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### **Eating as a Gendered Act: Christianity, Feminism, and Reclaiming the Body**

“...it is necessary that a religion that throbs with incarnational redemption should at last release its followers from the prison of their own skins that the traditions have made...[I]f the body is as important in the process of redemption as the Christian faith has said it is, then our task is to declare the good news of the body.”

--Lisa Isherwood, *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*<sup>1</sup>

In current society, eating is most definitely a gendered act: that is, what we eat and how we eat it factors in both the construction and the performance of gender. Furthermore, eating is a gendered act with consequences that go far beyond whether one orders a steak or a salad for dinner. In the first half of this paper, I identify the dominant myths surrounding both female and male eating, and I show that those myths contribute in important ways to cultural constructions of male and female appetites more generally speaking. In the second half, I argue that the Christian church should share feminism’s perception of these current cultural myths as fundamentally disordered, and I claim that the Christian traditions of fasting and feasting present us with a concrete means to counter those damaging conceptions and reclaim a healthy attitude toward our hunger.

#### **I. Food, Hunger, and Power**

It seems clear that certain types of food (as well as certain patterns of eating) are more closely associated with women than with men, and vice versa. In the following two sections, I examine both what these associations are and what they tell us about cultural conceptions of male and female hunger in general.

First, however, it’s important to note that cultural myths are not meant to characterize or capture the individual experiences of many—or even most—of the people living in the culture. Rather than describing actual, lived experiences, cultural myths tell persuasive stories about how things are for everyone *else*. In so doing, they present a “norm” against which people in the

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<sup>1</sup> New York: New York University Press. 2000.

culture evaluate themselves and their behavior (to determine, for instance, whether their teeth are white enough or their children precocious enough). Second, different cultural myths target different segments of a society; the myths I address in this paper are aimed primarily at white, middle-class American men and women still actively engaged in the process of constructing their own gender identities.<sup>2</sup> Cultural myths generally grip us most fiercely at crucial stages of personal formation, such as early childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood; as we age, and especially as we pass middle age, they begin to lose some of their hold.

The central cultural myths that surround male eating, then, purport to relate what and how the “real” man eats. In short, the story goes, he eats anything he wants, whenever he wants, and without suffering consequences more negative than indigestion. According to cultural mythology, the manly man can follow up a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs with a half-pound hamburger for lunch and a few beers watching the game later that afternoon...all without thought, without guilt, and without worry of weight gain (since, on the one hand, eating this way isn’t seen as likely to lead to weight gain, and, on the other, it’s no big deal if the man does gain a few pounds.)

At the heart of the myth of male eating is the idea that the activity of eating requires no real thought on the man’s part. Men get hungry, and so they eat. Moreover, they’re hungry most of the time, and they need substantial food to fill their appetites—food like “manwiches” and steak, nachos and cheesy fries.<sup>3</sup> Because satisfying manly appetites requires frequent and robust eating, men don’t have to feel badly about how often or how much they eat. In fact, male eating actually demonstrates strength and virility. “Power Up Your Diet!” reads a headline on the cover of a recent *Men’s Health* magazine: “12 Perfect Muscle Foods”.<sup>4</sup> All-you-can-eat buffets don’t present a temptation to the “real” man—they pose a challenge.

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<sup>2</sup> There’s a case to be made for these myths being myths of Western culture, broadly speaking, but I’ll be focusing on American culture more narrowly both because it presents the paradigm of the myths I’m describing and also because the Christian diet industry I’ll be discussing later is an almost entirely American phenomenon.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Tenth Anniversary Edition. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2000), Carol Adams points out that male eating is also constructed around eating meat: “Being a man in our culture is tied to identities that they either claim or disown—what “real” men do and don’t do. “Real” men don’t eat quiche. It’s not only an issue of privilege, it’s an issue of symbolism. Manhood is constructed in our culture, in part, by access to meat eating and control of other bodies” (17).

<sup>4</sup> March 2006.

On a deeper level, however, this license to consume actually masks an important set of food taboos. There is an entire class of foods men are strongly discouraged from eating: namely, anything “light”, fat-free, or overtly health-conscious—in short, foods that are coded as “feminine”. The thought of a man satisfying his hunger with a small container of fat-free yogurt for lunch, complemented with nothing more than carrot sticks and a Diet Coke, seems laughable precisely because it violates some of our most deeply held beliefs about male appetite. Major soft drink companies have spent millions of dollars over the last ten years or so carefully trying to market drinks like “Zero Coke” and “Pepsi One”—calorie free (or light) sodas—to men who won’t drink anything labeled “diet”. Interestingly, none of the new drinks been terribly successful; the image of the man who can eat (and drink) whatever he wants still dominates consumer consciousness, despite the growing pressure on men to fit a certain standard of physical attractiveness. Being almost constantly hungry—and hungry for a substantial quantity of food—is one of the primary characteristics of the “manly” man.

A lack of appetite, then, would pose a serious problem for a man. Yet, a complete lack of appetite is precisely what *women* are encouraged to strive for. One of the most prevalent myths of current Western culture is that women should eat as little as possible and constantly work to consume even less. The reason provided for this, of course, is that over-consumption leads directly to excessive weight gain: “A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips”, as the saying goes. In a culture where fat is seen not just as undesirable but as sinful—a culture in which being overweight is strongly associated with laziness and stupidity—the fear of being fat has extremely strong motivational power. This fear gains momentum, moreover, when what constitutes being overweight is determined largely by social context. Medical standards for obesity are generally not the operative force in women’s evaluation of their own weight. Studies show that, in fact, women consistently *overestimate* their level of obesity; they’re encouraged in this, perhaps, by popular weight-loss clinics whose official height/weight goals drop as much as twenty pounds below mainstream medical models based on the lowest mortality rates.<sup>5</sup>

The necessary connection drawn between food consumption and unacceptable weight gain thus makes eating an inherently dangerous activity for women. It also constructs female

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., the charts Sharlene Hesse-Biber presents on pages 64-5 of *Am I Thin Enough Yet?: the cult of thinness and the commercialization of identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

eating as an activity that involves a great deal of thought and planning, in sharp opposition to the myth of male eating. Women are taught to count every calorie that passes their lips for fear of what will happen if they don't rigidly control their food intake. Men, on the other hand, are largely exempt from this constant self-scrutiny not because they don't actually gain weight, but because they're not *seen* as being in danger of gaining weight every time they put something in their mouths.

“Properly” feminine eating thus involves minimal consumption, as demonstrated in the fact that foods marketed to women (and marketed as “healthy”) often contain no fat, no sugar, and as few calories as possible. So, for example, Nouriche Light, a popular yogurt breakfast drink, is advertised as a satisfying breakfast for women “on the go”—despite the fact that it contains less than one tenth of the recommended per-diem calorie intake for a healthy adult.<sup>6</sup> If a woman follows up this no-fat, low-calorie breakfast with a lunch of salad greens and no-fat cottage cheese and a Lean Cuisine or Weight Watchers dinner—and if she washes this all down with water or no-calorie diet drinks—she'll end her day having consumed approximately half the calories her body needs for optimal functioning.

She'll also be hungry. In *Notting Hill*, Julia Roberts plays a movie star who falls in love with bookstore-owning Hugh Grant; during one of the movie's more striking exchanges, the central characters are competing to see who has the worst lot in life. Roberts mentions the cost of fame and fortune, and then comments that she's been on a constant diet since she was nineteen. “Basically,” she says, “That means I've been hungry now for a decade.” The moment is poignant, but it's clearly meant to underscore the downside of super-stardom. In actual fact, however, that statement epitomizes the fate of any woman who lives up to the cultural ideal of female eating. The myth of female eating involves subordinating appetite to the point of constant hunger—and near starvation.

A complete recounting of the myth of female eating, however, includes not just the denial of hunger but also the surrender to it that's constructed as almost inevitable—a surrender that results in women gorging themselves on high-calorie, high-fat foods like chocolate, ice cream,

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<sup>6</sup> 170 calories of the recommended 2000 calories per-diem. Coca-Cola also recently launched a new energy drink for women: in contrast to their energy drink for men (Full Throttle) which contains 200 calories per can, “Tab Energy” contains no sugar, no fat, and no carbohydrates. The tagline for the ads is “Because women need a different kind of energy”—apparently, a kind of energy that isn't fueled by actual *nutrition*.

and cheesecake. Women do their best to resist, the story goes, but when hunger “wins”, they devour huge quantities of the sweet, gooey, greasy foods constructed as most tempting to the appetite. According to cultural mythology, women need to maintain rigid control over their hunger, because when they let their guard down, they binge.<sup>7</sup>

Female eating thus centers on an unending struggle with temptation posed by the mere *existence* of physical appetite.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, hunger is **the** central enemy in the myth of female eating, as the image accompanying a recent article in *Women’s Health* magazine vividly demonstrates. Two piglets gobble food out of a dog dish next to bold black letters that read: “Special Report: When Hunger Strikes.”<sup>9</sup> The implication is clear: when hunger strikes, women pig out. If binge eating is the inevitable consequence of giving in to hunger, however, then responding to hunger—that is, *eating*—becomes inherently problematic. The “perfect” woman simply doesn’t experience hunger. The struggle to achieve this impossible state occupies a great deal of the time, energy, and money of women who internalize this myth...at the very same time that it sets them up for inevitable failure.

## II. Hungering for Nothing, Hungering for Everything

On current constructions of female eating, then, thoughts of food occupy a prominent place in a woman’s life—from the moment she wakes until the moment she goes to bed again (feeling hungry and/or guilty about what she’s consumed), much of her day involves either denying or surrendering shamefully to appetite. This construction is, obviously, problematic in and of itself (especially as it contributes to and fuels potentially fatal eating disorders), and I’ll

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<sup>7</sup> The movie *Miss Congeniality* illustrates this myth with particular vividness. In one scene, beauty contestants fight their urge to eat a pizza that Sandra Bullock’s character brings into the weight room. Once they capitulate, they lose all control, with the consequence that, in the next scene, they’re engaged in an orgy of eating, drinking, and dancing at a night club.

<sup>8</sup> Some theorists offer economic explanations for this struggle: Susan Bordo, for example, advocates Robert Crawford’s view that “an unstable, agonistic construction of personality is produced by the contradictory structure of economic life. On the one hand, as producers of goods and services we must sublimate, delay, repress desires for immediate gratification; we must cultivate a work ethic. On the other hand, as consumers we must display a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse; we must hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction. The regulation of desire thus becomes an ongoing problem, as we find ourselves continually besieged by temptation, while socially condemned for overindulgence” (199).

<sup>9</sup> *Women’s Health*, March 2006.

argue that current constructions of male eating are similarly problematic. Yet, the central goal of this paper is not to address myths of male and female eating for their own sake. Rather, it is to show how these myths relate to our behavior (and our self conception) in ways that reach beyond our attitudes toward food—and in ways that should prove deeply disturbing to the Christian church. As we saw in the previous section, culturally-savvy women “know” that satisfying physical appetite is inherently dangerous and that they should limit their possibilities correspondingly: “I shouldn’t have a piece of cake, thanks—it’ll go straight to my thighs.” In this section, I’ll examine the connection that gender theorists such as Susan Bordo see between regulating physical appetite and regulating appetites of other sorts.

In general, Bordo argues, when women are taught to consistently deny and repress their physical hunger, they don’t just learn to control their food intake—they learn to deny and repress their other appetites as well. As she writes, “Such restrictions on appetite...are not merely about food intake. Rather, the social control of female hunger operates as a practical “discipline” (to use Foucault’s term) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of female self-restraint and containment of impulse” (130).<sup>10</sup> Through the constant practice of regulating physical hunger, Bordo claims, women learn to bring *all* of their desires under scrutiny and suspicion; they internalize the need to repress all their hungers, from the desire for chocolate cake, to the desire for sex, to the desire for a better-paying job.

In consistently denying their hunger for food, then, women learn to deny their possibilities and to restrict their behavior in other areas as well. They learn, for instance, that they need to be “good girls” sexually as well as in the buffet line; indeed, they’re taught that they’re responsible for controlling not only their own sexual appetites but the desires of their male partners as well.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, unlike men, who are socially constructed as constantly hungry for sex, women are typically not even seen as possessing strong sexual appetites.<sup>12</sup> The fact that

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<sup>10</sup> *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> In the same way that women learn the negative consequences of eating, women learn the negative consequences of giving in to their sexual appetite: e.g., “he’s not going to buy the cow when he gets the milk for free”.

<sup>12</sup> While shows like “Sex in the City” might seem to cut against this idea, in point of fact they do little to dispel current cultural myths. First, these “liberated” women often describe their sexual escapades in the same terms women in advertisements describe their chocolates and ice cream.

this apparent lack of desire might well be the result of immense pressure to repress sexual appetite simply doesn't appear in the cultural consciousness.

In this way, the conflict that lies at the heart of the myth of female eating both represents and contributes to the larger conflict that lies at the heart of contemporary constructions of female identity itself—namely, the struggle to restrict or ignore personal desires and appetites. The way in which women learn to police their hunger for food and to feel guilt for indulging their appetite can thus be seen as having broader implications for their very self-conception. Instead of assuming, for example, that an urge for recognition in her profession is natural, a woman may second-guess her desire: she may even feel guilty for experiencing that urge. Although she may ultimately choose to pursue a promotion, she will generally have to struggle against internalized pressures in order to do so.<sup>13</sup>

If women internalize the need to restrict their broader possibilities through rigid control of their appetite, what impact does internalizing the cultural myths of *male* eating have on men's conception of their possibilities? As we saw above, myths of male eating generally encourage celebrating and embracing appetite and its consequences, not fearing them. If Bordo is right that the “micro-practice” of responding to physical hunger correlates to how we respond to other hungers, then we would expect a culture that encourages men to indulge their appetite for food to encourage them to indulge their other appetites as well. In the same way that women learn to limit themselves in part through the daily practice of denying their hunger, men would learn to see their opportunities as almost limitless at least in part by being encouraged to satisfy their physical hunger.

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Their apparent sexual liberty thus represents the “binge” side of the cycle of denial/surrender. Second, the very fact that sexual fulfillment is one their central topics of conversation signifies it as unusual. Shows like this imply that, for women, indulging sexual appetite is similar to surrender to physical hunger—something to be obsessively contemplated, indulged in, and then discussed at length, and not simply one activity that occupies part of a balanced life.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, the pressure to meet the needs of others through the act of feeding them itself provides another example of the way in which women learn to deny their own desires. As Carol Adams writes in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*: “Over the twenty-five years of working on this issue, I have heard one recurring response: ‘I’d be a vegetarian but my husband needs to eat meat.’...By believing they must feed their husbands meat, these women perpetuate the sexual politics of meat that says men need meat to be strong and that men should determine the contents of the dinner plate. Meat eating becomes another vehicle for self-denial, for placing the partner’s needs first. Women see themselves as more responsible for taking care of their partner’s needs than for taking care of their own needs.” (22).

Indeed, a general sense of entitlement is often seen as central to contemporary constructions of masculinity. “Real” men recognize their hungers—hunger for sex and power, e.g., as well as for food—and satisfy them without guilt. The “manly” man both knows what he wants and takes it. In sharp contrast to the construction of femininity that leaves women fighting against their own desires and urges, this construction of masculinity sets men in conflict with primarily external challenges: a woman who won’t return their calls, a job interview, a mountain that hasn’t yet been climbed, etc. Masculinity thus involves the unreflective satisfaction of desires that are seen as “only natural”. If Bordo is correct (as I think she is) that our daily eating practices constitute one of the earliest and most pervasive ways in which we embody cultural norms, then men *eat* for success long before they dress for it.

As we saw earlier, however, this simple construction of masculinity as the satisfaction of uninhibited hunger masks certain taboos. In particular, as scholars such as Michael Kimmel and Patrick Hopkins have pointed out, it requires that men have no desires that code as “feminine”, and it requires that they experience the manly desires they do have as appropriately powerful urges.<sup>14</sup> In Hopkins’s words, “For a ‘man’ to qualify as a man, he must possess a certain (or worse, uncertain) number of demonstrable characteristics that make it clear he is not a woman” (114).<sup>15</sup> In general, any inclination a male has toward things perceived as feminine is either flatly denied or quickly condemned—unless, of course, he can turn it into a contest or a test of strength. Emeril Lagasse, for example, has made a fortune from his cooking show, but he specializes in preparing “guy” food, and it’s certainly no coincidence that his catch phrase is the challenging “Let’s kick it up a notch!”. A twelve year-old boy who’s interested in baking delicate pastry had better also play a mean game of tackle football if his masculinity is not to be called into question. In this way, general male possibilities of behavior and desire are restricted along precisely the same lines as male appetite and hunger: the desire for anything “feminine”—whether food, interests, behavior, or appearance—poses a serious threat to a man’s claim to masculinity.

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed history of this construction, see Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: a cultural history* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> “Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities”, in *Rethinking Masculinity: Philosophical Explorations in Light of Feminism* (ed. Larry May & Robert Strikwerda. Lanham: Littlefield Adams Quality Paperbacks, 1992.)

In fact, this proves to be one respect in which men are punished more severely than women for deviating from cultural norms. Women who violate the cultural imperative to restrict and regulate their desires might fail to perform adequately as women, but since what they do in contrast is something constructed as masculine, it often garners a certain amount of respect. A woman who drinks beer and eats hamburgers, for example, can often be accepted (at least temporarily) as “one of the guys”. She’s not, in the process, inherently alienated from either men or other women. On the other hand, men who violate the cultural imperative for strong hungers face a much harsher social evaluation. The woman with a high sex drive is at least fascinating; the man with a low sex drive is seen as pathetic.

### III. Opposite ends of the same spectrum

The myths of male and female hunger, broadly understood, present an inherently *disordered* conception of (and response to) appetite. To see this, it’s helpful to return briefly to the disadvantages inherent to the specific myths of male and female eating.

Internalizing the myth of female eating has obviously damaging consequences, as we’ve seen, especially if taken to its extreme but logical conclusion: constantly denying hunger leads to death. Less extreme, but still worrying, is the heavy toll that constant dieting takes on a woman’s physical and emotional life, especially if it follows the culturally encouraged cycle of under and then over-consumption. Internalizing the myth of male eating has negative consequences as well, however. After all, the unthinking filling of hunger doesn’t constitute a healthy alternative to denying one’s hunger: it’s an equally extreme response to appetite. Yet, one of the central features of the male myth involves the satisfaction of appetite regardless of physical health and nutrition needs. In fact, cultural constructions often actively discourage men from eating health foods—unless, that is, those foods don’t *appear* healthy. “I hate health food, but I love to eat!” reads an advertisement for organic cereal, accompanied by a picture of a man pouring the cereal directly into his open mouth. Another common theme in advertisements involves women “tricking” their romantic partners into eating healthy foods, as in a current ad in which a woman walks through the house thinking about how low in fat and cholesterol the Hot Pocket she’s carrying is. As her husband snatches it from her, the voiceover concludes: “And the best thing is, he has no idea.” The clear message, of course, is that the “real” man would reject

health-conscious food. Internalizing *this* myth, however, has clearly negative consequences for male physical well-being.

The disadvantages to living out the myth of male eating, however, are mirrored in the consequences of internalizing popular constructions of male appetite more broadly understood. The man who unthinkingly fills his appetites for food, sex, and power is not likely to live a flourishing life. What this myth encourages is not just a disregard for his own health or physical well-being, moreover, but an unreflective attitude that generally fails to take other people's needs and desires into account. A man acting out cultural myths takes the last piece of pizza without thinking about whether someone else wanted it; he also accepts a promotion at work without thinking about the negative impact his increased workload might have on his family.

In general, although the mythical, masculine response to appetite seems to result in greater freedom and a broader self-conception than the female response, neither one captures the sort of genuinely thoughtful approach that would characterize a deep respect for the body or the self. Rather, these extreme responses to appetite actually constitute opposing (and equally disordered) ends of a continuum: one end represents the constant restriction of appetite, the other its unreflective filling.

It's perhaps easier to see how the "typically" male and female responses to hunger are both extreme and disordered by examining how they're exemplified in popular culture by fictional couples such as Marge and Homer Simpson. Both their bodies and their lives exemplify the consequences of internalizing male and female myths of appetite: the perpetually thin Marge is engaged in a constant struggle to exert control over herself, her children, and Homer, while the unabashedly obese Homer's life is constructed quite simply around filling his appetites. Marge and Homer serve as an idealized illustration of the continuum I've just described, bounded on the one hand by self-denial and self-doubt and by unthinking dominance on the other. It's difficult to imagine Marge making a significant purchase purely for her own sake; if she did, she would certainly experience it as a guilty pleasure, and it would not be at all surprising for her to relinquish the purchase voluntarily for what she sees as the good of the family. In contrast, it's easy to imagine Homer making such an extravagant purchase and hard to imagine him doing so with any thought at all about how it would impact the family. If he were to give up the purchase, it would almost certainly be in response to *external* forces, such as Marge's nagging. In general, the mythical "all-American guy" not only puts his own desires first—he tends to fill his hungers

without even noticing the needs or desires of others. The “typical” woman, on the other hand, constantly represses and restricts her own wants and needs for the perceived good of the community (family, friends, work, church, etc.).

#### **IV. Disordered Myths and the Christian Community**

Current cultural myths thus present a general model of appetite that seems inherently disordered—one that also appears to contribute to troubling patterns of self-repression on the part of women and thoughtless domination on the part of men. In the remainder of this paper, I first argue that the church has a vested interest in deconstructing these unhealthy myths, and I then suggest that the Christian traditions of fasting and feasting can present us with a starting point for such deconstruction.

Given the negative consequences of internalizing these myths, it might initially seem odd to think I even need to make a case for the Church’s rejection of these behavior patterns. Yet, as a brief examination of the flourishing “Christian diet industry” demonstrates, there’s widespread acceptance within the Christian community of several of the central (and most damaging) elements of these myths—most particularly, the construction of physical hunger as an enemy that threatens both our bodies and our souls.

The success of books such as *Slim for Him*, *What Would Jesus Eat*, and *More of Jesus, Less of Me*—as well as programs such as Gwen Shamblin’s wildly successful *Weigh Down* plan—demonstrate beyond a doubt that Christians are not exempt from the cultural pressure to be thin.<sup>16</sup> What’s different about the Christian diet industry is the way it spiritualizes both this pressure and the proper response to it; what you eat and how you eat it is cast as possessing spiritual as well as cultural ramifications. As Marie Griffith characterizes this added dimension, “Disregard what goes in your body, many suggest, and you will not only gain weight, look ugly, and feel awful but you will also doom yourself to a lifetime and likely an eternity of divine disfavor” (2).

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent, in-depth examination of Christian attitudes toward the body in Anglo-American Protestantism, see R. Marie Griffith’s *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Chapters four and five in particular discuss the phenomenon of the “devotional fitness culture” and the “Christian diet culture”.

In general, the Christian diet industry purports to offer a spiritually-based solution to a serious struggle facing contemporary Americans, particularly the white, middle-class women between the ages of 25 and 50 who comprise the majority of the Christian diet industry's market. God can help you change your relationship to food, the claim goes, and you will in turn gain a closer relationship with God through the control of your bodily appetites and the resulting weight loss. Gwen Shamblin, for instance, draws a direct connection between spiritual health and tighter control over the physical appetites in *Rise Above*: "What wonderful news: as you love God, you will not be able to bow down to the brownies! It will be repulsive to eat the second half of the hamburger...You cannot serve both God and someone or something else, therefore the Promised Land is in sight—you will lose weight!" (177).<sup>17</sup> Obeying God is seen as entailing strict control over one's appetite, and the reward for such control is both increased love for God and weight loss.<sup>18</sup>

In drawing this connection, however, Shamblin and others appear to take for granted that the central problem facing contemporary Christians is the constant, overwhelming impulse to surrender to hunger, and that what we most need from God is support in overcoming those dangerous appetites. In *God Even Likes My Pantry*, Mab Graff Hoover describes her struggle in terms familiar from the myth of female eating: "[T]his flesh of mine is like a hungry tiger, always ready to break out of the cage of discipline and gobble everything in sight" (95).<sup>19</sup> Yet, she claims, "As long as I overeat or poison my body with chemical additives, I shall not become the righteous of God" (96). Hunger is a wild beast, and God's help is needed to keep it locked in the "cage of discipline." The ultimate goal is spiritual triumph over appetite—the attainment of a closer relationship with God through a strictly disinterested relationship to food.

This goal seems highly problematic, however. We've already seen that the attempt to maintain complete control over their appetites sets women up for inevitable failure. In the

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<sup>17</sup> *Rise Above: God Can Set You Free from your Weight Problem Forever* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000). Shamblin herself has recently fallen into disfavor with the evangelical Christian community—but for other theological views, not her assumptions about hunger and its relation to God.

<sup>18</sup> In the context of the connection I've drawn above between physical hungers and other appetites, it's especially interesting that Shamblin's most recent program (the "Last Exodus") also claims to be able to assist anyone who struggles with lust, drinking, and love of money.

<sup>19</sup> *God Even Likes My Pantry: Meditations for Munchers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983)

Christian diet literature, this pressure for “self-mastery” takes on divine overtones; one of the central messages these books and weight-loss programs convey is that it’s not just the editors of *Vogue* who think we need constantly to police our physical appetites—it’s God. A woman who breaks her diet by eating a pint of triple-fudge brownie ice cream isn’t just failing culture; she’s failing God. Worse, the failure isn’t constructed as inevitable, because the woman *could* have called on divine grace to assist her in avoiding the temptation. Giving in to hunger thus demonstrates spiritual as well as physical weakness—a sentiment that’s disturbingly evocative of the way many anorexic women characterize their internal struggles.<sup>20</sup>

By posing the central problem primarily in terms of the temptation to surrender to physical appetites, moreover, this approach fails to address the legitimacy of the myth of female eating itself. In contrast, I believe that any successful attempt to reclaim both female and male hunger—and, in the process, to begin the work of reclaiming both female and male bodies—must begin with the deconstruction of the myths that lie at the heart of the current crisis.

Before turning to the case for deconstruction, however, it’s worth addressing briefly how men and male appetite fare on the Christian diet schema. After all, if constructions of masculine eating center on the unthinking satisfaction of appetite, then a push toward reflective eating practices would seem like a good thing. Unfortunately, the Christian diet industry fails to promote the sort of thoughtful and balanced approach to eating that would constitute a genuine improvement on the current status quo. Instead, given its focus on resisting temptation and its construction of fattening foods as temptation, the adoption of this template for male eating would more likely lead to men facing precisely the same difficulties currently facing women. Indeed, as cultural pressure increases on men to conform to certain standards of attractiveness, there’s already a move toward this schema; men as well as women are increasingly taught to see high-calorie, fattening foods as the “enemy” and to guard against their consumption (at, of course, the same time that advertisements urge indulgence). Rather than resisting this pressure and its harmful consequences, however, the Christian diet industry appears to be appropriating it—in

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Aimee Lee’s memoir of her struggle with anorexia, *Solitaire* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), or the accounts Susie Orbach details in *Hunger Strike: the Anorectic’s Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

fact, it appears to increase the already-intense pressure by adding divine overtones to the cultural mandate for thinness.<sup>21</sup>

## **V. The Cycle of Fasting and Feasting: Reclaiming Eating/ Reclaiming Bodies**

In contrast, I believe that what's needed is the deconstruction of damaging cultural conceptions of appetite and that the first step in this process requires a reconceptualization of hunger itself. But how? This is the point at which many contemporary analyses of gender end on a note of despair: we live in a world in which women are consistently disadvantaged and in which the very advantages men possess simultaneously undercut their possibilities. It's hard to see how to counter the incredible pressure these myths have on our psyches. What I'd like to suggest in the conclusion of this paper is that the Christian traditions of fasting and feasting provide us with a concrete point from which to begin the reclamation of our appetites—a reclamation that in turn constitutes a positive move toward the reclamation of the good of embodied existence.

First, however, I want to make it clear that I'm not advocating what's traditionally been identified as the vice of gluttony. The call to reclaim our physical appetites is not the suggestion that we shouldn't control our appetites, or that we should freely and unthinkingly respond to our hunger. That would simply represent a move toward one extreme of the continuum I've already discussed (namely, the male end). The call to reclaim our hunger is also not the suggestion that we should wallow in the sensual pleasure food affords us for its own sake, so long as we don't overeat.<sup>22</sup> That attitude does seem gluttonous in its idolization of the pleasures of filling appetite. It seems to me, rather, that we need to stop seeing hunger as the Enemy, and that we should replace that conception with a deeply embodiment-friendly conception of appetite, according to which hunger calls us both to remember and to respect our physicality.

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<sup>21</sup> The Christian diet literature is distressingly free of nuance concerning the relationship between weight and health. Being thin is seen as inherently healthy, and being fat is seen as a clear sign of overindulgence and unhealthy eating habits. A surprising number of these books also ignore or downplay the role of exercise in a healthy lifestyle, instead focusing on the need to control appetite. Shamblin, for instance, argues that exercise is actually unimportant for the person whose hunger is held in check.

<sup>22</sup> Oddly, this is precisely the attitude toward food that Shamblin advocates. She recommends taking only the very best, choicest bites of each piece of food and concentrating on getting as much pleasure as possible out of each nibble.

Hunger is repeatedly utilized in Scripture as a metaphor for the *proper* response to something good. There's a reason we hunger—our hunger is meant to motivate us to action! Reconceptualizing appetite is not as easy as simply deciding to respect hunger and respond appropriately, however. As Bordo points out, the daily “micro-practice” of eating shapes our attitudes toward food and hunger on a physical as well as a conceptual level.<sup>23</sup> A shift in these attitudes that took place purely on the conceptual level would leave the subject split in many cases between belief and practice. Thus, I believe that the project of deconstructing cultural myths of eating needs to employ conscious effort on both the physical and the intellectual/emotional level.

The idea of effecting and reinforcing conceptual change through physical practices is hardly a new one. Indeed, it has a lengthy philosophical and religious history reaching back into the Hellenistic period. In general, this assumption about the relation between action and attitude underlies the general practice of spiritual disciplines, as well as the particular Christian practices of fasting and feasting—practices that prove particularly relevant for the project I'm advocating here.<sup>24</sup>

Before I make a case for changing our attitudes toward hunger through, in part, the practices of fasting and feasting, it's important to distinguish between two distinct ways of conceiving of the end goal of fasting. First, there exists a long-standing tradition of asceticism in the Christian church that endorses the ideal of repressing the physical appetites for the purpose of attaining greater spiritual knowledge and a closer relationship to God. In this tradition, fasting is seen in part as a means of disciplining the body through the denial of hunger so that the flesh cannot draw the soul into sin. One of the main goals of this tradition is spiritual purity, attained through transcending the body and its desires. This conception of fasting is part of the neo-Platonic Christian tradition that accepts the construction of hunger as inherently negative, as a temptation to physical pleasure that draws us away from God. As such, it is not likely to aid in the project of reclaiming the good of physical existence.

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<sup>23</sup> She makes this point not only in the earlier-quoted “Hunger as Ideology” but also in “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity” (pp. 165-184 in *Unbearable Weight*).

<sup>24</sup> The practices of both fasting and feasting play an important role in many world religions, of course; I focus on the Christian tradition here in part because it has played such a central role to this point in perpetuating precisely the myths I'm arguing it also has the resources to deconstruct.

Yet, there's a second, body-friendly conception of fasting that stresses abstaining from certain foods at certain times for the purposes of *reclaiming* our appetites. This tradition recognizes that our hungers are currently disordered, in that we tend to indulge or deny ourselves in unhealthy ways, but it focuses on re-ordering that hunger rather than denying it altogether. Physical appetites and their fulfillment number among the goods of God's creation, and we can change our eating patterns in ways that help us regain a healthy sense of hunger. Rather than denying ourselves food for the sake of losing weight or demonstrating our control over the wayward body, we abstain from certain foods at certain times to gain a clearer sense of genuine hunger and a deeper appreciation for our dependence on God. In Archimandrite Kallistos Ware's words, "In this way, asceticism is a fight not *against* but *for* the body... When we fast, this is not because we regard the act of eating as shameful, but in order to make all our eating spiritual, sacramental, and Eucharistic—no longer a concession to greed but a means of communion with God the giver" (24-5).<sup>25</sup> (Interestingly, the original tradition of the fast included abstaining not just from certain types of food and drink for the period of the fast, but from sex as well—a point that underscores the relation between different sorts of appetites.)

What most characterizes this tradition of fasting is its emphasis on joy and celebration rather than deprivation and guilt. Rather than concentrating obsessively on what we are or aren't eating, this conception of fasting designates it as a time to draw closer to God in gratitude for what he provides for us—and to notice more fully and consciously what that is. As such, this practice of fasting can counter the disordered behaviors of both the person who eats unreflectively and the person who consistently strives not to eat: on the one hand, it requires concentration and careful thought about the activity of eating while, on the other hand, it frees the person to eat without guilt within those guidelines.

The counterpoint of fasting in the Christian tradition is the practice of feasting. Although current popular conceptions of feasting imagine it as full-scale gorging, overindulgence is not at the heart of the practice of feasting. Instead, what's central to the feast is, as with the fast, an attitude of thanksgiving and of celebration for the gifts of creation. Hunger is welcomed, for it draws us to the table. We are meant to satisfy our hunger when we are feasting; we don't, however, fill ourselves for the joy of the filling itself. It's highly significant, I believe, that the central metaphor for the kingdom of God in the New Testament is a wedding feast. In general,

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<sup>25</sup> *The Lenten Triodion* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2001).

the activity of eating functions throughout Scripture in large part as an act of fellowship. Feasting doesn't occur in solitude or in competition; instead, it serves to unite people and to nourish them, physically and spiritually. The true practice of feasting emphasizes integrating the practice of eating into our lives as a whole—it involves such aspects as thinking about where we get our food, how we prepare it, with whom we share it, and when and in what manner we eat it.

In this context, both the mythically female response of denying hunger in the face of the feast and the mythically male response of unthinking consumption are seen as inappropriate and ungrateful reactions to the bounty given to us. The practice of feasting is, in contrast, a response to hunger that requires reflective attention to it as a call to sharing in the good of nourishing ourselves and in the good of embodiment.

Ultimately, it seems to me that we should strive for the sort of celebratory attitude toward food and appetite that Anne LaMott describes at the close of “Hunger”: “It is, finally, so wonderful to have learned to eat, to taste and love what slips down my throat, padding me, filling me up, that I’m not uncomfortable calling it a small miracle....[L]earning to eat was about learning to live—and deciding to live; and it is one of the most radical things I’ve ever done” (197-8).<sup>26</sup> The reconceptualization of hunger as a call to nourishment (rather than as an enemy to be fought or an urge to be unthinkingly filled) can play an important role in the ongoing struggle common to both feminism and Christianity of reclaiming both our bodies and our selves from a culture that undercuts our flourishing. Learning to eat can, in fact, be about learning to live.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “Hunger”, in *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Many thanks to the members of the Philosophy department at Calvin College for their helpful comments on a much earlier draft of this paper, as well as to the audience of the Women’s History Month and Sexuality Series talk at which I gave a version of this paper. Conversations with Terence Cuneo, Ruth Groenhout, and Matt Halteman proved especially useful.