

Body politics

by [R. Marie Griffith](#) in the [Feb 23, 2000](#) issue

*Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems Among American Girls and Women*, by Michelle Mary Lelwica

Christians have long been aware of the close link between physical and spiritual hunger and, by extension, between food and devotional practice. Amid the modern obsession with dieting, many people have commented on the relationship between disordered eating and religious longing. Mary Louise Bringle's *The God of Thinness* delves poignantly into the theological implications of her battle with compulsive overeating. Jo Ind's *Fat Is a Spiritual Issue* is a moving portrayal of how food obsessions can mask hunger for God, and how a passionate encounter with the divine may aid in healing a tenacious eating disorder. Gwen Shamblin's *Weigh Down Diet*, which has attracted thousands of women and men to meetings in churches throughout the country, also is based on the principle that what so many compulsive overeaters, bulimics, anorexics and others perceive as a problem with food is at its base a spiritual hunger.

Non-Christian diet gurus have leapt upon this notion, as recent titles show: *Beyond the Food Game: A Spiritual & Psychological Approach to Healing Emotional Eating*; *Love Yourself Thin: The Revolutionary Spiritual Approach to Weight Loss*; *Feeding the Body, Nourishing the Soul: Essentials of Eating for Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Well-Being*; and *Losing the Weight of the World: A Spiritual Diet to Nourish the Soul*. Such books claim that a renewed spiritual practice, in this case a practice grounded in Asian and Native American wisdom and New Age worldviews rather than traditional monotheisms, will cure the epidemic of eating disorders, ill health and obesity.

Michelle Mary Lelwica's *Starving for Salvation* also is founded on the tenet that our problems with food really represent problems of the spirit. But Lelwica takes the argument a step further by seeking an expansive political and theological framework for analyzing the spiritual hunger that she observes and has herself experienced. "Eating problems point to spiritual hungers—desires for a sense of meaning and wholeness—and such hungers are inextricably intertwined with the politics of these

problems," she argues.

Acknowledging that she has no new data on contemporary food and fitness syndromes, Lelwica sifts through the stories and studies already available in order to forge a reinterpretation of them. She is committed, in the service of feminist, liberationist and constructivist forms of theology, to unmasking pervasive ideologies of the body.

Lelwica's provocative book offers multiple rewards. Her inventive expressions, such as "culture lite" and the "politics of distraction," help diagnose the false promises of fulfillment offered by consumer culture. Her term "body sense"—"a sense that has been rewarded and punished through internalized social norms . . . acquired through the ritualizing activities of the body"—is evocative. The book is less jargon-laden than many of its academic counterparts. Chapters addressing the popular icons and rituals of womanhood, tied to the myth that thinness reaps salvation, are especially lucid. Lelwica analyses how commercial images create meaning in women's lives even as they warp women's well-being and serve capitalist, authoritarian ends. Though not entirely original, her scrutiny of the political dimensions of eating problems will speak to those uneasy with the overwhelmingly therapeutic models that have long held sway. While she is more eloquent when diagnosing cultural afflictions than when offering solutions, her goal of providing a constructive alternative to the vogue of fitness merits praise.

Most significant, perhaps, is Lelwica's wrestling with a problem that has puzzled many observers of the diet scene: to what extent are fitness and abstinence "religious" activities? How can one distinguish between the sacred and the profane in this complicated venue? Dealing sensitively with the personal stories of girls and women struggling with eating problems, Lelwica also works with the extensive secondary literature on dieting that touches upon religious questions. She is able to locate the religious themes in so-called secular diet literature, demonstrating irrefutably how notions of sin, guilt, penance and redemption have been put to ill use. If she falls too easily into normative judgments—distinguishing arbitrarily between an "authentic religious experience" and "cultural logic," for instance—her analysis of the permeable boundaries between religion and culture is incisive and valuable.

Given Lelwica's careful attention to religion, the image of traditional Christianity presented in the book is bewilderingly devoid of nuance—which is especially

disappointing in light of the outstanding studies of Christian eating and fasting practices that have emerged over the past two decades (Caroline Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* and Teresa Shaw's *Burden of the Flesh* prominent among them). Lelwica depicts Christianity as having had an overwhelmingly negative impact on women. While she sometimes qualifies the argument by preceding "Christianity" with "conservative," her lack of modifiers elsewhere suggests that such a distinction is perfunctory. In her view, the tradition's emphasis on the doctrine of salvation, tied to notions of sin, has meant that for centuries "a woman's 'salvation' presumes her shame and requires self-alienation: her transgression is absolved when she forfeits a sense of agency and a feeling of peace with her own body." For women, the only routes to salvation have involved obedient submission to husbands and family life or severe physical mortification.

Lelwica sees Christian discipline as a chief culprit in today's diet obsession, if not its paramount cause. She links the tradition to "contemporary diet and fitness rituals," the "superiority complex" in which thinness is perceived as virtue, and the belief that "wholeness [like the perfect body] is ever beyond the present moment, the mundane moment, the embodied moment here and now." She virtually ignores Christian authors like Bringle and Ind who have developed alternative ways of viewing these ties. Bringle is curtly dismissed in a footnote and Ind receives no mention at all. While the growing culture of evangelical dieting, whose most famous current exponent is Shamblin, is ripe for criticism, it is hardly clear that this movement's identification of "God's will" with cultural norms for the body represents a logical outgrowth of the variegated Christian tradition.

Yes, there is evidence that Christianity has played a role in abetting and justifying a wide array of bodily fixations (and not only those pertaining to food or to body image). Yet Lelwica's historical evidence is meager, her argument resting not so much on documented connections as on "cultural logics" and "affinities" between traditions of Christian asceticism or biblical stories and modern eating problems. At one point, for instance, Lelwica traces a girl's avoidance of ice cream to a classic Christian dualism, "expressed in the beliefs that good and evil are never mixed and that what is of utmost value is inaccessible, invulnerable and indisputable." However suggestive such parallels may be, they call for a more precise exploration. Without greater specificity, we cannot know how much to blame Christian tradition for contemporary body ills, nor know the possibilities for deliverance in that tradition, as sketched out so adroitly by Bynum and by various devotional writers (Roberta Bondi

also comes to mind).

Though Lelwica mostly holds Christianity in disfavor, in the end she invites readers to search out the possibilities within the tradition, charily specifying the points of greatest hope and least danger. In trying to help those women and girls who remain attached to Christianity, she invokes feminist, womanist and mujerista theologians who reconstruct "the stories and symbols of biblical religion . . . to transform what has been silenced into speech." Echoing themes that suffuse modern diet literature, she also urges us to look to the goddess movement and to Eastern religions as a way of filling in "some of the gaps that the legacies of Western religion have bequeathed" to us.

Whether such suggestions can help to heal our maladies or simply divert us from dealing with the problems of our culture is difficult to say. The individualistic way such movements are appropriated today renders them unlikely to have a deep impact on the images, ideologies, institutions and social arrangements that Lelwica so persuasively critiques.

In this respect, Lelwica herself becomes an unwitting contributor to the cultural logics that she censures. She offers a privatistic spiritual remedy that loses its political edge at the very moment when we most need it to carry us from critique to praxis, from despair to hope for lasting social change. This "lite" ending to a generally satisfying book leaves unanswered a crucial question: What larger, positive roles can theology and religious practice play in altering our cultural landscape, lessening our attention to physical size and reuniting body and soul?

Lelwica helps readers think about our need for "a different kind of salvation" than that offered by modern American culture, but her book's limitations reveal the grip that the popular culture of spiritual seeking and religious alienation has even on the insightful critics of modern body obsessions.