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The Excessive Body and The Sickly Soul: Christian Nutritionists and Contemporary Gluttony

Dan Otsuki

Abstract

Beginning with a brief anecdote relaying why this topic is both important to me on a personal level as well as why it matters on a grander scale, this paper explores the Christian Seven Deadly Sin of gluttony in contemporary contexts. This paper delves into the history behind the Seven Sins, ultimately focusing more precisely on gluttony and how it has historically been understood by many Christians. With a brief aside to the Christian practice and importance of fasting, this paper also looks at the psychological rationale for gluttony and the worry that this psychological understanding may lead gluttony to be seen as acceptable within society. Next, the paper discusses two case studies within Christian nutrition, Chelsea Blackbird and First Place 4 Health, as a means to better situate gluttony and obesity in a contemporary context for modern day Protestant Christians. The essay then goes into how weight and gluttony affect women within the tradition, and finally goes into possible counter-arguments for this paper and its findings. The paper concludes with an overview of the information presented as well as the implications gluttony has on society at large.

Introduction: A Short Anecdote of Gluttony & Its Exceptions

Allow me to begin with a personal anecdote regarding my topic and why I chose it. To put it lightly, I come from a conservative suburb about twenty minutes south of Denver, Colorado. In my town, football is the storied Friday-night event of stereotypical high school movies, and as such, football head coaches are seen as shepherds to their respective flocks, the

wisdom and lessons imparted onto players are taken nearly synonymously with church gospel. My coach, a devout Christian, would often times incorporate Bible verses or Biblical teachings into his speeches before, during, and after practices and games.

Now, if one knows anything about football, there's a likely chance one knows linemen, specifically offensive lineman, are on the heavier side weight-wise. For my coach, linemen were considered, in his words, "exceptions to the Sin of gluttony." The use of the term "exception" is important here, not only for context, but because my coach would routinely heckle players who had girlfriends who weren't his ideal of a "proper" woman: i.e. one who was very thin. What was my coach's rationale for this? Simply, a girl who didn't take care of herself physically was not doing so spiritually either. When asked what made a given woman different in this respect than our three-hundred-plus-pound linemen, my coach only laughed and said, "Those girls ain't protecting our quarterback."

At the time, I thought that was poor reasoning, growing up without any strong religious denominations myself. But, as I've continued reflecting on where I grew up and the things I was told, I began to wonder: how is it that a given person's physical weight can lead to their spiritual-self being impure or sinful? Through research and the help of the Seven Deadly Sin of gluttony, this paper concludes, while the term "gluttony" is not nearly as common in contemporary Christian rhetoric to describe obesity, many other words and verbiage historically situated in association with gluttony remain ever-prevalent. This gluttony-based rhetoric serves to provide exclusive boundaries around weight loss, namely that dietary changes should be sufficient to overcome obesity. Unfortunately, this philosophy only leads to many being stigmatized due to their weight, making their "unfit" bodies relay a message of an "unfit" soul.

The Seven Deadly Sins: A Brief History

Contrary to many beliefs, the Seven Deadly Sins are never explicitly listed in the Bible—including, of course, gluttony. In fact, with most modern Bible translations today, there are only seven verses in which the terms “gluttony” or “glutton” are used.¹ While all of these passages paint gluttony or the gluttons themselves in a decidedly negative, sinful light, there is never mention of making gluttony as a sin somehow worse than other moral faults. It was not until the fourth and fifth centuries that the Seven Deadly Sins began to emerge.

Evagrius of Pontos (346-399 CE) and his disciple John Cassian (360-430) were the first to conceptualize the Sins.² The original list, first recorded by Evagrius, a “father in the early centuries of the Christian church,” was meant to record the “eight ‘thoughts’ or ‘demons’ that typically beset [him]: gluttony, [lust], [greed], sadness, anger, [sloth], [envy], and last of all, pride.”³ It wasn’t until Pope Gregory I (540-604) that “the list of capital vices [was cut] down from eight to seven, the biblical number symbolizing completeness, by subsuming sloth under sadness.”⁴ Pope Gregory I’s change also marks the point in which the Sins (as well as their contrasting virtues) became a framework for widespread morality in Christianity, pitting the Sins in “a spiritual battle” with the rest of humanity.⁵ It was not until the thirteenth century when sadness was removed in favor of its-once-subsumed sloth by Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) that the

¹ *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2011) The passages referred to are: Deuteronomy 21:20, Proverbs 23:20-1, 27, Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:34, & Titus 1:12.

² Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung. *Glittering Vices*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 27-8.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

list of the Seven Deadly Sins, as is popularized today, came into being.⁶ Given, of course, that the Sins are not directly listed in the Bible, are not the direct words of God, they have, theologically, been more often “understood as personal faults, which can lead the believer away from the love of God and their community.”⁷ As these “personal faults,” however, prohibit one from being closer to God, the reasoning behind their stigma within Christianity becomes all the clearer.

Given this broader background on all seven Sins, this paper will now focus on gluttony and how it has been historically and culturally perceived.

Gluttony: Excess of Body & Sickness of Spirit

Regardless of whether the rhetoric of “sin” is used to describe someone who is overweight, obesity in Western nations is seen as an increasing taboo. Numerous medical studies from both the United States and the United Kingdom have denoted those overweight as part of an epidemic—as a disease. By doing so, society implies “obese individuals are a product of their own faults.”⁸ What’s more, religious rhetoric surrounding the Sins is still used in some medical discourses today. The British House of Commons Health Committee report on Obesity (known as the HOC report for short) included a whole chapter of their findings dedicated to Sins; entitled “Gluttony or Sloth?” in which “the causes of obesity...are examined.”⁹ By using this verbiage rooted in causality, the HOC report “implies moral fault.”¹⁰ Essentially, the report claims people

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ William James Hoverd. “Deadly Sin: Gluttony, Obesity and Health Policy.” *Medicine, Religion, and the Body*, no. 11 (2009): 215.

⁸ Ibid., 210.

⁹ Ibid., 208.

¹⁰ Ibid., 209.

eat too much, and this is bad, leading to obesity and therefore health complications. Setting aside, for the moment at least, that there are more factors than merely over-eating that can lead an individual to be considered overweight, gluttony is not and has not historically been seen as *only* eating too much.

While gluttony is often thought of as merely the over-indulgence of food and drink—often times manifesting itself in a given individual being overweight if not obese—this perception is merely one facet of a larger picture. In the Middle Ages, gluttony was defined as: food eaten “[t]oo daintily, too sumptuously, too hastily, too greedily, [or] too much.”¹¹ For the four forefathers of the Sins—Evagrius, Cassian, Gregory I, and Aquinas—the original conception of gluttony could, in fact, be broken down to six major points: (1) gorging on too much food, (2) snacking outside of meals, (3) thinking of eating and food when one’s mind should be occupied with other matters, (4) eating expensive food, (5) craving delicacies, and (6) paying too much attention to food.¹² These approaches to eating express the “pleasure of eating,” not how it is reflective on scales or body-types.¹³ Based on this, it would appear gluttony manifests itself whenever a given individual is consuming sustenance for any reason beyond that of pure practicality. The manner of eating, including how much is being eaten, is not always the point—often times it is how infatuated a given person is with what they are eating. If more satisfaction is being had by experiencing the food than there is by merely filling the void of hunger, gluttony is present.

¹¹ DeYoung. *Glittering Vices*. 141.

¹² Dennis L. Okholm. “Rx for Gluttony: Even Christian diet experts rarely talk about it anymore, But the early monks did, and for good reason.” *Christianity Today* 44, no. 10 (2000): 64.

¹³ DeYoung. *Glittering Vices*. 142.

This raw satisfaction from food, however, is not inherently the problem. For many Christian scholars, theologians, and philosophers, “[p]leasure is neither good nor evil within itself. It becomes either evil or good depending on the spiritual use to which it is put.”¹⁴ There is clearly pleasure to be gained from eating when one is hungry or drinking when one is parched, but this form of pleasure, according to most, is necessary. Eating or drinking merely because one enjoys the act of eating or drinking (or because one loves what one is eating or drinking) is where morality begins to falter. The rationale as to why consuming for the sake of consuming is bad comes down to *why* one opts to consume beyond what is necessary for survival.

To those who believe in the Sins’ ruinous powers, the gluttonous are only so largely due to fear, their consumption acting as their coping mechanism. To put it simply: “[one] can stand [one’s] emptiness, spiritual confusion, when [one is] eating better than when [one’s] stomach [is] empty.”¹⁵ In other words, the existential terror people have when trying to situate themselves within the context of the universe, religion, and God seems far worse when one is starving. By eating, and ultimately over-indulging, one at least has some measure of power over one’s life; while the existential terror of the unknown exists, a given individual can still take solace in what he, she, or they can control. By taking control of one’s life in this way, one appears to have “lost the true center of [one’s] life—the love of God—[for one] cannot be master...of [one’s] own will.”¹⁶ In order to conquer the fear of “always feel[ing] empty and needy,” individuals will “overfill [themselves] with pleasures [they] can supply” themselves.¹⁷ To Christian scholars,

¹⁴ Lance Webb. *Conquering the Seven Deadly Sins*. (New York: Abridged Press, 1955), 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁷ DeYoung. *Glittering Vices*. 184.

then, when terror of uncertainty enraptures someone, they're tempted to leave God's path behind in favor of their own vices and solutions. This leads to more than an unfit body—it encourages an ungodly soul.

This historic look at gluttony will next be contrasted with fasting in Christianity and psychological understandings of gluttony, serving to provide an antithesis and rationale for over-indulging.

Fasting & Psychology: Healthy Bodies Closer to God or Rationalizations for the Sins?

While this paper does not go into the Christian practice of fasting in excruciating depth, looking at fasting as an antithesis for gluttony is beneficial for understanding gluttony's malice for those who subscribe to the Seven Deadly Sins' evils. Historically, people “fast to become healthy Christians who are able to love God and others.”¹⁸ Some of the first mentions of fasting come from the Bible in which Luke wrote: “for forty days [Jesus] was tempted by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days.”¹⁹ If gluttony (by which Jesus appears tempted in the Bible by the Devil) is taken as the contrast to fasting (the behavior Jesus actually exhibited), it becomes all the more obvious why gluttony is considered so abhorrent and fasting so holy. By scarfing down morsel after swig of food and drink one does not truly need for survival and functionality, one is actively denying a greater ability to love God and other humans.

Perhaps then, on a more psychological level within Christianity, gluttony is seen as a mode of overcoming one's inability to feel God's presence or have any connections with other

¹⁸ Okholm. “Rx for Gluttony.” 65.

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible*. Luke 4:2.

people. In this way, gluttons provide another interpretation as to why they do what they do (through a Christian understanding): eating provides a “sensual satisfaction,” an escape from “one’s failures and wrongs.”²⁰ Again for those who believe strongly in the Sins’ powers, the failures would be the inability to care for one’s fellow humans, unable to create emotional bonds or sympathize with the plights of others. The wrongs, on the other hand, are choices one makes that leads one further from God. While these reasonings are never explicitly stated, they are interesting contrasts from the closeness fasting is meant to bring.

This psychologizing of the Sins, for some Christians, is actually a negative trope. Some claim that the “general implication of all [the] psychologizing is...[one] can safely leave behind any notion of the danger or seriousness of these ‘vices’ as genuine moral problems.”²¹ The fear of some Christians here is the Sins, in this case gluttony, will become little more than terms to rationalize away various moral decays within society, writing off gluttony into “a quaint name for various eating disorders,” or merely someone devouring “three extra jelly doughnuts.”²² This fear appears to be rooted in the idea that the Sins could become normalized within society. The desire is not for the Sins to become accepted and rationalized psychologically by society, but rather for the Sins to be understood as problems that are an attempt to overcome and cover up one’s “inner failures.”²³ This understanding is dangerous not only because it allows for gluttony to flourish as more and more people see it as acceptable, but because “bodily cravings never have anything but temporary satisfaction. No matter how lovely the pleasure [one] take[s] in

²⁰ Webb. *Conquering the Seven Deadly Sins*. 42.

²¹ DeYoung. *Glittering Vices*. 12.

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

²³ Webb. *Conquering the Seven Deadly Sins*. 119.

eating, [one] will always get hungry again.”²⁴ By denying God and the path towards Him (the path fasting has historically provided), one is effectively only putting a bandage on a festering wound, not ever truly healing it. For many, the Sins are more than storied notions of archaic morals; they *are* morality, and the trivialization of them is seen as a decline in humanity’s goodness.

With small histories of both gluttony and fasting now set, this paper will now delve deeper into contemporary examples of Christian nutrition and body image, seeking to uncover whether or not the ideals of over-indulging and fasting remain consistent today.

The Body and The Spirit: Christian Nutritionists and Contemporary Health

Now, with proper background information established, the question still remains: how is it that a given person’s physical weight can lead their spiritual-self to be seen as impure or sinful? To put it more simply, are bodily weight and spiritual morality linked?

Historically, it would seem, the two most certainly are. For hundreds of years in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, “Christianity was the source of the language of...healing that pictured physical and spiritual health as intimately intertwined.”²⁵ Given that Christianity controlled the rhetoric around healing, it is little surprise that body and spirit would be seen as interdependent. As this was around the time the Sins were beginning to make their rounds in Europe, creating a dominant structure for morality, gluttony’s role as being both physically and spiritually harmful was all but assured. This conclusion, however, is hardly anything ground

²⁴ DeYoung. *Glittering Vices*. 146.

²⁵ Margaret R. Miles. *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 96.

breaking. What is more pertinent remains if the wording around obesity remains similar contemporarily. To explore this further, I turn to diets and Christian Nutritionists, whose literary work makes up a notable portion of “books categorized as Christian life and spirituality” guides (which account for forty percent of self-help books on the market today).²⁶

Diets, as a whole discourse, have historically been seen as a means to control others, exerting clergy-like power over those who subscribe to the diets in question. In Medieval and Renaissance Europe, “a physician’s chief responsibility was prescribing ‘diets,’ which included controlling all aspects of a patient’s life and behavior, an authority traditionally exercised by the church.”²⁷ What can be viewed here are some of the first prescribed diets, which function much like religious teachings: they are to be obeyed and adhered to throughout one’s life at all times. These diets were not only specific to food-related things, but they did include them and ultimately worked to “strengthen and legitimize [the] social authority” of “early modern physicians.”²⁸ Perhaps these diets were not literally seen or meant to be seen as pseudo forms of religion. They did, however in many ways, act as such, as they pervaded so much of people’s daily lives. While diets today are far more food-and-nutrition-centric, the historical background as to why they are meant to be so fervently followed is important to note when looking at Christian nutritionists and their teachings.

Chelsea Blackbird is a “certified nutritional therapist” whose philosophy integrates both religion and health with the mission statement: “Eat REAL food. Eat the food that GOD made.

²⁶ R. Marie Griffith. *Born Again Bodies*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 2.

²⁷ Miles. *A Complex Delight*. 95.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

Food from NATURE will keep you HEALTHY.”²⁹ Before moving on to more of her website, let’s dissect this mission statement, as it holds much Blackbird’s ideals. For starters, the words written in all capital letters are done so by the website, not me, and therefore, these are the words Blackbird desires audiences pay attention to the most. While the claim of “REAL” food and “NATURAL” food being healthy is rather redundant (‘real’ likely equating to ‘natural’ in the first place), the added attention to God and health is what one’s attention to should be drawn to. Blackbird’s mission statement implies three important points: (1) real/natural food is inherently healthy, (2) God made real/natural food, and (3) therefore, God is ultimately the cause for health. This distinction, implying God is the source and reason behind one’s healthy eating carries with it its own set of implications; foremost, if only food made by God is good for you, it reasons everything *not* good for you is *not* made by God. This statement, without explicitly mentioning gluttony, carries many of the values associated with gluttony.

Moving throughout the website, I sought to see if there is any mention of gluttony and fasting. Though I searched, the terms “gluttony” and “fasting” do not appear to be mentioned anywhere on the site. Instead, the website is home to many blog-esque posts regarding how various pieces of a diet should be approached (fats, proteins, grains, and so on). Even the section denoting what Blackbird herself “NEVER” eats is filled with fairly positive diction, concluding with Blackbird saying, “Do I eat healthfully ALL the time? Of course not. I’m human. And a mom (who needs wine). But I’m seeking those nutrients most of the time, and that’s what’s important.”³⁰ This statement struck me as a very human, and frankly humorous, take on eating

²⁹ Chelsea Blackbird. “The Christian Nutritionist.” *The Christian Nutritionist*. Accessed on April 10, 2016. <http://www.thechristiannutritionist.com/>

³⁰ Ibid.

and nutrition - one without any mention of religion. While God and Christianity are quite prevalent around the site in general, this departure seemed far more like talking to Blackbird on a purely personal level. What *did* strike me, however, was a slide-show-esque portion of the site titled “What Clients Are Saying.”

The clientele of a given business says a lot about the ultimate goal of said business, especially if the business in question is willing to present the clientele’s responses. Here are a few of The Christian Nutritionist’s client reviews:

- “Week one of Sugar Detox and lost 2.2 pounds and I feel great...no bloated belly...sleeping well.”
- “I lost 11 pounds in 14 days on the sugar detox!”
- “30 lbs-gone. Statins-gone. Chronic athlete’s food-gone.”
- “I’ve been told I look "wonderful" and "gorgeous!" I have lost about 3 lbs already and feel great!”
- “I haven’t weighed this little since high school!”
- “The knowledge and guidance Chelsea provides have been life-saving for me. She empathetically and prayerfully opened my eyes, heart, and stomach to the healing powers of God-given foods.”
- “If you ever go to bed praying that you only wanted to help 1 person, please be at peace knowing that you already have.”³¹

These are seven of the eleven total responses the site advertises, but they speak to two major themes: (1) losing weight is good and the general goal (indicating a specific implied sense of

³¹ Ibid.

beauty) and (2) religion plays a role in the shedding of the aforementioned unwanted weight. While fasting is, again, never explicitly mentioned, the idea that attaining a certain “thinness” is the general goal remains, echoing the rhetoric of fasting. By opting to not over-indulge, one is actively choosing to fast - in a manner of speaking - more than one had been prior as is evident by weight loss. These statements also appear to disregard individuals who are more prone to being considered overweight due to genetics or other “non-gluttonous” reasons, creating a barrier of inaccessibility for those who cannot lose weight merely by dietary changes. These two themes are resonated in other Christian dietary authorities as well.

The website and group “First Place 4 Health” uses very similar rhetoric to inspire people to eat healthily and lose weight. The organization was founded in 1981 as an affiliate of Houston’s First Baptist Church and attributes its “tremendous success...to its biblical approach to weight loss.”³² One of the group’s major aspects is their reliance on what is known as a “Four-Sided Person” which begins by having people ask themselves “the most important question[:] ‘Is Jesus at the center of my life—is He both my Savior and my Lord?’”³³ Next, the group presents individuals the “four bars,” what makes a person a “Four-Sided Person”: one’s “heart, soul, mind, and strength.”³⁴ In order to help assist individuals with finding balance within the four bars, strengthening one’s weakest attributes while not allowing those one is most attuned with to overpower the individual, the group offers four modes of guidance: “(1) apply yourself to the First Place 4 Health program, (2) begin to study God’s Word, (3) interact with others in your

³² First Place 4 Health. “About.” *First Place 4 Health*. Access April 20, 2016.
<http://www.firstplace4health.com/about/>

³³ First Place 4 Health. “Four-Sided Person.” *First Place 4 Health*. Access April 20, 2016.
http://www.firstplace4health.com/about/four-sided_person.html

³⁴ Ibid.

group, and (4) follow a prudent plan of eating and exercise.”³⁵ With this information in mind, First Place 4 Health depicts many of the same themes Blackbird preaches.

Much like Blackbird, First Place 4 Health displays two of its main goals as a closer relationship with God and weight loss, implying the two are intertwined. As a given group’s “About” page is typically meant to set the tone for the company—depicting its goals and/or mission statement—First Place 4 Health’s is telling. Attributing its success to a “biblical approach” implies some use of the religious or spiritual as central to the means of weight loss. By having new members begin with asking what the group considers “the most important question,” a question heavy steeped in religious language, the group further implies religion is the true saving grace that then leads to losing weight. To First Place 4 Health, the spiritual health one incurs by abiding to their program is irrevocably linked to their weight-loss success.

It is important to note that First Place 4 Health, much like Blackbird, does not include the word *gluttony* as an overarching theme or term on their site, nor do either ever explicitly mention why excessive weight is *bad*. While one could infer from this that *gluttony* is not important to either organization, the language used again is very referential to *gluttony*, creating an implicit argument that *gluttony* (which manifests itself in an individual being overweight) is simply inherently negative. By equating weight loss (which can be understood as the inversion of *gluttony*) as coming directly from God, it can be reasoned that God is the driving force behind one’s weight loss, effectively exorcising *gluttony* from those who are possessed by it. In this way, weight loss becomes more than merely a portion of the Christian religion, it becomes a sect in and of itself, encouraging followers to relinquish themselves to a higher power in the struggle

³⁵ Ibid.

to become slimmer, more beautiful, and making “health...a religious obligation.”³⁶ For many women, this reasoning leads to more rigorous beauty standards.

Slimming Beauty: The Effect of Gluttony on Female Beauty Standards

Before moving on, I feel I should add a disclaimer regarding societal pressures based on genders. This paper, and specifically this section, is not intending to imply that societal stigmas regarding overweight individuals are specific to only women. Men and individuals who do not identify within the gender binary are also regularly subjected to criticism for their weights and/or eating habits. I believe it is also important to situate myself in relationship to this topic, as I am a white-passing, male-identifying individual who would not be considered overweight by many or most standards. I do not mean for any of this to be taken as *the* objective female experience, as I clearly have none. However, it should be noted, within the Christian dietary and self-help genres, “female authors both [dominate] and [aim] their work explicitly at women.”³⁷ Given the large female demographic both in the form of audiences and in the writers publishing said works, I believe it vital that pressures on females in relationship to this topic be addressed.

For many Christian women, Christian dietary books and nutritionists act as metaphorical blinders, keeping females focused on their weight, perpetuating the discourse that thin is beautiful and a spiritual ideal. Women are and have been framed “both as victims and devilish tempters for other individuals,”³⁸ impinging on the pleasures and virtues of men. Thus, “control of women’s roles and functions in domestic and institutional arrangements were [and are] seen as

³⁶ Griffith. *Born Again Bodies*. 41.

³⁷ Griffith. *Born Again Bodies*. 217.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

key to” minimizing feminine temptation over men.³⁹ This aforementioned control, at least in part, harkens back to my opening anecdote. My ex-coach, by dictating what is a “proper” or “improper” woman in terms of weight, creates a form of control that raises barriers for women not deemed “proper.”

This example about my coach, however, is steeped in irony. If the control is meant to make women less tempting for men, it would lend to reason the ideal for a woman should be the opposite of what is considered tempting. The logic presented by my coach, however, is reversed: he desires women look a certain way (his ideal of beautiful) in order to make them socially acceptable, but by doing so, they immediately become less trustworthy because they are now more tempting (hearkening to the Sin of lust which this paper does not have the scope or length to delve into). Although I never sat down with my coach and had a heart-to-heart with him and this paradox he presents, the paradox does represent many of the difficulties many women face with societal beauty standards.

Given this paradox, one in which inherent boundaries appear to exist for women regardless of body type, what can be said about female bodies (the historic implicitly bleeding over into the present)? Simply put, by linking the soul to body and saying that if a woman *is* physically fit (nominally attractive for today’s standards), then she is a temptress while simultaneously saying if a woman *is not* physically fit (nominally unattractive for today’s standards), then her soul is impure. This paradox can be summarized in the idea that “women, fat

³⁹ Miles. *A Complex Delight*. 99.

or thin, [are] agents of sin.”⁴⁰ This ultimate conclusion carries with it its own set of moral and societal implications for women.

While women still seem unfortunately doomed to be critiqued for their bodies, regardless of their body-type, it appears most Christian women attempt to focus on being skinny, accepting all the negativity that comes with that. Many Christian women subscribe to “the prototype that emerged in the postwar period...[and] its steady focus on extreme slenderness.”⁴¹ Women who continue to subscribe to the idea of skinny being the ideal make a “‘true Christian womanhood’ that is ever more narrow and exclusive.”⁴² This self-perpetuation from women to other women acts panoptically. In other words, by noting the supposed disorder (women who do not fit the ideal mode of fitness), the powers in place (the majority of women who do subscribe to skinny as the ideal) denote what is “other” in a given system, showing the “natural order of disorder” and strengthening the given power’s authority in the given system.⁴³ This self-reflexive control is toxic to women trapped within this system of beauty standards. Those who rebel from said standards are further ostracized by the majority, making the minority exist evermore on the fringes of any given community. This alienation only serves to weaken the minority’s position, making change in a system difficult. Due to this phenomenon, beauty standards and their gluttony-based rhetoric are ironically perpetuated by the very people they stifle.

The Faults of Gluttony: Possible Counterarguments and Rebuttals

⁴⁰ Griffith. *Born Again Bodies*. 219.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis” from Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*. (New York: Vintage, 1984), 322-3.

As noted above, gluttony is not often used contemporarily to understand obesity in Christian-dominated cultures or in the rhetoric used by Christian nutritionists. Pair this with the fact that “religious practice in the United States correlates positively with obesity, as Christians generally...are the heaviest of all... In other words, many ‘firm believers’ do not have ‘firm bodies.’”⁴⁴ The previous statement begs the question: is gluttony still relevant to society today when it comes to looking at overweight individuals? To put it more simply: does this paper have any real purpose, any real reason to be read?

These are fair questions given the lack of “gluttony,” as a term, used by contemporary Christian nutritionists and the positive correlation between religious (Christian) practices and obesity. But, just because a word is less present does not mean its meanings and connotations are forever lost. It is critical to reiterate that, although the term “gluttony” might be increasingly less common today to understand weight, its effects are still felt, largely due to soul and body duality. It appears that conceptions of the soul and body are still linked today as “[f]it bodies ostensibly signify fitter souls, whose prayer appear particularly, perhaps exclusively, suffused with wonder-working power.”⁴⁵ Again, this idea of soul and body being linked relates directly to this paper’s opening anecdote.

Putting aside the fact my coach *did* (and likely still does) use “gluttony” as a term, his overtly sexist logic as to why unfit women make bad girlfriends is remarkably reflective of how gluttony, without being frequented as a term, applies to Christian-dominated societies today. Gluttony has historically been seen as a sin which has historically been seen to be reflected in

⁴⁴ Griffith. *Born Again Bodies*. 2-3

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

one's body weight. If, then, a given person is overweight, he, she, or they are seen, at least on some subconscious level to those who subscribe to these Christian ideals, as being guilty of gluttony, of excessive consumption. As many Christian dietary groups and nutritionists denote religion and God as a (if not *the*) means to overcome one's less-than-ideal weight, the idea that one's physical weight and eternal soul are connected is perpetuated. While this explanation does little to describe why there are a high percentage of overweight Christians in America, it *does* help explain why Christian nutritionists are so sought out, why they make up such an inordinate portion of self-help books. If there are truly so many overweight individuals who *do* believe that one's physical weight can negatively reflect on their soul's well-being, it falls to the diets prescribed by people like Blackbird to help them out of their rut and back onto the righteous path of God. Unfortunately, perhaps, for these individuals not satisfied with their body weights, they ain't protecting my high school's quarterback. At least then, if history has taught me anything, that's one sin they might have been forgiven for.

Gluttony Today: Implications and Conclusions

Today, gluttony's pressures and affects are ever visible in our society. Many “[y]oung people, including children, in Christian culture...continue to struggle with eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.”⁴⁶ In fact, “[t]he pressure to be thin and beautiful may be greater for teens in the devotional world...[as] Christian teens are as crushingly preoccupied with bodily control as with the many symbolizations of embodiment that aid them in signaling spiritual

⁴⁶ Ibid., 245.

intensity and authenticity.”⁴⁷ It would seem, by the previous quote, that although gluttony is not often used literally contemporarily, its effects still tremor within those who subscribe to the Sins as genuine and unshakable moral faults. The “obesity epidemic,” and merely not having an “idealized” body in general, lead to the theory of an impure soul, one further from God and one’s community. This idea of gluttony persists not only in how one’s physical body looks, but in how one consumes anything. For many, over-indulgence in general can be seen as “the moral equivalent of substance abuse, however legal.”⁴⁸ Whether this comes in the form of drinking too much alcohol, smoking too much marijuana, or eating enough to start an “obesity epidemic,” gluttony is present.

Setting aside the “obesity epidemic,” in many developed nations, gluttony (and all of the Sins, for that matter) have become popularized via various forms of media. From the Sponge Bob fan theory that seven of the main characters represent the Sins to anime television shows such as *Full Metal Alchemist* and *The Seven Deadly Sins* integrating the Sins as central characters, the Sins are as present now as they ever have been. Although many who subscribe to the Sins’ malicious ways have feared the Sins’ normalization within society, it appears gluttony and the others have found a means to do just that, making the Sins seem interesting rather than as deadly as their names imply. While gluttony itself is not used to understand obesity as frequently as one might think, the rhetoric and stigma around obesity appears to be derived from gluttony’s influence.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ DeYoung. *Glittering Vices*. 147.

With this influence, however, comes barriers for many individuals. Although more information continues to be published denoting obesity as, often times, being connected to a mixture of factors such as genetics,⁴⁹ the stigma around over-eating or unhealthy eating being the primary cause for obesity persists. As many cannot help their genetic build, those affected are ostracized by society at large. For many Christians, this is all the worse, as this supposed visible proof of gluttony equates to a lack of faith, separation from God, and questionable moral purity. While, largely due to panoptic influences and controls, women appear to suffer the proverbial short end of the stick, all who subscribe to set ideals about what is or is not okay as a body type are confined under preconceived notions of beauty. This normalized idealizing “[i]n media societies in which cameras define beauty,”⁵⁰ creates widespread discourses and metanarratives about beauty. Often times, such metanarratives can lead to harm within any given society, in this case coming in the form of eating disorders and associated issues.

Ironically, of course, these definitions of beauty are not universally normalized, speaking to the relativity of a given body type’s beauty in any given culture. Articles and (bad) Photoshopping have defined what the “best” bodies in various countries are (both the ideal female body⁵¹ or the perfect male body⁵²), and YouTube videos have done the same for a whole

⁴⁹ Andreas Beyerlein, Rudiger Kries, Andrew R Ness, and Ken K Ong. “Genetic Markers of Obesity Risk: Stronger Associations with Body Composition in Overweight Compared to Normal-Weight Children.” *PLoS One* 6, no. 4. 2011.

⁵⁰ Miles. *A Complex Delight*. 140.

⁵¹ Alanna Vagianos. “What The ‘Ideal’ Woman’s Body Looks Like In 18 Countries.” *Huffington Post*. Published August 14, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-the-ideal-womans-body-looks-like-in-18-countries_us_55ccd2a6e4b064d5910ac3b0

⁵² Diana Bruk. “How 1 Man’s Body Was Photoshopped to Meet 19 Different “Ideal” Beauty Standards Around the World.” *Cosmopolitan*. Published February 17, 2016. <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/lifestyle/news/a53831/global-beauty-standards-men/>

(albeit brief) history of the world's beauty standards for women.⁵³ Unsurprisingly, the variations are fairly great. Of course these body types are unrealistic for many, and for most societies the heavier bodies are put leagues apart from the ideal, harming the body image of many young people and leading to reduced self-esteem and increased eating disorders. For many Westerners today, it seems clear that distain for larger bodies remains prevalent and the excessive body means only one thing: a sickly soul.

⁵³ BuzzFeedVideo. "Women's Ideal Body Types Throughout History". Filmed. YouTube Video, 3:09. Posted [January 2015]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xrp0zJZu0a4>

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