

## The Religion of Thinness

### I. Introduction

I come from a country where many people, especially women, pursue the goal of a thinner body with religious-like devotion. This paper examines this devotion and some of the questions it raises about 'religion,' 'the body,' and 'culture,' and the relationships between them. I analyze the quest for a slender body as a 'cultural religion,'<sup>1</sup> which I call the 'Religion of Thinness.'<sup>2</sup> My analysis revolves around four observations.

The first is that for many women in the US today, the quest for a slender body serves what has historically been a 'religious' *function*: providing a sense of purpose that orients and gives meaning to their lives, especially in times of suffering and uncertainty.

Second, this quest has many *features* in common with traditional religions, including beliefs, myths, rituals, moral codes, and sacred images—all of which encourage women to find 'salvation' (i.e., happiness and well-being) through the pursuit of a 'better' (i.e., thinner) body. Thus I use categories from the field of Religious Studies to examine this quest.

My third observation is that this secular faith draws so many adherents in large part because it appeals to and addresses what might be referred to as *spiritual needs*—including the need for a sense of purpose, inspiration, security, virtue, love, and well-being—even though it shortchanges these needs, and, in the long run, fails to deliver the salvation it promises.

1 Catherine Albanese uses this term to describe religious-like phenomena that do not neatly fit in to the boundaries of institutional religion. See Albanese 1992: 493–500. In his analysis of the 'cultural religion' of popular music in the US, Robyn Sylvan (2002: 79–80) uses the work of Charles Long to elucidate this concept. Long shifts away from Geertz's notion of religion as 'establishing powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting modes and motivations' to an emphasis on '*modes of experience*' and '*the qualitative meaning of the nature of experience*'.

2 Many of the ideas and analyses in this paper draw on and expand work that I did in my previous books. See Lelwica 1999 and 2009.

Fourth, a number of traditional religious *ideas, paradigms* and *motifs* tacitly inform and support the Religion of Thinness. More specifically, its soteriology resurrects and recycles the misogynist, anti-body, other-worldly, and exclusivist aspects of patriarchal religion.

Ultimately, my analysis is not only critical of the Religion of Thinness; it also raises suspicions about any clear-cut divisions between 'religion', 'culture', and 'the body'. In fact, examining the functions, features, and ideologies embedded in this secular devotion gives us insight into the *constitutive role of the body in the production and apprehension of religious and cultural meanings*. This epistemic insight is invaluable because it reminds us that the seemingly transcendent truths of religion are, in the end, *human constructs*, variously created and developed through somatic, psychic, and social processes in response to the mystery, the suffering, the transience, and the beauty of life.

## **II. The quasi-religious function of the pursuit of thinness: confusing the boundaries between 'sacred' and 'secular' behavior**

I realize that the 'Religion of Thinness' isn't exactly a religion. But this raises the question: what *is* a 'religion'?

In his classic definition, Clifford Geertz describes religion as 'a cultural system' that humans create in their search for ultimate meaning. To illustrate the distinction between 'sacred' and 'secular' systems of meaning, Geertz notes the contrast between religious fasting and dieting. This distinction, Geertz argues, is based in these practices' diverging ends and the varying frames of meaning and dispositions they foster. Whereas culturally-inspired weight-reduction aims to achieve a 'finite' or 'conditioned' goal (presumably health or beauty), religious fasting seeks to attain an 'unconditioned end', like nirvana. Whereas dieting is tied to 'worldly' values, ascetic fasting derives its meaning and motivation in reference to transcendent truths, as well as a picture of 'a general order of existence', of 'the way things in sheer actuality are.' (Geertz 1973: 89, 98.)

At first glance, Geertz's distinction makes a lot of sense. You need only watch a TV commercial for a weight-loss product, read a popular women's magazine, join a diet club, listen to a schoolgirl insist she's 'too fat', or a doctor telling you to 'watch what you eat' to observe the *this-worldly* quality of the quest for thinness. Yet a closer look at the popular, professional, and experiential discourses on weight control suggests that something more is being negotiated in this pursuit, especially among its female participants. The more

one probes this ‘something more’, the more the distinction between what is ‘cultural’ and ‘religious’ begins to blur, and the more one sees that for many women, creating a slender body *is* a matter of all-pervading significance, an end whose achievement seems tantamount to ultimate salvation. In the words of an anorexic woman:

The more weight I lost, the more I became convinced that I was on the right way. I wanted to know what was beyond ordinary living. . . . Abstinence was just in preparation for some special revelations; it was like the things the saints and mystics had done. I wanted to be praised for being special. . . . to be held in awe for what I was doing. (Bruch 1988: 131, 136, 175.)

Over 40 years ago, Mary Douglas recognized the fluidity of the distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ motivations and behaviour. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas argued that ‘rituals of purity and impurity’, such as dietary restrictions, are central to religious behaviour. At the same time, she noted, ‘very little of our ritual behaviour is enacted in the context of religion’. Instead, ordinary practices of purification (such as refusing to eat certain foods) are the activities through which we generate a larger sense of value and purpose. Purely secular explanations of these practices (such as medical hygiene or aesthetics) reduce their symbolic meanings and functions by ignoring their multiple layers of significance, including their capacity to generate a picture of the ideal social and cosmic order and to unify individual experience within that grand scheme. (Douglas 1991: 2–3, 78–82.)

If Douglas’s insights blur the distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’, Catherine Bell’s work shows how the socialized body participates in creating this distinction. In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell uses the concept of ‘ritualization’ to highlight how meanings are *produced* in ritual activity (1992: 8, 67, 74).<sup>3</sup> The significance of ritual practices rests not in their *inherent* difference from other ways of acting, but in their capacity to *constitute* themselves as distinct from—and holier than—more mundane ways of acting. Such practices are rooted in what Bell calls ‘the ritualized body’, which is a body that has been socialized to look, feel, and act in culturally mandated ways. Religious meanings are thus ritually produced *through the body* in relation to prevailing

3 Bell’s theory highlights how rituals make meanings, rather than have or reflect meanings. Ritual practices do not dramatize the symbols they reference; rather they generate their meanings for practical purposes.

social norms and in reference to ‘realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.’<sup>4</sup>

Bell’s work offers a way of thinking about the pursuit of thinness as a quasi-religious quest through which a woman’s body is distinguished and sacralized, her fears and dreams are negotiated, and the prevailing social order is reproduced. As part of a cultural network of beliefs, images, and moral codes, weight-loss rituals don’t simply create an ‘ideal’ body; they also generate a worldview, an embodied strategy for self-definition, and a precarious way of coping with the problems and possibilities of life at this historical moment. These multiple levels of meaning are evident in Sallie Tisdale’s depiction of her life as a chronic dieter:

After a time, the number on the scale became my totem, more important than my experience—it was layered, metaphorical, metaphysical, and it had bewitching power. I thought if I could change that number I could change my life. . . I would weigh myself with foreboding, and my weight would determine how went the rest of my day, my week, my life. (Tisdale 1994: 17.)<sup>5</sup>

***The pro-Ana movement: anorexia as a religious quest***

The fuzzy line between ‘religious’ and ‘cultural’ motivations and meanings is evident in an Internet subculture known as ‘pro-Ana.’ ‘Ana,’ which is short for ‘anorexia,’ is the imaginary goddess of this movement. Everyday, untold

4 In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), Bell draws on the insights of Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault. From Gramsci, she uses the concept of ‘hegemony’ to highlight ‘the dominance and subordination that exist within people’s practical and un-self-conscious awareness of the world’ and their sense of ‘identity’ and ‘reality’ therein (pp. 82–3). Bell’s notion of the ‘ritualized body’ is close to Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘socially informed body,’ the body that has incorporated the moral, aesthetic, and scientific codes of its society into its everyday habits of being (p. 80). From Foucault, Bell picks up the idea that the body is basic to all socio-political relations of power (p. 202).

5 The multilayered significance of weight and body-size among many women calls into question the distinction Charles Taylor (2007) makes between a ‘secular’ (i.e. modern, disenchanting) worldview, and one that is ‘religious’ (i.e., pre-modern, enchanting). On the one hand, contemporary women who pursue a thinner body with religious-like fervour are chasing after a kind of Cartesian fantasy in which the ‘mind’ is separate from and in charge of ‘the body.’ On the other hand, the thinking of many women involved in this pursuit is highly enchanted in that external realities—including those as tangible as food and as empirical as a number on the scale—are imbued with profound meaning and have, in Tisdale’s words, ‘bewitching power.’

numbers of girls and women log on to pro-Ana websites in search of support for their weight-loss efforts. The pro-Ana worldview is captured in the 'Ana Creed':

I believe in Control, the only force mighty enough to bring order to the chaos that is my world.

I believe that I am the most vile, worthless and useless person ever to have existed on the planet, and that I am totally unworthy of anyone's time and attention.

I believe that other people who tell me differently are idiots. If they could see how I really am, then they would hate me almost as much as I do.

I believe in perfection and strive to attain it.

I believe in salvation through trying just a bit harder than I did yesterday.

I believe in bathroom scales as an indicator of my daily successes and failures.

I believe in hell, because I sometimes think that I am living in it.

I believe in a wholly black and white world, the losing of weight, recrimination for sins, abnegation of the body and a life ever fasting.

In addition to this creed, the pro-Ana subculture includes Ana prayers, Ana psalms, moonlight rituals, Ana Commandments, and 'Thinspirational' images (i.e., images of emaciated models; see Figure 1) that are used motivate Ana's disciples. Pro-Anas are dedicated to the 'higher purpose' of the fat-free body and support each others' tireless efforts to 'bring order out of chaos' by making their bodies disappear.<sup>6</sup>

However bizarre and troubling this subculture may seem, it's not altogether surprising. For the pro-Ana movement is nothing but the extreme

6 My discussion of pro-Ana draws on Lynell 2002, Barcum 2005, and Irvine 2005. For some examples of 'thinspirational images', see Ruud nd. A quick Google search for 'Pro-Ana' yields numerous other images and web pages devoted to both promoting and exposing the subculture.



Figure 1.

end of a broader *continuum* of troubled eating and body image in the US, where many girls and women who do not have eating disorders identify with the attitudes and activities of those who do. Studies show that as many as 80 percent of ten-year-old girls in the US have dieted, and the same percentage of women in their mid-fifties say they want to be thinner. More than three-quarters of healthy-weight adult women believe they are 'too fat', and nearly two-thirds of high school girls are on diets (compared to 16 percent of boys).<sup>7</sup>

Thus while only a fraction of the female population in the US are avidly pro-Ana, the majority wholeheartedly believe that they would be happier if they

were thinner. In the end, the perspectives and practices of Ana's disciples—including their religious overtones and characteristics—differ in degree, not in kind, from the thinking and habits of many 'normal' girls and women, who regularly monitor what they eat in the hopes of becoming noticeably slim.

### ***The sociohistorical context of the religion of thinness***

To understand any religious movement—whether 'cultural' or 'traditional' (to use a rather ambiguous distinction)—one must examine the *sociohistorical context* in which it takes root. In the US, a growing appreciation for the slim physique emerged in the early 1900s, when, according to historian Hillel Schwartz, the slender body became a sign of white, middle-class, Protestant,

7 The percentage for fourth-grade girls is based on a study conducted in the Chicago and San Francisco areas cited in Brumberg 1988: 32. The percentage for women in their fifties appears in McLaren & Kuh 2004: 35–55. See also Garner 1997: 30. Figures for healthy-weight adult women and high school girls are from Kilbourne 1999: 125, 134, and Bordo 2003.

Anglo-Saxon privilege, and the plump body was increasingly associated with poor, working-class, and/or ethnic immigrants (especially Jewish and Catholic women) from eastern and southern European countries. Whereas in the nineteenth century, the thin body was a sickly body, signifying poverty and social vulnerability, by the end of World War I, slenderness was increasingly associated with economic, ethnic, and even religious privilege. (Schwartz 1986: 142–3.)<sup>8</sup>

By the latter decades of the twentieth century, a variety of *social institutions* and *ideologies* converged to strengthen this association. While the federal government warned Americans that overeating represented ‘as critical a public-health concern as any before us’, the fashion industry began featuring models who made their predecessors look downright pudgy. When Twiggy appeared in magazines in the late 1960s, she was 5/7” and weighed 91 pounds. Seeking to profit from this trend, entrepreneurs catered to women’s growing anxiety about body size by offering an array of products to help them lose weight. Meanwhile, evangelical Christians wrote books—such as Charlie Shedd’s 1977 title, *Help Lord! The Devil Wants Me Fat!*—that revived the deadly sin of gluttony, demonized obesity, and insisted that God prefers us slim.<sup>9</sup>

Rooted in these sociohistorical trends, the Religion of Thinness today is also shaped by *economic interests* that promote a schizophrenic attitude towards eating. On the one hand, Americans are encouraged to ‘supersize’ their meals. On the McDonald’s website, the copy next to an image of the calorie-laden ‘Angus Third Pounder’ says: ‘Bigger is Better’ and ‘Satisfy Your Cravings.’ On the other hand, we are encouraged to restrict our appetites and consume low-fat, low-calorie, or diet foods. The schizoid messages—*restrict* and *indulge*—are seen on the covers of some women’s magazines, like the May issue of *Women’s World*, which promotes the ‘Water Cure’ diet right next to a feature called ‘cupcake bliss’.

These mixed messages feed off each other, giving rise to a situation where two-thirds of the adult population in the US is overweight, even as the vast majority wish they were thinner. The \$60 billion-a-year market for weight-loss products cashes in on this contradiction, while sales for highly processed foods—i.e., foods loaded with the sugar-fat-salt combination that

8 On the ‘Americanization’ of ethnic minority and working-class cultures through monitoring body size and eating habits, see Schwartz 1986: 248–9, Seid 1989: 91, 226 and Levenstein 1988: 104.

9 See Seid 1989: 85–7, 148, 191, 201, 237–8, 107, 105–6.



Figure 2.

pushes our evolutionary buttons and makes us want to eat more—are increasing.<sup>10</sup> No doubt, this increase contributes to the obesity epidemic in the US, which is the flip side of the Religion of Thinness. The economic interests that fuel both trends are evident in companies like Nestle, which market delicious chocolate with one hand, and weight loss programs with the other (Nestle bought Jenny Craig, one of the most popular and most profitable weight-loss programs in the US, with franchises in Canada, England, France and Australia, in 2006 for \$600 million).

***(Gender) indoctrination and the legacy of Eve***

That females are the primary targets of companies that subsidize the Religion of Thinness is evident in a magazine ad for Dannon Yogurt (see Figure 2), whose copy reads: ‘100 calories. 0% fat. Proof that there is God and she is a woman watching her figure.’ This ad not only assumes that women are more

10 This is the topic of David Kessler’s book *The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite* (2009). Kessler was Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the US from 1990–7. In her book, *Bodies* (2009), Susie Orbach observes the nexus beneath the apparent contradiction between the ‘obesity epidemic’ and the cultural obsession with thinness: ‘We need to insist on the links between the rise of obesity and the intensification of visual images of thin people; the introduction of long shelf-life foods saturated with fats, soy and corn syrup; the extraordinary growth of the diet industry; and the segmentation practiced by the food industry, who take out fat from one food, such as milk, and sell it back to us in another. These four events parallel the rise of obesity. You could produce a graph showing the rise in the sale of low-fat milk and another that showed rising obesity numbers and they would fit perfectly. Similarly, a graph of the growth of the diet industry would fit with one showing the rising numbers of larger people.’ (Orbach 2009: 126.)



likely than men to be worried about their figures; but it also implies that this anxiety has theological roots: if God ‘herself’ is counting calories, surely women should be doing the same.

A brief look at some of the images in *Nickelodeon Jr*, a magazine designed for young children that circulates for free in US preschool and day care centres, reveals the different kinds of relationships to the body that are encouraged among boys and girls (see Figure 3). An ad for an ADHD medication shows a boy wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and a baseball cap; he is holding a glove and looks like he is ready to play. The message is that for boys, the body is for being active. In the same magazine, an ad for a sugar-substitute features a girl dressed in a fairy princess outfit. She is laying on her back with a foot in the air, eating a treat that apparently has been made with this low-calorie sweetener. The message about the body here is equally clear: for girls, the emphasis is on appearance. Though the girl’s dress indicates she may be a ballet dancer, the fact that she is eating a treat made with an artificial sweetener underscores the importance of staying ‘feminine’, ‘pretty’, and ‘slim’. Ads for toys in this same magazine reinforce this gender/body socialization: those for boys (i.e., Batman and Star Wars characters) encourage physical action and adventure, while those for girls (i.e., Barbie and other kinds of dolls) promote a preoccupation with the body’s contours and surface. For boys, the body is a vehicle for activity; for girls, the body is a text—an image for others to see.

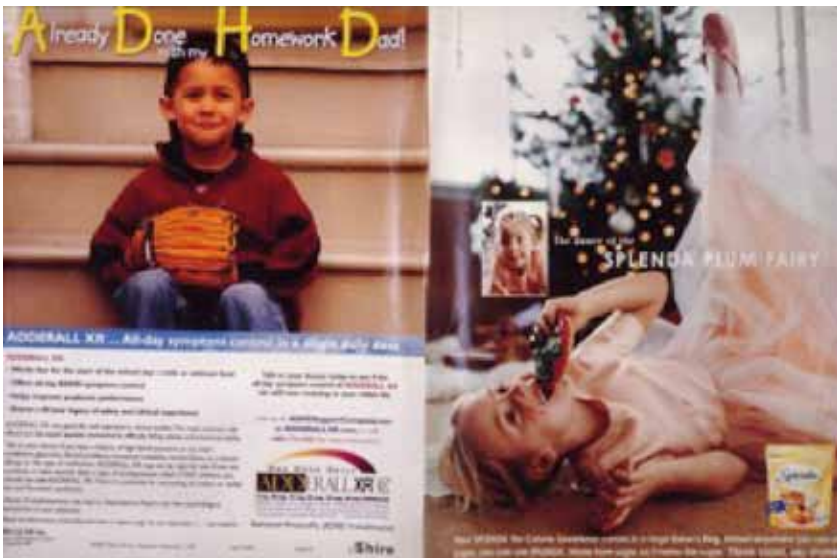


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

As a feminist scholar of religion, I can't help but notice the connection between commercial culture's directives for girls to define themselves by perfecting their bodies and long-standing religious ideologies that see women as representing the corporeal side of existence. The archaic notion that women are more physical, more carnal, more sexual than men, which is present in various religious traditions, is alive and well in the *objectification of female bodies* that is so common in the media today. This is another reason why women are the primary participants in the Religion of Thinness: they have been indoctrinated by a cultural/religious optic to see

themselves primarily as bodies. An ad for *Advertising Weekly* (see Figure 4), which features the close-up of a woman's cleavage, illustrates the extent to which some marketers go in reducing women to their bodies. Unashamedly, it endorses the common practice of using female flesh to sell things. The copy between the plump breasts reads: 'Advertising. We All Do it.'

Ads that promote the association between women and physicality are part of a long-standing history that I call the 'legacy of Eve'. Remember the Jewish/Christian creation myth about how sin enters the world? It is through the act of a woman eating—through Eve's disobedient appetite. For centuries church leaders returned to this story to find evidence that women are more driven by their physical urges than men, that their unruly bodies cannot be trusted and therefore require more supervision and are in greater need of salvation. The Religion of Thinness perpetuates the 'legacy of Eve' by casting female appetite as a disruptive, shameful force that needs to be supervised, regulated, and redeemed. Of course, the story of the Fall was not *intended* to send a message that women need to contain their appetites and be thin in order to be 'good'. Nonetheless, the *symbolism* of the story—particularly the association

between female appetite, shame, temptation, and sin—continues to have resonance for many women today.

***The morality of thinness***

The idea that women's appetites are untrustworthy and that eating is giving in to temptation is embedded in the 'morality' of the Religion of Thinness. This value system is reflected in ads that use moral discourse and/or religious characters to encourage consumers to buy their products. A magazine ad for Jello depicts a nun, licking her lips, as if she has just committed some transgression by giving in to the pleasure of eating (see Figure 5). The image represents appetite as a kind of sinful urge, and eating as a kind of guilty pleasure—a temptation we should try not to give in to (though the look on the nun's face also suggests that perhaps we cannot—and should not—help ourselves). A moralizing vocabulary is also prominent on the covers of *People* magazine, where celebrities' weight-loss efforts are characterized as *moral* victories or failures: 'Diet winners & sinners of the year' (January 1994), and 'Diet wars: who's winning, who's sinning' (January 1993).

Battling and conquering the body's appetites is a traditional religious motif that implicitly supports the moral codes of the Religion of Thinness. Historically, mastering one's physical urges has been central to the Christian



Figure 5.

life, for example, not because flesh and spirit are separate in classic Christian theology, but precisely because they are hierarchically *linked*. Thus one's physical body can be used to improve the state of one's soul. Medieval women who starved themselves were not simply trying to regulate their wayward appetites; they were also seeking to cultivate an *inner* state of holiness.<sup>11</sup> This state was visibly communicated by their frail and shriveled up figures, which were unseemly in the eyes of potential male suitors, but beautiful (or so they believed) in the eyes of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Similarly today, the presumed 'beauty' and 'goodness' of a woman's tight and trim figure is linked to the perception that slenderness manifests an interior state of discipline and virtue.

The fuzzy line between 'religious' and 'cultural' motivations and meanings is evident in the discourses of anorexic and bulimic women. A former anorexic explains:

When I was hungry, I felt like I was living right. I felt better when I would eat only fruits and vegetables, even when I was hungry. Pretty soon I was able to convince my mind and my body that such feelings of purity were much better than any fattening food. I was on my way to becoming the invulnerable perfection that I really craved. . . I believed that the kind of food that went into my body had the power to absolve or disgrace me, and I would feel these feelings deeply depending on what I had ingested. (Manlowe 1994: 93.)

The popular cultural belief that the 'good body' is a *controlled* body—a body that reverses the sin of Eve—is tacitly linked to another Christian idea, namely, that suffering and sacrifice are salvific. Rooted in late medieval theology, this 'atonement theory' has been especially applied to women, for whom selflessness and self-denial are supposedly natural virtues. Though most women today do not describe their weight-loss efforts as 'redemptive', many experi-

11 See Carolyn Walker Bynum's classic study on medieval Christian women's fasting: *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food for Medieval Women* (1987). In *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (1998), Theresa Shaw notes the perceived correlations between the fasting female body's exterior appearance and its interior virtue in early Christianity. See especially pp. 22, 32–3, 135, 236, 243–4, 250.

12 Susie Orbach (2009: 171) makes a similar observation about the connection between physical appearance and internal moral states: 'Almost without exception, how individuals think and feel about their bodies has come to play an ever larger part in their notion of what is right or wrong. They believe that their bodies are a physical enunciation of their true state of being.'

ence the pain of hunger or the burn of a workout as evidence that they are on the 'right' path. Or they feel 'bad' for eating the 'wrong' food, or eating 'too much', and they may 'atone' for such 'sins' by purifying/purging themselves with laxatives, vomiting, starving, and/or exercising excessively.

A number of ads for low-fat or diet foods use explicitly moral language to associate thinness with virtue. For example, 'French Twists' pastries, advertised in *Weight Watcher's Magazine*, are described as a 'Sinful Treat'. Similarly, the 'Protein Plus Protein Bar' promises to be 'Sinfully Delicious', and the 'Meso-Tech' energy bar is described as 'Guilt-Free Chocolate'.

However silly, this moral rhetoric is also seductive because it fosters a sense of virtue, purity, and self-worth without requiring one to delve into the deeper issues of what it means to act ethically in our complicated world. Instead, a woman can deem herself 'good' if she eats foods that are 'good'—which of course means foods that help her be thin. In the face of larger decisions that have no neat and tidy answers, this dogmatic, clear-cut morality system not only helps a woman to feel in control, it also allows her to feel as though she is acting responsibly, even if her sphere of influence is reduced to the size of her body. The tragic upshot of this 'morality' is that it distracts attention away from the most pressing ethical challenges of our time—of which there are plenty.

### ***Rituals of thinness***

The moral codes of the Religion of Thinness are deeply etched in the *rituals* women perform in their efforts to downsize their bodies. Counting calories, carbohydrates, and fat grams, separating the 'good' foods from the 'forbidden', stepping on the scale every morning, running on the treadmill to 'burn off' dessert—these are just some of the rites through which the 'truth' of thinness is planted deep within women's bodies and psyches, where it starts to feel natural and thus beyond question.

Like rituals of traditional religion, weight-loss rituals work by turning mundane, everyday activities into movements with transcendent meaning. Activities as ordinary as walking or biking become opportunities to connect with a higher purpose: the 'ultimate value' being skinny. Some surveys suggest that the majority of American women who exercise do so to lose weight.<sup>13</sup> My point here is not that exercise is bad. On the contrary, I have argued else-

13 For example, in a survey conducted by *Essence* magazine on issues related to troubled eating and body hatred, 74.5 per cent of respondents said that they exercise to burn calories. See Villarosa 1994: 19.

where that exercise can be good for both ‘body’ and ‘spirit’. The problem with exercise in the Religion of Thinness is that its primary aim is not fitness but weight-loss. A growing body of research indicates that the thinness and fitness are not automatically linked and that good health is possible at a variety of sizes.<sup>14</sup>

What’s more, exercise that’s motivated primarily by weight-loss perpetuates an ironically disembodied, future-oriented soteriology. Like the otherworldly orientation of certain forms of traditional religion, this forward-looking mindset encourages women to envision their fulfillment as a distant dream. ‘When I die and go to heaven’ becomes ‘When I finally lose enough weight’—perhaps by going on *Shape* magazine’s ‘Happy Diet’ (Figure 6). In this soteriology, the happiness for which humans long is something you have to look forward to—something that could happen ‘in just one month’, when (as the title of another *Shape* article suggests) you ‘Get back into your skinny jeans’—rather than something you can experience *here and now*. ‘Happiness’ is the ‘Bikini Body’ you can achieve—in ‘just 4 weeks!’ The assumption is that the body you presently have is *not* okay.

Industries that sponsor the Religion of Thinness simultaneously promote and prey on this assumption by proffering an abundance of products designed to supplement women’s ritualizing efforts to eradicate the shame of Eve. Some of these products are rather creative, like the ‘Cellulite Solution’ or the ‘Chews to Lose’ weight-loss gum. Some are kind of amusing, like the ‘Think Like A

14 I have written about the spiritual benefits of exercise on my blogs with *Psychology Today* and the *Huffington Post*. See <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/bloggers/michelle-lelwica> or <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-lelwica>. Much of this research is cited by Linda Bacon in *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Your Weight* (2008). See also Gaesser 2002 and essays in Rothblum & Solovay 2009. *The Health at Every Size Journal* (now out of print, but formerly published by Gürze Books) was a helpful resource for this perspective. See also Campos 2004, Oliver 2005, Alley & Chang 2007, Campos *et al.* 2006, Saguy & Riley 2005, and Hellmich 2005. In *Bodies*, Susie Orbach makes an interesting observation about the cultural influence on widespread assumptions about the dangers of obesity: ‘There is . . . clear evidence that the most protective weight for health purposes is a BMI of 27.5 (if one accepts the BMI at all)—a figure that is presently in the recently designated overweight category. Interestingly, overweight people who exercise now have a lower mortality rate than thin people who do the same. So one is led to wonder why thin has erroneously become the gold standard for health. Could it be that even though the evidence does not support the idea of thinness as healthy and good, the overwhelming power of today’s visual aesthetic has affected even doctors and medical researchers? The social phenomenon of fads and scares has been well explored. The so-called obesity epidemic is one of them.’ (Orbach 2009: 127.)

Thin Person Tape Series' (also available in Spanish). And some are an insult to our intelligence if we take time to think about them—like weight-loss supplements that promise we can 'Lose Weight Naturally' by taking a pill.

Implicitly, the logic of commercial weight-loss rhetoric draws on classic Christian concepts like 'sin' and 'redemption' to create a hierarchical ordering of bodies. As post-colonial theologian Sharon Betcher points out, the Augustinian binary of 'brokenness/wholeness' is embedded in the dominant commercial culture optic that constructs 'disabled' or 'defective'

bodies in contrast to those it deems 'normal' or 'whole' (Betcher 2007: 3–11, 65, 109). The ritual pursuit of the 'flawless' body is encouraged by a consumer-driven, media-saturated culture that renders the 'less-than-ideal' (or 'fallen') female body in need of constant improvement/redemption.

Ads that peddle weight-loss products would be amusing were it not for the destructive attitude towards the body they foster. This attitude is reflected (and promoted) in the violent language that's frequently used to sell weight-loss products. Beneath the image of a fragmented, bikini-clad female body, the small print on an ad for 'Fat Burner' instructs you to 'Show those pesky fat cells no mercy.' It sounds like a line from the Medieval Inquisition! A number of ads and images encourage us to 'blast' or 'burn' the fat from our bodies—as if it were an enemy that needs to be exterminated, a heresy to be burned at the stake. There's even an Internet fat-burners support group—called 'Inner Circle'—so you don't have to fight this demon alone.

Given the symbolic nature of such ritual discourse and the behaviour it encourages, we might ask: *Why is fat so scary? What does it represent?* Within the Religion of Thinness, fat symbolizes the chaos or messiness of our lives: the problems, the uncertainties, the disappointments, in short, everything that eludes our control. In essence, fighting this 'enemy'—'burning it off'—fosters a sense of power that many women feel is missing in their lives.



Figure 6.

The discourses of women who have suffered from body image and eating problems reveal that many do in fact see weight-loss as a means of empowerment. 'I was a goddess in my own little world,' a former anorexic-bulimic woman recalls, 'meting out punishment and rewards for evil and virtuous behaviour' (Kahler 1993: 229–30). Another former anorexic describes the sense of dominion she derived from her self-denial:

... checking in at ninety-one pounds, I thrived on hunger, uneasy when I was not satiated with my one-hundred calorie meal. I felt weightless, hollow, as if I could pass through tangible objects like a ghost. I was supernatural; removed from the cruel world, untouched by reality. I had conquered reality. (Sender 1993: 29–30.)

Notice how, for this woman, regulating the body generates a sense of a 'higher power', and this is *a sense that she feels in her body* (it is not just a mental construct). Notice, too, that the *sense of power* she generates by refusing to eat poses no threat to the world around her; in fact, it depends on her obedience to the status quo she seeks to transcend.<sup>15</sup> Yet even bulimic women, who appear to be 'out-of-control', say their purging rituals give them the *feeling*—the psycho-somatic-emotional *sensation*—of being in charge. One woman said that vomiting after eating gave her a sense of 'accomplishment' and 'relief'; after flushing the toilet, she would look in the mirror and tell herself: 'Everything is under control' (Browne 1993: 87).

The idea that you can take charge of your life by controlling your body is not-so-subtly promoted in the before-and-after pictures that often accompany ads for weight-loss products. Through cliché conventions (i.e., women in the 'before' pictures are typically slouching and look unhappy) such images beckon with the promise of being 'born again' through a thinner body.

Seeing this promise requires a kind of 'religious' imagination (implicitly, for those who are drawn to the possibility of such transformation; and explicitly, for the scholar who analyzes it). For it is the religious imagination that—through symbols, rituals, myths, moral codes, and soteriological aspirations—envisions *an alternative way of being*, the possibility of becoming a 'new creation' (to use Paul's terms) amid the pains and problems

15 Several feminist philosophers who incorporate the insights of Michel Foucault (particularly his understanding of 'disciplinary power') have observed how the 'empowerment' women seek and experience through their weight-loss efforts depends on their obedience to (and disempowerment by) dominant cultural norms. See especially Barky 1990. See also Bordo 1993, Haug 1987 and 1992.



of life as it is. In the Religion of Thinness, many women pursue this ‘born-again’ potential with the evangelical fervour and literal mindset of a religious fundamentalist. One recovering anorexic woman described her steadfast commitment to dieting as ‘a replacement religion . . . with its own set of commandments and rituals.’ ‘I was so devoted,’ she explained, ‘that I was practically ready to give up my life for it’ (Kelly 2008: 9).

It’s not just radical transformation—the possibility of being ‘born again’—that women seek through weight-loss rituals. There is also a yearning for basic security and order embedded in the pursuit of thinness.

I found the image in Figure 7 many years ago when I was doing ‘research’ (i.e., reading women’s magazines) for an article I was writing. For a long time, I didn’t understand what a big beefy man closing a heavy vaulted door had to do with feminine products. Then one day I was reading an essay by Anne Spalding entitled ‘The Place of Human Bodiliness in Theology’. In it, she quotes Augustine’s reference to menstruation as symbolizing ‘flood of chaos’ (Spalding 1999: 72). I suddenly understood the meaning of the image. Surely this door would contain such a disaster.

The supposed need to get women’s unpredictable, chaos-prone bodies ‘under control’ is not confined to the Religion of Thinness. Women are constantly reminded of the need to ritually erase all traces of their physical evolution. Instead of appreciating the increasing gravity of our bodies as we age, we are encouraged to defy, contain, cover, transcend and/or conquer the corporeal aspect of our existence.

Rituals are the most embodied aspect of religion. By enlisting our senses through somatic activities—eating, drinking, touching, moving, smelling, singing, bowing, breathing—rituals bring our ‘bodies’ and ‘minds’ together,



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

if you were thinner'. For many viewers, these images function as modern-day icons, revealing the 'truth' about what it means to be a beautiful, good, successful woman. Celebrity models and actresses are the female 'saints' of this post-modern cultural devotion, though, compared to historical Christians, most of their worshipers are not very conscious of the power these icons have to shape their self-understanding and motivate behaviour (Miles 1985: 7–9, 128).

Indeed, most Americans do not pay much attention to the lessons these images offer; they view them merely as 'entertainment'. In November 2009, however, the ad in Figure 8 caught the attention of many because the woman's body has been photoshopped to the point of being surreal, if not grotesque. There was some outcry against Ralph Lauren, and the model herself (who was later fired for being 'too big') publicly admitted that she did not recognize herself in the image.

One doesn't need a PhD to recognize that images like this are artificially produced through airbrushing, photoshopping, and other digitally 'correc-

creating a kind of *muscle memory* of the truths they aim to foster. Through their formulaic, repetitious, embodied nature, rituals plant the socio-symbolic meanings they produce under our skin, beyond our conscious awareness, so that through our daily choices and actions we participate in—and occasionally resist—the reproduction of the world we inhabit.

### *Iconography of the Religion of Thinness*

The ritual crusade for a thinner body would have little power to get under women's skins without images to inspire the pursuit of the ideal. These images are *everywhere* in the US today—at the news-stand, on billboards, in grocery stores, on the Internet, in waiting rooms and in living rooms. This omnipresence ensures the hegemony of the myth that 'you would be happier

tive' measures. But this recognition is often not enough to protect women from the desire to look like the ideal. This is partly because there are so few alternative visions of womanhood circulating in mass culture today.<sup>16</sup> But it's also because the images seduce through *nonverbal* instruction: the pictures do not just *tell* us—they *show* us—the importance of being slender. By engaging women's somatic senses (in this case, visual pleasure), this instruction produces a kind of 'knowledge' that can override linguistic reasoning.

In effect, the iconography of the Religion of Thinness and the myths it perpetuates appeal to women on a more-than-cerebral level. On an *existential* level, they hook women by capturing their imaginations, providing a model of who they might become and suggesting a purpose that gives their lives meaning. On an embodied level, these images stimulate women's aesthetic and somatic sensibilities, giving them a way to see, cultivate, feel, and dwell in the 'beauty' and 'truth' of the story they tell. The mythical 'perfection' of the models' bodies speaks to women's yearnings for self-definition in the face of life's irresolvable mysteries, possibilities, and problems, as well as their desires for recognition and respect in a society that measures their worth through their bodies.

Producers of these images are aware of the way 'supermodels' function as *role models* in the eyes of many of their viewers. Magazines frequently run articles about celebrity models that foster intrigue and devotion, especially among young women. An issue of *Young and Modern* tells readers what model agents look for, how the top ten 'supermodels' made it, what a typical day in the life of a model is like, and whether they could be 'the next Cindy, Kristy, or Kate' (Fellingham 1993). That magazine makers understand the awe and reverence these celebrity icons elicit is evident in a column *Elle* magazine ran in the mid-1990s called 'The Lives of Supermodels'—a parody on *The Lives of Saints*. Focused on the supermodel Niki Taylor, the copy of one column reads:

The thirteenth child of a fisherman in a small village near Cadiz. Left school when discovered by God in a restaurant; at seventeen, donned the sacred vestments of her order; devoted life to illuminating the holy books, though open to the right movie role (Fellingham 1993).

16 In many ways, these images bear the 'stamp of sameness' that Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno identify as a tool in the creation of a totalitarian regime. See 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,' excerpted in *During* 1993: 31–41.

Taylor's 'miracles' include: 'Stop[ping] traffic at 14<sup>th</sup> and Broadway' and 'Liv[ing] on water'.

However amusing, this example of secular 'hagiography' underscores the important role celebrity icons play in contemporary women's search for something transcendent in a disenchanted world. In many ways, the quest for the holy grail of Thinness can be seen as a 'secular strategy for re-enchantment' (Landy & Saler 2009: 1), one that combines the rationalizing, measured, and formulaic modes of modern life with a lingering popular yearning for connection with sacred and saving powers—powers that transcend the tangible world and fill a void in the human heart.<sup>17</sup> Idealized images of bodies without bulges appeal to modern women's competing needs for a sense of agency, self-determination, and mastery (on the one hand), and inspiration, awe, and beauty (on the other).

Although thinness is primarily a Euro-American ideal, the past few decades have seen a growing presence of 'models' of colour in this iconographic tradition. One may be tempted to see this trend as an affirmation of cultural diversity. However, a lot of the 'diverse' images reinforce racist/patriarchal stereotypes, such as coloured women's supposed proximity to nature and/or their sexual availability. The effect of these images, then, is not to raise consciousness about issues of race and culture but rather to increase profits by appealing to a more heterogenous group of consumers. Cultural critic bell hooks refers to this marketing strategy as the 'commodification of otherness': one of patriarchal capitalism's techniques for spicing up 'the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' in order to preserve its hegemony' (hooks 1992: 72).

Even when racist/sexist ideologies are not invoked to promote the Religion of Thinness, a white-Western norm for female body size is automatically assumed. In many African countries, the woman in the 'before' photo in Figure 9 would be considered more beautiful than the same woman in the 'after' shot. This reminds us that slenderness is *a culturally specific ideal masquerading as a universal norm*.<sup>18</sup>

17 In her memoir of her struggle with anorexia and bulimia, Marya Hornbacher (1999: 118) reflects on the inner emptiness that she and others like her experienced: '... we were hungry and lost and scared and young and we needed religion, salvation, something to fill the anxious hollow in our chests. Many of us sought it in food and thinness.'

18 The tightly contoured female body delineates an elite white-Western vision of womanhood, produced and circulated by the popular media and employed for commercial purposes. This ideal of femininity is, to borrow an insight from postcolonial

Fueled by an increasingly globalized economy, mass cultural images export the narrow white-Western ideal to the far corners of the earth, spreading the desire to be skinny to cultures that have historically allowed for a variety of body shapes and sizes. Studies show that exposure to images of thin Euro-American models of femininity fosters anxiety about body size among women in non-Western contexts. In some of the countries where the emaciated white-Western ideal now circulates, a sizable portion of the population has difficulty finding enough to eat.<sup>19</sup>

The Indian version of *Elle*, a women's fashion magazine based in New York City, features models who are uniformly stick-thin. Though preoccupation with this body-size norm is not *verbally* prominent on its covers, the importance of slenderness is *visually* unambiguous in India's *Elle*. And the magazine's covers feature articles promoting weight-consciousness, such as 'Are You a Fat-Skinny?' 'Under the Skin of Cellulite,' 'Lose 5 Pounds in 5 Days,' and 'Drop a



Figure 9.

- feminist Medya Yegenoglu, 'a particular masquerading as a universal,' enabling 'one culture's coding of [female] bodies [to become] . . . the template through which all [women's] bodies are conjured.' See Yegenoglu 2002: 87, 93.
- 19 See Becker *et al.* 2002 and Shuriquie 1999. In *Culture and Weight Consciousness* (1997), psychiatrist Merbat Nasser says eating and body-image problems are becoming increasingly common in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America, especially among women in these contexts who identify with Western cultural norms circulated through the media. The following studies validate Nasser's study: Akan & Grilo 1995, Cogan *et al.* 1996, Lee *et al.* 1996, Gunewardene, Huon & Zheng 2001, Al-Subaie 2000, Wang *et al.* 1999, and Ung, Lee & Kua 1997. For a review of the literature on eating problems from cross-cultural perspectives, see Soh, Touyz & Surgenor 2006. This review discusses mixed findings about the similarities and differences of women's eating problems and their causes in diverse cultures.

Dress Size Fast'. In the South African version of *Shape* magazine, preoccupation with body size is explicitly promoted through both rhetoric and pictures that differ very little from those on the covers of the US version of this text.

The missionary exportation of white-Western norms for female body size to women in the two-thirds world resembles the spread of European Christianity during the colonial period. In both cases, a white-Western superiority complex converts a specific cultural/religious norm into a universal ideal, which then serves as a tool for commercial expansion. In both cases, the oppressive effects of such imperialism are camouflaged and sugar-coated as aspects of a 'higher' mission (whether saving souls or perfecting bodies). And in both cases, a network of beliefs, rituals, images, and moral codes are deployed to help converts *internalize* the ideal and thereby perpetuate their own colonization.<sup>20</sup> In both cases, a one-size-fits-all ideology creates the myth that there is only one path to salvation.

### **Critiquing the 'ultimate' value of thinness**

To challenge this paradigm and the tunnel vision it perpetuates in the Religion of Thinness, we need to ask a few critical questions: Why is the 'ultimate body' necessarily slender? Who authorizes this narrow doctrine of 'perfection'? Who benefits when we adopt it as dogma? Is there really only one slender path to the health, happiness, and beauty we seek? Why not appreciate our physical diversity, rather than see it as a problem that needs correction?

These critical questions open the door to some even 'bigger' issues: To what should we be devoted? What is (or ought to be) our 'ultimate' purpose? Which values should we seek to foster? Which truths affirm? What kinds of rituals give us the stability we need to transform pain and cope with uncertainty? Where can we find beauty and inspiration? What role models, symbols, and stories deserve our attention? What insights, experiences, and/or activities make us feel sane, healthy, happy, and whole amid life's constant and often messy permutations?

As these questions suggest, my deconstruction of the religion/culture binary in my analysis of the Religion of Thinness does not negate the value of re-

20 I draw on a number of post-colonial feminist insights to make the comparisons in this paragraph, particularly those from the following essays and books: Donaldson 2002: esp. 45–8; Kwok Pui-lan 2005 and 2002: esp. 63, Betcher 2007 and Fiorenza 2007.

religious questioning and meaning making. In fact, my critique of the Religion of Thinness engages in this very process insofar as it suggests that some purposes are more ‘ultimate’ than others—not because they are intrinsically holier or higher, not because they transcend the ‘truths’ of the tangible world, but because, on a very practical and embodied level, they promote human and planetary well being, while providing a means for interrogating the ‘truths’ of all religious and cultural scripts.

The image in Figure 10 returns us to the question—What exactly is a ‘religion’?—which, you may have noticed, I have not answered definitively. Let’s have a closer look at this image.

Notice its quasi-religious motifs: 1) the mystical, shadowy, blue-hazy light; 2) the triptych, or altar-like frame that the three images form; 3) the woman’s pose, which, while not exactly a crucifixion posture, seems to be reaching for something transcendent.

In the copy in the corner, these allusions to religion become explicit:

This is not about guilt. It’s about joy. Strength. The revival of the spirit. I come here seeking redemption in sweat. And it is here I am forgiven my sinful calories. Others may never understand my dedication. But for me, fitness training is something much more powerful than exercise. It is what keeps my body healthy. It is what keeps my mind clear. And it is where I learn the one true lesson. To believe in myself. Avia



Figure 10.

The ad implies that this 'new religion' is a welcome substitute for its traditional counterparts, which presumably promote more guilt than joy, and which denigrate rather than celebrate the body. Yet the emphasis on *sinful calories* and *redemptive sweat* suggests that this 'new religion' hasn't really moved on much from its patriarchal predecessors. Perhaps the important question, then, is not *whether* the pursuit of physical perfection is 'a New Religion', but *what kind* of 'religion' it turns out to be.

Ultimately, by exposing the line between 'culture' and 'religion' to be fluid rather than fixed, my analysis implies that there is no essential 'religious' substance and that religious truths do not come from on high. Rather, they are *produced from below*—through the somatic-psychic-social processes whereby humans generate and experience a sense of what is most important in life. Precisely this insight equips us to recognize that some 'ultimate purposes' are simply too thin to be worthy of our devotion, and that we would do well to invest our religious/meaning-making energies in the creation of myths, images, rituals, moral codes and soteriologies that help us appreciate both the body's creative potential and the diversity of truth and beauty it produces and perceives.

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