

Christian Belief in the Student “Body”: The influence of faith status, church affiliation, and understanding of Christianity

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Abstract

There is limited examination in the literature of Christians' beliefs about the physical body and the factors that influence these beliefs. This study describes college students' beliefs about their bodies. Data was gathered using the Christian Teachings on the Body Scale to assess how faith status, church affiliation, and knowledge of Christianity impact college students' Christian beliefs about their bodies. The main finding is that students' beliefs about the body are positively affected by having religious faith and specific knowledge and understanding of Christian teachings. Church affiliation also impacts beliefs about the body. Results are discussed relative to Christian theology and anthropology literature describing humans as embodied. The discussion includes potential implications for integrating Christian faith into university courses focused on the human body. Faculty teaching at religious universities may use these findings to understand student views of the body and to inform their teaching in ways that guide students toward a Christian worldview.

Keywords: Christianity, Imago Dei, body, faith integration

Introduction

University educators realize that much of our teaching prioritizes cognitive rehearsal of information more than embodied learning that integrates both learners' mental and physical aspects. The approach is common enough that educators casually refer to it as the Brains-on-a-Stick model. Teaching and learning focus on the mind and cognition for good reason, helping students understand relevant disciplinary theory, develop practical and vocational skills, and even form their worldview. As Christian educators who affirm that humans are embodied image bearers of God, we realize that our engagement with students warrants a balanced approach that includes the mind and the body. Even disciplines focused on studying the physical aspects of human life, such as the performing arts and physical education, can struggle to include holistic methods that address the physical domain. Recent Christian scholars outline the importance of developing spiritual and educational habits that shape our minds and bodies in God's truths. (Allison, 2021; Howell, 2021; Kleinig, 2021; Smith & Smith, 2011) Christian Scripture gives theological support for incorporating such an embodied and holistic approach.

Support for Embodied Education

The Christian scriptures narrate a positive and holistic understanding of human persons. God declares the goodness of material creation, including humans, several times in the creation account (Genesis 1:4, 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25, 1:31). The book of Genesis portrays humans as embodied creatures made in God's likeness to steward creation and reflect God's image in the world. The Gospels reveal that God enters the human story in embodied physical form through the incarnation (lit. "made flesh") of Jesus, that Jesus sacrifices his physical body in death, and that Jesus is resurrected in bodily form. This physical death and resurrection restore an embodied relationship with God, humanity, and the created world. The doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, that God incarnated as Jesus Christ and that Jesus resurrected and ascended in a physical body, confer value and meaning on the physical human life. The Christian worldview supports the human body as important, necessary, and central to God's interaction with creation. From beginning to end, the Christian story values the embodied human being as spiritual and physical (Sullivan & Barnes, 2024).

While Christian educators generally affirm a positive view of the human person, including the body, such views do not always translate into holistic and Christian educational methods. The literature is scarce on examples of holistic faith integration in most disciplines, including those that focus on the human body (Howell, 2021). One recent survey (Glanzer, 2024) found a similar disconnect between Christian universities' stated mission of "Christ-animated learning" and the language of general education courses related to bodily stewardship. Of the course titles, such as health, lifetime fitness, physical education, wellness, or a related topic, only 3% provide course description language that suggests integrating holistic Christian faith into their teaching. There are likely many reasons for this disconnect, including the practical need for Christian universities to offer theological content primarily through theology departments to ensure alignment with supporting denominations and governance boards. Still, Christian faculty members outside of theology and Christian studies departments should consider ways of teaching and faith integration (FI) that promote a Christian theology of the body that can influence students toward a deeper and more faithful Christian life.

Historic Christian Belief and the Body

Scholars generally summarize historic Christian thinking about the body as a story of undulating teachings within major Christian traditions rather than specific differences among these traditions (Harvey, 2014; Hoffman, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Koch, 2007; Watson & Parker, 2013). Throughout some of its history, both Catholic and later Protestant theology had high regard for the body. Christian views and teachings in both traditions reflect historical understandings of biblical Scripture, theology, philosophy, and even anthropology. Some early Christian writers were influenced by Greek philosophy, especially Platonic dualism, which viewed the soul as superior to and separate from the body, and some also saw the body as a distraction from the spiritual life. This perspective has continued to shape how some Christians, especially in Protestant and Evangelical traditions, view the body (Anderson, 2011; Hochstetler, Hopsicker, and Kretchmar, 2008; Twietmeyer, 2008). However, not all theological perspectives were negative. Scholars like Bynum (1995) argue that the universal Church has long emphasized the unity of body and soul, particularly in its belief in bodily resurrection. Kelly (2012) highlights the Catholic tradition's long-standing appreciation for the body. He points to church fathers like Justin Martyr, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas as evidence that the Church often affirmed the importance of the body:

Christians in the early church and the medieval period repeatedly insisted on the importance of the material world and the human body in the

Christian life against views held by Gnostics and Manicheans. They developed their arguments by appealing to central Christian beliefs regarding the goodness of the created world, the Word becoming flesh, and the resurrection of the whole person, body and soul. Such views provided theological justification for ... religious practices that involved the human body. (Kelly 2012, 93)

Recent Catholic affirmations of the body as a positive and holistic expression of the *imago Dei* come from Pope John Paul II (1997). The International Theological Commission of the Catholic Church also emphasizes a holistic rather than dualistic view of the human person, “Avoiding both monism and dualism, the Bible presents a vision of the human being in which the spiritual is understood to be a dimension together with the physical, social, and historical dimensions of man” (para. 9, 2004).

Historic Protestant theology gives less attention to developing a theology of the body. Anderson (2011) summarizes the lack of Protestant evangelical Christian thinking about the body: “a theology of the body is one of evangelicalism’s least developed doctrines” (p. 35). Recent protestant biblical scholars and theologians have enhanced this discussion in positive ways. Allison (2021) argues that God created humans as embodied beings, that the body is a central part of our spiritual identity, and that the scriptural narrative of creation, incarnation, resurrection, and glorification presents embodiment as a good and essential part of life. Kleinig (2021) also presents a positive theological view of the body focused on the embodied nature of salvation through creation, incarnation, and resurrection, and he further emphasizes the sacramental nature of the Christian’s life of faith in the body:

Faith, and the life of faith, involves our whole selves, body, soul, and spirit. It is always embodied faith, just as we are always embodied souls...Faith in Christ always issues in bodily actions. The works of faith...are his works that he does together with us in our bodies. (p. 85-86)

Both of these scriptural views emphasize that the body is essential to the Christian life and biblically portrayed in holistic and integrated ways rather than dualistic or separated, in which the body has secondary status as a temporary housing for the soul. This theoretical discussion, however, rarely involves empirical discussions of how these historic positions influence Christians' general beliefs (i.e., laypeople) toward their bodies. One step for those seeking to integrate Christian thinking about the body into teaching practices is to explore and understand how college students view these concepts. Since these students receive

classroom teaching strategies, empirical studies exploring this population are needed. Given the present historical background on Christian theology related to the body, and because of the dearth in the literature examining Christians' beliefs toward the body, the present study examines how college students in a Christian setting view their bodies. The approach involves a descriptive survey analysis of university students' beliefs about the body.

Relevance of Christian Beliefs for University Faith Integration

Recent US population surveys of religion report that approximately 65% of Americans identify as Christian, 26% as religiously unaffiliated, and 10% as adherents of another faith, including Judaism (2%) (PRRI, 2022/2023). A report on religious identification among college graduates outlined a nearly identical composition (Pew, 2014). These findings that most college students identify as religious, and nearly two-thirds as Christian, provide an encouraging rationale for Christian faculty who want to improve their FI strategies in ways that align with orthodox Christian teachings. However, Christian faculty can face challenges to these FI efforts.

One of the general FI challenges involves addressing the information gaps of incoming university students (Allison, 2021; Nehrbass, 2022). One of the most common gaps involves students who do not receive sufficient previous instruction in a biblical Christian worldview. Another gap involves students who experienced church or religious school instruction in ways that syncretized Christian theology with concepts from secular philosophy when thinking about the human person. For example, the evangelical tendency to borrow philosophic concepts like substance dualism or Gnosticism when talking about the person and the body is documented and undoubtedly impacts student beliefs. (Jacobsen et al., 2016; Anderson, 2011, p. 37). There are also FI tools that assist in addressing these and other challenges.

In the pages of this journal, Nehrbass (2022) provides Christian faculty with helpful categories of "entry points to faith integration" (FI) that include foundations, pedagogies, practices, and perspectives (p.14). Related to incorporating Christian foundations into our teaching, it can benefit faculty to explore current student levels of Christian understanding. Once known, faculty can develop teaching strategies that improve student understanding of foundational Christian truths. The present study examines student beliefs about the body relative to faith status, church affiliation, and knowledge of the Christian faith. Exploring these beliefs can help faculty understand how students internalize Christian concepts related to the body.

It can also assist faculty in integrating foundational Christian truths into their FI teaching strategies. Such efforts may help students develop a more biblically Christian worldview.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the influence of faith status, church affiliation, and knowledge of Christian teachings on college students' beliefs about their bodies. Descriptive survey data will examine how Christian students think about their bodies and how these views differ based on faith status, church background, and self-reported knowledge of Christian faith. These proximal measures of religion may be useful for faculty in developing educational strategies that help students integrate Christian faith when thinking about their bodies.

Methods

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to measure how Christian faith, church affiliation, and level of Christian understanding impact religious beliefs about the body. In particular, this study addresses how positive and negative beliefs formed within a religious tradition connect with people's thoughts about and attitudes toward their bodies.

Participants and Procedure

Participants (n=575) attended a private Christian university in Southern California from diverse faith backgrounds and Christian denominations. Using the online survey system Qualtrics®, participants indicated the degree to which they hold certain Christian views about their bodies and attitudes toward them. Participants reported their faith status (Christian, non-Christian, or unsure), church affiliation (Evangelical, Catholic, or other Christian, such as Anglican or Orthodox), and understanding of the bible and Christian teachings (minimal, basic, or good). The author emailed a survey link to a convenience sample of kinesiology and exercise science students enrolled in an introduction to the discipline course over four semesters from 2022 to 2024. Students were invited to participate during the first and last weeks of the course. Participation was voluntary, with no incentive provided, and discussed as part of the learning process in the introductory course. Participants represented a variety of denominations within the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant religious traditions, as well as secular traditions.

Measures

Student beliefs about the body were measured using the Christian Teachings on the Body Scale (CTBS). The CTBS is a 14-item validated scale (see Appendix 1) that assesses "the extent to which a participant endorses explicitly Christian teachings about his or her body" (Jacobson et al., 2016).

With a seven-point Likert Scale, sample items include "my body is a temple of God," "my body is holy," and "I glorify God through my body." There were also items measuring non-Christian views, such as "It does not matter what I do with my body," and "I can do whatever I want with my body" (Mahoney et al., 2005). Total scores were calculated by obtaining a mean for all items, with items #10 and #11 reverse-scored. Participants responded to each statement on a scale of 1-7, where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree. Higher scores represent a higher endorsement by the participant of explicitly Christian teachings about the body. Participants self-reported their Christian faith status, church identity, and faith knowledge. Christian faith status was established with the question, "Do you consider yourself to be a Christian?" and was limited to choices of yes, no, or unsure. Church identity was established with the question, "Which denomination or church do you identify with or attend," and limited to choices of Evangelical/Protestant (Baptist, Church of Christ, Methodist, nondenominational, Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc.), Catholic, or Other Christian (Anglican, Orthodox, etc.). Faith knowledge was established with the question, "How would you describe your level of understanding of the Christian faith?" It was limited to choices of minimal (I don't read the bible or know much about Christian teachings), basic (I understand basic bible stories and teachings), and good (I regularly read the bible and have learned Christian teachings for a few years or more).

Undergraduate students enrolled in an "introduction to the discipline" course from fall 2022 through spring 2025 participated by responding to the survey. Students who elected to take the CTBI survey submitted a digital consent form. All responses were anonymous (deidentified) and confidential, stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. CTBI scores were compared based on faith status, church affiliation, and knowledge of Christianity.

Measuring Religious Belief

Mahoney et al. (1999) argue that proximal measures of religion (e.g., assessing religious views and beliefs) are superior to distal measures (e.g., assessing frequency of behaviors such as attending religious service or praying) in understanding how religion influences people's lives. While it can also be important to examine the frequency of religious service attendance and other distal or external measures of religiosity to understand how belief impacts

behavior, focusing on these factors alone can miss the variety of ways that people orient themselves to God and how they view the role of faith in their lives. Defining and assessing specific beliefs and religious behaviors beyond simple church attendance are valuable for understanding how religion influences health and other measurable outcomes (Goodman et al., 2013). Escher (2013) emphasizes the content of what people believe and internalize when seeking to measure the impact of religion, rather than the frequency of religious behaviors or religious orientation. Others agree about the importance of measuring specific religious beliefs, especially to understand how people think and feel about religion and their bodies (Buser & Parkins, 2013; Kim, 2006, 2007). For this reason, the present study uses CTBI as a proximal measure of how Christian faith relates to students' beliefs about the body. This study contributes to describing how these beliefs differ among the present student sample regarding faith status, church tradition or affiliation, and Christian knowledge.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize overall CTBS scores and individual responses to the 14 survey items. One-way ANOVA was used to examine group differences in CTBS scores based on Christian faith commitment, church identity, faith knowledge, and level of Christian education. *Post hoc* Tukey multiple comparison analyses determined the statistical significance of differences between the group means. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS® software version 29.

Results

Faith Status and Christian Beliefs about the Body

Table 1 below summarizes participant CTBS scores based on Christian faith status. Groups differed in score among Christian, non-Christian, and unsure ($p=0.001$; $F=62.39$). Those who identified as Christian had the highest overall scores (91.51 ± 11.53), followed by those who were "unsure" (80.13 ± 11.01) and those who identified as "non-Christian" (71.68 ± 16.95 ; $p<0.001$). Tukey post hoc comparisons indicated significant group mean differences between Christian and non-Christian students ($M1-M2=19.83$; $p<0.001$) as well as between Christian and unsure ($M1-M2=11.37$; $p<0.001$) and non-Christian and Unsure ($M1-M2=8.46$; $p=0.004$).

Table 1 *Comparison of CTBS Score by Christian, Non-Christian and Unsure*

	N	M	SD	SE	CI Lower	CI Upper	Minimum	Maximum
Christian	493	91.51	11.56	.52	90.49	92.53	19	107
Non-Christian	37	71.68	16.95	2.79	66.02	77.33	36	102
Unsure	45	80.13	11.01	1.64	76.82	83.44	59	105
Total	575	89.34	13.11	.55	88.27	90.42	19	107

* $p < .001$ ($F=62.40$)

Church Affiliation and Christian Beliefs about the Body

Table 2 summarizes participant CTBS scores based on church affiliation. Groups differed among those who identified as Evangelical, Catholic, or other Christian ($p=0.001$; $F=6.89$). Those who identified as Evangelical had the highest overall scores (92.54 ± 11.19) followed by those who identified as "other Christian" (90.14 ± 12.37), and those who identified as Catholic (87.84 ± 10.36). Post hoc comparisons indicated significant group mean differences between Evangelical and Catholic students ($M1-M2 = 4.69$; $p < 0.001$). No significant group mean differences were found between Evangelical and other Christian or between other Christian and Catholic students.

Christian Knowledge and Beliefs about the Body

Table 3 summarizes CTBS scores based on Christian knowledge. Groups differed among participants who self-reported as having minimal, basic, and good understanding ($p < 0.001$; $F=69.55$). Those with good Christian knowledge had the highest overall scores (95.16 ± 11.31), followed by those with basic knowledge (87.04 ± 12.06), and those with minimal knowledge (76.69 ± 12.39). Tukey post hoc comparisons indicated significant group mean differences between good and minimal Christian knowledge ($M1-M2=19.06$; $p < 0.001$), between good and basic Christian

Table 2 *Comparison of CTBS Score by Evangelical, Catholic, Other Christian*

	N	M	SD	SE	CI Lower	CI Upper	Min Score	Max Score
Evangelical	336	92.54	11.19	.61	91.34	93.74	20	105
Catholic	96	87.84	10.36	1.06	85.74	89.94	59	104
Other Christian	36	90.14	12.38	2.06	85.95	94.33	55	107
Total	468	91.39	11.30	.52	90.37	92.41	20	107

* $p < .001$ ($F=6.89$)

Table 3 *Comparison of CTBS Score by Minimal, Basic, Good Understanding of Christianity*

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	CI Lower	CI Upper	Min Score	Max Score
Minimal	61	76.69	12.39	1.59	73.52	79.86	42	100
Basic	273	87.04	12.06	.73	85.60	88.48	19	104
Good	240	95.16	11.31	.73	93.72	96.60	20	107
Total	574	89.33	13.12	.55	88.26	90.41	19	107

* $p < .001$ ($F=69.55$)

knowledge ($M1-M2=8.22$; $p<0.001$), and between basic and minimal knowledge ($M1-M2=10.84$; $p<0.001$).

Discussion

Understanding the religious background of university students, including their faith commitments, church affiliation, and knowledge of the Christian worldview and teachings, can assist faculty in developing effective FI strategies that help students think more Christianly about their bodies, potentially leading to a deeper understanding and appreciation of humans as physical image bearers of God as well as practical outcomes such as positive health behaviors and body image. The present study employed a data collection strategy that has inherent limitations in addressing the research purpose. The cross-sectional survey design allows for a descriptive understanding of students' beliefs about the body. However, it is limited in establishing causal relationships among these beliefs and key variables of faith status, church affiliation, and Christian knowledge. The participant sample is not random; instead, it involves a convenient group of students from a private Christian university and within a specific department of kinesiology and exercise science, limiting the generalizability of the findings to different student populations or colleges. The reliance on survey data also introduced response bias, especially the desire for participants to respond in socially acceptable ways for their religious university setting. This could have limited the validity of the self-reported responses. Considering the limitations of the present study, future exploration of the topic can benefit from naturalistic research designs that gather qualitative data through in-depth interviews, which allow participants to explain their thinking in deeper and nuanced ways. Data from such designs may be used to better account for and explore the differences in Christian church affiliation and knowledge of Christianity noted in the present study and how these factors impact belief.

Considering these limitations, the present study provides descriptive evidence that Christian faith status, church affiliation, and knowledge of Christian beliefs impact students' views of their bodies. Students who identified as Christian had significantly higher overall scores than those who were unsure or non-Christian. Christians affiliated with an Evangelical background also had significantly higher scores than Catholics, but not those from other backgrounds, such as Anglican or Orthodox. The level of self-reported knowledge of Christian teachings also impacted views of the body; those reporting a good understanding had higher and more Christian views of their bodies. Participants with a basic understanding also held generally positive Christian views, while students with minimal understanding had the lowest scores and the least Christian views of their bodies. Some of these findings are intuitive and expected, such as Christian students scoring higher and indicating a more Christian and biblical understanding of the human body. Those who report a good understanding of Christian teachings are also expected to score higher on a measure of Christian thinking about the body than those with basic or minimal understanding. One explanation for this relationship could be that much of the language in the CTBS is biblical (e.g. fearfully and wonderfully made, living sacrifice, temple of the Holy Spirit) and assumes a knowledge of Christian verbiage, something Christian participants would more readily agree with, especially those with a good understanding of Christian teachings.

Difference Based on Church Affiliation and Understanding of Christianity

The finding that Catholic students had significantly lower scores than Evangelical students in Christian thinking about the body presents an interesting area for further exploration. Descriptive survey data are limited in explaining why these differences might exist. As mentioned,

future studies can benefit from data collection that gathers qualitative interviews that allow participants to explain their thinking more profoundly. Still, it is not apparent from the historic Christian teachings about the body presented earlier why this sample of Catholics and Protestants should differ. Understanding these historic Christian teachings about the body can inform future studies that explore similar student beliefs as well as FI strategies that attempt to increase biblical and Christian understandings of what it means to be an embodied human.

Data from the present study also provides strong evidence that the level of student understanding of Christian belief and theology impacts Christian thinking about the body. Students with a basic or good understanding scored much higher, indicating more Christian thinking about their bodies. While this relationship could relate to student familiarity with the biblical language in the CTBS—especially for those with a good understanding of the bible—rather than actual differences in Christian views of the body, the data indicate that student beliefs are impacted by biblical and theological content knowledge.

Implications for Faith Integration

With these findings in mind, faculty can consider including specific and systematic Christian theological content into their teaching, including a Christian theology of the body, to encourage students to integrate Christian faith into their thinking about the body. Returning to the FI model proposed by Nehrbass (2021), faculty can integrate foundational Christian concepts into their teaching to guide students toward a deeper understanding of the Christian worldview. For example, faculty can actively reject dualistic views that devalue the physical body by including biblical and holistic understandings of the human person as "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14), and as part of God's "good" creation (Genesis 1:31). Other strategies to increase Christian understanding and Christian views of the body might include incorporating foundational scriptural truths into our teaching, such as stewarding the body for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Romans 12:1), discussing concepts of normal ability and disability in terms of the *imago Dei* and Christ's ethic of love for "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40), and that our physical bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit in which we experience, worship and honor God (1 Corinthians 6:19). Even more important, specific and regular emphasis on the physical aspects of the Christian doctrines of incarnation and resurrection stated earlier, that God incarnated as Jesus Christ and that Jesus resurrected and ascended in a physical body, can reinforce foundational truths that form students toward uniquely Christian views of the body.

Findings from the present study have particular relevance for Christian faculty in disciplines focused on the body (e.g., Exercise Science, Health Sciences, Kinesiology, Performing Arts and Dance, etc.). Spirituality and religious practices are known to positively impact overall wellness. There is evidence that participating in specific religious practices, such as regular church attendance, can lower mortality rates (Li et al., 2016). Prayer and meditation have been identified as effective tools for coping with daily stress (APA, 2017; Knabb et al., 2020). Regular physical activity also enhances subjective well-being across many dimensions by improving body image and self-esteem (Shang et al., 2021). How individuals think about their bodies can impact overall health and health behaviors (Mahoney, 1999; Jacobsen et al., 2016). Views of the body can impact the quality and type of religious experiences within daily life (Sullivan, 2019). Some theological views—including those that espouse dualistic and subservient views of the body—may harm body attitudes (Forstmann et al., 2012; Jacobsen et al., 2016).

Given the findings on the interaction between religious beliefs and behaviors—and the present study's identification of differences in students' beliefs based on church affiliation and Christian understanding—faculty in body-related disciplines would benefit from developing faith integration strategies that deepen students' understanding of the body's goodness, inherent value, and theological significance within the Christian tradition and life.

Appendix 1

Christian Teachings on the Body Scale (CTBS)

Adopted from Jacobson HL, Hall ME, Anderson TL, Willingham MM. Temple or Prison: Religious Beliefs and Attitudes Toward the Body. *J Relig Health*. 2016 Dec;55(6):2154-73. doi: 10.1007/s10943-016-0266-z. PMID: 27283045.

Please rate each statement on a scale of 1-7 where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree

1. My body is miraculous
2. My body is Spirit-filled
3. My body is blessed
4. My body is holy
5. My body is a temple of God
6. My body is a gift from God
7. I glorify God through my body
8. My body is a living sacrifice to God
9. I serve God through my body

10. It does not matter what I do with my body (reverse-scored)
11. I can do whatever I want with my body (reverse-scored)
12. I honor God through my body
13. My body is a temple of the Holy Spirit
14. My body is fearfully and wonderfully made

Scoring: Total scores are calculated by obtaining a mean for all items, with higher scores representing a higher endorsement of explicitly Christian teachings about the body.

Items # 10, 11 are reverse-scored.

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