



God and Thinness: Is Christian Theology Feeding the Secular Commercial Weight Loss Industry?

A discussion of how one UK secular commercial slimming group has been resourced in various ways and to various degrees by Christian motifs and theological logic.



Hannah Bacon

Dr Hannah Bacon is a contextual theologian at the University of Chester. Her current research looks at how Christian theology might inform and transform contemporary social discourses on the body, and the female body in particular.

The religious dimensions of contemporary dieting practices are not hard to fathom. Increasingly in the USA, evangelical Christian women in particular are encouraged to get 'Slim for Him' or pray their weight away. Faith-based diets which blend Christian devotion with weight loss feed the US commercial markets as millions of American Christians commit to fighting fat through faith. However, this association between religion and thinness is not something simply located within explicitly religious diet programs or reserved for the US market alone. 'Secular' dieting ideals and practices also echo Christian discourses about sin and frame the pursuit of thinness in terms of conversion. A look at one UK secular commercial weight-loss group exposes how the Christian moral language of sin (spelt 'Syn' by this organisation) functions to police the boundaries of women's bodies and assists in the normalisation of anti-fat sentiment.

Inside a Weight Loss Group

The weight loss group I attended makes up one of 6,000 groups which meet across the UK every week. I joined the group as a researcher but also as a dieter, committed to the dual purposes of losing weight and conducting ethnographic research. As a paying member, I observed the group's goings on and conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 women and one man. Although the group varied in size, meetings averaged around 15 members each week. Dieters also varied in age but the group was almost exclusively female with only two male members attending, neither of whom attended regularly. The group was mostly white and middle class and the female leader reflected this demographic. Meetings took place in a church hall and usually lasted about one-and-

a-half hours. They were formulaic in structure and would usually end by the leader commissioning the group to 'go forth and shrink!'

Speaking of 'Syn'

This slimming group shows the enduring disciplinary power of the theological language of sin. 'Syn', originally spelt 'sin' by this weight loss organisation, stands for 'Synergy' and depicts the organisation's view that restricting the amount of food treats members enjoy (typically things like chocolate, crisps, cakes and alcohol) work alongside other elements of the diet to optimise weight loss. Syns are to be distinguished from 'Free Foods' (which the leader identifies with 'safe' foods) and so are foods which incur some kind of cost or danger. The diet organisation stresses that Syns must be calculated either by consulting the slimming guide produced by the organisation or by visiting their website. Members should consume between 5 and 15 Syns a day and are asked by the leader to record their daily intake. Because Syn connotes those foods which are not inherently safe, they must be restricted and regulated. The leader advises that it is the Syns we don't see which stand to get us into the most trouble – the Syns lurking in salad dressings, in the bits at the bottom of cereal packets. A lax attitude to Syn, she tells us, places the dieter in a 'danger zone'.²

Syn and the Fall: Continuing the Legacy of Eve

In one respect this group's discourse of Syn echoes the traditional theological motif of the Fall, allying Syn with food and a moral collapse away from purity. Mark, for

example, confesses in his interview that his 'downfall' is savoury snacks – a pork pie, a sausage roll. For Sarah, it is the tastiness of crisps that threatens to thwart her good intentions. She tells me that when eating a sandwich she has 'this thing where I want to eat crisps', and given the bread is already using up Syns, she knows she would be better off if she did not eat them but finds them hard to resist nevertheless. Indeed, the sentiments of St Paul do not appear to be too far removed from Sarah's struggle where he remarks, 'I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do' (Rom 7.19).

Some members are exasperated by their inability to motivate themselves towards weight loss and obtain the good they desperately desire. Mark, for instance, tells me that weight loss has made him feel good but he was 'slipping now' and wondered why his experience of losing weight was not enough to return him to his weight loss goals. Ruth similarly expresses frustration with her own eating behaviour: 'I can see it in myself. It is very easy to just slide back into your wicked ways ... and eat all these things which are responsible for how you got where you are in the first place.' For many then, Syn signifies a 'slide' or fall 'back' into old ways that members associate with a fatter self from which they are trying to escape.

As well as echoing Christian motifs to do with spiritual conversion (which I will address in a moment), allying food with a moral collapse away from purity echoes the traditional theological logic of Eden. It is certainly true that early Christian thinkers saw the story of creation in Genesis as endorsing a suspicion of appetite and female appetite in particular. For Basil of Caesarea, Genesis showed that desires of the flesh needed to be resisted. 'It was gluttony that betrayed Adam to death and brought wickedness upon the world, thanks to the lust of the belly.'³ It was Eve, however, who often came to symbolise the dangers of appetite and desire and it is this association between *women*, food and sin which operates so successfully in this weight loss group to curtail female flesh. For Tertullian, women were all cast in the role of Eve as 'the devil's gateway' and due to their sin were responsible for causing the death of Christ; for Augustine, the serpent approached Eve first because she was less rational and more susceptible to deception. The desire and lust associated with concupiscence was primarily established by Eve and by her eating of the forbidden fruit.⁴

It seems clear then that the legacy of Eve lives on in this weight loss group. If, as Michelle Lelwica argues, 'in the biblical story, humanity's fall from grace into sin is symbolically represented in the act of a *woman* eating', and 'this tale ... continues to influence attitudes towards women's roles and bodies today',⁵ then it is not surprising that this organisation adopts the Christian moral language of sin in order to promote its weight loss agenda. Already at hand is an association between women's appetites and temptation and just as Christian thinkers have insisted that female desire must be 'kept in check' (to use the words of Augustine), so this weight loss organisation insists that women in particular must

police their appetite and ensure the rational power of the will rules over their insatiable desire for food. The outcome is that women's bodies are diminished and the amount of space they occupy in the world contained.

That this weight loss group is orientated towards women is undeniable. The leader addresses the group on more than one occasion about wearing or fitting into our 'frocks'. She also advertises the organisation's annual 'woman of the year' award which celebrates the most successful member, clearly communicating the organisation's assumption that weight loss is *for* women or (at best) that women are expected to be more successful at reducing their flesh. This not only dishonours women's bodies but also offers a false hope of redemption through mastery of the flesh and self-sacrifice. Following a traditional account of Eve's culpability for sin, women in this group come to learn that they must transcend their flesh in order to be 'good'.⁶

I am the New Me! Confession and Conversion in a Weight Loss Setting

Furthermore, this group's shared narrative about weight loss which associates Syn with either a fall into old, 'wicked' ways or the need to return to a previous self that was morally upward, also casts weight loss in terms of conversion and self-transformation. Members communicate a need for self-change (for the self and the body to be other than it is now) and align this unquestionably with self-betterment. Not unlike Paul's bidding to the Colossians to strip off the 'old self with its practices' and clothe themselves with the 'new self',⁷ the reducing body emerges here as a new and glorious creation (a 'work' of salvation), symbolic of a move away from Syn and death (common cultural associations with 'fat') towards newness of life (i.e. weight loss).

Members repeatedly move backwards and forwards between the 'old' (deviant) and 'new' ('good') self, between transgression and obedience, and this locks them in an incessant state of dis-ease with their bodies. 'I'm trying again,' says Lucy after experiencing a gain: 'be very good in the week and if I'm not going out at the weekend, try and follow it at the weekend.' That members are unable to consistently stay 'on track' reflects classic Christian convictions about fallen human nature and the corrupted will which results. For the likes of Augustine, the sin of Adam and Eve drives us to turn our backs on the good we know. Just as he identifies weakness of will in line with Romans 7 as that which causes human beings to do the very things they hate, so members speak about Syn jeopardising the very thing they want: weight loss. Understandably, members tend to respond to weight gain with feelings of guilt and self-blame. Suzanne speaks about the shame and anxiety she feels (given her suspected gain) when approaching Tuesday's weigh in: 'I feel ashamed or like I've let myself down in a way 'cos ... it just like goes downhill ... and I think, oh, it's Tuesday! I'm going tonight and there's nothing I can do about it now.'

Wendy similarly tells me before a meeting that she had 'fallen off the wagon' and was frustrated that she

NOTES

1. Adapted from H Bacon, 'Does Size Really Matter? A feminist theological response to secular dieting and weight-loss', in H Bacon and W Morris (eds), *Transforming Exclusion: Engaging Faith Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 101–13.
2. Adapted from H Bacon, 'Does Size Really Matter?'
3. K Stone, *Practising Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 27.
4. Adapted from H Bacon, 'Expanding Bodies, Expanding God: Feminist Theology in Search of a Fatter Future', *Feminist Theology* (forthcoming).
5. M Lelwica, *The Religion of Thinness* (Carlsbad: Gürze Books, 2010), p. 169. Emphasis mine.
6. Lelwica, *Thinness*, p. 170.
7. Col 3.10.
8. M Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (trans. by R Hurley; New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. 61–2.
9. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 62.
10. See Bacon, 'Expanding Bodies'.

seemed to go through the same cyclical pattern of getting comfortable when she lost weight and then eating a bag of chips to celebrate. Nicola explains that her failure to consistently follow the plan and count Syn has led to her weight fluctuating. 'I've followed it for half a day, or I've followed it for two days and then the next day it's gone out of the window and I haven't even thought about what I'm doing.'

'secular' dieting ideals and practices echo Christian discourses about sin and frame the pursuit of thinness in terms of conversion ... I am the new me

Interestingly, members also invest a great deal of significance in 'facing Syn' within the public context of the group. The leader steers this 'truth-telling'/confessional process carefully. One week Rachel leads the group in Louise's absence but her mechanism for directing the group is identical. Like Louise, she invites members one by one to explain their weight loss, gain or maintenance and encourages them to leave their 'past' behind in pursuit of a 'new' ('good') self. Mark shares his story in this meeting. He had gained weight again and was frustrated that despite losing pound after pound over a period of months he had now gained the weight back over less time. It had been the holiday period and he had been away with another family. This had meant cheese and ham sandwiches at lunch-time and a beer in the evening. He wasn't making excuses but he had expected a gain. The leader retorted that he couldn't change where he had been in the 'past' and that it was now about looking 'ahead'. It was easy to feel guilty given the 'little man in the back of our heads who tells us we can't do it, we're useless'. Members nodded and agreed. He reiterated that he felt disappointed and frustrated but Rachel was keen to move him on towards positively thinking about how he might 'turn things around' in the week ahead. She reminded him that in his first week he lost 6½ pounds and questioned what was to stop him from going for the same loss next week. Although Mark thought this unrealistic given his pattern of weight gain, the leader inferred that if he was committed to the goal, he could achieve it. He agreed to try.

As well as reiterating Foucault's observation that subjects participate in the operation of power through the act of self-policing, this also reflects his contention that the process of confession unfolds within a relationship of power. In this case, members perform their truth telling to the leader who is experienced as the main interlocutor involved in the confession process. She becomes 'the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile'.⁸ She performs the role of quasi-priest judging members' actions and attitudes and re-establishing dieters on the right path. It is not surprising then that Foucault also identifies transformation as a central feature of confession. Confession, he says, is 'a ritual in which the

expression alone, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems and purifies him [sic]; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation'.⁹

Similarly in this group, the meeting allows members to be set free from their Syn and to publicly recommit to their pursuit of a thinner future, as Julie explains: 'I think just being there makes you think like you've reset everything. You've reset the balance and you feel you're back in control a bit now. You don't feel like you're hiding from it. You've faced what happened and ... I'm drawing a line under it. And you can start a new week. But if you don't do that I think you can hide away from it a little bit.'

Overlaps with Christian conceptions of penance are striking as attending group and making a public confession enables members to look ahead with integrity. Just as with Catholic teaching where the practise of penance brings about deliverance from sin, serenity of conscience and spiritual consolation, admitting Syn rather than hiding from it enables members to 'draw a line' under their past and start again. Confessing Syn publicly also mirrors the public confession of sin which forms part of many weekly Christian liturgies and restates the common Christian belief that that all have sinned and fallen short (Rom 3.23). Members learn that their Syn must be atoned for, that their repentant hearts must be reflected in 'good' works.

Concluding Remarks: Food as Life

This group's framing of Syn as a moral fall away from purity echoes traditional Christian accounts of the fall and demonstrates how the moral language of Syn serves to normalise weight-loss ideology. In adopting the Christian moral language of Syn, in echoing Christian practises of confession, in reflecting ancient theological accounts of fallen human nature and the need to replace the 'old' self with the 'new', this weight-loss organisation appears to be resourced in various ways and to various degrees by Christian motifs and theological logic. But this is not the only way to think theologically about food. In Proverbs 9 the female Sophia is portrayed as hostess and cook at a lavish banquet. She has built her house, set her table and invites all without sense to 'come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed' (Prov 9.5). By eating her food, her guests walk in the way of insight and live (Prov 9.6). Eating leads to life and a future rather than death as is the case in Eden. This provides a stark contrast to the belief that only weight *loss* and the controlling and careful observing of appetite will lead to wholeness and ultimate salvation. The ignorant eat their way into wisdom, they do not get wise by cutting down!¹⁰ Given the popular symbolism of sin is conveniently adopted by this 'secular' weight loss organisation to service its own commercial agenda and further the patriarchal control of female flesh, it is, I believe, time to think again and allow the richness of our theological tradition to help develop and alternative response which is good for our health.