

Bodily ambivalence

by [R. Marie Griffith](#) in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

By Teresea M. Shaw, The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity. (Fortress, 298 pp.)

It is always gratifying to find a book rigorous enough to please specialists and engaging enough to appeal to a general audience. Teresa Shaw addresses ascetic prescriptions and practices whose formation has long engrossed historians and whose modern analogues have often preoccupied contemporary Christians. Building on the work of scholars who have sought to explain the diverse modes of bodily renunciation in early and medieval Christianity, Shaw highlights what she describes as the "profound ambivalence" with which Christian thinkers interpreted the flesh: it was a burden that must be suffered resignedly during earthly life, yet it remained the crucial material out of which devotional practice and spiritual progress were forged. The body was to be honored and cared for as well as endured and strenuously disciplined.

As her title suggests, Shaw focuses especially on fasting and its link to the ascetic ideal of virginity. Varied currents of thought shaped early Christian teachings on sexual and dietary restraint, and Shaw traces these themes in such influences as Stoicism, Platonism and the Greco-Roman physiology represented in the medical writer Galen. Here and in the later Christian writings of such figures as Basil of Ancyra, Jerome, John Cassian, John Chrysostom and Evagrius of Pontus, Shaw locates the explicit connection made between the type and amount of food consumed and the extent of sexual arousal that supposedly ensued. Fasting, then, warded off passion, while gluttony instigated lust. Shaw is not the first to discover this connection, but her attentive reading of a wide array of texts and her careful attention to the differences between authors on such questions as meat-eating and abstinence make for a fresh and readable exploration.

Even more intriguing, Shaw connects her discussion to a broad framework of protological and eschatological ideas, in which fasting and virginity were perceived as ways of imitating and manifesting both the Eden of the past and the Paradise to

come. She argues cogently that the presumption that women had a greater natural suitability for fasting than men was deeply influenced by the developing ideology of virginity and sexuality that linked "eating to sexual desire, sexual desire to the fall, and the fall to embodiment . . . , gender differentiation (or at least gender hierarchy), and death."

Shaw's excellent book would be even better had the author added a conclusion specifying the wider implications of her study. Nonspecialists in particular are bound to wonder about the later history of the ideas and practices she traces. Many are well aware of the work of the renowned historian Caroline Walker Bynum on the fasting of medieval women, but aside from scattered mentions of Bynum and a few other historical accounts, Shaw neither connects this later history to her own analysis nor reflects explicitly upon some of the broad issues that are unavoidably at stake. For Christians, the problems posed by embodiment remain, and though we presume a rather different medical, ethical and philosophical framework for our questions than did patristic authors, the questions themselves are not as different as we might suppose.

If questions of dietary regimen seem to have lost their earlier connection to theology, numerous pastors, theologians and laypeople believe that both what they put in their bodies (do we eat meat? do we drink liquor?) and how much they consume (do we eat to excess?) are concerns of Christian ethics and the Christian life. Even those unconcerned about diet as a religious matter are concerned with establishing the proper use of sexuality, articulating the best ways to "honor the body," feeding and clothing the bodies of others as part of a faithful witness, practicing more expressive and "embodied" modes of worship, celebrating the act of giving birth as a religious experience and so on.

At the same time, our culture is preoccupied with dietary and fitness regimens whose intensity and strictness find historical parallels in some Christian sources, however distinct the motivations and desired results may be. What similarities or unbridgeable differences exist between patristic bodily prescriptions and our own, and what might contemporary Christians learn from the comparison?

Shaw does not address this question, but thoughtful readers who are rethinking the role of asceticism will do well to read her account and judge the wisdom (as well as the extremes) of these early prescriptions. In this sense, Shaw's book can be a resource for those engaged in the kind of project to which Margaret Miles's

Practicing Christianity, Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* and the authors of *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy Bass, have contributed: finding nourishment for a reinvigorated, purposeful way of life by carefully sifting through Christian history, thought and experience.

Questions could then emerge about the utility of moderating one's eating not merely for cosmetic reasons but as a way of practicing restraint, of curbing one's preoccupation with food so that one can attend more fully to other needs and goals. As Shaw's book makes clear, the quest to discipline the body in this way inevitably leads to its own excesses, even compulsions, but this reality need not dissuade us from efforts toward balance and discernment. The Christian tradition resounds with diverse ethical and practical models for exploring such questions and relieving our contemporary bodily obsessions. Shaw's book is a welcome invitation to that pilgrimage.