Soul Food: The Condemnation of Fatness and Apotheosis of Thin Bodies in Christian Diet Books

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April 2013
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Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the tremendous help and support from Professor Travis Zadeh, my advisor during this endeavor. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the religion department as a whole. I am so grateful for the valuable advice, guidance, and encouragement from Barbara Hall in the Writing Center, Librarian James Gulick, and the Office of Academic Resources in the culmination of my studies at Haverford College.

I am so grateful to my Maman, Papa, and brother Mathieu for their love, encouragement, and humor throughout this challenging process.

Finally, I thank my dear and delightful friends who have generously supported me in every step along the way.
Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the social and religious pressures to diet on obese and overweight individuals. I also contest the ubiquitous notion found in Christian diet books that weight loss is salvific. These books follow a formulaic concept that losing weight means gaining spirituality, strengthening the correlation between a small body mass and a spiritual zenith. Further, they condemn behaviors that are associated with being overweight and obese, as the sin of gluttony also becomes a sin against societal norms. Additionally, remaining fat is perceived as a choice going against God’s plan. I argue that the promoted salvific experience of losing weight becomes paradoxically oppressive and submissive, as a duality of virtue and sin is aligned with thinness and fatness, respectively. This paradox becomes especially harsh for overweight females who lose weight through loss of agency and control over food consumption. I then introduce personal narratives of women recovering from eating disorders. Through a close reading, I navigate the same arguments about oppression and submission with regard to food consumption through the experiences of underweight women recovering from serious anxieties with food and bodies.

Next, I build upon how these reconstructions of dieting habits intersect with culturally constructed norms about the female body and beauty ideals. I implement a counterexample in which women are force-fed and fatness is ideal. Through my comparison of corpulence as both the preeminent and defective female body shape, I demonstrate that the control of food consumption is essentially the control of how female bodies contribute to their surrounding society.

Keywords: Fat, thin, obesity, diet, salvation, deliverance, submission, obedience.
Introduction

“The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

Genesis, 3:13

So Eve utters, when confronted by God in the Garden of Eden. She is punished for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge and tempting Adam to do so as well. So begin the biblical associations among food, eating, temptation, and the first woman. Human beings require food in order to survive, and the sin of gluttony, like lust, teeters at the edge of when necessity converts to pleasure. Francine Prose, author of *Gluttony*, suggests:

“The ways in which [gluttony] has been viewed have evolved in accordance with the changing obsessions of society and culture. From the early Middle Ages until the early Renaissance…the principal danger of gluttony was thought to reside in its nature as a form of idolatry…of worshiping the belly as God: a cult with rituals and demands that would inevitably divert and distract the faithful from true, authentic religion” (3).

Much of this speaks to distrust about human bodies and behaviors. The worship and indulgence of food are thought to be compelling and tempting alternatives for devotion to God. R. Marie Griffith, whose research focuses on gender, sexuality, and spirituality, traces the trajectory from the early ascetic to the contemporary dieter in her book *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (2004). Griffith states that “restrained eating as a divine command” has been maintained throughout a vast period. Beginning with early sixteenth and seventeenth century evangelical Protestantism, she notes the emphasis on “somatic indicators of true faith,” which, “[promote] corporeal acts of devotion such as fasting while affirming that signs of authentic spiritual renewal were essentially grounded in the body” (15,
Furthermore, she observes that as centuries have passed, there is still a significant malaise about the human body, which she categorizes as “disgust toward the body, a sign of a severe Protestant asceticism” that has influenced much of how food, eating, and body mass are perceived in the United States today (15).

There is a fear and anxiety about food, which reflects a fear and anxiety about our own bodies and the extent of the damage we can inflict on ourselves. Food is tempting, and gourmandize is infectious. The sights, the scents, the tastes, and the textures in eating food are reminders of the delicacies we might enjoy in other areas of human life. Creating foods and enjoying them afterward is a powerful, and quotidian exercise we can partake, through which we can decide what enters our bodies. When it comes to food, power, control, and agency are all on our plates. How much is too much to handle?

I began this course of work with the hope of locating and examining a particular trend of religious inclusivity within the medical field. My initial project explored the use of the Bible, by both medical doctors and religious patients, as a resource for healthy eating. As my research progressed, I came across an entire genre of contemporary religious guides for dieting. I was unfamiliar with this field and was surprised to discover the prodigious proliferation and readership of these texts within Christian circles. Upon searching for secondary source material specific to Christian diet books and finding only a few, it became overwhelmingly clear to me that these texts deserved to be studied in depth and in their own right.

Later in my research process and after being constantly bombarded with solutions to eating far too much, I began to think of what it means to eat far too little. I was fascinated to find a subgenre of self-help books and memoirs about eating disorder recoveries written by Christian women for other Christian women. As I read these two kinds of texts alongside each other, I
realized that their content, though dealing with dissimilar eating behaviors, harmonized in a way that helped clarify my argument and intellectual endeavor, as well as enriched my experience of composing this thesis. I began to notice trends in how people—especially women—believed that what and how they ate reflected who they were as religious individuals. To this end, I became increasingly aware of how female bodies are evaluated in terms of worth and virtue based on food choices.

The scholarly study of Christian diet books has been isolated to both Lisa Isherwood’s *The Fat Jesus* (2008) and R. Marie Griffith’s *Born Again Bodies*. Both authors have engaged with Christian diet books published in the 1950s to late 2000s, but predominantly with respect to how these texts, as tangential resources in their research, are born out of and contribute to an American religious genealogy; I use various aspects of their works in order to frame my exploration and locate it within the larger scholarly field. However, my critique centers on a close reading of these texts, as they are the foci of my argument.

This thesis develops a critique of diet books that is restricted to those books marketed as Christian or published by Christian-affiliated publishing houses. Would this critique be different if this thesis targeted diet books in general? Certainly. However, I have chosen to focus on works with an explicit religious orientation. My attention to religious commentaries on food and dieting warrants a different kind of analysis than it would for books with no explicit religious orientation. These books amplify the overlap between Christianity and the body in a way that secular diet books do not (at least not intentionally), contributing to a contemporary religious asceticism.

The material I investigate in this thesis does not come out of any particular denomination, aside from a very broad category of Protestantism (though one author identifies as Catholic). In
the course of my analysis I make no direct claims about the specific denominational origins of these food-related self-help guides, even though religious dieting books draw heavily from a Protestant reading of the Bible. However, the authors are purposely vague in their use of scripture in order to reach a larger audience and establish a voice of authority. Religion and scripture are used piecemeal as extremely broad categorical tools to inspire and help change a target audience familiar with the evangelical traditions of biblical hermeneutics. In other words, these texts present their audience with scripture that is taken out of context and neatly packaged for use, turning scripture into a mantra for dieting. While this can certainly be called a method of interpreting the Bible, the main focus of this thesis is not to critique how these texts interpret scripture and what such approaches mean for particular branches of Christianity. Rather, this thesis focuses on what these interpretations of scripture, religion, and the human body reveal about larger bodies and eating, regardless of denomination.

The influence of Protestant readings of the Bible on the drive to improve the self, combined with increasing medical awareness of nutrition and the obesity ‘epidemic’ in the United States, help construct the formulaic notion found throughout this material that losing weight means gaining spirituality. Subsequently, these works condemn behaviors that are associated with being overweight and obese, as the sin of gluttony correspondingly becomes a sin against societal norms. In particular, Christian diet books reveal a hybridization of spirituality and dieting. From this amalgamated relationship, the idea that good nutrition, thinness, and self-restraint are salvific is manifest. However, when played out in practice, as fatness and overeating are aligned with sin and thinness aligns with spiritual virtue, the salvific experience of losing weight becomes paradoxically oppressive. Additionally, losing weight is construed as the only suitable option for individuals to escape the condemned larger body type and the behaviors that
are associated with it. This paradox is especially potent in female experiences of losing weight, as it reveals claims about the female body in relationship to God, vis-à-vis fatness and food. In addition to these diet books, the narrative of spiritual and physical recovery from eating disorders reveals a contrasting case designed to illustrate similar arguments about female bodies, food, and spirituality.

I have divided this examination into four chapters. As I progress through the chapters, the emphasis on female bodies becomes more essential and profound. In chapter one, I examine social and religious demands that privilege thinness. This chapter also explores the use of religious language construed in dieting experiences. Chapter two serves as a detailed analysis of Christian diet books that are the crux of this thesis. In the course of this chapter, I take into consideration textual content, diagrams, testimonials, and reviews. Chapter three, in turn, offers a look into personal narratives, also promoted as Christian literature, of women recovering from eating disorders, which supplement my examination of weight loss guides. The texts included in chapters two and three are examined by reading the material against the grain of their original intention and creation; in doing so, we can gain further insight into the discursive assumptions and motivations governing both the genre in question and the larger social and religious contexts informing this material. To this end, most (if not all) of these primary sources are considered in a way that their respective authors did not intend. Chapter four begins with a counter example of a study in Niger, in a community where obese female bodies are perceived as the culturally and spiritually ideal form. The chapter borrows considerations from the previous three chapters in order to postulate how larger female bodies are perceived in the religious discourse that permeates Christian diet books and a broader cultural arena. In conclusion, I explore how these Christian texts contribute to a larger set of discursive practices that are oppressive toward
women’s bodies, through the disregard and condemnation of certain female body types and eating behaviors.

As national bestsellers, some of these books are widely read by Christians both in the United States and abroad. In this thesis, my objective is not to determine the success or failure of these guides, nor to prove that these authors have ulterior motives concealed under a concern about health. My aim is to approach these sources from a scholarly perspective and analyze their contents in light of my argument. That being said, these are extremely personal narratives, in particular those included in chapter three, which deal with traumatic and painful experiences; I hope to treat these texts with the respect and sensitivity they deserve, despite the critical and scholarly reading of the discourse this thesis requires.
I. Slim Obligations: Dieting as a Social and Religious Duty

In 1957, Presbyterian minister Charlie Shedd proclaimed in his book, *Pray Your Weight Away*, that “fat is the embodiment of disobedience to God since it prohibits the Holy Spirit from penetrating one’s heart – it can not get through the layers of fat” (qtd. in Isherwood 71). Similar discourse, relaying the inimitable perils of the overweight body, is unmistakably evident throughout the pages of religiously oriented diet books in contemporary American society. Titles such as *Heal Yourself for Christ’s Sake, More of Jesus; Less of Me*, and *Help Lord, the Devil Wants Me Fat* have graced the bookshelves of self-help sections, ranked as national bestsellers, and fallen into the arms of hundreds of thousands of people as they begin their journeys counting calories, measuring waists, and stepping onto scales (72). The notion that the physical human body serves as a direct measure of one’s spirituality and closeness with God is at the core of such literature. Moreover, such a framework positions the human body as a hazard to the soul in the search for closeness with God. The associations between the cultural understandings of food and temptation, as adumbrated in the introduction, allow the control of the hazardous physical body to expand in significance and worth, expressly through dieting. Conversely, overeating becomes dramatically vilified. The evolution of food, dieting, and religion come together in what could be called a perfect cultural storm. As, Francine Prose, author of *Gluttony* (2003), articulates:

“Our fixation on health…quasi-obscene fascination with illness and death, and our fond…hope that diet and exercise will enable us to live forever have demonized eating in general and overeating in particular. Health consciousness and a culture fixated on death have transformed gluttony from a sin that leads to other sins into an illness that leads to other illnesses.” (4)
According to Prose, it is ironic that Americans have an unhealthy obsession with health. This fixation enables a fat-phobic rhetoric to become normalized and revered. Furthermore, normative discourses within the field of medicine and public health are also aimed at ‘eradicating’ obesity and encouraging weight loss, which, in turn support and reinforce a particular preoccupation with health. The United States Library of Medicine defines ‘obesity’ as, “Having too much body fat.” Obesity is distinctive from ‘being overweight,’ which is considered a condition of “weighing too much.” However, both of these categories—obesity and overweight—quantify a person’s weight as “higher than what is thought to be healthy for his or her height” (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/). Though these definitions are technical and supplemented with extensive methodical examples of risk factors and causes, in the quotidian, the terms themselves are invested with cultural values of normativity, morality, prosperity, blame, and agency. These themes materialize in religious discourse about obese or overweight bodies as a microcosm of how structures of value are established in a broader cultural context.

In the essay “Empty Bellies/Empty Calories: Representing Hunger and Obesity,” (2012), author Jean Retzinger, an assistant director and lecturer in media studies at the University of California, Berkeley, utilizes primarily photographic evidence and American media representations of categorically underweight and obese bodies in her quest to understand how people might extrapolate behavioral and moral attributes from observing such bodies. Not only does Retzinger admonish the various representations (or misrepresentations) of larger bodies in the media, but she also takes issue with the rhetoric of scientific and medical fields in describing such bodies and conditions as ‘diseased.’
The discourse of disease and its repercussions, outlined in Michel Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic*, “increases rather than reduces the likelihood of turning fatness ‘into a deeply stigmatized physical characteristic’” (qtd. in Retzinger 33). Furthermore, “Presenting obesity as a serious health ‘threat’ of epidemic proportions is…an exercise of power, disciplining and surveillance, encouraging those who fall outside the ‘norm’ to experience shame and remorse.” Thus, the ‘disease’ of obesity becomes threatening and connotes otherness. The subsequent rejection of those obese or overweight bodies as deviant encourages observers, who are likely, but not necessarily, physically dissimilar to direct blame toward those individuals. Retzinger addresses this idea of culpability in her observations of media “[presenting obesity] as a disease brought on almost solely by personal failings: lack of self-control or willpower,” as such, “the language of personal responsibility turns the individuals who suffer from obesity into ‘culpable victims,’ or perhaps, more accurately, culpable collaborators” (33). Not only does blame emerge in the discourse, but agency, or rather the apparent refusal to be an active agent in the pursuit of the acceptable body, is also appropriated to overweight or obese individuals.

As risk factors and causes of obesity are often tied to behavior and self-control, it becomes significantly easier to target the obese person as the source of the problem and the instrument of deviant comportment. Thus, the rationale transmutes: if obesity becomes a self-inflicted disease, the cure must be found within the person. The ubiquitous phrase ‘lifestyle changes,’ whether found in a medical journal or in a *New York Times* bestselling diet book, follows such a rationale. The problem of overeating takes a leap from a medical concern to a lifestyle change, which imitates the conversion of gluttony as a sin against God to a sin against society, its ideals of beauty and standards, prompting, “the wages of sin [to change] and now [involving] a version of hell on earth: the pity, contempt, and distaste of one’s fellow mortals”
(Prose, 5). Encouraging lifestyle changes becomes a front for the public shaming and judgment of fat bodies.

In an analysis of the public perceptions of starving children in economically desolate areas and overweight and obese people in both prosperous and poor American urban neighborhoods, Retzinger concludes that “Solutions to hunger encourage structural changes that will lead to ‘personal empowerment,’” as, “solutions to obesity demand ‘personal responsibility’ up front from those deemed obese”(33). Starving children are perceived as helpless and incapable of changing their circumstances. Observers feel empowered when they can save a malnourished human body. On the other hand, fat people must be judged for their corpulence and left alone to save themselves—they are personally responsible for their fates. Such solutions allow obesity to become part of an individual in a way that transcends any corporal boundaries. Additionally, the language of empowerment and responsibility becomes a common thread in the religious diet literature examined in chapter two. Corpulence becomes symbolic of something almost sinister, which requires significant effort to redeem, rehabilitate, and reshape. Retzinger claims that American culture, as a whole, encourages losing weight as an active process to combat this ‘disease;’ the cure is one that seemingly allows a person to become more self-aware and diligent, while simultaneously testing a person’s commitment to a virtuous cause. The resulting paradigm of virtue and deviancy begins the transition into the religiously saturated discourse found in Christian diet literature, reaffirming the relationship between a small body mass and a spiritual zenith.

As an evaluator of this relationship, feminist theologian and author of The God of Thinness: Gluttony and Other Weighty Matters (1992), Mary Louise Bringle undertakes a critical
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analysis of dieting as a cultural phenomenon and social duty in the United States. Bringle suggests, “Dieting has assumed the fervor and proportions of a leading new ‘religion’, with its own bible, its own ritual observances, and its own high priestesses and priests” (26). Not only have societal pressures on the larger body increased, but also dieting as a phenomenon has transformed into its own pseudo religion. Dieting has become formulaic with the intent to indoctrinate; it maintains wrongs, rights, and proper devotees. Dieting, as a phenomenon, borrows terminology typically associated with religious discourse. For example, on the April 2013 cover of Vogue Magazine, a blurb included on the bottom corner of the page reads: “Finding Balance: A gym virgin works out, a fitness fanatic slows down, a diet addict breaks free” (Vogue, April 2013). The link between exercise and first time experiences speak to the motivation to participate in healthy habits. As an exercise ‘virgin,’ you have not yet engaged your whole body in the pursuit of health. Fanaticism and ‘breaking free’ have elements of control and deliverance construed in their meanings that are ubiquitous in the Christian diet books featured later.

Bringle also alludes to a potent fanaticism, which only draws more people into this dieting phenomenon and pressures those who do not participate to join. As this phenomenon has grown and metastasized to numerous areas of human interactions, the human body has transformed into a disproportionate locus of sacredness. In other words, elevating dieting onto a pedestal automatically shifts the human body into a space where it is glorified, and vice versa. Bringle warns that, “[American dieters] have lost the sense that the body is neither sacred nor execrable” (34). She attributes this lack of equilibrium to attitudes toward food and eating, as fear and remorse are principal players in the game of eating extremes. Citing Geneen Roth’s dieting and self-help guide, *Women, Food, and God*, in her essay “On Establishing a More
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Authentic Relationship with Food,” (2012), author Kara Shultz gives her readers an example of how these extremes easily become conventional: “Everything we believe about love, fear, transformation, and God is revealed in how, when and what we eat. When we inhale Reese’s peanut butter cups when we are not hungry, we are acting out a entire world of hope and hopelessness, of faith and doubt, of love and fear” (qtd. in Shultz, 224). While this assertion might seem hyperbolic, it does help demonstrate the extent to which food is filled with far more than mere calories. It follows that dieting is about so much more than food as well. Bringing into play the popular lament “Everything I like is either illegal, immoral, or fattening,” Bringle emphasizes that the three are habitually confused for synonyms when it comes to food and eating (54). To exacerbate an already meager linguistic circumstance, biblical language becomes colloquial when we call certain foods “tempting” or “sinful.” Thus, when an avid dieter surmounts his or her urges, resists temptation, and abstains from eating every donut in the box, he or she is elevated to a status that is revered, perhaps only because we have raised the stakes on what it means to eat. As Bringle insists, “the modern-day dieter replaces the early Christian ascetic as one who is revered for great will power in resisting temptation” (54).

Lisa Isherwood’s The Fat Jesus presents an analysis of body image and size within the purview of Christian heritage; the text offers insight into how fatness is generally perceived. Isherwood, a liberation theologian, remarks, “We are living at a time when fat phobia is at its height and to question this is seen as a sin, because the rhetoric is about making people healthy and caring for their well-being” (2). Isherwood introduces the dichotomy between positive and negative as it relates to rhetoric of healthy living. Because obesity and fat seem to be the indelible markers of bad eating habits, combined with the variety of illnesses that result from being overweight or obese, avoiding such illnesses becomes contingent on changing those eating
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habits. However, methods of changing one’s eating habits or lifestyle vary and can have
dangerous and undeniably unhealthy ramifications. Hence, dieting becomes about rectifying an
unhealthy condition, but can easily become destructive. Despite this, the rhetoric of change or
self-improvement used in diet books aligns itself directly with ‘health.’ The authors have an
understanding that ‘healthy’ is a definitive condition, thus it becomes almost impossible for
readers to deem the term ‘healthy’ as anything but a positive state of being. Thus, much of what
constitutes ‘unhealthy’ within this paradigm automatically becomes negative. However, the
terms themselves are subjective. The rhetoric of diet books such as What Would Jesus Eat?
(2002) and The Weigh Down Diet (1997) compels readers to idealize such ‘healthy’ changes.
Isherwood sets out to problematize such impulses by taking issue with the fundamental claims
that shape Christian-oriented diet literature.

For example, throughout this literature, authors usually portray Jesus as a healthy eater,
thus positing that human beings have a responsibility to eat healthily as well. Isherwood does not
engage with the question of whether or not Jesus was a paragon of healthy eating; instead, she
demands that we take a closer look at why Jesus is portrayed as such, and that we reflect why, in
contrast, he would not be portrayed as an overweight man with sugar cravings. Isherwood
explains that there is “The rainbow of Christs… we have Asian Christs, Latin American
Christs…queer Christs…disabled Christs.” She continues, “There is one notable absentee, the fat
Jesus, or the corpulent Christ” (1). Why shouldn’t Jesus be fat? Despite the diverse mosaic of
physical representations of Jesus sampled above, a hefty Jesus does not fit on the spectrum.
Fatness, as articulated above, is characterized as unhealthy, thus negative. In a realm in which
good and salvation and evil and sin exist, fatness becomes the embodiment the latter two.
This classification is paralleled in conventional American discourse on bodies in which ‘health-conscious’ people who exercise regularly and eat healthy foods are praised. However, there is much to suggest that such praise does not come from an appreciation of healthy habits, but rather a fascination with restraint and the fear of appearing uninhibited by the surrounding society’s measures. Thinness is an appealing mechanism for social acceptance, while fatness brings automatic rejection. Being called ‘fat’ is virtually never a compliment; it is sometimes substituted by words with positive connotations such as curvaceous or voluptuous. (Positive connotations of fat will be paramount in the discussion on female fatness and sexuality in chapter four). Moreover, ‘fat’ relentlessly needs a solution and to challenge one’s own corpulence is respectable and responsible. To do so is to make a positive choice, an exercise of willpower, and a demonstration of commitment to the accepted aesthetic, which all deserve respect and recognition.

The refusal to diet, interpreted as a lack of self-control or apathy towards a healthy lifestyle, is a choice that runs against what is valued and desirable. This interpretation creates a space in which ‘fat phobia’ is not only rampant and accepted, but also that, according to Isherwood, promulgates the “prejudice about fat people that does not speak of concern and respect”(2). Much like in Retzinger’s thesis, Isherwood attributes this prejudice to the generally accepted rationale for why people become obese. Fatness is presented as a decision, in the face of the more pure and conscientious option to be ‘healthy.’ The pursuit of a new, thinner body is indicative of wanting a different life—a better life, as opposed to a life filled with temptation and lacking self-control. The lack of concern and respect for bodies that supposedly divert by choice from the accepted norm (though ideas of normativity with regard to body size are seriously contested and obviously not universal) permeates the diet literature examined in the next chapter.
II. Gastronomical Ideology: An Exploration of Christian Diet Literature

The themes relayed in chapter one play important roles in the Christian literature explored below. Chapter two focuses on diet books expressly marketed as Christian diet books, with no explicit denominational connection. One text, authored by Dr. Don Colbert, stands apart as a nutritionally focused book. In other words, it resembles a nutritional encyclopedia of a glorified Mediterranean diet; it is not an interactive guide for a reader to reflect on his or her body size. The text is included in the analyses below due to its contribution to this thesis as an example of infusing nutritional information with a religious narrative. I have included two texts in this chapter, though the structures, content, and aims of the multitude included in my research are incredibly similar to each other. Altogether, these texts emphasize the need for a closer relationship with God and demonstrate a marriage of medical/scientific advice and spiritual guidance, piecemeal use of scripture, and the notion that the physical body is a paramount receptacle and measure of spirituality. These themes illuminate the salvific aims that are fundamental in the configuration of Christian diet books, as well as contribute to our understanding of the human body in relationship to God. The chapter ends with testimonials from women and men, predominantly the former, who have followed these dieting programs and guides. From these testimonies, we can begin to uncover the morphed progression from salvation rhetoric to the condemnation and oppression of larger bodies and pressure to become thin, in particular larger female bodies.

The first text explored in this chapter, What Would Jesus Eat? serves as an example of the nutritional emphasis echoed in Mary Louise Bringle’s analysis of extremes imparted in the previous chapter. In a brief advertisement of Dr. Colbert’s books, featured on
Christianbook.com, the publisher states, “‘your waistline is your lifeline,’ according to Dr. Colbert. It’s no secret that excess weight—especially in the midsection—is ‘the root of all evil’ when it comes to the risk of developing many life-threatening diseases” (http://christianbook.com). Before even purchasing the book, potential readers’ perceptions are already shaped to deem excess body mass as something ‘evil’ that only leads to more evils. As such, Dr. Colbert’s guide becomes a resource to impede this unfortunate and heavy destiny. In the actual text, Colbert gives his readers explicit advice on diet and lifestyle choices when he asks in his introduction, “What would Jesus Do?” He then challenges his readers to eat as Jesus did, insisting, “Why shouldn’t we? We seek to follow Jesus in every other area of our lives. Why not in our eating habits?” (ix). Colbert shifts food and eating into a new realm for contemporary readers—one that aligns with the Biblical-retelling narrative that appeals to his audience. His assertion that following Jesus wholly includes imitating his dietary habits is certainly provocative and inspires the self-reflection that is ubiquitous in dieting culture.

Colbert not only instigates reflection in his readers, but he also explicitly reestablishes food as a symbol of sacredness: “At the Last Supper, He instituted a ritual that involved food as the most sacred memorial of His death” (x). This statement, found in the early pages of Colbert’s diet guide, catapults food, as a basic mean of survival, to a consecrated status. However, Colbert does so without giving any biblical context. He borrows from scripture to lead his audience on a spiritually-infused nutritional path, which he believes will motivate change. It does not matter that he packages and interprets scripture, as long as his audience feels compelled to change. If food serves as a sacred memory of Jesus’s death, and by default his sacrifice, then consuming the processed, refined, and fatty foods many Americans eat might be a crucial violation of that sacredness. Moreover, the intention to consume such foods comes at a hefty price, at least for
Colbert. He does not relay any dire spiritual consequences of keeping an unhealthy diet, aside from issues of weight and health, but he does offer an appealing alternative for those who choose to eat like Jesus.

The transition from the hors d’oeuvre to the entrée of his guide is a bold interpretation of how changing one’s eating habits can change one’s spiritual destiny:

If you truly want to follow Jesus in every area of your life, you cannot ignore your eating habits. It is an area in which you can follow Him daily and reap great rewards for doing so…[it] requires a commitment to change, a commitment to be all that God created you to be, and a commitment to yield your desires to God’s instruction. God in turn, will honor your heartfelt commitment by giving you more energy, better health, and a greater sense of well-being. Are you willing to make a commitment to follow Jesus’ example and eat the way He ate? (xv).

Many themes are at play in this assessment. Colbert inserts the word ‘truly,’ as though questioning the genuineness of his readers, presumably followers of Jesus. This comes with the assumption that perhaps his readers are not as devoted to Jesus as they may think or would like to be. ‘Ignoring’ one’s own eating habits is irresponsible, as well as a weak demonstration of faith. In subsequent passages of his guide, and the next book explored in this chapter, this irresponsibility is portrayed not only as a personal failing, but also as a moral one.

In contrast to Colbert’s earlier claims about the elevated status of food, his next remarks in the above excerpt convey the practice of having good eating habits as remarkably attainable in our daily lives. However, the obtained elevated status of food is not completely lost, as he emphasizes the recompense for nutritional self-awareness–God honors such commitment. Interestingly, he does not describe this recompense as a gateway into heaven, or other more obvious rewards for commitment to God. Instead, the body becomes central to Colbert’s claim. The honor that God bestows on his faithful followers finds its place within the body, as they accept their responsibility to properly nourish the body that has been created for them. Thus,
Colbert outlines a cyclical journey, which begins and ends with the human body. In doing so, he reappropriates religious discourse to suit his objective: eating healthy foods (as he defines them).

Salvation becomes key in this journey to better eating habits. As mentioned above, salvation here is not used to describe the afterlife. It is a salvation in this earthly life; if you eat better, you will be saved and liberated from fatty foods and your fat body. The commitment to ‘yield your desires to God’s instruction’ is a method through which responsibility and agency are tangled. Colbert, much like the authors featured in this chapter and the next, begins to blend the lines between where responsibility and credit for losing weight lie. As a dieter, the individual is changing him or her self; however, it is God who rewards you and who is represented in your newfound thin body. Though Colbert makes definitive claims about Jesus’s diet, his decision to focus mainly on nutrition, as opposed to dieting strategies found elsewhere in this genre of literature, lends a less critical eye on bodies (on the surface at least), and instead imparts criticism on food, food choices, and the food industry. His method of doing so is to compare contemporary eating habits to what he describes as Jesus’s dieting habits; from this, Colbert extrapolates how contemporary relationships to food differ from and must be remodeled to a exemplary relationship with God and Jesus. Through Colbert’s rhetorical strategy, the body, especially the larger body, looms in the background as an eventual test of how well one incorporates ‘good’ nutrition into one’s lifestyle.

As a medical doctor, Colbert is in a unique position to give nutritional advice. Though his readers may not have any medical knowledge beyond what might be commonly known, Colbert can use a medical lens to establish authority. His prerogative is religious; this much is clear from the title of his work and his intended readership, but he medicalizes his assertions in order to
reach a broader audience and cast universality on otherwise singularly religious counsel. Colbert manages to adjoin two narratives of successful food and eating strategies that are drastically different from each other. The resulting resonance grants legitimacy to his argument.

Colbert suggests that imitating Jesus’s dietary habits surpasses some medical treatments. While discussing the amount of fish in Jesus’s diet, Colbert articulates the benefits of fish oil (41-43). He asserts that Jesus’s daily intake of fish oil was the optimum amount. Thus, he recommends a dosage range for an appropriate daily quantity of fish oil, by “[taking] fish oil capsules and [eating] fatty fish a few times a week” (43). However, prior to delivering this vague prescription, he gives his readers insight into the physical ailments that can arise if a person does not eat a sufficient amount of fish oil in his or her diet. Colbert provides a brief overview of the various medical treatments to relieve those ailments, but asserts that even he, an educated doctor, would “choose the fish oil any day” in order to prevent such ailments in the first place. Colbert attributes a better outcome to Jesus’s “natural solution” than to modern medicine (42).

Colbert uses the term ‘natural’ several times throughout his diet guide. One of the most poignant examples is found in his attempt to align the term ‘natural’ with temptation. Retelling Matthew 4, in which Jesus fasts, is tempted by Satan, and subsequently refuses the proposal of food in order to satisfy such a temptation, Colbert acknowledges, “[Jesus] was extremely hungry…Satan’s temptation was aimed at the most immediate physical need of Jesus…Would He choose to live according to His natural impulses and needs, or would He live according to spiritual principles?” (20). Colbert implements the notion of choice in this scenario, but more specifically, the choice to live according to spiritual principles rather than ‘natural’ behaviors. His discourse is wrought with the notion of empowerment over the physical body and being set
free from its temptations and possible risks to the soul the body brings. These ideas are
paramount in the second diet book included in this chapter.

Founded in 1986 by dietician Gwen Shamblin, the Weigh Down Workshop conducts
instructional meetings in all fifty states and overseas. The weight reduction program promises to
guide its followers away from dieting and toward fulfillment with God through seminars and
video instruction. As Shamblin welcomes her reader to the paperback version of her Weigh
Down Workshop, The Weigh Down Diet, a national bestseller, she assures the reader that he or
she is “about to embark on a unique program,” in which the word ‘diet’ means “the food and
drink regularly consumed” as opposed to “[eating] according to prescribed rule.” According to
the author, what makes her program unique is how she envisions the role of food. She explicitly
removes the Weigh Down Diet from the category of ‘diets’ (though the word remains overt in the
title) as an attempt to show her readers and followers a new and successful way to lose weight,
dissimilar to the multitude of available, yet faulty diets they may have already tried previously.
She does this by precisely stating so in her introduction and by using the alternative definition of
diet mentioned above. In the same vein as similar Christian diet books, this ‘diet’ is presented as
the alternative plan that will finally work for its frustrated reading audience.

Shamblin emphasizes the “freedom” found in the diet she describes as food regularly
consumed (as opposed to prescribed rules) as one of the key points of her program (x). Her
portrayal of this program demonstrates to an observer or participant that the program is not about
food habits and dieting, but rather that it seeks to change a participant’s relationship with God.
As Shamblin iterates, her program “emphasizes God’s power—not ‘will-power’” (xi). This claim
underlines a shift in perspective for Shamblin’s readers. Put simply: this is not about you, it is
about God, and until you understand this, you cannot lose the weight. Nonetheless, throughout this entire process, Shamblin unremittingly personalizes God’s love for his creations, as she reassures her readers several times in every chapter that God loves them. She does this so frequently that it reads like an encouraging mantra. Shamblin wants her readers to believe that God is essentially paying singular attention to each individual on this weight loss journey.

Although she asks participants to reevaluate their weight and eating habits, she articulates that though this reevaluation may seem as though it comes from the individual, it is actually a God-given occurrence. The process of losing weight is sequential, with mounting significance; first, an individual must have the will to change and second, and more meaningfully, realize that this will comes from God. Accordingly, the slimming of your physical body is God’s will and as will be demonstrated in the testimonials referenced later, this weight loss is subordinate to the spiritual change an individual will undergo.

Her readers may wonder why they have failed to experience this change in their lives before. They may ask themselves why God has not intervened with their eating habits or large frames. Shamblin offers an explanation for why previous diets have not worked for her readers: these other programs were based on man-made rules, as an alternative to God’s rules (4). Apparently, readers can ignore that the rules in *The Weigh Down Diet* are technically Shamblin-made (or at least communicated) rules. But perhaps this speaks to the metamorphosis of dieting that Bringle articulates, mentioned in chapter one: dieting becomes so interconnected with spirituality that it begins to resemble a religion itself. For Shamblin, there is an incorrect way to diet, ergo the man-made dieting strategies, and there is a correct way to diet, ergo the religious path. Thus, a proper diet follows God’s rules. When this is acknowledged and accepted,
Shamblin claims, “Once you let go of that false god, food, you will never have to walk down the dietetic aisle again” (271). Once again, food is elevated to a tremendously extreme status. Shamblin goes as far as calling food a false god. To condemn it further, she does not capitalize the word god itself; it deserves no such distinction, yet the personification remains profound. If dieting and eating excess food are oppositional forces, Shamblin thinks of the former as the obvious solution to the latter. This solution, to diet, is the virtuous path away from the false god/religion of eating food to excess. Not only is food a false god, but it is also the choice of sinners. This is particularly apparent in the testimonials from *The Weigh Down Diet*, as individuals repeatedly confess that their overeating stemmed from satanic influences and they have since been saved through dieting.

Amidst the notes of encouragement strung with spirituality, Shamblin makes direct connections to scripture in her quest to inspire weight loss. She describes the weight loss journey as “[finding] yourself coming out of Egypt and entering the Desert of Testing” (115). While this is not her first allusion to the ‘slavery’ of bingeing, this is the first overt and specific reference to biblical scripture. However, she quickly veils this reference with a vague and universally appealing comment. Shamblin immediately iterates that “The intent of this book was never to be a thorough scholarly explanation of Scripture to prove points that have been debated by theologians for hundreds of years...This book is written for those who want to live out the truth” (115). Shamblin borrows from scripture, not to illuminate the scripture itself, but to help her reach and inspire an audience. Her use of the term ‘truth’ further delineates her diet program as the singular path to salvation, as opposed to other methods that do not align with God, or as it were, ‘truth’. However, ‘truth’ becomes universally appealing because in this isolated comment, it does not align with any particular denomination or religion. For any reader, ‘truth’ has a
positive connotation. Readers can identify with this vague and overarching appealing term. However, Shamblin’s religious ambiguity is short lived, as she then makes overt and immutable religious references.

Shamblin titles the entire second portion of her diet guide ‘Phase II: Out of Egypt.’ This phase includes more borrowed scriptural passages than any other section of her guide. The chapters in this phase have as chapter headings the emblem of a man in robes leading a camel, presumably through the desert (See Appendix, *Figure 1*). The man in the image is technically nondescript–she gives no caption describing the image. Yet, he represents a Moses figure leading, as Shamblin puts it, followers through the ‘Desert of Testing.’ Shamblin writes, “You have just been set free from making bricks for Pharaoh (dieting, counting fat grams, have-to exercising, pills, liquid fasts, foods you do not want to eat, constant weighing, clothes that do not fit, and the scorn of men, _____...you fill in the blanks)” (117). Everything she includes parenthetically falls under the category of ‘making bricks for Pharaoh,’ including a literal blank segment on the page, subject to her readers’ imaginations. Interestingly, these parenthetical examples begin with food-related references and move toward more aesthetic and social concerns. The worry of fitting into clothing, although a legitimate concern, is presented here through a hyperbolic framework. As newly thin people, Shamblin’s followers no longer need to be confined by tight and ill-fitting material things. Moreover, they can be active participants in a market where clothing is sold for a certain body type; they now have a physical marker of acceptance. This inclusivity allows her readers to celebrate the victory of attaining a thin body in a social arena.
Next, she lists being set free from the ‘scorn of men’ through achieving this new physical frame. This can be interpreted in several ways, and no doubt her readers’ interpretations are varied as well. Much like Prose’s description of a new version of hell on earth where we must contend with the contempt and distaste from our peers, vis-à-vis physical appearance, Shamblin envisions this same judgment from fellow human beings. Her words, framed within a liberating metaphor, provide solace to her readers. They are now free from the embarrassment when they cannot stop eating, in public or private, or when they might feel unappreciated or disliked by other people. A God who loves them and rewards them for committing to dieting has lifted the weight of this scorn from others off of their shoulders. ‘Men’ could represent all humans in general; the term could also be an exclusive gender association. For women, losing weight could literally be the freedom from the scorn of men. Men would now appreciate their bodies and cease judgment.

Not only does Shamblin allow participants to establish a biblical basis for their new journeys, but she also empowers them with the extensive, yet vague, descriptions of what it means to be ‘enslaved’ by their weight. Individuals can place themselves and their issues within a religious chronology and find the freedom Shamblin, and God, promise. Owing to their newfound relationship with food, they have been liberated from the enslavement of overeating and fatness. Shamblin’s advice is saturated with a liberation discourse that is engineered to inspire her readers. However, her use of liberation metaphors results in a contorted version of freedom. Though her readers are ‘liberated’ from immoral eating habits and fatness, they now find themselves wholly obedient to God in His righteous path.
As a disclaimer, Shamblin requests from her readers “Do not think of yourself at all… He calls imperfect people to be devoted to Him so that we can see His awesome and mighty right hand rescue us!” (xi). Shamblin implies that there is a weakness disguised as imperfection in her readers, which needs an external force to rescue and transform it. For Shamblin, and probably for her readers as well, fatness in itself is cause for rescue; though she does not yet use the word salvation, or any derivation of the term, it is implied in this excerpt. This is a potent example in which the physically larger body becomes a symbolic surrogate for the immoral or spiritually depraved nature of the individual. Shamblin continuously assures her readers that this predicament is not cause for despair; on the contrary, they should trust that “He wants you to depend on Him for deliverance so you can see how mighty He is and how important you are to Him” (4). In both of these passages, Shamblin iterates several ideas that are crucial to the argument of this thesis. Firstly, the notion of dependence comes into play. Fat bodies have been rejected and need to depend on this strong external force that will love them. Combined with the frustration that many of Shamblin’s readers feel after failing to lose weight, this concept emphasizes the idea that no one else loves or appreciates these larger bodies. Perhaps they do not deserve such affection, nevertheless, now with God calling them on this journey, they can be accepted as long as they commit to dieting. (Commitment will be explored in greater detail below when Shamblin discusses how to proceed after relapsing into bad eating habits.) Secondly, deliverance is imperative in Shamblin’s claim. Not only do larger bodies need to be rescued, but they also can and will achieve salvation or deliverance through improved eating habits and decreased weight. It is as though appropriate food and eating habits are the direct links to salvation and decreasing weight is a measure of how close one is to true salvation.
In “Phase 1: How to Become a Thin Eater,” Shamblin begins by praising those people who seem to be naturally thin. In her personal narrative of weight loss, she confesses that she experienced jealousy as well as motivational awe when in the company of acquaintances who stopped eating when they were full, never overindulged, and kept thin figures (17-19). Interestingly, the chapter heading of Phase 1 (Figure 2) is an overt example of religion and nutrition fusing together. The intersecting knife and fork, an elementary symbol of eating, is converted into the symbol of the cross, a recognizable emblem of Christianity. Thus, Figure 2 illustrates the notion that one who has control over his or her eating practices exemplifies the spirituality that is embodied in the symbol of the cross.

Shamblin is careful to award legitimacy for wanting a thinner physique. She asserts, “The motivation to be thin is not vanity—it is natural. God has programmed us to want the best for our bodies” (5). Wanting to be thin is not solely about outward appearances; as a marker of spiritual worth, it is natural, as she says, to want this physical sign that holds a multitude of significance within corporeal confines. In fact, this motivation is a sign of divine origin. Tapping into this God-given drive shows acceptance and allegiance to God’s plan, as “God made all people to desire to be at their right weight and that this is not greedy or vain, but rather, a healthy, innate drive programmed in us by God” (21). Conversely, remaining fat is not a neutral choice; those who choose to remain fat are going against what God has planned.

The Weigh Down Diet presents this choice as one that not only goes against God’s plan, but also insults or hurts God. Overeating, especially when we feel hunger translates to not “even [giving] God a chance” (106). Such a statement reinforces the closeness we are supposed to have with God, and the opportunities we should allow him to give us. The fact that for Shamblin, we
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can disregard both this closeness and opportunity through our eating habits is crucial in understanding how our diets should be structured. She writes, “He would like us to wait for hunger so He can delight us with the new Mexican restaurant for supper–but He cannot, because we…bowed down to [indulgence] earlier in the afternoon. We decided our indulgence, cooked it, and ate it. God gets squeezed out of our lives as we refuse to wait on Him or look to Him” (106). Shamblin describes what occurs when we decide to take control ourselves. If we decide what we should eat, we fall susceptible to indulgence. However, if we had trusted in God and were obedient to him, the Mexican food would be God-given and free of sin. Our refusal to do the latter indicates that there is literally no space for God in our lives as our bodies fatten with indulgence.

Shamblin repeatedly makes distinctions about what it means to nourish the body. In a diagram, she illustrates what she believes are the two principal receptacles of the human body: “We have been created with two empty, needing-to-be-fed holes in our body,” the stomach and the heart (1, See Appendix, Figure 3). She insists that fat people fill their hearts, or satisfy their heart hunger, with food. Righteous eaters, or thin eaters, know to fill their stomachs with food, stop when full, and fill their hearts with God (See Appendix, Figure 4). Having an intimate attachment to and dependency on food and eating are dangerous because those habits leave the heart unsatisfied–you are filling your heart with the ‘false god’ of food. Once you begin to change how you feed yourself, you can improve your relationship with God and be accepted by God through satisfying your heart hunger in the correct manner.

It is also crucial to project that change to others. She gives an illustration showing four people sitting around a dinner table (See Appendix, Figure 5). In the illustration, three of these
human figures have their heads tilted down towards their respective plates of food. One figure sits with its legs crossed, head completely straight, holding a glass. There is no food in front of this person. Shamblin suggests to “try to raise your head out of the plate and look around and talk to people. Show less affection for the food. It’s not your love anymore” (100). Thus, she wants her readers to publicize their denunciation of food. Notice that these figures are purposefully ambiguous with regard to gender. Later, we will see an example in which Shamblin uses these ambiguous human representations, yet complements them with discreet female undertones.

Love for and devotion to God are fundamental to losing weight according to Shamblin. In a segment where she addresses the need for exercise, she insists that good exercise is secondary to the food one eats. Shamblin asserts, “the only exercises we insist on are getting the muscle of your will to surrender some of the extra food you have been eating” (31). Surrendering the food away and receiving God’s love is key; emotional toil is necessary, while physical exertion is not. She emphasizes the need for prayer, but becomes slightly sardonic when she states “many are too large to get on your knees right now. That is OK–just get on your knees in your heart” (31). Shamblin exposes several ideas with this comment. First, she accentuates the act of praying as a physical action. Her sardonic comment targets the obese in such a way that highlights a physical lack of mobility. Second, to ‘get on one’s knees in one’s heart’ reinforces the idea of the heart being the receptacle that most urgently needs to be filled, whose hunger needs to be appeased and subsequently satisfied.

When speaking of love and affection for God, Shamblin uses her own story as an example. As a woman who struggled with her weight growing up she felt “pressure and
difficulties came from all directions” (174). Despite this anxious despair, Shamblin endorses obedience to God as the solution. When she struggled with overeating, she felt, “as if God was going to have to ‘kill’ the Gwen in me,” in order for her “to do His will” (174). She suggests that for her to give control over to God, God would have to kill her free will. As she continues, she rejects the idea that she was right in trying to sustain her free will. She concedes, “we have to face little deaths to ourselves daily…if we have desire eating…get down on our knees, die to our wishes, and ask God to remove this desire. This form of obedience involves death to self…it is at the core of obedience” [emphasis in original] (See Appendix, Figure 6, 174). Desire for food is followed by the need to eliminate the self. We must die a figurative death in order to rid ourselves of desire. Shamblin suggests that our bodies must be metaphorically extinguished in order to be in God’s way. This way, temptation cannot arise, and we become obedient to the God who has saved us.

In order to reassure her readers through this harsh experience, she explains that, “[It becomes] easier as time goes by–to make God the object of our own affection,” yet now she insists, “I am personally crazy about Him; I cannot get Him off my mind” (72). As a woman, her confession of love and affection for God has a nuanced meaning. God has satisfied Shamblin’s hunger and she ‘cannot get Him off her mind.’ Her use of language is reminiscent of someone speaking about a significant other or lover. In other words, she behaves like a woman deeply enthralled and in love with a boyfriend or husband. This deliberate use of endearing speech reinforces the profound connections between the female body and God. As we saw above, Shamblin understands the experience of dieting as a salvific process, one that liberates the individual from food and fatness, but also puts the individual and her or his body in service to God. Thus, the idea of liberation becomes seriously misconstrued. Her overt inclusion of love
and affection, coupled with her use of passionate language position the experience of dieting, as a woman, within a new framework: the female body restrains from eating and actively loses weight in pursuit of love and acceptance from a dominating male figure.

We see throughout Shamblin’s material either elusive or blatant female-oriented recommendations. Earlier, we looked at the image in Figure 4; however, the caption underneath this image is the focus here. The image represents heart hunger and feeding and Shamblin underscores this with an explanation: “Our heart and needs are fed by looking for and finding that God is our Financier, Comforter, Mechanic, Lawyer, Physician, Counselor, Friend, Husband, Defender, Trusting Leader, and Father” [emphasis added] (3). The descriptor ‘husband’ stands out from the rest as a gendered term with respect to the recipient, i.e. the dieter. If we perceive God as our husband, along with the many other roles she lists that permeate numerous aspects of human life, our needs are met. Along with the image, Shamblin confirms that this relationship is contingent on dieting and proper fulfillment of both our hearts and stomachs.

Toward the end of The Weigh Down Diet, Shamblin addresses the issue of relapse to bad eating habits. She attempts to reassure her readers if even after they have lost their excess weight, they begin to overeat. She asks, “What if you mess up?” and answers with an anecdote (273). In summary, she describes the vows taken during a marriage ceremony between two individuals. Shamblin claims that though these individuals take vows, specifically, “For better or for worse,” they have no way of knowing what the best or worst circumstance could be. She continues that, “the wife might forget to do the husband’s laundry,” but that does not mean she loves her husband any less. To make her point, Shamblin proposes a scenario in which an adulterous wife
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forgets to do her husband’s laundry and demands that her readers use this analogy for assessing their own mistakes about food consumption. A wife forgetting to do her husband’s laundry, though she loves him, should be forgiven for her mistake, according to Shamblin. However, if she is having an extra-marital affair, circumstances have drastically changed. Thus, should the wife have an “adulterous heart” her mistake is an unforgivable grievance and the husband “has a right to be [offended]” (274-275). The wife’s behavior toward her husband dictates how her morality is measured. Analogously, should an individual be tempted by food and overeat during one meal, he or she can be forgiven for this indiscretion, as long as his or her love for God is genuine, true, and excludes all other recipients of this love. However, if an individual has an “adulterous heart,” that is not committed fully to God, and makes the same mistake, he or she cannot be absolved.

Shamblin gives credence to her workshop by providing her readers with testimonies from sixteen Weigh Down Workshop graduates. Among these, fourteen testimonials are those of women. I include the testimonials from men because they are instrumental in demonstrating ideas relevant to this chapter. My analysis begins with the men’s testimonies and will transition into a selection of the women’s accounts. From these, we will see the gendered dynamics in the pressure to lose weight. Interestingly, the framework that Shamblin has constructed has encouraged a very myopic understanding of how God and even Satan relate to individual persons. The individuals below reflect about God and Satan in extremely close and personal ways, bringing these figures in close proximity to the human body.

The first testimonial comes from Nathan Kuslansky. He confirms that, “Within two weeks, God began to change my life inside and out” (284). Note Kuslansky does not say that he
began to change his life and lose weight. While Kuslansky may have had agency when he decided to join Weigh Down, his ensuing progress toward a thinner physique is due to God’s will. Kuslansky then elaborates on what was in store for him next. He claims, “My first intentions were to lose weight, but God had much more in store for me than I could ever imagine” (284). His physical weight moves to the background, as his spiritual growth comes to the foreground. Kuslanky’s spiritual growth seems to come as a surprising outcome— he could not imagine God’s plan for him. His language demonstrates the notion that the larger body somehow obstructs true spirituality. Nathan, hindered by his size, was not reaching his true spiritual potential, thus incapable of understanding what his religion could ultimately bring to his life.

Discussing retroactively, he writes, “The transitions taking place in my life made Satan very upset.” Echoing Shamblin’s claims about the false god of food, Nathan believes his overeating and weight gain were influenced by Satan. Having succeeded in this program, he has been saved from these satanic forces, and, “now [has] the desire to be in God’s Word. There is also a constant hunger and thirst in [his] heart to grow and mature in [his] Christian walk” (284). While he may not have tried a multitude of diets before beginning his journey with Shamblin’s, he does acknowledge that this diet aligns with ‘God’s Word.’ Furthermore, he delights in “the escalation in [his] spiritual growth,” and insists, “the 130 pounds [he] lost in eight months are only a side effect and a physical sign of obedience” (285). Thus, Nathan has been set free from fatness and food and his slim physical body falls secondary to his spiritual gain. But most importantly, he is obedient to God. We see this trend repeatedly, as Shamblin and now Kuslansky, claim that they have been ‘liberated’ or set free from fatness or food, only to become
obedient to God. This seems to indicate that losing weight is about God, instead of who or what else (you or food) controls the physical body.

Kenny Autry’s testimonial resonates with these same concerns of relinquishing control, feeling a change in one’s soul, and becoming closer to God in the process. He writes, “I began to lose weight, but the real change was in my soul. The peace and rewards that come with total obedience cannot be explained in words…a closer walk with God is my life’s goal” (289). It is clear that for both Autry and Kuslansky coming to the realization that God needed to be in control of their eating habits was the most profound step in their journeys. Consequently, they relocate this physical change deeper within themselves–it runs through their souls.

For women, this transformation is similarly substantiated by Donna Peak, who lost 126 pounds through Shamblin’s program. She writes, “God began to reveal to me that my weight was spiritual, not physical” (283). In the opening of her statement, Peak forges a link between her physical weight and her spirituality; she understands this relationship as a revelation from God. Without God’s revealing act, she would still understand and perceive her weight as a separate entity from her spirituality. Moreover, her motivation to lose weight is not exclusively to be thin. In fact, her motivation to lose weight might purely be a spiritual gain. Peak’s spirituality has become intimately connected with her physical appearance by virtue of redefining her fatness as a spiritual deterioration. She ardently expresses, “I came face-to-face with submission and true confession. True confession and repentance poured forth from my heart as I pleaded for the Lord’s forgiveness and submitted everything totally to Him.” Peak has acknowledged that her previous state, including her weight and spirituality, were not aligned with what Shamblin claims as the correct state of being, vis-à-vis her weight. Thus, repentance is necessary to move forward.
Peak asserts that she has genuinely repented from her heart; she, perhaps knowingly, adopts language Shamblin integrates into her diagrams on stomach hunger and heart hunger (See Appendix, Figures 3 and 4). Peak has, from her point of view at least, succeeded in using the correct physical vesicle for God’s love. Her language demonstrates misconstrued ideas about liberating herself from her excess weight–she has ‘submitted everything,’ including her body, to God.

In the following three testimonials, each of these women describes her weight in relationship to two males in her life: her husband and God. During her marriage to a man who accepted her large physical size, Delores Vaughn acknowledges, “I was thinking that I was just the way God made me and I should be happy and enjoy my life” (286). She felt love and acceptance from her husband and this was enough to convince her that her body was the size God meant it to be. After losing a substantial amount of weight, she reflects: “I accepted a lie from Satan and kept getting larger and larger” (286). I do not include her entire testimonial, as it is very extensive, but it imperative that I clarify the context of this harsh statement. In summary, Vaughn does not propose that her husband was the embodiment of evil; however, she does suggest that her husband is not the person in her life whose evaluation of her body matters most. In other words, though she is married to him and loves him, his perception of her body is not the most important (nor is hers)–God’s perception is supreme. As an overweight woman, Vaughn’s acceptance of a lie from Satan is a reflection of her spirituality, or lack thereof. It is also a reflection of her newfound relationship with God. She, like others, has been set free from fatness and overeating, and now loves God in the way she is meant to. She demonstrates this love through obedience to God with regard to her eating habits. She explains, “My goal is to be obedient to God and let Him take me to the weight He wants me to be” (287). This is the first
testimonial that features such a direct and specific comment on what God supposedly wants a female body to weigh. Vaughn does not elaborate on how that weight is quantified in numbers on a scale; however, her suggestion that God does want her at a certain weight is substantial and merits our attention.

Sally’s story begins with her weight loss. Her testimonial then transitions into her relationship with her husband. Her husband is an alcoholic and before she lost her excess weight she struggled finding a way to cope with his addiction. Sally attempted to be more independent in both her weight management and marriage, but felt success in neither area. She admits her excess weight inhibited her relationships with both male figures in her life. After experiencing *Weigh Down*, she attributes all of her success in losing weight to God. Her reflections about her husband’s enduring alcoholism are notable. She explains, “My husband has given his life to the Lord, but he still drinks. That, I believe, is next on God’s agenda. Our marriage is improving daily as I relinquish my long-standing position as self-appointed head of the household and become the submissive wife. It’s really hard, but it’s worth it” (297). Because God helped her lose weight, she believes God will also help her husband overcome his alcoholism. Her relationship with her husband is improving, as she becomes the ‘submissive wife.’ Sally understands her physical weight loss as a precursor to her improved marriage. In losing weight and enduring this spiritual journey, she has now come to realize her proper place in matrimony. Furthermore, Sally appreciates that this new allocation of power and control is ‘worth it.’ From what I can assess, it appears that Sally’s spiritual growth makes her submission worth it. Being thin allows Sally to feel acceptance from God as, “[her] life is being restored,” yet its restoration is contingent upon a submissive relationship with both her husband and God (297).
The last testimonial comes from Jill Bass, who like Sally above, attempted to establish control over her body through shaping her own eating habits. Jill struggles and develops an eating disorder. Though she was thin, she believes that she had no right to decide through her willpower what she could and could not eat. She discloses, “I am convinced now that I was in bondage to sin and the enemy…I had closed my eyes to the sin that enveloped me. What willpower I had! How thin I was! How enslaved I was!” (294). Unlike the others mentioned above, Jill could resist the temptation to overeat; however, she could not escape the habit of eating too little. Prior to joining *Weigh Down* and undergoing a spiritual and physical conversion, Jill believed herself to be in bondage to sin (i.e. food, though in a way we have yet to see in this chapter because she refused to eat). Like the others, she associates eating habits with Satan: “Satan told me that if I obeyed God and didn’t do this myself, I would get fat” (294-295). She fears getting fat, but only in that this fear comes from what she believes is evil. In other words, Satan told Jill to restrict her food consumption and now she realizes that God, neither Satan nor herself, should be in control of her eating habits and physical weight (large or small).

Jill’s insecurities about food manifest themselves in her relationships with male figures as well. Prior to joining *Weigh Down* and finding solace in relinquishing control to God, she resented her husband for her problems about her weight and eating disorder (295). Now that she is in “the Promised Land,” she confesses, “I believe that now God has given me an opportunity to be the wife He calls me to be” (295). Having been set free from the sin of controlling her own weight and body, she can enter the Promised Land and have a proper marriage. God wants her at a certain weight and wants her to be a certain kind of wife to her husband. Her body is at the center of this new reality in which she has no control and feels saved from the burden of regulating her own body weight. Jill delights in this new outlook on her relationship and she is
“focusing so much more on obeying God in all areas of [her] life” (296). These testimonials reveal a sense of personal victory through relocated bondage and submission to male figures, in the quest of spiritual gain and moral virtue. This chapter highlights a theme of born-again conversion narratives through loss of control over one’s body; in the next chapter, this theme is also present throughout the spiritual and physical recoveries from near-fatal eating disorders. To borrow from Jill’s testimony, “Though the bulimic or anorexic woman has a very different compulsion than the overweight woman, her victory comes from the same place–our mighty resurrected Lord!” (296).
III. Narrow Recoveries: Personal Narratives of Eating Disorders

The following chapter considers the perspectives of women recovering from severe cases of anorexia and bulimia through a renewed experience of spirituality. These texts stand out as self-help books geared toward Christian readers, much like the texts in the previous chapter. However, as personal narratives, their aims and structures are quite different. Though parts of these narratives are included as sources for scholarly and critical discussion for this thesis, it is imperative to mention once again that I intend to be sensitive to the delicate nature of these immensely personal stories. The content of these texts is not included in order to criticize or judge difficult or traumatic experiences, but rather to enrich the argument of this thesis, as well as to provide a noteworthy perspective on body image and eating habits.

Poet Sheryle Cruse, a recovering anorexic and bulimic, wrote her memoir, *Thin Enough: My Spiritual Journey Through the Living Death of an Eating Disorder* (2006), with the hope of inspiring other Christian women suffering from eating disorders to heal through spiritual means. The pages of this memoir expose a tremendously difficult experience, in which food is perceived as the most deleterious substance to the human body. Cruse’s experience is about establishing control and power over her body, as well as her surroundings, through strict eating habits. While her fundamental message to her readers is to stop dieting and lose significant amounts of weight, her experience illustrates remarkably similar processes to those in chapter two: struggles with food, salvation, obedience, and the female body in relation to God.

I begin this chapter with an analysis of how control, eating, and the female body are perceived by these authors through a close reading of how these women understand their recoveries, both physically and spiritually. In the analysis below, I show a similar trajectory
discussed in the previous chapter; interestingly, the texts in both chapters demonstrate a kind of conceptual symmetry. In other words, women, of different sizes and with varying behaviors toward food, undergo strikingly similar experiences concerning their bodies with respect to God.

Cruse undergoes a transformation, which begins with a desire to control her eating habits and body. She becomes drastically thin and begins to lose control over her life, emotions, and endures judgment from other people. Cruse sinks into a depressive state in which she convinces herself that God cannot love such a body. She experiences a moment in which she is called to change her body and eating habits and believes she has been saved. Her ultimate reaction is to understand that God does love her after all and she relinquishes control over her body and consumption of food to God. Ruminating on her long road to recovery, she provides insight into how she has overcome this terrible battle: “That’s how two new journeys began for me: adapting my approach to eating and adapting my approach to life and truth…I knew if I wanted my relationship with God to be real, I needed to do this” (120). Understandably so, her eating behaviors are very much tied to her outlook on life, truth, and God. God is not real for her (and she perhaps is not real to God) until her approach to eating harmonizes with her approach to spirituality.

Katie Gesto, who identifies as Catholic, dedicates her memoir and guide *Hunger for Freedom: My Spiritual Journey of Recovery* to God (2004). Having recovered from a seven-year-long battle with bulimia, Gesto writes, “I dedicate this book in thanksgiving to the Loving One who healed me and set me free to live for Him alone” (v). The dedication page indicates how she understands her recovery and its intimate ties to her spirituality. In stating so, Gesto establishes a relationship between herself, her bulimia, and God. God orchestrated her recovery from bulimia; she has been set free of this compulsion concerning food, and now enjoys her
freedom to live for God. She does not take complete ownership of her recovery from this condition. Instead of using the opportunity to be empowered by her recovery, she sets herself free from the burden of bulimia and her body, and puts complete trust in God. She encourages her readers to do the same, as she writes, “If you are struggling with an eating disorder…you may need to get honest with God…admit that you’ve not been seeing your life clearly” (x). Honesty is a crucial step in the recovery process; Gesto insinuates that this journey to healthier eating necessitates a close reflection and evaluation of your life, as well as facing God. For Gesto, acknowledging that you have been wrong and that you need God’s help leads you on the right path to recovery.

Gesto also argues that, “the journey of recovery is a way of praying.” She continues that prayer is “trying to transcend the bondage of our self so to reach union with the One who can set us free to be fully alive” (163). As her memoir is addressed to an audience of readers with a religious commitment, this is not a controversial statement. However, this serves as an important reminder that recovery from an eating disorder and spirituality are not mutually exclusive. In other words, recovery necessitates some spiritual change or growth. As with Jill in chapter two, Gesto deliberately uses the word bondage. However, she designates this bondage to the ‘self,’ as opposed to food. I postulate that this is because Gesto believes she initially had complete control over her food intake; she had the willpower to ingest and expel it from her body, as she chose. However, as she slipped further into her bulimia, Gesto would binge and purge uncontrollably. As she stresses in her memoir, she could not resist from doing so. At the onset of her bulimia, she was in bondage to her self, which had control over food and eating. However, as her health regressed, she lost all control.
Identifying a root cause to eating disorders in psychological terms is a common feature throughout these texts. In the opening pages of her memoir, Sheryle Cruse shares what she believes is the root of her problem: the distance she felt from her parents, her father in particular, as a young girl. She compares this lack of affection to a distance with Jesus and God. Her logic is that if she never felt closeness and love from her father, she could never feel closeness or love from her Father. During a brief moment in her childhood, she does feel a close connection to God. Cruse remembers watching a children’s television show about Jesus and explains, “The story of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:35-43) really stuck out to me. I identified with the little girl Jesus brought back to life…I wanted to be her” (17). Cruse longed to be the recipient of affection, love, and healing from Jesus. She believes that because another little girl received these, she could as well. Even at her young age, she remembers what she believes to be the most poignant excerpt from this passage, Mark 5:41: “Little girl, I say to you, arise” (109). As an older woman writing about her childhood experience, she explains that she believed this was directed to her; thus, she finally felt special.

She loses sight of this hopeful connection, as she begins to reflect on her eating habits. She reflects that before she began to perceive any problems and insecurities with her physical body, she was “an innocent, preapple Eve. I was prehurt and prescarred. But I grew up, and I ate the apple” [emphasis in original] (17). She insists she ‘ate the apple’ because she “needed someone, something (God), but [she] found a substitute instead. Food” (18). So began her childhood weight gain, and at seven years old, her mother introduced Sheryle to her first diet, when she noticed “the dreaded sin manifesting itself in her little girl” (19). Her mother not only disapproves of overeating, but also associates it with sin. Its manifestation in her child instills in her urgency and panic, leading her to take control and force Sheryle to diet. It is unclear whether
her mother believes that Sheryle is to blame for this sin, or if she cannot help overeating. Either 
way, her voracious appetite must be extinguished before her body becomes, and remains, too fat.

At nineteen years of age, measuring five feet four inches tall, and weighing 80 pounds, 
Sheryle Cruse’s body is skeletal, weak, and according to her, the proof of her success. When she 
feels pressure from friends and family to nourish herself, she only eats “safe” foods, “in the 15 to 
50 calories-per-serving range, like ketchup, jams, and jelly” (12). These public displays of 
eating, though she is compelled to oblige to reassure those around her, render Cruse 
uncomfortable and guilt-ridden; she writes, “I… squelched my self-indulgence, while relocating 
my self-control. I put away the jam and shut the fridge door…I had chosen to eat it, now I chose 
to face the consequences” (13). Eating any foods, even just a tablespoon of jam, instigates 
feelings of guilt and loss of self-control. Similar to the way in which Shamblin’s readers 
discussed their eating habits in retrospect, Cruse, far before her recovery, deems any binge (the 
term here is relative) immoral and weak. She refuses to display any lack of self-control or 
discipline; she perceives herself as the other extreme that contrasts the social perception of obese 
odies we saw in chapter one. Theoretically, she can never be accused of personal failure or 
incapable of resisting the temptation of food.

As Cruse notes her decent into dangerous insecurities about her body and self-worth was 
fueled by her constant strive for perfection. Her steadfast commitment and drive to be thin 
culminates when she decides to reinvent herself before college. She writes, “I had to prove that I 
was a worthwhile, beautiful girl…determined to reinvent myself” (40). Cruse links beauty and 
worth in her mind, and her pursuit of both will not only give her a new body, but a new life as 
well. She admits she idolized thin female celebrities, explaining, “I thought [my life] would be 
perfect too if I could be as beautiful as they were” (41). Her life would be perfect and her body
would be the proof. She, like the many others we have read from thus far, sees her physical body as confirmation of her true self. Upon reflection of her tendency to worship these lithe female forms, she observes, “I coveted who these women were. So much for the ‘no other gods’ commandment…I pursued my own idol of perfect, thin beauty and self-obsession” (41). At this time in her life, when she sought control over her own body shape, Sheryle, interpreting and evaluating her own spirituality, condemns herself as spiritually deviant, attached to idols and coveting the lives of others.

Her feelings of power and control are augmented when she compares herself to other anorexic women. In her mind, she emerges as the one who lasted or even won; she puts herself and her body above those other women. Cruse competes with other female bodies in order to amplify the significance and worth of her own. As she takes her readers through the dark thoughts of her past, she writes, “I remember priding myself whenever I heard about other anorexics dying at heavier weights than I was at. To me, that symbolized my strength” (49). I include this thought not to dramatize my point, but to illustrate just how much Cruse depended on this sense of accomplishment, willpower, and control–these feelings existed nowhere else in her life. Her dependence grew out of a tragic loneliness and unworthiness she perceived from those surrounding her.

Here it might be useful to ask why these women, when searching for control, self-worth, and power, seek to change their bodies, furthermore change them in such a drastic way? Cruse views her body as the locus for receiving love and acceptance–love she has not yet felt–thus is overcome with the urgency to change her body. Once that change occurs, she is convinced that her life will be perfect.
Before her conversion, so to speak, through her recovery, Cruse’s typical day began with getting herself out of bed and immediately collapsing to the ground, as her body was physically too weak to support itself. She explains, “Collapsing was inevitable…I saw it as the price I needed to pay to have perfection and worth” (12). Her prize: the admiration of her “golden rib cage…[a] trophy.” Interestingly, at this point in her journey, she understands her emaciated form as “worthy, and somehow holy” [emphasis in original] (13). Not only is her body a valuable trophy, it is also holy. Prior to what she believes is her salvation from anorexia, she is in some ways her own version of a God-figure. Cruse has created this holy trophy as the embodiment of her perseverance and self-control. She contrasts these assertive justifications when she confesses, “I obeyed my inner drill sergeant and stumbled in the dark to my exercise equipment…somehow that had morphed into the morning installment of my daily punishment” (11). Cruse blurs the distinction of who is in control of her body. While her frail body is her pride, glory, and show of strength, discipline, and intense perseverance, she also acknowledges an inner force, which fuels her strict exercise regimen–her punishment. She does not explicitly compare this force to a satanic figure like some of the testimonials mentioned in chapter two; however, Cruse does feel “that the eating disorders stood in [her] way…Surrounded by evil that was seeking to destroy [her]” (107-8). She personifies her eating disorder as something concrete, destructive, and evil, as her body literally fades away. She excludes the disorder from her ‘self;’ it is the other seeking to destroy. This compartmentalization helps her cope temporarily until she can no longer quell her feelings of shame.

Later, she does admit that she felt debilitating “guilt, shame, and pain” (72). Pre-salvation, she is essentially excluding herself from the very possibility that God loves and values her. In a particularly difficult moment, she claims, “If I died, I would deserve only hell” (99).
According to Cruse, her body–and her self by association–is only worthy of hell. Cruse’s feelings of shame manifest themselves in different ways. We have seen her eat as a buffer to reassure her parents. Nevertheless, she is constantly “scared of the danger of being discovered” (48). Cruse does not want to get caught; she does not want her caustic habit or emaciated body to carry the label of sin. However, as she feels increasingly judged by people and begins to feel she has lost control of her life, she falls into a depressive state, which magnifies her shame. She confirms, “I felt shame…I knew that what I was doing was wrong, but I still kept going” (47). She is yet to be rescued, but understands she might need to be saved.

For the first time in her journey, she wonders, “What God thought of me now. Did He still love me?” (52). Her body has reached an extreme; she falls on the opposite end of the spectrum from obese bodies, and yet, she believes, like her counterparts, that she has done something gravely wrong and God cannot love her, nor her body. This love is one she associates with other male figures, as well. As a young woman who has gone through puberty and is attracted to men, she asks, “Who would love me now? What boy? What man? What God?” (72). Cruse acknowledges that the state of her body is a measure of her worth–romantic, sexual, or spiritual. The desperation she feels shows through her writing; everyone has rejected her body. Though she has gone through puberty, her malnourishment prevents her from menstruating. She is, biologically speaking, not functioning the way a woman should. Emotionally and sexually, she does not see herself as a woman either–let alone a desirable woman–and expresses her disdain at looking like a little girl (74). Her extreme body size has impeded her maturation as a woman; she cannot separate this from her worth as a woman in the eyes of God.

Cruse’s disgust and disappointment with her form enables her to feel her most desperate sadness and turmoil. It is when she is at her lowest and weakest that she is able to rise. In what
she describes as the most critical moment of her recovery, she is barely lucid, “[feeling] deeply excavated, lying dormant, and waiting for death,” and then suddenly, “I remembered…‘Little girl, I say to you, arise’” (108-109). Her recount of the story reads like the resurrection of her soul and salvation from her near-death withered body. She is instilled with a newfound sense of hope, through a reference to her preapple Eve, prehurt, and prescarred days (17). Cruse does not explicitly state that she is a Jesus-figure; however, she does imply through her use of language, that her circumstance can be likened to resurrection and deliverance.

Cruse feels she can be saved and returned to the days where food and eating do not come with the tumultuous burden it carries now. She comforts her readers, who like her have felt this despair: “He desires to forgive you of your sins. All you need to do is ask” (202). Cruse, much like Shamblin, empowers her readers with the knowledge that they can be saved and forgiven, but they must ask for it, they need to come forward. Salvation is contingent upon facing God and truly realizing what state your body is in. Agency stops here though, as “God will do the fixing. Just give Him your heart and mean it with all of your heart” [emphasis in original] (205). Once again, love is key. For both the overweight and underweight, wholehearted love and devotion to God will save you from your eating habits and undesirable body.

For both Cruse and Gesto, communicating their stories and helping others is their chief aim and the structure of their texts is indicative of this. These memoirs and self-help guides have interactive components. Cruse begins each chapter with a poem; her prose is interrupted sporadically with isolated biblical passages, questions for her reader to consider, and statistical facts about eating disorders. For example, “Chapter One: Stuffed Unconscious” begins with a poem; the opening lines read:

The little girl reached out arms for love,
and with arms returning empty
She asked herself,
‘What can I have?’
The little girl looked all around
and food answered her (15)

She includes the passage “Since you were precious in My sight…I have loved you” (Isaiah 43:4). Cruse asks, “Does food make you feel happy and calm?” and later states, “Forty percent of 9-year-old girls have dieted” (19). The chapter ends with a “Prayer to Rise” and “Journaling Section: To Help You Work Through Your Thoughts” (28-29). Each chapter follows the same structure. Not only does she communicate to a reader who also has an eating disorder, but Cruse is also allowing the reader to have her own voice in dialogue with God. Her guide is a medium through which another person can interact with God. She provides tools and helpful resources she knows will be useful for her target readership. Cruse’s guide is intended for women. She does not address her story to a male reader undergoing an eating disorder. Yet, she explicitly states “That’s how you build your father/daughter relationship with God” or “You too, little girl, will arise!” (208, 213). Cruse excludes an entire gender from this condition. She does not openly deny that boys or men can have an eating disorder. However, it is clear that she solely addresses female readers. For Cruse, only females succumb to this disorder in which they try to control their own bodies and discover that they have rejected God in so doing.

Cruse is careful to establish a relationship of equals with her readers, though they may not yet be saved. She acknowledges, “Each of us, in our own way rejected and disobeyed God” (161). For females, this is emblematic of their physical, emotional, and spiritual rejection of God; this rejections stems from the disobeying female body. However, her readers should not despair, as she urges, “He is the God of your flesh, whatever state that flesh is in” (207). No matter how dire the condition is for her readers, Cruse does not believe that God forgets his ‘daughters’
Dunoyer (208). She reminds her audience that God created their female flesh. As such, God is capable of returning the state of female flesh to whatever form is essential.

In this chapter, I have suggested that irrespective of size, a woman having complete agency and control over her eating habits is the root of the problem, vis-à-vis her relationship to God. In the next chapter, we will see the reconstruction—or reshaping, as it were—of the female flesh into an ideal mold. This reshaping is very literal, and introduces an extreme lack of autonomy and agency we have yet to see in this thesis. While women and their bodies have been judged, pressured, called to change, and subsequently saved, they have yet to be physically formed and fashioned in such a direct and practical way as in the final chapter. Through the direct molding of female bodies we see an increased emphasis on sexuality and the woman’s body as symbolic of society’s wealth and (re)production, economic and biological.
IV. Weighty Consequences: Female Corpulence in Culture

In this chapter, we move from self-imposed forced starvation to force-feeding and fattening. While the women in chapter three took it upon themselves to control their bodies (and subsequently lost all control), the women discussed in this chapter are force-fed by others in the pursuit of corpulence. I include stories about these women to enrich our understanding of how food is used to control female bodies and how size is a measure of spiritual, personal, and cultural worth.

In the prologue of Rebecca Popenoe’s publication *Feeding Desires: Fatness, Beauty, and Sexuality Among a Saharan People* (2004), the anthropologist suggests that, “The association around the world between female fatness and happiness, well-being, sexiness, beauty, and social status contrasts starkly with modern Western readings of fatness as indicative of laziness, lack of self-control, ill-health, low status, and unattractiveness” (5). Popenoe’s ethnographical research in Niger on the intensive fattening of young Azawagh Arab girls sheds light on a seemingly radically different aesthetic agenda from the ones we have seen in previous chapters and those generally found in some communities in the United States.

Popenoe carefully notes that the predominant ‘thin is best’ purported ideal is not ubiquitous throughout the United States. For example, she refers to a 1989 study, which demonstrates that for some Puerto Ricans living in Philadelphia, the term obesity does not hold a stigma. In fact, a physically larger married woman symbolized “a successful marriage to a husband who provides adequately for his wife” (5). Much like the association between fatness and a male provider in the Philadelphia example, in Niger, Azawagh Arabs esteem the larger female body and correlate its size with her husband’s wealth and the success of her marriage.
Popenoe’s research, more often than not, the fat female body is understood as a reflection of a male issue, whereas the thin female body becomes a statement about the woman’s life. In other words, if a woman is fat, her fatness represents a male in her life. By contrast, if she is thin, her thinness represents her unmarried and unproductive life as a single woman. I use the term unproductive to mean *non-producing*: put simply, a thin woman is not creating babies, while fat biologically enables a woman to produce children through the onset of puberty and menstruation. We will see later in this chapter how thin female bodies are made useful in this society. These categorical associations contrast those we have seen previously. If a woman is fat, it represents her distance from and defiance to God, and if she is thin, her body symbolizes her acceptance and obedience to God.

Within this Nigerien community, obese women are revered; one such robust body was described as having “the grace of a goatskin sack full of milk” (36). This peculiar simile likens the female body to an object of tremendous value. For Popenoe in her analysis and for Azawagh Arabs in their use of the phrase, the choice to compare the female body to a container filled with milk, instead of water, is tremendously significant. The sack of milk has beautifully “fluid contours” women should aspire to have. Milk, more valuable than water because it can fatten, is primarily symbolic of a man’s wealth. Interestingly, this simile does not purposefully draw on the association between women and lactation. Also, the fact that a young girl is typically fattened with a diet heavy in milk is merely secondary in meaning in the use of this simile. As I mentioned before, a woman’s fatness is tied to male connections.

As a young girl morphs into a corpulent woman, she also becomes less mobile and more subdued. Her sexuality is simultaneously illuminated (by virtue that she is physically ready for fattening, thus having reached the genesis of her sexual maturity) and suppressed. The latter
becomes true in cases such as these, because “fatness in a female is said to both arouse male
desire and to suppress a woman’s own” (40). Thus, the fat female body becomes more about the
man associated with her, rather than the woman herself. In addition, the fattening process imparts
immobility; a girl needs to learn not to move, as she grows into a woman who men can admire
for her corpulence and the aesthetic appeal fat brings. One example of an aesthetic detail that is
especially esteemed is the presence of a “dress” of stretch marks on a woman’s body (39). The
marks can be further accentuated by continuously running a comb over them. The female body
can carry such marks of decoration and distinction, which elevates it higher on a scale of worth.

Before reaching this pinnacle of beauty, a young girl must change her behavior as a
function of her fattening regimen. When Popenoe asked an older woman how a newly fattened
girl must act, the woman answered, “She should walk respectfully. You must comport yourself
as a woman. You are on the market now. It is an education” (42). The female body is not the
only component of the person that must change; her behavior must transform as well. Clearly,
body size is so often associated with behavior. In previous chapters, we have seen behaviors that
influence body size. Conversely, we have also detected a trend in which people believe that a
certain body size must correlate with certain behaviors. However, for these women, changing
your body means changing your behavior so that it matches what men believe your body
symbolizes: readiness for marriage and subdued agency and sexuality.

Sidi, the older woman who gave this explanation, associates readiness for marriage with
ownership. Female bodies are evaluated in terms of what they can bring to the table. Fat female
bodies are on the market for marriage and for mating. The most prized woman is the most
corpulent, one whose body contours remind us of a sack filled with milk, a valuable and life-
giving substance. The man who marries her owns this symbol of value by default. Popenoe
asserts, “Not only do female bodies turn the stuff of men’s labor into something enduring, fertile, and infinitely appealing, but in doing so they enhance that value immeasurably” (130). The fat female body is the embodiment of male labor and cultural notions of value. The female body symbolizes continuous production under male ownership. Interestingly, men never undergo this fattening regimen. It is culturally implausible, and perhaps anatomically impossible, for a boy to turn his body into a shape that resembles a sack filled with milk. He cannot have a woman’s body (that fits this cultural definition of a woman), because he cannot produce milk. His body must be the exact opposite of a woman’s (107). In effect, men do not have the ability to form this particular body for themselves, yet they may possess a woman’s body and take credit for its remarkable corpulence.

This sense of ownership is emphasized in who takes charge of feeding a young girl. A little girl is never put through fattening by her mother, or any matrilineal relative. Older women from the patrilineal line undertake this challenge and often a young girl will move to the home of her father’s extended family when she begins her transition into womanhood. Though a woman will feed the girl, she is still under the care and control of a male figure, with regard to what she eats. When she has achieved the right shape and size, her father’s family is awarded the respect for such a suitable creation (93). The control of her food consumption has been passed on to women who represent the male figures in a girl’s life.

An Azawagh Arab girl would only forego fattening if she had a suitable alternative for work, productivity, and contribution to society. The only feasible alternative to forced fattening would be to devote herself to studying the Qur’an. As Popenoe explains one particular woman’s educational path, “To fatten is to ready oneself for marriage, and as long as Ketti was studying the Koran, she was engaged in an activity not compatible with marrying” (77). Ketti’s thin body
Dunoyer was made useful through her intellectual contribution within religious studies. Now as an adult woman, she furthers that contribution as a local Islamic teacher. Whether it be with milk or sacred texts, girls must fill their bodies to the brim in order to truly become women, thus passively or actively contributing to their society.

In Isherwood’s *The Fat Jesus*, similar categorical expectations of women are found in the analysis of the rhetoric of nineteenth century ideals of physical beauty. Presented as a “public/private split,” by Isherwood in her chapter entitled “Slim for Him,” “women in the theatre [were] being praised for being voluptuous…women at home…for being frail and ethereal” (65). Both the weighty and waiflike are praised, whilst “women’s bodies, under the male gaze, have very different purposes and are expected to fit the different requirements” (65). Those requirements are very much tied to sexuality. For the Nigeriens predominantly featured in Popenoe’s research, a woman who chose to eat uncontrollably (despite her imposed extreme fattening regimen) was perceived as morally loose and undisciplined. If a woman takes control of her eating habits, she is in the wrong. It is also a cultural faux pas to speak of food in public. Conversations about food, but more specifically eating, are akin to openly and graphically conversing about sex. For Azawagh Arabs, the human mouth is symbolic of female genitalia. For nineteenth century Americans in Isherwood’s thesis, “a women’s desire to eat was seen as a way of judging her sexual desire…hence voluptuous actresses and slender wives” (68). Thus, if we apply such theories to the religious discourse examined throughout this thesis, restrained eating replaces sexual appetite and intimacy with a more appropriate and valuable intimacy with and appetite for God, at least for any woman involved. This is not to say that women have no appetite for food (or sex), but rather that being saved and close to God is contingent upon the suppression of that appetite. This reinforces the notion that a woman must relinquish control her body,
overweight or underweight; control must be allocated to a male figure–man or God. Whether this serves the purpose of satisfying an aesthetic appeal or subduing sexuality, obedience and submission are necessary, with regards to what foods a woman eats and the shape of her body. Eating, a substantial component of survival is controlled and we cannot separate it from its associations with the body and sex, another considerable way through which we proliferate human life.

The proliferation of human life is strongly tied to females and feeding. In *The God of Thinness*, Bringle writes, “Women become…the feeders of whole families of humanity. Food comes to be psychologically, symbolically equated with female power…to give or withhold nurture” (35-36). Through food, women have the ability to exercise power. Taking away a woman’s control over food renders her less powerful and more subdued. I conclude my counterexample with considerations of how the consumption of food, fattening, and contribution to society come together through female bodies. The contribution of Azawagh Arab women to society is contingent upon how successfully they are fattened with a diet consisting primarily of milk. Popenoe writes, “by controlling and literally embodying the flow of milk, the most valued food…women express and safeguard their society’s vision of itself, as well as its continuation and increase” (123). A woman’s body is the medium through which milk flows; she either imbibes it or creates it for her progeny. Her role as the guardian of ‘society’s vision of itself’ lends significance to my argument throughout this thesis. In the Nigerien context, female fatness represents male wealth and continuing life. In the religious discourse examined in previous chapters, fatness, the embodiment of temptation and lack of self-control, is rejected, as thinness is revered. Across the board, women’s bodies become the quintessential markers of what the society deems worthy. However, they show no agency in constructing what those markers are,
and within a religious context their bodies anxiously remain on a fulcrum between condemnation and salvation, until they submit to and obey God through proper food consumption.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have challenged the notion promoted in Christian diet books that losing weight is a salvific experience, and instead argued that dieting becomes the fodder for obedience and submission to God. Furthermore, I have shown through a close reading of women’s personal narratives of weight loss, that deliverance from fatness and controlling one’s own food consumption transmutes into bondage to male figures.

I contrasted these ideas with examples of starvation and force-feeding. Nevertheless, experiences of eradicating fatness or encouraging it reveal attempts to relocate female agency. The reconstruction of female eating habits lends itself to the deconstruction of female bodies, power, and agency, due to the links between fatness, food, and women. Through these associations, I have highlighted how female bodies are perceived as useful and contribute to the esteem and value of societies.

With the help of food consumption, women can produce two valuable things: children and milk. Fat regulates both processes of production. Thus, there is something about abhorring fat that stems from hindering women from contributing to society through being productive with their bodies.

‘Fat’, like ‘dirt’, can never be clean. It is useful, in that it allows living things to flourish and survive, but it cannot be clean. The word ‘fat’ has a similar set of connotations to ‘dirt’ in terms of its ethical dimensions: there is no clean dirt. The same is true for fatness. The contextual nature of fatness—the terms and structures of change surrounding it—allows no neutral category of fatness to emerge in the discourse about large bodies, in particular large female bodies.
Appendix- Supplementary Figures

Figure 1—“Phase II: Out of Egypt”, Gwen Shamblin, The Weigh Down Diet (113)

Figure 2—“Phase I: How to Become a Thin Eater”, Gwen Shamblin, The Weigh Down Diet (xv)
Figure 3–Correct and incorrect food receptacles, Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet* (2)

Figure 4–Heart hunger, Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet* (3)
Figure 9-2: Try to raise your head out of the plate and look around and talk to people. Show less affection for the food. It’s not your love anymore.

Figure 5–Appropriate table manners, Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet* (100)

**obedience**

Figure 6–Hidden meanings of ‘obedience’, Gwen Shamblin, *The Weigh Down Diet* (174)
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