collective identity. Bodily representations of the religious community can also lead to more adroit coordination in the activities undertaken by members of the religious body. In fact, scriptural passages in many faith traditions invoke bodily imagery to produce meaning, identity, and coordinated activities. The Bible's New Testament contains multiple Pauline references to the "body of Christ" (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:13, 24–26; Ephesians 2:13–16), while Zen koans liken superficial knowledge to the outer "flesh" and deeper wisdom to the inner "bone" (Reps 1994). How, then, do religious communities symbolize, and thereby imagine, the body to mark themselves with a distinctive social identity? And, given the contemporary emphasis on bodily flexibility, how does such symbolism engage the imperative for adaptiveness, responsiveness, and "multi–tasking?"

Before addressing these questions with empirical referents, I turn my attention to a second dimension of body culture—namely, embodied practices. If semiotics of the body are the symbolic means through which religious communities embody a collective identity for their members and publics, what of the material substance of the body? As well recognized by sociological perspectives on the body (e.g., Connell 1995; Davis 1997b; Hancock et al. 2000; Turner 1996; Wallace and Wolf 1999: ch. 8), all that is solid does not in fact melt into air. The body is socially meaningful as much through its materiality—in short, its "stubborn fleshiness"—as through its symbolic representation in metaphor and narrative. In crafting his theory of body–reflexive practice, R.W. Connell (1995) argues for a perspective that takes seriously the materiality—and even the agency—of the body in the negotiation of identity and social relations. Transposing Connell's theory from the investigation of gender to the study of religion, it

becomes readily apparent that bodies can function as both *agents* and *objects* of religious practice.

As agents of religious practice, the bodies of the faithful participate actively in the production of religious culture and the fashioning of religious identities. Insurgent bodily practices such as speaking in tongues and ecstatic worship can give rise to uncharted faith experiences, yield new theological meanings, and destabilize established religious hierarchies. And yet, as objects of religious practice, the bodies of adherents do not stand apart from pressures brought to bear upon them by religious culture and structure. In many faith traditions, the bodily activities of religious adherents are structured by theological edicts that prescribe ritual posture and public comportment (e.g., prayer styles, forms of religious dress), consumption habits (e.g., ritual fasting, abstinence from proscribed substances, the ingestion of ritual foods), and sexual practices (e.g., moral frameworks specifying the appropriate conditions for sexual expression).[5] Hence, religious groups of many stripes are organized around a disciplining of the body—one that is both productive (yielding new social forms and cultural meanings) and prohibitive (restricting the avenues for social engagement and cultural expression). In a word, the key to examining bodily practices is found in sustaining a paradox: Bodies are both agents and objects of religious practice. Bodies both produce and consume religious culture. Bodily practices draw on existing social structures such as gender, race, and sexuality while also subverting and recreating those structures—often doing so simultaneously.

Aesthetics and novelty aside, a theory is worth very little if it has no meaningful connection to real–world social processes and everyday experiences. In what follows, I apply the insights articulated above to the negotiation of religious identity among the Promise Keepers. Body semiotics figure prominently into PK's discursive and visual representations of godly masculinity. By drawing on a number of different cultural metaphors for defining men's identities, movement leaders present a flexible and manifold vision of godly manhood that appeals to a broad swath of men characterized by divergent sensibilities, standpoints, and life circumstances. Moreover, a careful examination of the embodied practices undertaken at the grassroots of this religious movement reveals how men's bodies are

both agents and objects of evangelical identity and religious fellowship. Finally, the recent contraction of the Promise Keepers in terms of membership and public presence sheds light on the processes that underlay the "dismemberment" of such movements.

Religious Identity and Body Semiotics: Symbolic Representations of Godly Masculinity

A clear illustration of semiotic representations of the male body emerges in the discourse and visual imagery promulgated by the Promise Keepers (Bartkowski 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004). Such depictions often enlist metaphors of gender, sexuality, and the body (see Murphy 2001 on metaphors of masculinity in contemporary American culture). In what follows, I use various types of media (e.g., books, music, images) produced by elite Promise Keepers as an empirical referent through which to examine the role of body semiotics in creating religious identity.

Bodily metaphors are especially prominent in the best–selling advice manuals of PK author Stu Weber, namely, *Tender Warrior* (1993) and *Four Pillars of a Man's Heart* (1997). The archetype of the Tender Warrior, broad enough to encompass "strength" and "tenderness," enables evangelical men to craft a flexible religious identity. Weber (1993: 69) contends:

> Underneath a warrior's breastplate beats a tender center. In every man there is the tender side. The side that connects to another. The thirst for relationship. The desire to touch and be touched. To hug. To link. To be with. A real man has feelings and isn't afraid to express them . . . Now don't get me wrong. There is a difference between 'tender' and *soft*. That's why they're two different words.

Weber continues by championing his evangelized version of the mythopoetic man: "We want Tender Warriors...not 'soft males'...Masculine sensitivity never will and never *should* match its feminine Counterpart... It's a long way from macho to soft. Come down somewhere in between" (Weber 1993: 69–71). Tender Warriors, then, are flexible creatures—reducible to neither stiff logical reasoning

(gender traditionalism) nor unbridled emotional expression (men's liberationism). Tender Warriors are capable of "multi–tasking," and such dexterous imagery is likely one reason for the quick rise to prominence of the Promise Keepers.

The Tender Warrior archetype is predicated on what Weber (1993, 1997) calls the Four Pillars of manhood, which themselves cover a composite of characteristics:

- the King Pillar—symbolizing men's vision and character;
- the Warrior Pillar—representing the strength and power of masculinity;
- the Mentor Pillar—celebrating men's faith and wisdom;
- the Friend Pillar—depicting men's heart and their capacity for love.

These pillars are likened to other four–fold schema that appear in nature (e.g., four points on the compass, four seasons in the year). This rhetorical allusion is portrayed as natural (rather than merely metaphorical) inasmuch as the Four Pillars of masculinity are perceived to be as immutable as the four seasons of the year or the four quadrants of the earth. And like center posts that work in tandem to support a building, these Pillars are defined both by their tenacity (the unyielding strength of the combined pillars) and their flexibility (taken together, these pillars represent an adaptable, well–rounded masculine character).

Where marital relationships are concerned, Tender Warriors are neither status–conscious patriarchs nor full–board egalitarians. Rather, Tender Warrior husbands are "servant–leaders" who "color [their] headship in soft shades of the tender side . . . rather than in the harsh tones of the warrior side (Weber 1993: 96–97). Nevertheless, the "steel strands" that form the "cable–like spine" of a Tender Warrior's masculinity are characterized foremost by "initiation," for "among the ancient Hebrew words for man is one meaning 'piercer.' It's feminine counterpart is 'pierced one' . . . At his core a man is an initiator—a piercer, one who penetrates, moves forward, advances toward the horizon, leads" (Weber 1993: 45).

Consistent with the gendered and sexualized body imagery strewn throughout this discourse, Tender Warriors do not simply raise children

but instead "release arrows" into the next generation (Weber 1993: ch. 11). On the topic of fatherhood, Weber invokes complicated—but still deeply gendered—metaphors of active subjects (archer, hunter), passive objects (target, prey), and the relations of interconnectedness (arrows, the hunt) between these otherwise disparate categories. Weber's exploration of fatherhood begins with him plucking a poetic passage on parenting from the Bible's Psalm 127 (verses 3–4):

> Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; they shall not be ashamed, when they speak with their enemies at the gate.

True to his mythopoetic style, Weber's parenting exegesis probes the symbolic significance of the archetypical Tender Warrior father who is at once a disciplined archer with arrows in his quiver and a fearless hunter of bull elk:

> As I write these words, I'm looking at three arrows on my desk . . . I'm turning one in my hand, now. Feeling the heft and balance of its shaft. Looking down its length to the round edges of its blunt head. It's a target arrow, and a good one. I wouldn't waste my time with anything less . . . As I write these words, I'm looking at a picture on my desk. It's a picture of my three sons—Kent, Blake, and Ryan . . . Each was crafted by the Lord God in the secret place of his mother's womb. And each was fashioned, balanced, and readied for flight within the four walls of our home. My three arrows were all designed to leap from the bow and split the air . . . Tender warriors are responsible for releasing those few precious arrows with all the sureness of eye and strength of arm that we can borrow from our God and Father (Weber 1993: 155–157).

Poetic archetypes of the godly Promise Keeper, therefore, construct religious identity through the deployment of bodily metaphors. The archer–father must have a "sureness of eye" and "strength of arm." Such overt references are complemented by more

subtle yet profound forms of masculine (phallic) symbolism—the "arrow," with its "long shaft" and "blunt head," "splits the air" and "pierces its target." Yet, poeticized PK discourse rejects two–dimensional, either/or dichotomies in favor of a body semiotics that is defined by its complexity and flexibility—the Tender Warrior.

PK body semiotics are also clearly illustrated in this movement's promotion of racial reconciliation—albeit with a different metaphor of the body. The sixth of the Seven Promises that serve as the PK mission statement encourages each individual Promise Keeper to "reach beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity." By integrating the principle of racial reconciliation into the PK mission statement, the Promise Keepers show themselves to be a flexible, multicultural movement—one distinct from but engaged with Afrocentric men's movements such as the Million Man March, with whom the Promise Keepers shared the National Mall only two years apart.

In his contribution to *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, "A Call to Unity" (1993), PK founder Bill McCartney directly addresses the "sin of racism" and advocates "biblical unity" through "racial reconciliation." McCartney discusses how his eyes were initially opened—and were moved to profuse weeping—concerning racial injustice through his attendance at the funeral of a local black man who played football for the University of Colorado prior to McCartney's tenure with the team. Based on this experience and others like it, McCartney has become a vocal proponent of multiracial evangelicalism. Tellingly, he utilizes a metaphor of the body—in this case, the ultimate male body—to do so. Citing 1 Corinthians 12: 24–26, McCartney (1993: 166–167) pleads for unity and love to be demonstrated among Christian "brethren"—regardless of color—who are all members of the "body of Christ." From this vantage point, the gender–based unity shared by PK brothers, combined with their shared religious identity as the "body of Christ," can trump racial divisions that would otherwise keep men separated from one another.

Visual depictions of the male body—at once deeply gendered and boldly multiracial—also figure prominently in PK media. Taking but one example, the logo for the 1999 PK conference series, *Choose This*

Day, exaggerates the traditional masculine features of the male body. The man in the foreground of the *Choose This Day* poster, featured on the cover of the compact disk sold during this series, is no wimp. He boasts extremely broad shoulders while sporting long, powerful legs and arms. He has a square chin and strong jawbone. Given PK's emphasis on multiracial evangelicalism, it is hardly surprising that the man in the poster's foreground is black. Interestingly, he is flanked by an army of racially unmarked men standing in his shadow.

Even more intriguing, the blackness of the protagonist is balanced by a different color scheme on an inset picture. In the lower right corner of this poster is an inset drawing of the body of a large white man, shown from below to emphasize his imposing stature, guarding the doorway to his home like a gladiator. His home is shown in black, and stands as a shadow behind this towering figure of masculinity. The caption reads, "CHOOSE THIS DAY: AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD—Joshua 24:15." Inside, the compact disk itself offers yet another color scheme over this same portrait, such that the protagonist's body is no longer black, but rather becomes yellowish brown. Within this montage, then, men's bodies are vividly racialized (black versus white), racially unmarked (background men), and marked by a race that is fluid and flexible (changing from black to white to yellowish brown).

Religious Identity and Bodily Practice: Embodiment and Everyday Life among Godly Men

Having interrogated the semiotic representations of the body rendered through Promise Keepers media, I now turn my attention to the negotiation of religious identities among men in the grassroots of the movement. To what degree do the symbolic representations of the body featured above inform PK men's understandings of themselves and shape their relationships with their fellows? In what follows, I reveal how the grassroots production of gender, race, and sexuality in this evangelical men's movement draws on semiotic representations of the body as a cultural resource for negotiating religious identities. At the same time, I am careful to highlight how the negotiation of religious identity is complicated by the fleshy materiality of men's bodies in this evangelical fellowship. The movement's symbolic representations of

the body are thus influential but not determinative of men's bodily practices.

I explore bodily practices among Promise Keeper men by featuring two ethnographic vignettes (see Bartkowski 2004 for methodological details). The first vignette examines how evangelicalism is embodied *en masse* at PK stadium conferences. The second vignette considers bodily practices in a more personal context, namely, one Promise Keeper's struggle to overcome the "sexual sin" of autoeroticism. In both cases, I argue that understanding the embodied character of religious identity entails accounting for the materiality and agency of believers' bodies.

Embodied Evangelicalism:
Race, Gender, and the Body at PK Stadium Conferences

Promise Keeper stadium conferences, the movement's signature event, are nothing short of a spectacle (see Bartkowski 2004: chs. 4 and 6). Gravitating between the raucous and the reflective, PK conferences are meant to be experienced and imbibed *en masse.* As part of my broader research project on the Promise Keepers (Bartkowski 2004), I was among the more than 300,000 men who attended one of the 1999 conferences entitled *Choose This Day*—though I attended as a non–evangelical researcher, not as a member of the group.

At the particular conference I attended, "Choose This Day–San Antonio", the Promise Keepers deftly blended diverse evangelical notions of godly masculinity with key elements of local south Texas culture. My fieldnotes from this event reveal how Latino social markers were deployed to invest idealized visions of godly masculinity with the local flavor of Tex–Mex and Tejano culture. This two–day event was emceed by Isaac, an articulate Latino minister who used his status as a Hispanic evangelical to racialize and Southwesternize PK's masculinity discourse at several points during the conference program. In one instance, Isaac compared an oversized Texas jalapeno to an undersized California jalapeno to highlight the fact that "everything is bigger" in the Lone Star State—including men's love for Jesus. Not surprisingly, this comparison drew loud cheers and screams from the 50,000 men in attendance at the Alamodome. Then, with the chants of conference attendees urging him to consume the Texas chile, Isaac proceeded to bite into the oversized jalapeno. As his eyes

began to tear, his cheeks reddened, and his face began to sweat, Isaac parodied the notion of the insensitive, stoic, macho man by choking out over the microphone, "No man, it's not hot at all." This sardonic remark was greeted with profuse laughter and cheering by PK conference attendees.

At other times during the conference, the performance of race entailed crossing otherwise entrenched cultural cleavages through transgressive bodily practices. Between conference speakers, Isaac donned a pair of dark sunglasses and performed a stunningly exact cover of James Brown's "I Feel Good" with the stage band. Isaac's embodied eradication of the color line, reminiscent of the blended colors of men artistically rendered on the *Choose This Day* logo, created an atmosphere in which men could set aside their inhibitions and cross racial boundaries when forming small prayer groups at the conference. These prayer circles relied on tactile engagement with one's brothers—hand–holding, hugging, and sometimes open weeping. PK encouraged such bodily practices by urging members to "break down walls" that divide men from different racial and economic backgrounds.

The PK–San Antonio conference featured a mini–concert by The Katinas—a Samoan band adopted and adored by many in southwestern Texas. Multicultural and defiant of genre, The Katinas deftly mix the rhythms of calypso, rock, and hip–hop while singing in both English and Spanish. As a Christian "crossover" band, they have wide appeal among both evangelical and mainstream audiences. The high–decibel volumes produced by The Katinas and the PK Maranatha Promise Band penetrate not only the ears, but the hearts and souls, of conference attendees. PK conferences jettison the dry, auditory act of listening to music for a multi–sensory ravishment in which melodies are felt, experienced, and imbibed. As is the case at rock and hip–hop concerts, deep bass riffs and powerfully amplified drums at PK events engulf and caress the bodies of conference–goers. Convivial music creates an atmosphere of abandonment, frivolity, and unapologetic emotional expression.

The typical PK conference–goer can hardly be described as inhabiting a docile body. Not content merely to consume conviviality, conference attendees collectively produce ear–piercing, heart–stirring

songs and sounds during the more raucous periods of these events. PK men spend a great deal of time singing together throughout conferences. At the Alamodome, these efforts were aided by television monitors that scroll the words to contemporary Christian songs and classic hymns along the bottom of the screens. Monitors in every sense of the word, these large televisions are suspended from the ceiling and broadcast montages of merry men crooning before "audience cams." In "screening" masculinity on these monitors, such images prominently display the singing, swaying bodies of close–knit godly men before their fifty–thousand–plus compatriots.[6] The songs chosen for these events are noteworthy for their low, rich tones and baritone keys—thereby playing upon the deep pitch of men's voices. Gender difference becomes an obviated fact, effectively accomplished through the vehicle of men's voices.

Oftentimes, singing gives way to cheering and screaming. At several points during the San Antonio conference, men were challenged to cheer for Jesus at the top of their lungs. "Come on! That's not loud enough," chided one conference speaker, with his hand cupped behind his ear. "I can't hear you! Jesus can't hear you!" Another speaker divided the arena full of men down the center aisle, and periodically engaged these rival factions of conference–goers in a call–and–response competition during his talk. After making a key point, he would point to men on one or the other side of the arena and yell into the microphone, "Get it?"—to which the men would scream instantaneously (after some rehearsing), "Got it!" If men on one side of the arena responded weakly, they were chided by the speaker, who would roll his eyes and shrug his shoulders at the competing faction of men on the other side of the arena. Consistent with themes of conversion and forgiveness, this speaker was careful to give each group of men a chance to redeem itself from paltry responses with more robust shouts of "GOT IT!" later in his talk.

At such conferences, these cacophonic practices are complemented by a range of PK signature gestures, some of which are transposed from other social settings. During breaks in the program, men regularly "do the wave" and cheer for Jesus: "We love Jesus, yes we do. We love Jesus how 'bout you?" Much like sports participation and fandom,

such gestures often require a "kinetic fluency"—that is, a mastery of bodily movement and physical coordination—among those who perform them (cf. Mazer 1998). During reflective and prayerful songs, many men stand with both of their arms raised toward the heavens for lengthy periods of time. When undertaken in the upper deck of the Alamodome's steeply positioned seats, standing "no hands on the edge" is dizzying and, in a sense, physically liberating—akin to riding a roller coaster "no hands" over its steepest hill. Dry, disembodied accounts of religious action therefore risk overlooking the critical ways in which bodies are implicated in the creation of a religious ethos and the collective negotiation of religious identity.

Tender Warriors, Unwieldy Bodies:
Accountability and Conflicted Identities

There is a more private side to conference attendance as well, one that is designed to give rise to men's long–term involvement in the Promise Keepers after the conference is over. At key points during conferences, men form prayer circles and are told that they should commit themselves to long–term change by joining accountability groups. PK accountability groups, small weekly gatherings in men's local communities, link Promise Keepers into a companionate brotherhood that is spiritual, emotional, and physical in character. The goal of such groups is for men to hold one another accountable to the Seven Promises introduced at stadium conferences. As part of my field research, I attended several Promise Keeper accountability groups. My observation of accountability groups, and in-depth interviews with men who frequented them, further illuminate the role of the body in religious identity negotiation.

Among the more striking aspects of PK accountability groups is the positioning of men's bodies in space. Accountability groups typically consist of some sort of circular space—often chairs arranged tightly together in an enclosed circle—regardless of the number of men attending the group. When men arrive during the course of these meetings, the circle of attendees is typically expanded to envelope the new arrivals. Here the transgressive elements of PK body culture are designed to counter men's tendency toward isolation and withdrawal. The distinctive body culture produced through accountability groups

instead integrates men within a circular brotherhood. The geography of these gatherings is designed to assist men in achieving two key goals embraced by Promise Keeper accountability groups—the recognition of equality among all men, and the fostering of emotional and spiritual connectedness with one's compatriots.

The spatial layout of accountability group circles aims to "break down walls"—in a physical, embodied sense—that often divide men one from another. Several accountability groups within the central Texas area consist of members who differ in age (teens to retirees), race (Anglo, African–American, Hispanic), and social class (e.g., college professors seated next to auto mechanics who were themselves adjacent to unemployed men). Men are commonly encouraged to sit next to a brother who they do not know to foster trans–racial, interdenominational fellowships. The bodily inscription of space in PK accountability groups, then, aims to level the pernicious social hierarchies that pit men against one another in various social arenas (secular and religious) "outside" the circle.

This is not to say that accountability groups establish uniform, unconflicted religious identities among Promise Keepers. While the circular social space of the accountability group places men's bodies side by side in a way that fosters brotherly encouragement, many men come to these groups wrestling with vexing personal troubles. Among the difficulties sometimes voiced at such gatherings are "sexual sins" of one sort or another, including premarital sex, extramarital affairs, and masturbation (all of which are considered sins against God's standard of "sexual purity" from a PK standpoint).

Jeff, who describes accountability groups as the perfect complement to the "mountain–top experience" of PK stadium conferences, testifies to this fact. Through Jeff's involvement in PK and its accountability fellowships, he ultimately overcame his "incredibly shaming" problem with masturbation—a sexual practice that he now recognizes was an "intimacy killer" in his marital relationship. Jeff's struggle to overcome masturbation highlights the critical role of embodiment in religious identity negotiation, while illustrating the uneasy tension between religious edicts concerning sexual desire and the agency of desirous bodies.

It was at Jeff's first PK conference that he decided to share this thirty–year struggle with his brothers during a small–group prayer session. In offering this admission, Jeff felt a palpable sense of relief. Indeed, Jeff's vulnerability on this score resonated with manly "tenderness" (that is, emotional openness and vulnerability) championed by leading Promise Keepers. The PK conference had helped Jeff to cultivate a genuine spirit of contrition about his decades–long struggle with masturbation. While he had long felt guilty about this practice, the spirit of contrition stirred in him at his first PK conference moved Jeff to feel genuine sorrow for his transgression. He had resolved to commit this sin no more. Yet, genuine change proved elusive. At every turn, Jeff's desirous body stubbornly resisted his best efforts at reform.

When Jeff tearfully admitted his longstanding struggle, the men in his stadium conference prayer group were shocked. Jeff describes the other men's collective reaction as "jaw–open." Their response did not square with uniformly sanguine portrayals of conferences as heart–to–heart sharing sessions among men. Yet, in spite of his fellows' initial reaction, Jeff had hoped that his brothers would help him to avoid this sin thereafter. Stadium conference prayer groups are instructed to exchange contact information and hold one another accountable to PK standards of godly manhood, including sexual purity. But despite the PK edict of accountability, no brother in that prayer group ever recontacted Jeff. Jeff admits feeling deeply disappointed by this development, and he was unable to stop masturbating without intervention on the part of his brothers. As Jeff has since come to understand it, the men in his prayer group "had the same difficulty [with masturbation]. It just simply hit too close to home." His problem, he now surmises, was their problem as well—and they did not wish to be held accountable for changing their behavior.

Undeterred by this disappointing development and still hopeful that the movement had much to offer, Jeff forged ahead with his involvement in PK. Jeff recounted with relief how he met an accountability partner who helped him to solve his problem with masturbation: "I had tried on my own [to quit masturbating] and thought, 'I can beat this. I can beat this.'" But, on his own, Jeff could not escape the grip of autoerotic desire. The turning point for Jeff

occurred "when [he] finally got to the point where [he] gave it over to the Lord, and found again it was the accountability part." At their men's retreat, Jeff and his accountability partner formed a pact. His accountability partner agreed to call Jeff once per week at an undetermined time to ask Jeff about his "problem." Jeff now firmly believes in the transformative power of brotherly accountability: "Believe me, this is something that you don't want anybody asking you about. You can imagine. You don't want somebody calling you up [to ask you if you have been masturbating that week]. And when they do, you certainly don't want to have to say: 'Man, I just, you know, I've fallen again. I just can't do anything about it.'" Jeff says that since forming this accountability partnership, autoeroticism no longer has any place in his life. Indeed, even his once unconquerable desire to masturbate is now "gone. It's disappeared."

Hence, tender but firm brotherly surveillance provided Jeff with an avenue for resolving his longstanding private trouble. Here, religious power operates on the body in a way that is both disciplinary and emancipatory. Surveillance from his accountability partner restricts Jeff's sexual practices. Given the ever–present (read panoptic) chance that his accountability partner will call to check up on him, Jeff is no longer free to masturbate when he pleases. But, from Jeff's standpoint, the freedom to sin is no freedom at all. Rather, Jeff has found liberation in making his private trouble a public issue. Jeff contends that regular scrutiny from his accountability partner has dampened a sexual desire—now "gone," he says—that for three decades had proved to be terribly unwieldy. What's more, Jeff says that he is now free from the shame with which he had wrestled for three decades.

Yet, Jeff's path to identity reconstruction and his cultivation of bodily discipline were long, winding, and fraught with elements beyond mere faith and accountability. As it turns out, gender plays a central role in this narrative of sexual transformation. On the advice that Jeff had received at his first PK conference, he had initially gone home to confess this problem to his wife. "They had told us, not specifically about [masturbation], but if you have got these [sexual] things going on—if you've been unfaithful or any of this stuff—the number one thing you have got to do is go home and tell your wife. Go home and

tell her now—which I thought was bold. And I thought it was incredible." I asked Jeff to recount his wife's reaction.

> Jeff: Oh boy. She didn't [pause]. It was almost like [the men's] reaction [at the initial PK prayer session]. She had no idea. She was stunned. Again, that was one of those things that made me aware of how important Promise Keepers is. Because, she really isn't built for that . . .
>
> *JB: So a group of guys could hold you accountable in a way your wife could not?*
>
> Jeff: She could, but I think there are certain issues [pause] . . . My friend terms it [this way]: "They are not built for that type of warfare." [My wife] didn't understand. She loved the intimacy aspect of it, the fact that I was opening up to her. But it's not something I could repeatedly ask her about or have her ask me about.
>
> *JB: Because she doesn't struggle with that issue, you're saying?*
>
> Jeff: Exactly. She doesn't understand.

Thus, Jeff's narrative of corporeal redemption highlights not only the complex interplay between faith and embodiment, but also underscores the deeply gendered character of his religious identity and bodily struggles. Within the context of Jeff's narrative, brothers—that is, men like Jeff, his accountability partner, and those in his conference prayer group—struggle with the gender–specific burden of autoeroticism. While he and his brothers readily affirmed their spiritual commitment to the ideal of sexual purity, their intransigent bodies were not on board. Men's bodies, desirous social agents that they are, foiled an idealized commitment to abstinence from all sex outside the bonds of marriage. The demanding and uniquely masculine character of autoerotic impulses is further underscored by the claim that women—specifically, Jeff's wife—do not wrestle with masturbation as do their male counterparts. Women are simply "not built for that type of spiritual warfare." And yet, after brothers openly confess their shared

struggle with sexual sin, the principle of accountability— tender yet tenacious brotherly surveillance—must be marshaled if men are to wage a successful "spiritual war" against sexual immorality. Tender Warriors, it would seem, are the ultimate victors in Satan's war for men's bodies: "As iron sharpens iron, one man sharpens another."

Conclusion

In this paper, I have underscored the importance of the body as a site for the negotiation of religious identities. Defining identity as the intersection of body, self, and sociality, I highlighted two dimensions of body culture manifested in religious life. Religious communities use *body semiotics*—that is, symbolic representations of the body—to fashion and disseminate distinctive religious identities. In addition, religious identities are negotiated through *bodily practices* in the everyday realm. Bodies are both producers and consumers of religious culture. They are at once agents and objects of religious practice.

To illustrate these theoretical concepts, I then examined the bodily negotiation of religious identity among the Promise Keepers across various social venues, including popular PK movement media (e.g., men's advice manuals), large stadium conferences, and PK accountability groups. I paid special attention to the production and negotiation of PK body culture—that is, the repertoire of bodily representations and practices through which this men's movement fosters distinctive social relationships among its members. As a central feature of PK stadium conferences and accountability groups, PK body culture promotes transgressive forms of social interaction such as the laying–on of hands among brothers, interracial fellowships, men's public displays of emotion, call–and–response sermonizing, and the playful evangelization of sports rituals at PK stadium events. Yet, even as it seems to emancipate men from the constraints of conventional masculinity, PK body culture also disciplines men's bodies. The concept of accountability enables Promise Keepers to engage in brotherly surveillance, thereby eradicating the boundary between public and private while infusing this practice with concern and compassion. And PK strongly encourages the routinization of men's daily activities through the disciplines of prayer and scripture study.

Recent years have witnessed what might be best described as the partial "dismemberment" of the Promise Keepers as a religious movement. Although the movement remains active and continues to boast that it has brought millions of men "to Christ" since the early 1990s, PK is no longer as visible or vital as it once was (Bartkowski 2004). There are important insights about religion and identity to be gleaned from this movement's diminishing fortunes. Like prior incarnations of Muscular Christianity that waxed and eventually waned, the earlier muscularity of PK has given way to hypertrophy. The many reasons for the contraction of this religious movement are beyond the scope of this study.[7] However, PK's rapid rise and fall suggests that a religious movement whose identity is marked by an unstable mix of embodied antinomies and fluid identities (e.g., Tender Warrior) may not have the staying power typically enjoyed by more "organized" forms of religion (congregations and denominations). The innovative refashioning of evangelical identity unleashed by the Promise Keepers attracted men to this faith tradition in droves during much of the 1990s. Yet, in creatively using sensate culture to give men an embodied experience of religious rebirth, PK took its place alongside equally ephemeral cultural forms in American society—sport, music, and entertainment—all of whose leading lights and fashion trends change with dizzying rapidity.

Thus, the flagging fortunes of the Promise Keepers underscore the perils of organizational "flexibility." Although "agile" businesses and employees with "flexible skill sets" are lauded for their dexterity in the corporate world (Martin 1994), flexibility in the religious realm can be both a blessing and a bane. As a religious movement that counterposed itself to "organized religion," the Promise Keepers were able to define masculinity in variegated ways to reach diverse constituencies of men (e.g., across the lines of race, class, age, and denomination) (Bartkowski 2004). Offering a fluid and complex rendering of men's religious identities, the movement won scores of followers and eclipsed all previous men's movements that had come before it. Yet, given its revivalistic (anti-establishment) character, PK was unable to bind this mix of constituencies into a cohesive "body of believers." Here, then, are the perils of "multi–tasking."

There is, of course, much more work that needs to be conducted regarding the body's place in the negotiation of religious identities. The theoretical concepts and empirical illustrations provided here are intended to contribute to a literature that, despite its prospects, remains underdeveloped among scholars of religion. Given the spirited study of embodiment by scholars across diverse disciplines, disembodied scholarly treatments of religious identity will increasingly be viewed as incomplete and inadequate renderings of religious experience. While social life among the faithful cannot be reduced merely to embodiment, scholars have much to gain from embracing the religious body in its many incarnations.

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Notes

1. This is not to say that scholars of religion have been wholly silent concerning this topic. A handful of research studies draw on contemporary cultural theory to explore the embodied aspects of religion and spirituality (e.g., Adams 1998; Bartkowski 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004; Belzen 1999; McGuire 1990, 1996; Orta 1999). Moreover, several excellent explorations have examined the relationship between religion and the body with attention to important cross–cultural, historical, and theoretical issues (Coakley 1997; Mellor and Shilling 1997; Turner 1996: ch. 3). These volumes explicitly seek to redress the "anti–body bias" (Scott and Morgan 1993) that has pervaded not only traditional social science in general, but research on religious history and culture, as well as sociological theory. To be sure, many fruitful insights emerge from these volumes. Yet, most portraits to date feature oddly disembodied treatments of religion and the body. Focusing on broad–brushed comparisons between historical epochs (Mellor and Shilling 1997; Turner 1996), and abstract philosophical–theological orientations of religious traditions writ large (e.g., Judaism, Greek Christianity, Western Catholicism, Taoism) (Coakley 1997), religious experience and identity are not embodied—in a grounded, lived sense—within such treatises. A handful of ethnographic investigations of non–mainstream religious groups (Belzin 1999; McGuire 1996; Orta 1999) provide excellent models for empirical researchers interested in the

intersection of religious identity and embodiment. In many respects, this essay can be read as a plea for more research of this type. My case study of the Promise Keepers is designed to extend this line of scholarship to mainstream religious groups in the contemporary U.S.

2. Structuralist approaches on identity tend toward determinism by emphasizing the reproduction of social structures and the persistence of inequality. Radical constructionist accounts (other than Foucault's early work on sexuality) tend toward voluntarism by emphasizing resistance to social structures and the subversion of power relations (see Ammerman 2003 for review). In my view, the most promising theoretical approaches to identity negotiation reject determinism and voluntarism and instead recognize the ongoing interplay between structure, agency, and embodiment (Connell 1995; Davis 1995, 1997b; Giddens 1984). From this vantage point, sociality can simultaneously serve oppressive and emancipatory ends.

3. My use of the term "identity" deserves some clarification. Corporeality, subjectivity, and sociality are three intersecting configurations that together comprise identity. These configurations are connected by multiple interstices. Hence, they do not form a stable, harmonious system. Identities, and their constituent configurations, are characterized by tension, contradiction, and indeterminacy. What's more, subjectivity and sociality do not always triumph over corporeality when identity–based tensions arise. Agency is capable of being exercised not only by individual actors (subjectivity) and social collectivities (sociality) but by bodies (corporeality) as well (Connell 1995). In this sense, bodies have a "corpo–reality" that is not simply reducible to subjective or social forces. This view of the body as an active agent in the process of cultural production challenges the "docile bodies" thesis—i.e., the view that bodies are merely passive objects over which social and cultural forces exercise their influence. The docile bodies thesis is embraced by many structuralists and constructionists alike, yet another reason to manifest suspicion toward these polarizing theories. In contrast, I embrace the view that bodily practices are "onto–formative" (Connell 1995). Bodily practices are capable of giving rise to new subjective standpoints and social relationships.

   Finally, as illustrated in my case study of the Promise Keepers, identity configurations can be inflected by a variety of different status markers (e.g., religion, race, class, gender, age, sexuality, nationality). These status markers have a complicated relationship with one another. Statuses are rarely accorded to the body, the individual actor, or the social group in

a manner that is uniform and consistent. For example, in a culture that privileges whiteness, blackness (race) can be used as a justification for denying economic opportunity (class) even as dark skin is exoticized and eroticized by its physical distinctiveness (gender–sexuality) (see, e.g., L. Davis 1997 and Hoberman 1997 for excellent illustrations; see Butler 1989 on the connections between gender and sexuality). Because identities—religious and otherwise—are composed of multiple conflicting statuses, they should be understood as intersectional, situationally specific, and contradictory (see Ammerman 2003).

4. Social scientists of religion have likely overlooked the body for both methodological and institutional reasons. Among the methodologies available to social researchers, surveys and in–depth interviews are preferred by many social scientists—especially sociologists. Non–experiential methodologies do not lend themselves to explorations of culture as an embodied phenomenon. It is noteworthy that anthropologists, whose primary tool of trade is ethnography, have been much more receptive to exploring the place of the body in social and religious experience (e.g., Cassell 2000; Martin 1994; Orta 1999). There is an elective affinity between ethnography—a naturalistic, experiential, and embodied method of social research—and a scholarly focus on the body (Bartkowski 2004).

   In addition, a neglect of the embodied dimensions of religious identity may result from boundary work that occurs within the academy (see Agger 2000; Vaughn, Sjoberg, and Reynolds 1993 for critical treatments of knowledge production in the academy). Having quite recently gained a secure foothold within the American Sociological Association by establishing their own section, sociologists of religion may not wish to trade this newfound legitimacy by studying topics—such as the body—that seem unscientific, trendy, or esoteric in focus. Sociology, like other academic specialties, is a "discipline" not only in the sense that it requires practitioners to master a set of definable skills. It is disciplinary in the sense that it imposes normalizing conventions (i.e., disciplining techniques) on those who gain entry into its community of scholars (Agger 2000; Feagin and Vera 2001).

5. Some elaboration and examples of bodily comportment, consumption practices, and sexual practices in religious communities are in order here. By bodily comportment, I refer to a wide range of religious postures, gestures, and movements. Depending on one's faith tradition, for example, prayer may take the form of sedate solemnity (e.g., kneeling silently with a bowed head, closed eyes, and clasped hands) or ecstatic, expressive

worship styles (e.g., dancing, clapping, shouting, and drumming). Both forms of prayer rely on the ritualization and mastery of a particular set of embodied practices—a form of "kinetic fluency" (Mazer 1998). Many religious communities define themselves through the collective movement of bodies through social space (e.g., Catholic Communion rites, evangelical altar calls, Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca). Bodily consumption practices, rituals that rely on the ingestion or proscription of particular substances, are equally diverse. Interestingly, substances that are taboo among particular groups (e.g., alcohol and tobacco in some conservative Christian circles) are sacralized and consumed in others (e.g., sacramental wine among Catholics, tobacco in some Native American sweat lodge ceremonies). And, of course, religious groups often prescribe or proscribe certain forms of sexual expression. These commonly include specifying the social conditions under which intercourse should take place (e.g., sex after rather than before marriage; sex with a person one loves; sex as a proselytization tool); defining the appropriate gender of one's lover (e.g., heterosexual); and endorsing particular practices related to procreation (e.g., natural family planning, contraceptive technology, abortion).

6. Following Cohan and Hark in *Screening the Male* (1993), I use the word "screening" intentionally here as a polysemous term. Consistent with common usage, live or filmed images of men are screened when they are broadcast through media such as television or cinema. But men are also screened for such media broadcasts inasmuch as these images provide a particular portrayal of "manhood"—often the result of strategic production decisions. In this sense, screening entails producing an image, montage, or film in which particular men and forms of masculinity that would undermine the desired portrayal are "filtered out" or not presented in the text. As Cohan and Hark (1993: 3) argue, cinema "puts [the male] on screen, it hides him behind a screen, it uses him as a screen for its ideological agenda, and it screens out socially unacceptable and heterogeneous cultural constructions of masculinity."

7. For an in–depth analysis of the rise and fall of the Promise Keepers, see Bartkowski 2004.

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