

# The intimate intensity of Evangelical fighting ministries<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The author discusses what she learned from her participation in evangelical fighting ministries, paying special attention to how these communities sought to connect with God through interacting with each other. In training with and interviewing the members of these ministries in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the author found that as evangelical Christians, many struggled to establish and maintain the primacy of their personal relationships with God over their interpersonal interests. Yet they also believed their relationships with God were meant to be witnessed and experienced by others. During moments of worship they shared emotional intimacy, granting each other opportunities to make outwardly perceivable their internally felt relationships with God. During their Brazilian jiu-jitsu training, they were encouraged to feel God's presence as they grappled with each other at very close contact. Using the concept of compartmentalisation, the author analyses how these evangelical fighting ministries demarcated their practices into emotional and physical forms of intimacy, thereby finding different ways to achieve what they perceived as personal contact with God in their intense interactions with each other.

Keywords: *evangelical Christianity, fighting ministries, Brazil, body, compartmentalisation*

For years now popular culture has been used in church social programming in urban Brazil. One surprising development since the turn of the 21st century has been the popularising of evangelical fighting ministries. In this article I discuss how certain churches in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, are using social outreach programmes that combine worship with close-contact grappling in an effort to help young people learn about God, each other, and themselves. In my own research I found that these programmes generally offered Brazilian jiu-jitsu-focused sparring sessions bookended with thirty-minute religious activities guided by leaders from their affiliated churches.

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During their nightly training sessions they would arrange themselves in a circle and sing, pray, and discuss spiritual quandaries and then they would engage in paired confrontations in which they learned how to apply Brazilian jiu-jitsu and judo techniques, which focus on grappling on the ground. In a low-stakes, unchoreographed manner they would roll around on a mat in close contact, sometimes applying chokes and holds. And then they would come back together to pray and sometimes sing before parting ways for the night.

As self-proclaimed evangelicals, many of these ministries' participants devoted their time to maintaining personal relationships with God in the face of myriad interpersonal interests. This could be a difficult task due to the visceral intensity of urban Brazilian daily life, as it was cluttered with stories, sometimes first-hand, of violence, sex, and mind-altering influences (Lewis 1999; Matta 1979; Matta 1991). These participants shared a real concern over how to keep everyday life from getting in the way of their spiritual development. And yet their relationships with God were also supposed to be witnessed, experienced, and even tested by the very people and situations consuming most of their everyday lives. Within evangelical fighting ministries the factors that could potentially disrupt the participants' intimate connections with God could also provide opportunities for furthering them. How did these ministries marshal such intensely intimate, emotional, and physical encounters into means for better knowing God? How did their allowing the profane to sit alongside the sacred affect the exploration of self, other, and the divine? How did expressly human interactions shape spiritual meaning-making?

During worship participants were encouraged to communicate with God and each other not only with words but also through laughter and tears. I analyse how they opened opportunities for themselves to make perceivable their own relationships with God and tested each other's willingness to render themselves emotionally vulnerable. The laughing and crying were not only meant to be public performances of private devotion to God. Just as laughing and crying together have been shown to establish intimacy in other overtly public settings (Haag 1993; Seizer 2011), in this case they also seemed to be markers and makers of good personal relationships with God. During their combat sport training participants of these ministries were meant to learn about their relationships with God by grappling with each other at very close contact in near silence. Their stoic give-and-take of pain happened within an intimate space of physical interdependence. When they were training, potentially uncontrollable emotions, like laughing and

crying, were intentionally foreclosed so that participants could develop fighting techniques and gain an awareness of pain thresholds (Downey 2007a; Spencer 2009).

I use the notion of compartmentalisation as an analytical tool to understand the impact of this aspect of the fighting ethos on evangelicalism. I explore how these ministries kept what members could experience during training clearly demarcated from what they could do during worship. The collective categorisation and (re)direction of certain behaviours encouraged participants to engage in emotional and religious practices one moment, and stoic and secular endeavours the next. I argue that although participants learned to sequester and redirect emotion without much verbalisation or debate, their active compartmentalisation still held important implications for how they might have sensed God. Thus, one of the aims of this article is to expose some of the links between what these evangelical fighting ministries suggest is wisdom from God and what the participants are teaching each other. In particular, I hope to contribute to a certain subfield of the anthropology of religion, which both emphasises 'the role of skilled learning in the experience of God' as well as the embodied 'proclivity' to absorb the spirituality in question (Luhmann, et al. 2010, 66). I use the analyses of affective flows and emotional structures by Knoblauch and Herbrich (2014), Blackman (2012), and Wetherell (2012) to outline the sorts of spiritual meaning-making that can emerge from emotionally and physically intense moments of togetherness.

### **Methodology**

I trained, worshipped, and spoke with people involved in two evangelical Christian fighting ministries and their host churches in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. After analysing the online activity of Brazilian evangelical churches' use of martial arts (Rivers 2011), I conducted research in Rio de Janeiro over the course of three years for a total of roughly six months. I attended worship, trained with evangelical fighting ministries and secular academies, and accompanied them to competitions and retreats. I furthered the combat sport aspect of my research by training in a dojo in Bloomington, Indiana, in the year between my first two trips to Brazil. I also conducted sixty-five semi-structured interviews with pastors, church secretaries, congregants, their friends and family members, as well as professional and amateur fighters and leaders in the fighting community. Following Burdick (1993), I looked at the successes and failures as specified by past and present members

from each church, considering clusters of participants instead of a single demographic. Using this approach, I learned that the notion of a person as a work-in-progress was a salient trope for these congregations and the larger fighting community.

At the evangelical fighting ministries, I listened for what people talk about before and after they train and monitored my own experiences to understand their effects on my body and spirit. Wacquant (2004) opened this line of pursuit, questioning how we might best ethnographically represent all the social and physical experiences a person undergoes when learning to fight both through aching repetitive, incremental steps and intensely acute physical activities. Since then Downey (2005; 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2008) has significantly increased this conceptual toolkit, combining phenomenological and kinesthetic codifying methods for interpreting and translating embodied experiences. Likewise, Spencer (2009) offers tools with which to perceive how a habitus of pain gets generated during combat sports training. Although not directly concerned with theological or religious questions, their careful analyses of the ethical and practical implications of fighting underpins the theoretical negotiations I undertake to analyse how evangelicals grapple with God when they spar with each other.

Engaging in carnal sociology (Wacquant 2004) requires focus on the researcher's own physical and mental states vis-à-vis the people with whom she trains. Using my own body, I put this carnal sociology to work as a qualitative tool for data collection. I investigated how much of the talk that surrounded training determined an action's significance. This investigation included reviewing my extensive fieldnotes and videotaping the training sessions at the facilities. It proved useful to have both types of data, because what the camera stationed on a tripod at the corner of the mat recorded turned out to be quite different than my personal bodily experience of incrementally shaping my 'incarnate intelligence' (Wacquant 2004, viii). For example, the time I spent with these fighting ministries taught me how critically informative it is to experience first-hand the physical pain of losing as well as the intimate and social gratification of winning a match. The interplay of both sensations constitutes the daily basis of the personal and collective transformations of the community that forms a martial arts academy (Kohn 2007). In the field I also realised how important observant participation is not only for learning about the fighting world but also for engaging in the socio-spiritual world. That is, I felt I had to participate in the worship, prayers, singing, Bible readings, and social events to learn how the people around me became members of their own religious communities

and how they then developed relationships with God together.

Because of the noticeable differences in group behaviour during worship and then during fighting, I found it useful to analyse these ministries' knowledge production in terms of how they handled emotions together. Knoblauch and Herbrik (2014) theorise how loosely organised 'emotional styles' can harden into 'emotional regimes', outlining particularly how popular Christian communities normalise their participants' emotional expression and concealment. In my own research I saw how certain emotional regimes did seem to structure and contain opportunities for momentary bursts of emotion. By seeing how peak affective moments were guided by emotional regimes, I came to recognise possible connections between different types of information, such as that which was sensed as coming from God and that which was understood to be coming from human beings.

While it is theoretically productive to outline emotional styles and regimes, it is crucial to keep open the discussion of affect in practice because of its own open-endedness. Blackman (2012) offers a corrective to the potential for any overly causal overlaying of discourse and intentionality onto the active field of affectivity. This approach is especially relevant to the study of charismatic Christian communities because of the debate over what to make of what religious communities say they are doing; that is, the struggle among scholars and believers to explain belief. It can be implied by scholars that there should be a crisis of liberal Western ways of knowing when confronted with an acceptance of God in anthropomorphic terms while maintaining His being immaterial and supernatural (Asad 2003; Barrett 2004; Harding 2001; Robbins 2003). Concerned with this conundrum, Knoblauch and Herbrik (2014, 358) purposely focus solely on what they see and hear communicated. Blackman (2012), on the other hand, investigates all that might flow between the material and immaterial.

Both are eminently appropriate approaches to analysing religious community affective processes, but they come from opposite ends of the spectrum. One looks at what is communicated, which limits the analysis to that which tends to be (overly) managed and directed from the top down. This approach makes it possible to reflect on the hierarchical structures in place in both worship and dojo everyday life. The other operates with an expansive mindset, allowing in the other-natural, multidirectional affectivity of people feeling together as subjects living a 'singularity in the face of multiplicity' (Blackman 2012, 23).

Wetherell (2012) offers a bridge for connecting these distinct positions, attending to the difficulty of wrestling with affect's dynamism while reject-

ing the notion that articulations of it must be indeterminate. She finds that traditional accounts of emotion are far too restrictive while much of the affect theory coming out of cultural studies is all too eager to throw off what has come before to avoid the problem of subjectivity altogether (2012, 3f.). Instead, Wetherell intermeshes psychology with cultural studies to show how subjects' embodied meaning-making happens through well-worn practices that can (but do not always) turn into intense moments.

### **The Churches behind the ministries**

In broad terms the evangelical fighting ministries involved in my research opened affective moments in much the same ways, but their host churches were quite different as were some of the ways they carried out their ministries. This was in large part because an atomised, consumerist model of faith generally instructs the activity of Protestant Christianity in the dynamic field of popular religion in Brazil (Chesnut 1997; Chesnut 2003; Selka 2010).

One of the two churches involved in my research, Bola de Neve, which translates as 'snowball' in English, is part of a large transnational non-denominational network. It is what many scholars would consider 'neo-Pentecostal', although I found that its members rejected that categorisation, preferring instead to simply call it a 'Christian' church. It serves roughly 2,000 regularly attending congregants, and its many social programmes operate from a beachfront, converted three-story condominium in Barra da Tijuca. Its neighbourhood is considered *nouveau riche* by cariocas, that is, inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro. It houses Brazilian footballers, musicians, actors, and a business class, most of whom made their ascent over the last forty years or so. The glamour and optimism of this borough's youthfulness, social ascension, and casual, beachy lifestyle play into the distinct reputation of Rio de Janeiro's Bola de Neve, setting it apart not only from the traditional hallmarks of mainline Protestant churches but also from the solace purportedly provided by strict adherence to (neo)Pentecostal churches' many lifestyle rules (Manning 1980; Novaes and Graça Floriano 1985; Stewart-Gambino and Wilson 1997).

In a very different part of the greater metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro I encountered another successful fighting ministry at work, this time at Igreja Batista Betânia, a Baptist church with a social life as active as Bola de Neve's, although the community's neighbourhood is in the industrial 'West Zone', which is often described as remote, crime-ridden, low-income, and distinctly unglamorous. It hosts roughly 2,000 regularly attending con-

gregants in one of the suburbs that has grown up around the state military academy of Realengo, with which the local communities have a complicated relationship (Svartman 2012).

I found that the churches and their fighting ministries met different needs, despite their shared love and national pride for the martial art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Bola de Neve held sessions only once a week primarily for young men already training in secular academies elsewhere. This church community tended to place more emphasis on developing social capital among its churchgoers and their friends, making it possible for amateur fighters to socialise with professionals. In turn, rigorous attention to the development of fighting skills per se was not the primary goal. Rather, attention was paid to creating a space in which men (and in a different part of the church, women) could open up to each other, overtly connecting personal efforts at spirituality with sociality. This ministry spent roughly half of each two-hour session on Bible readings, exegesis, and applications to everyday life, with the group leaders generally offering advice for encouraging more men into the religious fold. The rest of the time was left for open roll, a casual ground game of grappling and loosely applying choke and joint holds. In these ways, more importance was placed on cultivating socio-spiritual competence than martial arts.

Batista Betânia placed more emphasis on developing career fighters than cultivating evangelists. This fighting ministry in fact operated as an academy and was run not within the church (like Bola de Neve) but on its own grounds, in the church's large community centre. It offered Brazilian jiu-jitsu and judo training and degrees for male and female children, adolescents and adults and was open five days a week. It was affiliated with the secular international professional-amateur fighting organisation, the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Confederation, which provided judges for the biannual belt exams. Moreover, the students regularly participated in regional and international competitions at the weekend, which not only tested and sharpened their fighting skills but also helped them make important student-athlete and potentially professional connections. I saw that while Batista Betânia also provided a path for generating social capital, it differed from what Bola de Neve offered in that there was no unspoken rule at Batista Betânia that fighters would ultimately join the church. Still, like Bola de Neve's fighting ministry, this academy bookended each of its training sessions with prayer and discussion sessions. That said, in this academy Bible readings and questions about fighters' faith and allegiance were purposely avoided to distance members of the church and the ministry from the stereotype of the aggressive

evangelical zealot. Instead, fighters were encouraged to form a circle when the sparring session ended, and then their group discussion would generally mingle secular and spiritual anecdotes rather casually. Despite their differences, these churches' fighting ministries shared the overarching aims of exploring relationships with God through interacting intimately with each other and generated different types of knowledge by compartmentalising their ways of being together according to the tasks at hand.

### **God is working on us: Laughing and crying together**

In encouraging each other to emote and disclose uncontrollably, evangelicals participating in the fighting ministries established a setting in which they could better feel the presence of God. For them, two of the most effective channels for sensing and conveying God's presence were laughing and crying. This may have been because these multidirectional forms of affective communication (Blackman 2012, 61) could be shared actively and freely among the members, setting the stage for growing their own interpersonal bonds and in sensing those bonds also feeling the presence of God.

The following entry from my fieldnotes shows the blending of fighting and worship ethos at a moment of culmination within an evangelical fighting ministry. It also captures the significance of sharing emotions for some of the members of this community.

Dec. 7, 2012: At the Batista Betânia Belt Ceremony, an event held in the church sanctuary in which students in the evangelical fighting ministry are promoted. At the very start of the ceremony the M.C. jokingly promised (like the fighting instructors had earlier in the week at training) that the service would not be religious, but it was. The service was dedicated to the evangelical fighting ministry leader, Hermann, also affectionately known as 'the little old man'. There was a slide show of his daughter Thaizar and other fighters visiting him in the hospital, where he was getting a liver transplant. Afterwards, Thaizar and some of the fighters came over to me. They had been crying, and they asked me if I had cried. I could tell by the way they were looking around as they hugged people that they wanted everyone to cry (profusely). I had heard them use crying as a sign of the significance of an event before, and so, I said, 'Yes, I cried' (even though I had not). They laughed out loud and smiled and nodded – it was the right thing to do.

Thinking back on that night, I can still remember that feeling of being overwhelmed, again and again, like waves rolling over me. My time in the field was ending; I would be going back to the United States in less than two weeks. I felt so much during the ceremony, but for some reason I did not cry. I wish I had cried; maybe that was part of the reason I lied? I felt anger, sadness, concern for Hermann, happiness, pride for personally knowing this community, and yet still wondered if they really accepted me. All these confusing moments of interpersonal significance crashed into each other. Did it have me thinking about God? Yes. And did I look for signs of a presence in other faces? Yes, just as they had looked into mine. That night was comprised of a string of emotionally charged moments. Each one opened a space for intense feelings, but how could they then be overlaid or even directed into more focused thoughts and feelings? How were people supposed to learn about their relationships with God through interpersonal interactions, even those so strongly felt?

For active church members of these ministries, expressing how, or perhaps, even only that they felt something played a key role in sensing God's presence. Not everyone participating in the evangelical fighting ministries attended the affiliated churches; some were not even Christian, proclaiming other faiths or no religion at all. Indeed, that non-congregants participated in the ministries was a point of pride for the church leaders at both Bola de Neve and Batista Betânia. Pastors at both churches told me this ministry helped their churches reach prospective Christians to whom they might not otherwise have had access. For the active church members, there was a strong correlation between behaviour during worship on Sundays and the worship segments of the fighting ministries. Pastors who would offer sermons on Sundays might also lead discussion at training sessions later that week. Moreover, the impetus to laugh and cry together, and the interweaving patterns that would lead to those peak moments at the fighting ministries tended to follow similar pathways, or 'affective ruts' (Wetherell 2012, 14), as those traversed during congregational services. Church members who were respected for their devotion (and good singing voices, it was often said) would guide the others in the worship activities and emotional responses, and I noticed that everyone kindly 'played along'. This is not to say they were acting. Whether they meant it or not did not seem to be the point; rather, the point was that they were there, participating. And thus, perhaps their presence counted towards their spiritual learning just as their participation would when the combat sport training started in earnest.

Laughter played an important role in the worship dynamic. Pastors would share anecdotes about how God might intervene in everyday interpersonal conflicts, such as showing a couple the way out of their lovers' quarrel or how a young working mother could cope with the sense that she had little control over her work or home life. In response those listening would always laugh out loud, nodding vigorously and looking around for knowing agreement from others. They would even reach out and touch each other on the arm, physically searching for signs of commiseration. Likewise, a common theme in everyday conversations with members of both churches' fighting ministries was the analysis of how they as believers knew God was with them even in the smallness of their everyday lives. The laughter that generally followed could be considered an admittance of their acceptance of this truth.

Even though laughter itself is rather inarticulate, in that it is often pre- and post-verbal, it offers some small thing to hold on to, even if people only feel moved to ask themselves, 'Why did I laugh?' Philosopher John Morreall explains that laughter is involuntary and can therefore be said to betray the laugher's character. It denotes triviality but is also seen as a powerful sorter of moral fibre. And yet what is funny is also merely aesthetic and thus difficult to articulate (Morreall 1987, 229f.). Still, laughter is a mode of communication, a sign whose meaning is based on convention, though there generally remains an ambivalence between laughing with and laughing at someone or something. In this case the mingling of the two and the curious notion that God was laughing with (and/or at) the community in question made for moments that were both poignant and ambiguous, simultaneously felt together and individually, with questions surely left hanging in the air.

At the other end of the spectrum but often co-present with the laughter was crying. There are some striking correlations between the study of laughing and crying in religious contexts (Morreall 1999). I am especially drawn to the suggestive power associated with the ineffable quality of both. In establishing the theoretical foundation for the collection of essays, *Holy Tears* (2005), editors Patton and Hawley expand on the specialness of the medium of crying, explaining, 'As vehicles of feelings that go too deep for language – the sorrow of exile, the sparkle of ecstasy, the weight of memory, the wound of empathy – tears resist abstracting intellectual process along with every other alchemy of sublimation...Tears are subjectively sealed – and yet they are contagious' (2005, 3f.). And yet my research bears out what Wetherell, building on the work of Blackman (2007/2008), argues: such flows

of affect are not an object to be caught but rather something like a zone or atmosphere to be caught up in (2012, 141).

During worship being brought to tears could be preceded or followed by people raising their arms in the air, standing on chairs, or, conversely, lying prostrate on the floor. Generally, members would then gather around a crying individual to sway, hug, pray, and cry with them during sermons and prayers, but especially during testimonials and singing. Afterwards, during the slow exit from the church, I would hear people say in approval of their worship experience, 'Oh, God was speaking through him tonight, he really had me crying!' This was generally followed with a question as to whether others had cried as well. This could then be discussed as evidence of whether the presence of God had extended to them or not. 'Working' on someone was how these communities described the presence of God in a person's visceral reactions to a sermon, song, or prayer. During worship at the fighting ministries people would cry when the instructor discussed the hard-fought successes and failures of a recent tournament, a fighter described his personal and family turmoil, or a member shared that he had found Jesus (again, sometimes). In these cases, too, people's tears were seen as evidence that God was 'working' on them. And through their crying and laughing God was also said to be working on the others present, and through them the larger community. But was God working on me when I was in this affective atmosphere? Sometimes I was moved to tears, and much more often to laughter. And I was moved sometimes by the collective emotional release. There was no way for me to know whether the feelings were genuine or not. But the effort to feel together and my wondering at the authenticity of those moments are matters I can explore here.

The bar for trustworthy behaviour and the search for signs of spiritual genuineness were markedly higher for actual congregants during and after church services than among participants at the fighting ministries. Under both circumstances the collective release of tension, whether via laughter or crying, seemed to offer a visceral point of contact between individuals' possible, private intimacy with God and the intimacy they shared with the others present who were actively striving to achieve the same. And in both situations evangelicals would emphasise that their relationships with God should be witnessed and experienced by others. But many congregants also constructed their socio-spiritual identities vis-à-vis a collective notion of a 'bad' evangelical, that is, one who placed the interpersonal value of his or her emoting above the focus on communicating with God. In the fieldnotes entry at the beginning of this section one can see that I could rightly be ac-

cused of this very misconduct in that moment I told the fighters I had cried because I felt that was what they had wanted to hear.

At that point in my research I was very aware of these communities' efforts at distilling spiritual honesty out of the frequent deluges of emotional fervour that took place during worship. I had heard some of them gossiping among themselves at social events, theorising how and why others were emoting in the ways they did. They would even ask, 'Was he faking it? Was she just going through the motions?' Perhaps trying to pre-emptively avoid accusations of falsely emoting, some members would detail the minutiae of their everyday concerns to be analysed for signs of God as well as their own personal missteps, always looking for situations that had not yet been overanalysed by the pastors. Perhaps they believed the more public attention they could pay to their own pedestrian sources of anxiety or grief – and the more realistic the feelings they could generate – the closer they could feel to God. In essence, they were reading and testing displays of emotional honesty in an effort to approximate a truer communication with God.

Thus far, I have focused on several aspects of emotional intimacy as they played out during moments of worship. I have brought brief attention to these components – laughing, crying, and the public analysis of private struggles, because they were the very aspects of connecting with God that were actively discouraged during the combat sport training that took place within the fighting ministries. Those moments could offer quite a different approach to learning about oneself and what it meant to work on a relationship with God.

### **Sequestering emotions on the mat**

As I mentioned earlier, many of the evangelical practices that might have led to uncontrollable emoting associated with worship were carried into the fighting ministries, but crucially they were kept separate from the practices and behaviours associated with fighting. Before and after training members would form a circle and hold hands. While in this hand-holding circle, they would sing, pray, and discuss biblical passages together, often engaging in the demonstrative emotional intimacy generally encouraged during worship in the sanctuary. Sometimes pastors would visit and offer a message. At other times church business and gossip were discussed rather matter-of-factly as a group. And there was always time – only ever before or after training – for members to give testimonials and to air grievances concerning personal health, work, and relationship issues. Just as in wor-

ship, these discussions oscillated between moving members to tears and to laughter. The advanced members often felt more free to move away from the more typical praise-talk of worship towards venting their anger and frustration at their circumstances and sometimes directly at God. This may have been due to the imminence of physical intimacy accompanying the fighting ministry practices. But it was only within those demarcated moments before and after training that participants were permitted to express themselves emotionally.

Supplanting whatever prospects there might have been for emoting in an uncontrollable style, the physical intimacy that instead structured the interpersonal encounters during training was both literal and figurative. It was literal in that the combat sport in which these fighting ministries specialised was Brazilian jiu-jitsu, a grappling and submission martial art, focused on joint locks and chokeholds, that takes place on the ground between fighters in close proximity. It was figurative in that the exchange of pain between participants was determined by corporeal interdependence. Students of martial arts are meant to learn how to sense and react to each other's motives, which in Brazilian jiu-jitsu are more often felt in the body rather than seen beforehand (see also Cohen 2006; Downey 2007b). This knowledge could be said to affect how members of these evangelical fighting ministries interacted with others, including God. A key part of learning to fight is learning to think about one's own reactions vis-à-vis others' actions. What others may do cannot be fully anticipated or understood, but their actions must still be sensed so that they can be reacted to.

Any overt show of emotion or even talk outside the discussion of physical techniques was not permitted as soon as training began in earnest. Thus, there was a clear shift from the demonstration of uncontrollable emotion, which might have signalled the presence of God, to the required demonstration of turning off emotionality entirely to show that one could control it and focus on fighting (and through it God). Like Knoblauch and Herbrink (2014, 366f.), I also found that the goals and setting of an occasion dictated the terms of the different types of spiritual and religious interpersonal communication made available. The encouragement of a freer or seemingly uncontrollable emotional style was something that seemed to travel and swell within the congregation during worship. In contrast, the general concealment of laughter and tears was verbally directed by the fighting ministry leaders and advanced students alike – but only when needed. The main situation in which members needed to be reminded was when they were doing an open roll, which could feel like nothing more than licensed

'roughhousing' and thus quite playful. Generally, there was an understanding that an air of gravitas should be maintained. It was only okay to break the silence and order of training when the fighting instructor gave the signal to do so, by calling the group together and saying pointedly it was time to play. These moments were rare and thoroughly relished by the members of these ministries. They tended to either precede or follow important markers in the church or fighting calendar, such as a group baptism or a large fighting competition.

Emotional displays were kept at bay while members were learning to fight, because the aims of the evangelical fighting ministries were not only evangelism and spiritual development, but also, of course, generating and sharing knowledge about martial techniques. Thus, the combat sports segment of the ministries was imbued with the culture and norms of the fighting world. In many ways the training segments resembled what I saw in all the dojos I visited. There were phases structuring the learning of martial technique: the warm-up and brief group discussion, the techniques demonstration, the practising of techniques, and then the 'open roll', when students grappled with each other. Just as emotions were separated from physical techniques so that students could focus on the physical tasks at hand and not on whatever they might have been feeling momentarily, bodies were discussed in objectified terms so that fighters could focus on applying techniques in a strategic and localised manner. That is, bodies were described and perceived in terms of parts so that the students could see and feel where exactly on their opponents they should place their own limbs. Learning and applying a technique was not unlike learning how to prepare a dish using a recipe. The instructor would show the movement, verbally and physically drawing attention to each of the body part(s) and steps in slow motion as they were needed to complete the task. When a technique was successfully executed, the opponent would tap out of pain or threat of injury. At competitions amateur students and professional fighters were also classified and separated according to their skill level, weight, and gender.

### **Learning from compartmentalising**

In the evangelical fighting ministries involved in my research there were clear efforts made at compartmentalising, that is, recognising and demarcating separations among various activities and behaviours. Specifically, they seemed to carve out and maintain distinctions between the emotional intimacy associated with religiosity and the physical intimacy of fighting. I

believe this work was meant to shore up the distinctions between seemingly different types of knowledge production so that participants could more easily understand and remember what and why they were doing whatever they needed to do at any given moment. I consider compartmentalisation key to what Wetherell (2012) would call the affective practices and affective-discursive meaning-making at work in these evangelical fighting ministries. I follow her understanding that even the most mundane and regularly occurring affective practices are in fact lively, situated communicative acts, organised moment-by-moment into performative patterns. And I agree it is analytically fruitful to think about how persistence, repetition and power pulse through these kinds of situated moment (Wetherell 2012, 102).

To posit the possible implications of compartmentalisation on an individual's spirituality, here my analysis turns away from the general work and play of evangelical fighting ministries to one person's thoughtful commentary on the significances of learning to worship and learning to fight. Olney played a critical role in my research, both theoretically and practically speaking. This person, with whom I had so many heated debates, also introduced me to many people who would become key contacts for housing arrangements, interviews, and access to famous gyms and controversial religious groups, both of which were generally suspicious of outsiders. By twenty-nine, Olney had held a variety of entry-level office jobs, had trained in boxing and Brazilian jiu-jitsu for several years at Bola de Neve, had recently become a pastor, and had already experienced several serious health issues. Taken together, these factors shaped his spiritual point of view. At the same time Olney prided himself on being a true carioca. He could flirt shamelessly with anyone within earshot, and generally did. He was an emotional young man, not at all afraid to laugh out loud, cry, argue, or get excited in front of others. And he felt it was his personal, lifelong mission to make everyone feel welcome and accepted. When I asked Olney about the value, or virtue, of a Christian ministry dedicated to fighting, he explained the logic in these terms:

The fighting philosophy gives balance to people, this helps humble<sup>2</sup> people, who see violence every day; it helps control aggressiveness, anger; it helps people deal with too much violence. The game is a strategy, is contact sport, is respect... It helps them see the difference between a fight in the street and the sport of fighting... There can be no anger or malice.<sup>3</sup>

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2 A common euphemism for being 'impoverished' in Brazilian colloquial talk.

3 All the translations were done by the author.

The elaborate categorisation of people into body parts, of situations into sets of circumstances and activities, and calls for the respect of others as competitors turned combat into a sport, and thus made it open for consideration as a ministry.

On the mat fighters were supposed to sense God through grappling with each other. That is, as they literally rolled around on the floor in close contact in an effort to make their opponents submit out of pain or threat of injury, this act of grappling could offer a very tactile, interpersonal externalisation of internal struggles with God. As such, the training sessions could be and sometimes were described as spiritually therapeutic, both due to 'mindless' stretching periods and the intense, difficult rolls. I asked Olney if there was anything about physical activity that could be important to evangelism. And he answered, 'No.' And, after thinking for a second, 'And yes.' He continued,

What is important for evangelism is relationships and friendship. If it's through sports and contact, okay. If it's through music, okay... When you're evangelising with sport, you feel good, light, unburdened... you are able to liberate your heart. Like if I have an intense fight, really struggling with this guy, at the end, I feel very good, happy. This affects the reception of the Word.

The relativistic norming and structuring of combat sport might have also offered ways to make sense of other areas of everyday life for some of the members. They could use it to structure how they should feel about their feelings and how they should sense God's presence through those structured moments. All this fighting competence, made modular through compartmentalisation, seemed to affect how members discussed God's ways of operating in their lives. For example, their participation in evangelical fighting ministries showed them they could productively experience God's presence on more aggressive terms than what one could expect in other ministries and church programming; moreover, that aggressive presence would be felt in the hands of each other.

When I asked Olney how a Christian fighter makes sense of the call to treat one's body as a temple, he answered that the fighter and his body are well taken care of, so in the moment of fighting he is prepared to face hardship. In this sense he is treating the body like a temple. He continued, saying, 'The Christian, too, is well-prepared, spiritually developed in the Word. When he faces hardship, goodness comes out.' I pushed the discussion further, asking: 'But what happens when you refuse to tap out because of pride?' Olney had said only moments earlier that the refusal to desist was

a positive trait of Brazilian fighters, and that they would rather have their arms broken than give in. I therefore wanted to know how he could say they were still treating their bodies like temples in such acts. Olney responded, 'Ah, yes, this is good. The arm breaks, but the honour, you understand? The honour is not broken... Pride is not a good characteristic in general, but for some cultures it sustains the people; it steadies the character of a person. If there is good in a person, it will secure it.'

If members of these ministries felt that God was on the mat with them, then they might have also experienced in their own bodies that the dynamics between God and people could range from comforting to openly antagonistic and that each type of encounter had its own time and place. I saw and heard this understanding conveyed in the fighting axioms evangelical fighters would say to each other and post on Facebook. They would make statements like 'Those who fight, do not brawl', 'You either win or you learn', and 'To live is to fight.' These were common sayings within the fighting community. But how did evangelicals make sense of them when they were placed beside common evangelical Christian sayings, like 'Turn the other cheek', 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you', and 'Love your neighbour as you would love yourself', all of which could be assumed to link reciprocity with pacifist patience and passivity? Describing the life of a devout Christian fighter, Olney said,

The lifestyle of a person who professes his faith, it is going against the system, he finds a way to live in a spiritual way, and develop a spiritual path. He cannot live only by the instincts, by the flesh, only act on his will to scream, act on his will to talk trash. As a person who is developing his spirit, someone can hit me, and I am a fighter – and as a fighter – I can respond like a fighter! But I do not respond like a fighter, I respond as a Christian. And so when I am offended, I do not offend back.

In this comment Olney momentarily positioned fighting philosophy against Christianity. But there is an overlap in the fighting and Christian ideals he espoused, though he focused on the carnal aspect here. Generally, both advise avoiding (over)reacting to a confrontation. The use of axioms from both the fighting philosophy and Christianity translated and familiarised all sorts of situations that evangelicals who also fight might have experienced on the mat on the one hand and in the sanctuary on the other. Moreover, members of these ministries seemed to recognise times and places for each type of lesson, letting themselves convert fighting ideals like perseverance,

learning by doing, and sometimes even self-preservation into Christian virtues in their own right, depending on the occasion.

What happened on the mat became acceptable in a way it could not elsewhere. In the fighting realm referees and instructors often remind participants to fight hard and clean. In interviews many evangelical fighters explained they felt compelled to fight 'harder and cleaner', due to their awareness of God's presence in them and in their opponents. Olney suggested this concern with the proper treatment of others was a crucial point of contact between martial arts philosophy and Christianity. He explained:

The Samurai Word, like the word of God, is to serve others, to learn to serve others. The other is more important than you, you have to bring honour to the other. The fight [and] its honours carry the seed of religion, respect. I respect those more advanced and those behind me. It's all respect in the dojo, it's all a demonstration of respect. You want to give your best in a fight, like you would want to give a guest the meal and the best coffee in your own home... There is a difference between indoctrinating someone to be upright, and what happens with fighting, the sport, there exist other ways to develop the spirit, but it's different [with fighting]; it comes from the inside out with fighting. It's like just telling someone, 'Don't put trash on the ground' and showing someone put trash in the trash can and not on the ground. There is a difference between indoctrinating respect and discipline, and developing the spirit within someone.

It is a corporeal and mental struggle to balance protecting oneself with looking out for the wellbeing of one's opponent, and so grappling offers a rich site of contemplation concerning how members of these communities might have experienced the compartmentalisation of God's presence. Evangelical fighters would say God was always simultaneously with both opponents. Intriguingly, He was with them in different ways, playing a different role. He was part of one person's loss and part of the other person's victory. Olney gave this anecdote:

Recently I heard there was a UFC fight and a fighter who was challenging Jon Jones for his belt, he got hurt. So they asked Vitor Belfort if he would [even though the fight would take place very soon after]. He said, 'I am ready to fight! I am always prepared. Because with God, I am always going to win.' This is the effect of God on a fighter... He does not yellow.

He does not despair. My fears, they are reflected in him... and when I am paralysed with fear, and I see this guy (Vitor Belfort) facing one of the best fighters, and he says, 'I am prepared, because my faith tells me I am ready for anything, ready to win, ready to lose,' it strengthens me. It influences the fight, the preparation. And you know, Jon Jones is a Christian, too? And he dominates the ring!

After a fight it was common for fighters to say God had been with them both during times of winning and losing, but intriguingly, they did not hold God accountable for the results of the fight. Rather, as Olney explained it, they felt his presence in winning and losing. They would choose to focus on his presence as a catalyst for them to learn and grow from the experience, however painful or humiliating it may have been at the time. In fighting losing is as common as winning, and the work of evangelical fighting ministries was often to connect that existential realisation with what some members would consider a comforting notion: that God was present for all of it.

### **Conclusion**

I have shown how in one moment participants were encouraged to release their emotions to experience God more fully; in the other, participants were taught to separate and suppress certain emotions so that they could learn quite a different aspect of God through their encounters with each other. These moments offered striking counterweights to each other, making distinct, and perhaps complementary, types of engagement in socio-spiritual development possible.

These evangelical fighting ministries found experiencing the building and releasing of tension together to be a productive mode of connecting with God. Through engaging in publicly reciprocating acts of emotion, namely laughing and crying, members of these communities gained access to a God that was first and foremost concerned with honest emotional availability. When they practised martial arts, they learned about their relationships with God by grappling with each other in hard-fought stoic silence, allowing only for the grunts of physical exertion and pain. During the time dedicated to worship 'sacred' traditional practices were enhanced by the inclusion of the 'profane' in the form of banal interpersonal quandaries and overt emotionality. More laughing and crying and discussion of everyday problems increased the feelings being shared among believers and God. Then, when training began, emotion and everyday life were not supposed

to distract the ministries' members from what tougher lessons they were supposed to learn on the mat.

But just as laughing and crying fed into what they may have learned during worship about how to communicate with God via other human beings, compartmentalisation, which kept the mood of martial training separate from that of worship time, might also have shaped how the ministries' members perceived the presence of God in their literal and figurative struggles with other people and themselves. Through the development and release of emotional and physical pressure, these communities learned to recognise the sharable yet also compartmentalisable omnipresence of God in their interactions with each other. In this way the interplay of the development of socio-spiritual and combat sport competencies connected interpersonal intimacy with proximity to God.

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