BITING THE APPLE: FOOD, POLICY, AND SIN IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the Judeo-Christian religious concept of sin influences the way Americans think about food. The language of sin used in regards to food and the underlying values are closely analyzed. The examination of sin and food ultimately shows how this complicated relationship may contribute to the results of current related and future public policy programs. The historical relationship between religion and food in post-civil war America, starting in approximately 1865, shows how America became a fat phobic culture. A close review of diet programs from the past and present indicate a language of sin. The consequences of this fat phobic culture along with other factors include eating disorders and the obesity epidemic. The issue of fat and the body has become a social issue.

The search for solutions and prevention to eating disorders and obesity is seen in various public policy programs and also in religious organizations. The options for treatment or lack of options reveal language of sin values. Beliefs about what and who to blame for America’s “weight problem” and how the issue
should be addressed is a values issue. American values related to hard work, personal responsibly, and discipline have religious roots that impact various legislation and public policy programs. A comprehensive understanding of how values influence the American relationship with food is a critical part of the struggle to find solutions to a larger social and public policy problem.
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ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF JUDEO-CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY AND FOOD VALUES IN POST-CIVIL WAR AMERICA

The human use of food, fasting, and rituals for religious and spiritual advancement is clearly seen in sacred religious texts.¹ Every religion references food somewhere in their holy text, the focus of this thesis is on the Judeo-Christian religious concept of sin in American culture. This chapter will provide a brief historical account of the connections between Judeo-Christian philosophy, food values, and the development of the language of sin in post-civil war America. The time period was selected because the most significant spiritual movements in American history took place after the civil war. This historical foundation is imperative to the reader’s ability to fully grasp how America’s current relationship with food has evolved. The point is to highlight significant historical Judeo-Christian religious movements, events, changes, and food related topics that are connected in post-civil war America. Finally this chapter will reflect on religious and spiritual elements and the development of the use of a language of sin in relation to the current American diet.

Post-civil war America experienced a number of dramatic changes. Particularly in Judeo-Christian centered spiritual movements and alterations. George Marsden’s *Religion and American Culture* describes how directly following the civil war Protestant Americans began fighting another war, a moral crusade on prohibition and the establishment of the blue laws.⁵ Marsden explains that even though there was diversity in religious practices in the 1860s the real power was in the hands of the Protestants.³ However, shifts in the American Protestant control started to be visible around 1910.⁴ Understanding shifts in power is important in regards to the American relationship with food. Since it can reveal a cultural power struggle over the meaning of Christian principles and their application in American society.

What a culture is experiencing politically and socially can be reflected in how that culture values food. If there was a major cultural shift in Protestant dominance around 1910 and this struggle was part of an underlying values struggle between Americans, perhaps there are corresponding eating behaviors and thoughts. The beginning of this cultural shift in America around 1910 explained by Marsden in *Religion in American Culture* was not necessarily about

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³ Ibid., 107.

⁴ Ibid., 108.
an actual decrease in Protestants. Rather an increase in the development of the, “
[ . . . ] essential paradox in American civilization: It is both intensely spiritual and
intensely materialistic.”\textsuperscript{5} This highlights the complications that arise in the
transition of moving a country forward to allow for full economic and
 technological advancements. While having the dual goal of maintaining a sense of
principles and morality, America also must move forward in materialism. This is
a cultural identity crisis.

In \textit{Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition}, the authors look seriously
into this relationship between sociocultural transitions to reveal possible impacts
on rates of eating disorders.\textsuperscript{6} The research found that overall the rates of eating
disorders appeared to increase in correlation with the level at which cultures were
experiencing social transitions.\textsuperscript{7} The depths at which economic, political, social,
and artistic movements create cultural changes seen and unseen, is difficult to
fully understand. Our relationship with food can reveal aspects of our society in
various ways. Food is a human life necessity and is used in various forms, such
as, war weapons, passive resistance, patriotism, celebration, “fashion” statements,
communication, love, identity, class markers, and finally forms of spiritual and/or

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 111.

\textsuperscript{6} Mervat Nasser, Melanie A. Katzman, and Richard A. Gordon, eds., \textit{Eating Disorders
and Cultures in Transition} (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), XIII.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
religious devotion. In America, our relationship with food is extremely connected to our relationship with our body and identity. In Changing bodies, Changing Cultures: An Intercultural Dialogue on the Body as the Final Frontier, authors Nasser and Di Nicola explain that eating disorders are closely related to identity struggles.\(^8\)

Similarly, a country that is experiencing a significant sociocultural transition can be viewed in some aspects as having an “identity crisis.” From approximately 1865 to 1910, the sociocultural transition of increasing secularization was inching forward.\(^9\) By 1910, the development of secularization had been established.\(^10\) The divided beliefs about Christianity created tension because it represented changes in American values.\(^11\) America’s values were leaning towards concepts of self-help and spirituality, and less on the Bible.\(^12\)

The belief that personal responsibility over anything else is critical to the American character was formed by 1910. The real devil was not some sort of monster in hell. The American devil was laziness, and fat would soon develop into the ultimate representation of this. This American value was formed from

\(^8\) Ibid., 172.

\(^9\) Marsden, Religion and American Culture, 112.

\(^10\) Ibid., 108.

\(^11\) Ibid.

\(^12\) Ibid., 119.
original traditional Protestant thought, which asserted that God created a world where if you do not work hard you do not deserve to be helped.\textsuperscript{13} The way that Americans generally tend to think about overweight people reflects this hard work value. Fat is simply a sign of laziness and it is the individual’s fault for their irresponsible eating behaviors that have caused them to be overweight.\textsuperscript{14} The fault of fat is placed on the individual not the society at large. However, there is a common underlying values struggle in the judgment of fat, which is ultimately about equality.

This value struggle has always been about equality and exposes the questions of personal responsibility vs. government responsibility in regards to various social policy issues. The debate of what makes for an equal start in America is revealed and this pertains to how America views being overweight. If being overweight is entirely the individual’s fault, then there is less of a reason for assistance from social and public policy programs. However, if being overweight is partly a result of unfair circumstances in healthy food options, which is the case for those, living in “food deserts.”\textsuperscript{15} Or if a health issue is the result of a mental illness, which is the case with eating disorders, then perhaps the government

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Anne Brumley, “As Horace Fat” in a Thin Land: Ben Jonson’s Experience and Strategy,” in \textit{Historicizing FAT in Anglo-American Culture} Elena Navarro-Levy, ed. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 126.

should assist in helping to create more equality in this area. In other words, the values behind beliefs in regards to how the “obesity epidemic” and increase in eating disorders should be handled reveal differences in who Americans thinks is to blame.

Current food policy topics reflect this blame debate. Basically, is healthy food a privilege or a right? For example, is simply providing a child with a free school lunch enough (even if the food is not of high nutritious value and evidence shows this effects concentration), or do you ultimately believe it is a human right to have access to nutritious food (instead of just any food)? Or do you believe that nutritious food is something you should have to work extra-hard for? Again this values struggle is seen in how Americans think about eating disorders because usually they are viewed as something the individual has created, a choice.

Therefore, if they have the slightest bit of control over their symptoms then they can help themselves. The assumption is that if an individual is struggling at any level, if they really want to stop binge eating or starving themselves they will. Also, if overweight Americans really want to lose weight they can simply stop buying junk food, and overeating. If you work hard enough you can overcome the donut and the diet. The same American values struggle that was established in Protestant philosophy in 1910 is seen in current food and body image values.
Establishing Fat: 1865-1920’s

Protestants were able to maintain dominance in American culture in the twentieth century by adapting to scientific discoveries while maintaining a moral agenda. This moral agenda continued to promote the self-help concepts originated from the Protestant ideas of good and evil in regards to the American work ethic. Although Protestant’s did have the highest numbers of individual members, Churches, and political power, America’s religious pluralism was continuing to expand as well. Catholicism had been flourishing throughout the country. Yet, despite differences in theological interpretations and beliefs, Catholics and Protestants both maintained a high level of anxiety and fear of sin.

The aggressive fears of sin and increasing religious pluralism, created tension in concepts of “right” and “wrong” living. The importance of personal responsibility was an American value that appeared to remain constant regardless of religious affiliations. The fear of fat also became more distinctly American in this early part of the twentieth century as well. The personal responsibility

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16 Marsden, Religion and American Culture, 140.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 144.

19 Ibid.

value had become intertwined with the American diet. The overweight body was a sign of a lack of self-care, and taking proper care of one self (by resistance of fat) was now a part of being a good American.

Once the concept of personal responsibility in regards to the American fear of fat was established after 1910, a preoccupation with the lean body did not take long to develop. Americans became more materialistic and more focused on, “[...] virtues of self-discipline, self-denial, and hard work.”21 America’s great paradox of dual materialism and spirituality was becoming more and more evident, and so was the fear of fat. The development of an unyielding and aggressive consumer culture was beginning to be part of the American life in the 1920s.22

The emphasis on the slender body was clear by the mid-1920s according to author Laura Fraser, in The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States:

But by 1926, Hutchinson, who was by then a past president of the American Academy of Medicine, had to defend fat against fashion, too, and he was showing signs of strain. “In this present onslaught upon one of the most peaceable, useful and law abiding of all our tissues,” he told readers of the Saturday Evening Post, “fashion has apparently the backing of grave physicians, of food reformers and physical trainers, and even of great insurance companies, all chanting in unison the new

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21 Marsden, Religion and American Culture, 205.

22 Ibid.
commandment Of fashion: ‘Thou Shalt be thin!’

It is interesting that Mr. Hutchinson compared this American fear of fat as a “new commandment” and described all of the ways in which the culture was fighting against this new sin leading up to the second World War. This fear of fat had slowly nudged its way into the homes of Americans. Fraser explains that the fear of fat was partly a result of the fact that it was no longer special to be fat, in other words fat had lost its elitism. Due to industrializations improvements in America’s ability to transfer food and keep perishables in the house, mostly everyone was able to have enough to eat. Exclusivity shifted from fat as an elitist display of abundance of food to thinness as an elitist display of self-discipline.

Religious Values & the Development of the Diet Industry: World War II to the 1960s

America’s relationship with religion changed during World War II (WWII). A renewed sense of faith in America’s prosperity was heightened post WWII in combination with increased moral and religious values. The

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24 Ibid., 12.

25 Ibid.

26 Marsden, Religion and American Culture, 218-219.

27 Ibid., 219.
increasing secularization of America took a backseat during this time period up until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{28} Religion was encouraged in a way that oddly also promoted pluralism, “Reflecting now more broadly and vaguely than ever the old Republican agenda of uniting the nation under a moral-religious ideal, people were encouraged to go to the church of their choice and to pray for peace.”\textsuperscript{29}

It was clear that an ideal American should have some kind of religious faith, and any faith would do. The American values system is spiritual in its root, but could also use materialism as motivation for acting out these morals, such as the importance of working hard. Therefore an American value often has religious roots and but easily morphs into a social cause or accepted belief. Religious movements took the path of organizing for various social justice issues, such as civil rights in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{30} This is an example of religion as a political and social tool. Marsden points out that it is important to note that Martin Luther King Jr., “[ . . .] made a clear distinction between the sin and the sinner. One should hate the sin, he repeatedly urged, but love the sinner.”\textsuperscript{31} Should Americans hate the fat person (the sinner) or the fat (the sin)?

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 223.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 224.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 242.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 242.
\end{itemize}
The time period after World War II up until the 1960s continued to move towards more materialism in combination with more spiritual and religious revival. Religion tends to play various roles during times of war, either as a political tool and/or as way for individuals to come together in times of need. During the Second World War many Americans united in mutual moral faith that military service for the country was what God expected.\textsuperscript{32} It was the country’s moral obligation to help those suffering from the war. The revival of a moral crusade was apparent in the development of a modern evangelicalism in the 1950s, which was lead by the influential Reverend Billy Graham.\textsuperscript{33} This was a highly energetic and spiritual movement for the country and created a sense of renewal among those who had been disheartened with the state of evangelicalism in America.\textsuperscript{34}

This spiritual movement’s message and the idea of controlling one’s destiny through positive empowerment ran parallel with one another.\textsuperscript{35} The underlying messages of both movements revealed a belief in the process of renewing and re-birth of one self in order to become the best person you can be.

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\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 336-337.
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\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 337.
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Evangelicals were focused on the born again experience and the positive empowerment movement was focused on the development of one’s self-esteem.\textsuperscript{36} The American concept of self-improvement and the spirit of religious renewal were clearly seen in the increase of churches and temples.\textsuperscript{37} The message of positive empowerment was for all religions and denominations. It was one of the few messages that brought all Americans together, because it was truly for everyone.

In addition to the explosion of religious revival and personal empowerment, America was experiencing great changes during the 1950s and 1960s, in many other forms such as civil rights movements and the beginning process of the fight to legalize abortion. The focus on fat had not slowed down as well as the growing number of individuals with various forms of eating issues. The diet industry was flourishing and so were other options for the overweight, such as Overeaters Anonymous (OA), which was established in 1960.\textsuperscript{38}

Big diet companies and rehabilitation programs were becoming popular. The American obsession with fat was not just for adults; children were now watched and warned of the dangers of fat as well.\textsuperscript{39} Hillel Schwartz, author of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 341.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 298-299.
\end{itemize}
Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat explains, “From the mid-1960s, children have been learning from Head Start programs, primary school teachers, 4-H clubs, television and their own books on dieting that fat— their own fat—is ornery.” At the same time children were exposed to more advertising through television in the 1950s, since the television had become a staple in the American home. TV dinners, candy and sodas were advertised to children, but so was the message that consuming fat and being fat were very bad things. The start of the dieting cycle and confusion around food and body image became ingrained in American children.

It is not surprising that the increase in religion after World War II along with American’s obsession with fat resulted in the development of religious dieting books, programs, and products. The first dieting book that kick started this movement was titled, Pray Your Weight Away by Charlie W. Shedd written in 1957. The idea that being fat was a visible sign of an individual’s sin was clearly understood. The spiritual connections between Americans and food were mainly focused on the avoidance of the development of fat on one’s body. Thus, the focus was not on using food or religious fasting as a way to become closer to

\[^{40}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{41}\text{Ibid., 308.}\]
God, it was in the avoidance of the development of fat on the body. The ability to stay thin implied that one was a spiritually sound individual.

The new age push towards spirituality and less focus on organized religion was in its early stages in the first years of the 1960s as well. This pull to the “spiritual but not necessarily religious life” was especially evident in the feminist movements that sought to fight patriarchy, due to the limiting roles and oppression religion appeared to offer women. Yet many feminists remained devoted to their religious beliefs and became activists within their synagogues and churches for equality. Overall, New-Age Spirituality and the idea of God as a form of energy, rather then an almighty figure in the sky was starting to influence the minds of Americans.

There was a shift in the dieting culture to concepts of energy, in food and in one’s life. The spiritual energy from food and the spiritual enlightenment of freedom from fat were paths to a better life. Taking into to much energy (food) was not a path to enlightenment. The scientific study of nutrition along with the expertise of exercise was combined with a growing moral obligation to eat “healthy” and sculpt your body into as best shape as possible.

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The connections between food and energy were becoming the new language of dieting. The science of food and fitness was studied by experts in the fields of nutrition, fitness, and various medical fields. How the body takes in energy and releases energy in regards to calories was the focus. Energy was a hot topic because, “It bore all the past allusions to fuel, calories, vim, metabolism, libido, nuclear power and thermodynamics, but it meant something more, something spiritual.”44 This shift in focus during the 1960s into the 1970s lead into a new focus in fat reduction, which was all about building lean muscle mass and exercise.45 It was not just important to be thin, but physically fit. The science of weight loss mixed with the spiritual elements of energy was merging into a new-age religion of fitness by the mid-1970s and continued to progress into the late twentieth century.

The new-age shift revealed deep religious conflicts among Americans. The split between the more spiritually focused and the more conservative religions such as evangelicals and Orthodox Jews was widening. Lee Schmidt addresses this widening gap between the new agers and the conservatives, in Restless Souls,

44 Ibid., 315.
45 Brumberg, Fasting Girls, 251.
In the latest round of social and religious criticism, the desire to personify—or demonize—the “new spirituality” has found an outlet in particularly harsh castigations of Oprah Winfrey and the so-called Church of O. Born-again Protestants and traditional Catholics both offer salvation from what they refer to as the “Oprahfication” of American religion and culture: that is, the spread of the feel-good spirituality that Winfrey urges upon her fans though her massive media empire.\(^\text{46}\)

This “Oprahfication” stressed that spirituality and God were important, but organized religion was not necessarily the way to get closer to these things. It was more about “connecting with one’s self” and developing your self-esteem, not about going to Church or synagogue.\(^\text{47}\) An important part of this building self-esteem process was being happy with your appearance and understanding the connection between your emotions and food issues. However, whatever needed to be done to make this happen was acceptable, because it was ultimately meant to enhance self-confidence. Building self-esteem and having positive body image were attached to each other. Thus, if you are overweight you cannot be happy with yourself and therefore you cannot have good self-esteem. Having peace with your self meant having peace with your body as well.

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\(^{47}\) Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 267-68.
As we will see in Chapter 4, there was an increase in eating disorders in the 1980’s. The death of the musician, Karen Carpenter at the age of 32 from Anorexia Nervosa, brought attention to eating disorders. The development of at least a basic awareness of the term “eating disorder” became common knowledge in the 1980s. Rising fears of obesity were also growing. Oprah Winfrey became the major source of new dieting techniques, scientific discoveries, and spiritual development. Oprah’s personal battle with her weight was something that her viewers could relate too. The soul searching and the weight-loss fight were major elements of her show. The concept of, “mind, body, spirit” wholeness was established.

This “mind, body, spirit” concept was important because it was a new way to combine the American relationship with food and morals. This is obliviously different from the Christian dieting programs because it is not about a certain religion. Yet, it is very similar because it is about aligning our relationship with food along with our moral values. As previously mentioned this all happened while rates of obesity and eating disorders continued to rise. This is not to suggest that the morality of healthy eating and the development of the, “mind, body, and spirit” connection is to blame for the increase in the extreme cases of
eating disorders and obesity. There are many other factors that play a large part of this social issue.

For example, the increase in the development of the mass industrial supermarket chains was noticeable in the 1980’s and 1990’s.\textsuperscript{48} Similar, to the increase in convenience and packaged foods in the 1950s, there was significant change in the entire “food system” during this time.\textsuperscript{49} Large supermarkets and more product overload, more choices and more confusion, more temptation and more guilt, more money and more diets. Food shopping is overwhelming and stressful, mixed messages become more apparent, with pressure to spend more on gourmet items, eat less, eat more, and spend less on, all as fast as you can! Our relationship with food was becoming even more confusing, and so perhaps it is not that surprising that there were more reported cases of eating disorders and obesity. Moving into the 1990’s, the “food system” as indicated in, \textit{Food Justice}, as follows:

The big food retail chains were also influencing the development and selection of food products, with an emphasis on a product mix that was supported by the long-distance supply chain. They had not only become part of a global food system but were changing its character and direction. The modern period of food system change could thus be considered a period of “retailing industrialization,” reminiscent of the earlier period of the

\textsuperscript{48} Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi. \textit{Food Justice} (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 44.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
industrialization of agriculture and processing, [ . . ].\textsuperscript{50} 

The way Americans buy and sell their food has changed dramatically with the expansion of these mass industrial supermarkets starting in the 1980’s and into the present.\textsuperscript{51} The process of picking out a yogurt can be exhausting. This is not to say that it is not nice to have all the options, but when the type of yogurt picked out also determines an individual’s personal sense of moral character, this is a problem. The changes in the supermarket system, religious and spiritual emphasis on eating and the over morality of our food, brings us to the “language of sin.” Briefly discussed by author Barbara Kingsolver in “The Ethics of Eating” on American Public Radio, this concept of a “language of sin” used in American conversations is evident in many ways.\textsuperscript{52}

As we shall see in the following chapters the use of a language of sin has deep historical roots in American values of hard work, and personal responsibility. The American relationship with food has been wobbling on an unstable ground for many years. We seem to be desperately clinging on to each new diet, scientific advancement, surgery, product, and exercise program in search for answers and meaning. There is no one answer solution but certainly, it

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

is a start to try and figure out why it is, as Kingsolver indicated in *The Ethics of Eating*, “It’s has if we are afraid of our food.”\(^{53}\)
 CHAPTER 2

A LANGUAGE OF SIN: WHAT, WHERE, AND WHY

Americans often use a language of sin when discussing their relationship with food that is evident in concepts of bad, sinful, and fattening elements. Sin is a recurring theme in the American relationship with food. How Americans value food is related to how Americans value their health and bodies. The idea that eating a certain food or too much of any food can be an immoral act is a values issue. The language of sin shows the belief that eating a certain way is related to an individual’s morals. Sin, guilt, and morality are mixed together in a values battle over what is the better for you option. This chapter will seek to show how these values play out in the current eating habits of Americans by explaining:

1) What is the Language of Sin?

2) Where is the Language of Sin Most Prevalent?

3) Why Does the Language of Sin matter?

4) Why Would Food be Sinful in the First Place?

1) What is the Language of Sin?

What is a “language of sin”? A language of sin is any use of written or spoken words that include underlying messages, themes, or ideas that involve the Judeo-Christian religious concept of sin. For instance, Cold Stone Creamery
offers, “Sinless Smoothies”\(^1\) described as, “Our Sinless Smoothies are a healthy way to indulge because they start at only 110 calories. By using only the freshest ingredients we are able to offer you a healthy indulgence that’s low on calories and big on taste.”\(^2\) Companies with names like “Sinful Desserts”\(^3\) and “Sinfully Sweet Gourmet Treats,”\(^4\) and cook books with titles such as, “To Serve with Love: 100 Simple, Scrumptious Meals from the Skinny to the Sinful” authored by Carnie Wilson and Cindy Pearlman, or Dr. Joey Shulman’s “Healthy Sin Foods: 101 Recipes to Maximize Taste and Lose Weigh.” There are countless products that use “gluttony” and “sin” directly in their product titles such as the “Gluttony - Butterscotch & Vanilla Grinder - Cape Herb & Spice Company” made by A Bountiful Harvest or Barefoot Contessa’s “Sinful Hot Chocolate Mix.”

In addition there are products and books that use language that focuses on a “cleaner” and more natural approach to eating, this is similar to a language of sin because it suggests that other foods or styles of cooking are unclean, which we will see, correlates to bad/sinful food. For example the Food For Life Baking Company, Inc., has two products with the names, “Ezekiel 4:9” and “Genesis


\(^2\) Ibid.


“which offer organic and sprouted grain bread products.” As we will see later in this chapter, the language of sin comes in many forms. Such is the case with “cleaner” foods seen as not contaminated with bad/sinful pesticides, fat, trans-fat, and high-fructose corn syrup.

The focus on cleaner food is significantly increased in reaction to the rejection of mass produced packaged foods, products, such as the “Pure Organic Raw Fruit & Nut Bars” by Pure Bar or “Clean Start: Inspiring You to Eat Clean and Live Well with 100 New Clean Food Recipes” authored by Terry Walters, are examples of this. Clean foods are advertised as simple and naturally sprouted from soil. Clean foods are seen as more spiritually connected to God’s natural creations, directly provided from the earth. Clean foods are perceived to be “holy and pure” and uncorrupted by human abuse of the natural world (free of pesticides, preservatives, high-fructose corn syrup, artificial sweeteners, etc.). The language of sin indicates that clean foods or diet foods are “sin-free” and if we eat “sin-free” we feel “sin-free.”

In addition, the language of sin includes the promotion of certain miracle nutrients, fibers, and herbs. In Marion Nestlé’s *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, she calls these additions “functional

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foods” and explains that advertising of additional nutrients, fibers, and herbs has become extremely popular. Nestle describes how trends of specific nutrient, fibers, and herbs come and go and uses product examples of Oat Bran, Ginseng Crunch, and Lipton’s Take Control. Nestle indicates that this market for functional foods has been very successful, “[ . . .] functional foods were estimated to have earned $86 billion in sales in 1996, with a growth rate of nearly 8% more than in the previous year, and to have risen to $91.7 billion just one year later.”

Clearly there is a market for these functional foods and the promotion of the next wonder nutrients, fibers, and herbs is part of the language of sin. Nestle uses the term, “Lesser Evils” to describe some of these products and shows how this is an opportunity for companies to promote concepts of “good vs. bad” foods.

The language of sin does not exist only in the promotion of functional foods, and gourmet grocery store items. For example McDonald’s has a billboard advertisement, which indicates this is “delicious harmony, made for you.”

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8 Ibid., 318-332.

9 Ibid., 319.

10 Nestle, *Food Politics*, 319.

The fast food industry has experienced extreme criticism and pressure from consumers to make healthier options available. This billboard shows McDonald’s responding to the consumer demands. The idea that harmony can be found in a balanced salad that is uniquely “made for you” also provides a metaphor for life. The answer to the impossible struggle to maintain balance in one’s life in the midst of so many food options is found in this salad. The message is that the consumer can feel good about this fast food option, because it is balanced.

In addition, the concern over the negative health consequences of consuming fast food, such as McDonald’s, is clearly seen in the language of sin because in some ways fast food has become almost immoral in itself. If you consume fast food instead of cooking or choosing a different restaurant, (especially if you are a parent feeding your children dinner) then you are choosing the easy and lazy way. This moral obligation has been made even clearer to Americans with the start of First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move Campaign,” which is further examined in Chapter 5.

Overall for those concerned about obesity prevention, particularly in regards to children, fast food is essentially the devil. Food companies, which advertise junk food to children in colorful, kid’s food styles, have been demonized
in a similar fashion. The pressure to make nutritious changes for the sake of children’s health is also evident in children’s cereals with the fairly recent additions of “Extra-Fiber” or “Whole-Grains” and/or subtractions “No Trans-fats” or “No Added Sugar.” Fast food companies have started to make changes to survive the criticism, like McDonald’s decision to replace the larger French fries in children’s Happy Meals with apple slices (or some sort of produce) instead of simply an adult serving of fries.\textsuperscript{12} This language of sin is popular in advertising and can show up in a variety of ways, but maintains underlying moral messages, which separate certain foods, and the body into good and bad subject matter.\textsuperscript{13} Parents are under immense pressure to keep their children away from any sin foods and to regulate their eating habits so that they do not contribute to the obesity epidemic.

The language of sin reveals connections between what we consume and moral obligations to our body and health. There is a moral obligation to respect your body by choosing the cleaner food. The Judeo-Christian connection is evident in the belief that by sinning you are disrespecting God. Therefore, by


disrespecting your body you are disrespecting your moral obligation to God. The reasons why a food is sinful or not will be explored later in this chapter, but this concept of clean/pure food versus contaminated food is clearly a way to communicate that sinful food is immoral.

2) Where is the Language of Sin Most Prevalent?

As indicated the language of sin can come in various forms such as the demonization of certain types of foods like fast food, or the sin-free and purified versions of cleaner food products. However, there are certain trends and styles of the language of sin that appear most often. The significance of this is that any food that appears to cause weight gain (sugar, fat, carbohydrates) is considered particularly sinful. Therefore, there is a real fear of these foods because of what they can do to our bodies. Sinful foods are usually thought to be harmful to the body in various ways.

Thus, the language of sin is mostly seen in the, 1) the diet industry (weight-loss focused); 2) functional foods\(^\text{14}\) (organic/clean eating, nutrient enhanced products, added fibers, and herbs); and 3) U.S. government prevention policies regarding Obesity, Childhood Obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, health, eating disorders, etc.

\(^{14}\) Nestle, *Food Politics*, 273-274.
In America the language of sin is seen very clearly in the various waves of popular miracle foods and/or the establishment of forbidden foods. Examples previously mentioned (clean eating cook books, sinfully delicious desserts, biblically named products, etc.) provide a small portion of what and where the language of sin exists. There is a cycle of good/bad foods and non-stop discoveries of miracle and/or forbidden cooking methods that usually originate with some connection to the three topics listed above. This is where and how the language of sin is the most popular. The types of foods or a particularly sinful food changes according to the most recent research or “diet craze.”

3) Why Does the Language of Sin Matter?

Do Americans really believe that eating a certain food or eating too much of anything is a sin? This would be difficult to generalize and obviously depends on an individuals religious beliefs regarding sin, however it is possible that this language reveals an underlying values struggle in regard to our relationship with sin. If the typical language used around food has underlying Judeo-Christian themes there is an obvious relationship between these two topics.

Language is an important indicator of cultural standards and beliefs and comes in various forms. The language used in describing food and food related

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15 Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 4-16.
issues are forms of expression of cultural values. This language of sin shows that there is a belief that food is more than just food. Jessica Mudry’s “Quantifying the American eater: USDA nutrition guidance and a language of numbers” explains that the language used in regard to food is an expression of values:

As the USDA relied on a language of science to describe Food and eaters, this discourse became integrated into policies Aimed at the public, and introduced them to an abstract, Quantitative conception of food. Mudry shows that this language of science impacted the public’s beliefs about food by creating a “quantitative conception of food.” Like Mudry’s “language of science” theory, the use of a language of sin may reflect American beliefs around food because it shows a fear of food (considered bad for you or the over consumption of) as a result of Judeo-Christian religious influences. It is important to see how this language of sin exposes the belief that by eating too much or by eating unhealthily an individual is actually committing an immoral act.

The language of sin in combination with a language of science reveals a theme of food and body image issues in Americans. Most Americans are not


“happy” with their bodies and with their relationship with food. In *Weight in America: Obesity, Eating Disorders, and Other Health Related Risks*, author Wexler indicates that, “In one survey, 24% of women and 17% of men said they would sacrifice three or more years of their life to be thin. There are reports of women who choose not to become pregnant because they fear gaining weight and becoming fat.” The internal struggle to not consume the “sinful” food is something that any American dealing with food issues handles daily. The desire to be free from this internal battle often leads many to seek scientific knowledge about nutrition and exercise for guidance, such as nutritionists and personal trainers.

However, it appears that no matter how educated an individual may become on the science of health, they can still be subject to various eating disorders and/or general food/body image issues. This may lead an individual to search for scientific solutions. In their search for solutions, (other then nutrition advice) they may seek out psychiatric care or a diet program, which provides caloric boundaries for them.

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19 Ibid.,137.

20 Ibid., 76-77.
An issue that has a Judeo-Christian religious concept of sin underneath it is solved by science concepts of ultimate nutrition and fitness. It is not surprising that food is increasingly becoming a way for Americans to express their values. Food is a way to show your socioeconomic status (gourmet, high-priced items versus fast food, etc.), but also a way to show your beliefs about religion and science. If you practice healthy eating you are putting the science knowledge to action, and pleasing the science Gods or an actual God (depending on your beliefs). Either way there is an element of “doing the right thing” for your body.

The choice between the apple and the ice cream bar is also a way to communicate a sort of personal style, a fashion statement. If an individual chooses the Kind Bar described as follows:

KIND is a brand of all natural whole nut and fruit bars made from ingredients you can see and pronounce® and it's also a movement that gives new purpose to snacking.21

or the All-Natural Dark Chocolate ZonePerfect Nutrition Bars described as:

Dark chocolate is all the rage. And why not? It’s the indulgent treat you can feel good about. That’s why we created our all-natural Dark Chocolate nutrition bars. we’ve mixed the rich, indulgent flavor of dark chocolate with antioxidants* that help support the immune system and satisfying protein to make good nutrition easy and tasty. Made with real cacao and a robust dark chocolate taste that will please the dark chocolate lover in all of us. *Vitamins C & E and selenium.22

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They may choose the Kind Bar to make a personal statement about their preference for all natural and simple ingredients. Perhaps this is a desire to communicate their support of local and organic foods, instead of mass-produced products.

Buying certain brands and/or buying only local foods or only from certain grocery stores, are popular ways to communicate individual beliefs about how food should be provided to a community. The purchase of certain brands that promote a more ethical approach is a way to express that you value this over another approach.

This is especially the case now for supporters of local and organic food, who are also using this as a way to protest against the large food corporation’s control over what we consume. This is a protest against some aspects of modernization as well, because it is a call to go back to the good old days of fresh food straight from a local farm. Again, it is a way of rejecting the mass produced world we live in. Therefore as previously mentioned “food is not just food”, it is a deeply layered, values issue. The point is that all of this (language of sin, values struggle within our food choices) puts pressure on someone trying to decide

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23 Nestle, Food Politics, 371-374.

24 Ibid.
between the apple or the ice cream bar, Whole Foods Grocery Store™ or Costco’s™, Local Farmers Market or Local 7/11™.

John Coveney, author of *Food, Morals and Meaning: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating* explains how the volume of information about food choices and the emphasis on making the best choice creates anxiety in the individual’s eating experience. This ultimately impacts how they view their own moral character.²⁵ It is clearly the individual’s responsibility to handle food intake and manage his/her health. As previously mentioned, if you are an overweight American you are in many ways also viewed as a weak American in regards to personal responsibility.²⁶

4) Why Would Food be Sinful in the First Place?

Is this belief that food is sinful because the act of eating something (particularly a food that may not provide any nutritional value, but simply tastes good) is pleasurable and pleasure seeking is considered sinful? Or is it sinful because science has shown it is not nutritious? In Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex, and the Hunger for Meaning*, the connection between how American’s once dealt with the morality of sex and today’s food obsession is made:


Food has come to occupy the place in our consciousness once held by sex. The inexorable link between sin and Lust, between the forbidden and the desired, has replicated itself in our attitudes toward eating. It is in succumbing that we fulfill our desires, but to succumb is evil. Just as the Medieval penitent struggled against the Satan within, the Dieter is locked in eternal combat against the temptation that lurks within his or (usually) her soul.

The connections between food and desire are evident in the Bible. In Angel F. Mendez Montoya’s *Theology of Food: Eating and Eucharist*, the relationship between desire and taste is explored. Montoya’s explanation of the story of Eve and the forbidden fruit shows how each sense is involved in the process of temptation, “She first looks at the tree. Prior to touch and taste, sensual stimulation is activated by vision. Vision is connected to desire, and leads Eve to judge the object’s edibility: “The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye.”27

Montoya describes the process of temptation for Eve, starting with the serpent’s comments slowly putting the idea of eating the forbidden fruit in her mind and then showing how the beauty of the fruit pushed her closer to the fruit, figuratively and literally.28 A desire for something that is visually pleasing but not “good for you” is a human weakness from the Judeo-Christian perspective. This is directly related to the consumption of “sinful” food.

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28 Ibid., 80.
The question of why food is sinful is debatable, however, it appears that this is an issue of human desire not necessarily the actual consummation of food, “Sin is not disobedience, but the ceasing of hunger for God.”

So the desire for the food distracts the human mind from God. So this would mean that according to the Judeo-Christian concept of sin, if humans were properly nurturing themselves with their devotion and attention to God, then they would find that their desire for an extra portion would cease to exist.

There are numerous programs that currently exist which support this theory in some way and/or actually use language that suggests this Judeo-Christian concept of filling up on God instead of food, this is evident in the dieting industry as well which will be further addressed in Chapter 3. For example, there is a program at The Falls Church in Fairfax, Virginia, that is titled, “Hungry for God.” This program provides background on a different Christian every week for a one month. The life of the Christian is compared with corresponding eating and exercise behaviors. The comparison shows the development of the individual’s life along with the act of eating and exercise, so simply eating is compared to pre-conversion and being a baby in the Christians’

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29 Ibid., 88.

theological stage. Then eating and exercise are added with the progress of the individual’s conversion to Christianity.

The point is to show how each one of these Christians were “Hungry for God” and although they each had different paths that ultimately lead them to finding their concept of God (Jesus), each Christian was not “full” or satisfied until they found God.

This would support the concept that the actual act of eating a “sinful food” is not the sin itself, but rather the distraction of Godly pursuits. Yet, Montaya explains that this association with the food containing the sin (food poisoning) and leading to death is popular in Christianity. This fear of food causing death can be seen in our fear of fattening food and the more recent fear of non-organic food and/or processed, packaged food. The fear of food somehow causing death may not be about the sin of consuming the food but rather the fear of desiring the food. This fear of desiring food is also evident in language that demonizes certain foods, particularly fattening foods.

The question of why food could be considered sinful is dependent on the interpretation of the sin of Gluttony and Judeo-Christian beliefs. Is it the actual consummation of food that is sinful combined with the desire of the food or is it simply the desire itself for the pleasure of eating that is sinful because it takes away the desire for God? As mentioned before there is not a sense that Americans

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31 Montoya Mendez, *Theology of Food*, 84.
believe that eating food for the sake of eating is an actual sin, but there is a clear stance that being overweight is a sin.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition, Montoya points out that Eve’s conversation and debate with the serpent regarding the fruit reflects the actual process of “theologizing.”\textsuperscript{33} Montoya argues that it is significant that this conversation is about a food and God because, “[ . . . ] connection between theological thinking and food suggests that one of the primary forms of theological thought is in fact food, and the practice of eating.” Therefore the human relationship with food is also part of the human conversation with God. Humans are dependent on food for survival and this is part of their connection to God as well.

However, how humans interpret this connection with food and God has changed over time. If the concept of gluttony is originally about the sin of committing an act that was purely for the sake of pleasure, (such as eating dessert), then, although the belief in the food ultimately being a sinful item remains consistent, the reasoning behind this value is different. When did it become less about the individual’s unlucky encounter with the dessert devil and more about the individual’s personal and psychological “issues” with food? Most Americans do not conjure up images of the devil sitting next to their bowl of ice cream.

\textsuperscript{32} Schwartz, \textit{Never Satisfied}, 307-312.

\textsuperscript{33} Montoya Mendez, \textit{Theology of Food}, 81.
cream telling them to devour it. However, there is still a sense the ice cream is “sinful,” an evil thing in their lives tempting them.

For example, a Yoplait commercial used in June 2011 begins with the scene of a woman standing at her office refrigerator battling with the “dessert devil” in which she proceeds to determine if she should give into the temptation. If she does “give in,” what she should do to “make up for it” if she does. “She could have a small slice, she rationalizes; she has been "good." Or maybe a medium slice with some celery sticks. Or what if she were to jog in place while eating a big slice of cake followed by some celery sticks – that would cancel everything out, right?” The sin of the dessert appears to be about the consumption of unnecessary calories in order to experience the pleasure of eating the dessert, basically that this woman is showing weakness to the dessert devil by giving into the temptation. However, Yoplait yogurt is suggesting she does not have to give into eating the dessert because she can satisfy her urge for the pleasure of eating with a dessert flavored Yoplait yogurt instead.

Francine Prose’s *Gluttony: The Seven Deadly Sins*, explains how the focus during the medieval period was on the devil “[ . . . ] how far we’ve come from the image of the devil tempting the sinner with pies and cakes, plying the glutton with

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the joys of the table as a substitute for—a dangerous distraction from—the more profound rewards of the spirit.”

Prose indicates that this shift in thinking happened when we became more focused on the idea of free will and the psychological issues of individuals.

Therefore, in many ways the use of a language of sin around food makes sense because it hits at the heart of our complicated and confusing struggle with religion and science (psychology) and free will. The language of sin shows that although free will and psychology dominate our modern thinking about food consumption, religious and spiritual struggles are still strongly intertwined.

Why food is sinful has changed and the meaning and significance of sin in our culture has changed, but the idea that “it is actually sinful” has not changed. Thus a language of sin is still used but reasoning is different and more scientific instead of mystical and mysterious. There is more of an emphasis on certain kinds of foods being bad for you such as junk food, fast food, fattening foods, deserts, sweet foods in general, red meat, mayonnaise, whole milk, processed foods, and more recently non-organic foods. The sin is in, knowingly eating one of these “bad for you” foods, instead of choosing one of the “sin-free” options available (Yoplait flavored cherry cheesecake instead of actual cherry cheesecake). Prose elaborates:

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35 Prose, *Gluttony*, 60.

36 Ibid., 60-61.
As our cultural concerns have shifted from a focus on religion, God, and the afterlife to an obsession with health and (by extension) the fantasy of endless youth and eternal life, the glutton need no longer fear a punitive afterlife but, rather, death itself—a premature death caused by immoderation, excess, and slovenly self-indulgence.\(^\text{37}\)

The science of nutrition and psychology are supportive of the language of sin because it is still about demonizing the unhealthy act of poor nutrition. This is seen in the promotion of ultimate nutrition in every aspect of one’s life. The science of nutrition is booming and the U.S. Government now funds various research projects aimed at helping to improve the obesity epidemic in adults and children.\(^\text{38}\) The psychology of “food issues” is now not just an individuals struggle with will power and/or with a “desert devil” it is a social problem with real consequences for the United States. This is clearly seen in the recent push for the government to come to the rescue by creating laws against the advertising of sinful foods to children.\(^\text{39}\)

In conclusion, the language of sin is found in variety of styles, however, ultimately it is all similar moral language, that expresses an underlying values message in association with the food or diet product. Americans are bombarded with moral messages that indicate that how they eat is directly related to how

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 10.


“good” they are. In *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex, and the Hunger for Meaning*, Iggers examines the saying, “You are what you eat.” Iggers explains how these morality messages mixed with our consumer culture have impacted our relationship with food by creating a sense that, “[ . . . ] we can find fulfillment through consumption. We have an economy that depends on the constant consumption of goods and services. The hunger itself must be manufactured, as much as the foods that supposed to satisfy it.”40 Having a healthy relationship with food in America is difficult, for many different reasons. The struggle to find balance in all the mixed messages of the language of sin is exhausting and confusing. As we will see in Chapter 3 the area in which this language of sin is most prevalent, is the diet industry, which has it’s own unique way of manipulating concepts of sin and guilt.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF SIN AND GUILT IN THE DIET INDUSTRY

Increasingly perplexed or intimidated by abundance, Americans have taken the protocols of slimming as the protocols for social and spiritual renewal. 

Schwartz, *Never Satisfied* 1

Diet food, weight-loss programs, low-calorie energy drinks, diet pills, calorie counting books, calorie counting meal plan calendars, food packaging with fitness-tips, fast fat-burning magazine articles, and various other products are endlessly advertised to Americans. All of these advertisements hold intentions of promoting weight-loss, renewal, and a new body. These diet products and programs encompass the diet industry. The diet industry is a unique and significant part of the language of sin.

In Chapter 2 the language of sin is defined, and then the most prevalent areas where the language of sin is found are revealed. The three most prevalent areas where the language of sin can be found are: 1) the diet industry; 2) functional foods; and 3) U.S. government prevention policies. Chapter two briefly described how this language of sin is involved in the diet industry. This chapter examines the role of sin and guilt in the diet industry by providing, 1) an overview of the development of the mass industry of dieting, 2) examining how sin & guilt are used as advertising techniques, and by 3) dissecting the dieting

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1 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 5.
process. The first part of this chapter shows the development of the dieting industry by looking at the 1950’s upsurge in diet products. Although the use of sin and guilt as advertising techniques is explored throughout the chapter, the second part will take a closer look at the issue. Finally, in the third part the process of dieting will be dissected to show how dieting becomes like a religion.

The Development of the Mass Industry of Dieting

The diet industry is doing very well and the advertising is working. A significant amount of Americans buy into at least some aspects of dieting in fact “[ . . ] 35 to 40 percent of American women and 20 to 24 percent of American men are dieting, and the amount they spend annually—quoted figures range from $33 to $55 billion—[ . . ].”² The diet industry is a multi-billion dollar cultural norm that has become part of the American way of life.³ However, all this dieting does not appear to be working, actually it appears to be making the problem worse, “Overwhelming evidence documents that over 90 percent of weight loss through weight-reduction plans (diets) is regained, with one-third to two thirds of dieters regaining more than they lost.”⁴ The diet industry is somehow able to

² Prose, Gluttony, 77-78.
³ Ibid., 4.
convince Americans to believe whole-heartedly in the latest new diet discovery or
diet product year after year. Advertising has a powerful grip on the American
mind.\(^5\)

The message behind many diet programs is that their product or magic
pill, can allow the consumer to eat whatever they want and still lose weight.\(^6\) The
diet industry is very dependent on reinforcing this belief. The desire to create
shortcuts to slenderness via fake sugars and foods appears to be uniquely
American. The first fake sugar product started with the creation and release of
saccharin in 1879.\(^7\) This activated a scientific search for low calorie sweeteners
and fake sugars and in the 1980’s the discovery of aspartame led to the popular
product NutraSweet.\(^8\) However, this search for finding that magic diet program,
food, pill, and drink gained significant momentum in the 1950s.\(^9\)

The growth in pre-packaged foods, diet products, and the overall
expansion of large food corporations has not slowed down since the 1950’s.\(^10\)

\(^5\) Michelle M. Lelwica, \textit{The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers Behind
Women’s Obsession with Food and Weight} (Carlsbad, CA: Gurze Books, LLC, 2010), 70-76.

\(^6\) Wexler, \textit{Weight in America}, 149.

\(^7\) Schwartz, \textit{Never Satisfied}, 264.

\(^8\) Ibid., 266.

\(^9\) Harvey Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America}

The differences between “real” food and “diet” foods have became increasingly blurred, in *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* author Hillel Schwartz indicates that, “When a society becomes confused about what is a food and what is not a food, what is real and what is an imitation, then we know that very strong forces are at work.”

The language of sin is used regularly in the diet industry as an advertising technique. The language of sin with an emphasis on the specific sin of fat was evident in the American mind in the early twentieth century. As mentioned in chapter one, the fear of fat and the general cultural pre-occupation with fat on the body started to accelerate in post-civil war America. The combination of significant religious and spiritual revival movements and a moral crusade impacted Americans relationship with food. Although, if body weight measurement is in indicator of an up and coming cultural fear of fat, then that would mean that, Americans actually started showing signs of this as early as 1750.

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The real obvious and rapid development of the diet industry began 200 years later.\textsuperscript{14} There was a noticeable change in the food habits of Americans in the 1950’s that placed an emphasis on lighter, fat-free, low-calorie items.\textsuperscript{15} In addition, there was also an increase in the overall fear of fat in 1950’s American pop-culture. The fear of fat itself, becoming fat and/or of fat people was showing up in various forms, such as films, books, and in television shows and commercials.\textsuperscript{16} In, “‘Kill the Pig!’: Lord of the Flies, ‘Piggy,’ and Anti-Fat Discourse” author Zeynep Z. Atayurt explains, “[ . . . ] how the fat child was imagined in the 1950s and into today. Obesity was considered a threat to the political, economic, and social order, [ . . . ].”\textsuperscript{17}

Atayurt explains that this fear of fat is visible in children’s literature and films, such as in, Lord of the Flies, and argues that this reveals a larger cultural fear of fat.\textsuperscript{18} As we have seen since post civil war America there has been a rapid development of a general cultural focus on fat and the body. The diet industry has been progressively expanding in various forms and styles. In the 1950s there was

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{15} Levenstein, Paradox of Plenty, 137.

\textsuperscript{16} Schwartz, Never Satisfied, 294-295.

\textsuperscript{17} Zeynep Z. Atayurt, “‘Kill the Pig!’ Lord of the Flies, ‘Piggy,’ and Anti-Fat Discourse” in Historicizing FAT in Anglo-American Culture, ed. Elena Navarro-Levy (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 43-44.
a clear increase in the attempt to engineer foods that are naturally high in calories and/or fat, so that they *taste like the real food* but *do not add to one’s caloric intake*. The 1950s was also the time when the expansion of “just add water”, frozen and pre-packaged foods, such as the famous “TV dinners” started to become a major part of the American diet.  

The development of quick and easy frozen foods changed the way Americans eat. All of this fits into a larger issue related to Americans relationship with food, which is the push for mass quantities of cheap food in combination with the push for thin bodies. In the 1950s the diet industry was able to take over in a grander way, because Americans became more and more dependent on packaged or pre-made/frozen foods. In *The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers behind Women’s Obsession with Food and Weight*, author Michelle Lelwica, explains how a dependence on pre-made foods increased in combination with the belief that lower-calorie and low-fat items were becoming more popular, “The fast-paced growth of weight-loss industries in the second half of the 20th century paralleled the expanded manufacturing and marketing of highly-refined, sugary, salty, fatty, high-calorie foods.” The diet industry has certainly been successful at converting Americans. The belief in the

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20 Nestle, *Food Politics*, 18-23.

21 Ibid., 318-319.
authority of each new diet maintains great power. The use of powerful techniques and the intensity at which the industry advertises has contributed to the success.

**Sin and Guilt as Advertising Techniques**

The 1950s were particularly exciting times for the diet industry because of this new belief that one could have the pleasure of sinful foods, without the negative consequences. Which would mean the “sin” of items like fake sugars are made acceptable because they appeared to not make you fat. As noted previously in chapter two there was a shift in why fat was sinful. The sin was fat on the body, not the actual desire for the pleasure of eating the sugar. The diet industry was developing new products that were meant to lessen the likelihood of fat on the body, but it was not about taking away the actual taste of fattening or sugary foods (although of course these foods do taste different). This sends a clear message that it is ok to want to eat the sinful food, but not ok to actually gain fat on the body from it.

**Sin and Guilt As Advertising Techniques: Understanding Why Body Type Matters**

Part of the reason why using sin and guilt as an advertising technique is so powerful, is because regardless of what an individual’s actual health is, at the end of the day it is the fat on the body that is associated with shame and guilt. This shows a serious disconnect. What it means to actually be healthy and what it means to just have a skinny body type are separate. Americans associate a
slender body type with health, despite the fact that many skinny Americans may actually not be living healthy lifestyles. The diet industry needs to maintain the sin of fat while sending mixed messages regarding sinful foods in order to stay powerful. As we will see in Chapter four, this message of sin and the fat body becomes especially difficult to understand when considering the diversity in body types and metabolic rates.

However, understanding why body type does make a difference is important because it is a large part of why sin and guilt work as advertising techniques. For example, if an individual is naturally slender and has a fast metabolism, they may eat the same amount as another with a slow metabolism and heavier body type and not gain weight.\textsuperscript{22} Research in\textit{ Weight in America: Obesity, Eating Disorders, and Other Health Related Risks}, indicates that “Heritability studies, [ . . . ] indicate that genetic factors may account for as much as 75\% of the variability in the human body weight and approximately 33\% of the variation in the overall body mass index [. . . ].”\textsuperscript{23} Yet the heavier individual is still disgraced for being larger despite the same levels of consumption as the slender type. The physically larger individual has “sinned” because they have not conformed to the slender body type, not because of their actual food intake. It is

\textsuperscript{22} Wexler,\textit{ Weight in America}, 27-29.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 27.
truly in the diet industry’s best interest to maintain the appeal of the slender body type, while at the same time keeping the desire for the sinful food alive.24

If consumers desire to eat sinful foods while wishing to have a slender body at the same time, then of course they will be enticed by the idea of having the best of both worlds. How, this affects an individual’s relationship with food varies. An individual battling an eating disorder such as bulimia (which involves cycles of binging and purging) may be particularly vulnerable to the diet industry’s message. The bulimic may feel that the diet industry’s message of “tastes great without the calories” reinforces a belief that purging measures are acceptable. Since, they experience the taste of sin, with out the actual sin of extra calories through the act of purging.25 This mentality does not “work” and as mentioned previously Americans are dieting more, but yet struggling with weight more then ever.26 The sin of certain foods and the guilt that comes along with breaking one’s diet results in a vicious cycle. The sin of fat and feelings of guilt, keep the diet industry alive. The diet industry’s technique allows for an emphasis on “bad” or sinful foods and/or a concentration of “good/miracle/sin-free” foods, which creates an unnatural hostile relationship with food and the body.

25 Wexler, Weight in America, 48.
26 Ibid., 1.
Sin and Guilt As Advertising Techniques:  
Exploring Original Sin in the Bible and Judeo-Christian Connections

In a country, like America where the majority of the food is in this, “bad” or sinful food category, dieting may be particularly difficult. Examining the role of sin in the Bible author Samuel Wells indicates in God’s Companion: Reimaging Christian Ethics, that there are two parts to the sin in Genesis.²⁷ Wells indicates that one part of this sin is the pre-occupation with the sin itself, (rather then focusing on all of the other guilt-free options). Wells examination of a two-part sin can be compared to how the diet industry uses sin and guilt as techniques. Wells indicates (bold emphasis added):

“The first is the sin of the serpent. [. . .] The second of sin is the woman’s lack of imagination (matched by the man’s later in the story). The conversation is undertaken as if God were not a companion – the convental language of “Lord God” used hitherto is replaced, at the serpent’s instigation, by the creation language of “God.” Immediately there is confusion: in the absence of awareness of God’s guiding and abiding companionship, the woman quickly regards the serpent as an authority figure. [. . . ] the result of the woman’s lack of imagination is that she suddenly inhabits a land of scarcity. The garden abundance is still there, as much as ever. But She cannot see it. All she can see is the one thing in the garden that she cannot eat. This is the effect of the serpent’s words. They have transformed a world of abundance into anxiety and scarcity, a companionship of trust into a web of deceit.”²⁸


²⁸ Ibid.
American dieters are often preoccupied with all that they cannot eat in a country of mass portions and non-stop temptations of “sinful” foods. The temptation of “sinful” foods is a bigger problem for some than others, (for example, as mentioned in the case of eating disorders) however it is a problem for the typical American dieter. The focus on weight-loss also creates a focus on all the fat that is not desirable on the body. The body is broken down into separate parts of good and bad sections. The bad/fat areas are illuminated and the abundance of health or beauty is barely recognized.

The language of sin shines a light on all that should not be consumed, and the diet industry is like the serpent (authority figure) their to guide Americans in the midst of temptation and confusion. The diet industry appears to provide, spiritual renewal, scientific results, a sense of community, self-discovery, and direction in a perplexing and “sinful” grocery store.

Therefore, dieting itself creates a similar set-up to Well’s two-part sin an awareness of all that one cannot eat in combination with giving authority to the diet program. This view of dieting is confusing in a culture that struggles with high numbers of obesity, considering that it would probably not be wise to simply ignore the real and serious consequences of obesity. Yet, shaming fat has not appeared to be helpful either. The focus has been on the sin of fat, instead of Well’s idea that the sin is in the actual emphasizing of the forbidden.
Sin and guilt in the diet industry is also addressed directly by various Judeo-Christian leaders. In the 1950’s, there was also the release of one of the first religious diet books by Charlie Shedd titled, “Pray Your Weight Away (1957).”29 This was significant because a Christian leader was directly addressing the issue of weight and God, for the ultimate purpose of weight loss. Being fat and consuming fattening foods is clearly viewed as a sin in this diet book. More recent versions of Christian dieting books include, “Bod4God: Four Keys to a Better Body” by Pastor Steve Renyolds, which includes a “Losing2Live” weight loss program.30

These kinds of diet books send very powerful messages to Americans regarding their relationship to food and sin. The message is that if you want to be closer to God, you can “pray our weight away.” The idea being that God can help you with this sin because ultimately God does not want you fat. The message also reinforces that the formation of fat on your body is a reflection of your sinful behavior. Along with the belief that you can rid yourself of this devil called fat, if you follow this new program. If you try hard enough and stick to this diet program, you will succeed.

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Dissecting the Process of Dieting

The process of dieting has evolved into its own American Religion. Author of The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers behind Women’s Obsession with Food and Weight, Michelle Lelwica, ThD., explains how dieting has many similarities to religious rituals. Lelwica’s focus is on women, however men have serious weight and body images issues as well and this is seen in an increase in eating disorders among men. Although women do diet in higher numbers, men are engaging in dieting behaviors and obsessions as well. It is important to recognize this is not just a “woman’s issue” and “Studies suggest that for every ten women with an eating disorder, one male is afflicted.” Dieting is a cultural norm for Americans and thus effects both women and men, although sometimes in different ways, intensity levels, and at different life stages. Men may diet in a way to create more muscle and “bulk up” but either way there is still a preoccupation with the reduction of fat on the body.

However, overall diet/weight-loss/muscle building programs generate excitement in the dieter, it is as if one is about to embark on an adventurous journey. This journey will provide all the elements of self-discovery such as

31 Lelwica, The Religion of Thinness, 37.
32 Ibid., 133-37.
33 Wexler, Weight in America, 47.
34 Ibid., 47.
challenge, competition, discipline, and if the weight is lost ultimately create an “enlightened” (thinner) self at the end (or if muscle is visibly bulked up a sense of accomplishment in physical strength gained). The dieting program itself is glamorized and/or idolized as a saving grace, which shows a connection between our dieting culture and what we value. The value of having successfully lost weight on a diet is placed extremely high.

The journey of weight loss is seen as spiritual and highly personal. Of course the negative physical consequences of obesity are drivers for weight loss, but there is also the shallow driver, which is to be noticed for one’s new slender body. As noted in chapter one, author George M. Marsden points out that there is an, “essential paradox in American civilization: It is both intensely spiritual and intensely materialistic.” Dieting has the same paradox it is often very spiritual and yet it is also very materialistic. It is also difficult to tell what is too little and what is too much emphasis on one’s body, and what is too little attention to food and what is too much.

On the Television show, “The Biggest Loser” the contestants are often told, “it is their journey” because of elements of personal growth rooted in the weight loss process. The demographics of the contestants vary. Regardless of any socio-economic, gender, and race differences, they are all there to accomplish

the same goal. The goal is to “uncover” their true self via weight loss and lose as much weight as possible in order to become the, “biggest loser.” Some of the show’s January 2011 season contestants are introduced to viewers as,

[. . .] meet Arthur, this season's heaviest contestant at 507 pounds; Courtney, a student whose family owns a Dairy Queen and who was already inspired by "The Biggest Loser" to lose 112 pounds on her own but wants to finish her weight-loss journey on the show; and Olivia, an opera singer who wants to look as good as she sounds so she can be cast in better roles professionally.36

The show is spiritual in its mission to have each individual become “enlightened” through weight loss and materialistic in its competitive and trivial (just .1 lbs. could make a difference in an individual’s score) nature. The “Biggest Loser” has all the elements of this great American paradox that Marsden makes clear. This paradox can be seen in many aspects of the American religion of dieting. The contestants are longing to live more fulfilling lives but they are also longing to have “good” bodies. They are longing to have control over their food addictions and they are longing to not be controlled by the limitations of their obese bodies. They are sometimes conflicted by amount of time they must commit to their journey, which will ultimately take away from their careers. The drive to make more money and live a healthy life is part of this American paradox.

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At the core of his or her weight-loss journey each contestant has “a story.” An underlying emotional element that must be addressed, this is the actual, “enlightenment” that must take place, a paradigm shift or breakthrough. Each diet promises that this really is it, this is finally the way through to the “thinner you.” For the purpose of comparing dieting to religion, there are similarities in the process of the dieting journey and certain religious behaviors. In *The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers behind Women’s Obsession with Food and Weight*, Lelwica provides a detailed list of the, “[... ] most common Rituals of Thinness [... ]”:

- Counting calories, carbohydrates, and/or fat grams (before, during, and/or after eating)
- Weighing ourselves on the scale
- Calculating body fat
- Measuring waist size
- Exercising compulsively and to extremes
- Planning and carrying out a binge
- Purging
- Dieting
- Obsessive eating behaviors
- Checking ourselves in the mirror
- Comparing ourselves to our culture’s idea of a “good” body
• Berating ourselves when we don’t measure up\textsuperscript{37}

These rituals provide a sense of control over one’s diet and life. R. Marie Griffith, author of \textit{Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity}, explains that the need for a physical form of devotion in Christianity as been filled by the American devotion to dieting.\textsuperscript{38} Dieting is a way for an individual to show their devotion to something that is quantifiable, noticeable, and physical. If it is sinful to be fat, then you are showing a religious like devotion by following dieting rituals (like the ones Lelwica lists above). The rituals are apart of the challenges involved in the “self-discovery journey” element that Americans are so closely tied to.

The spiritual element of personal growth is a human need and in America this is offered in the form of dieting. Lelwica suggest varies practices instead of the rituals of dieting, which include, “Being present to (and in) your body, Listening honestly to what it says, Responding to its needs with love and care, Accepting it as it is, Taking time to enjoy your physicality.”\textsuperscript{39} In addition, Lelwica indicates that, “Mindfulness is a spiritual discipline that is rooted in Eastern meditation traditions. It is also closely related to other spiritual practices,

\textsuperscript{37} Lelwica, \textit{The Religion of Thinness}, 134.

\textsuperscript{38} Griffith, \textit{Born Again Bodies}, 161.

\textsuperscript{39} Lelwica, \textit{The Religion of Thinness}, 251.
perhaps most notably the common practice of prayer. This need for humans to have spiritual and/or religious meaning in their lives is seen in the American relationship with dieting and as shown this is particularly visible in the use of a language of sin.

**Conclusion**

The way that Americans think about fat in regards to sin and the process of dieting poses many questions. However, changes in the way Americans eat, fast, pre-prepared, packaged foods along with a cultural focus on dieting, has appeared to cause allot of confusion and suffering. The message appears to be clear that God does not want people to be fat, but as noted earlier where does body type fit into this equation? What does that mean for someone when they neglect their diet? How guilty do they feel? Do they feel that they have forsaken their God?

The battles between science and religion are revealed in the American relationship with food in many ways. However specifically looking at the religious like devotion to dieting (such as the rituals and spiritual/emotional breakthroughs mentioned above), there are underlying themes of the struggle to find meaning, purpose, and boundaries in the American way of life. Living in a culture of endless options in nearly everything (including religions) can be

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40 Ibid., 46-47.
overwhelming. The amount of variety in food and diet products certainly is confusing. It can feel easier for someone who may be overwhelmed and frustrated with his or her weight to take on a tunnel like vision with a new diet. An American dieter is in a maze of dieting products and programs. Simply picking one diet program, gives the dieter direction.

Dieting may appear to provide a rational, stable foundation in a shaky and “gluttonous” world. America is abundant with restaurants, fast foods, massive grocery stores, convenience stores, and various other food options. If there is no sense of “good” and “bad” choices then perhaps Americans feel everything will fall apart without the restrictions and guidance of dieting? There must be a list of rules and regulations to make sense of it all, basically a separation between good and evil foods.

In addition, dieting may provide a much needed sense of community. American’s are polarized politically by certain “hot topics” which have roots in the religion vs. science battle, such as abortion, stem-cell research, and gay marriage. Americans are also polarized by those who have been able to maintain a healthy weight (the enlightened), and by those who have not (the sinners). Yet, regardless of this polarization there is still a sense of community in the dieting culture, and in the American fear of fat.
CHAPTER 4

RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN STRUGGLE WITH OBESITY AND EATING DISORDERS

The progression from a general “concern” over fat intake to a full-fledged collective phobia of fat, in America is apparent in the rise of obesity and eating disorders. As shown, this fear of fat is often expressed in a “language of sin” that suggests an underlying values struggle. The increase in obesity and eating disorders in America and moral struggles are connected in various complicated ways. There are many factors that contribute to the extreme versions of food and body image issues, (which include obesity and eating disorders). The language of sin is just a piece of the pie. This is a values issue with Judeo-Christian concepts of sin. These values are deeply imbedded in the American relationship with food, which becomes noticeable in the increase in obesity and eating disorders.

All of these issues related to food, the language of sin, obesity, eating disorders, nutrition, and body dissatisfaction are connected, and can be described in general terms as a, “social issue.” Obesity and Eating Disorders are a significant part of this social issue. The purpose of this chapter is to look closely at the severity of obesity and eating disorders in America, and show how Jewish and Christian communities are responding. It is significant that so many religious organizations are responding to this issue, because it reveals a spiritual and religious element to the recovery process. Reactions to social issues usually occur
from religious organizations, government policies and campaigns (Chapter 5 will cover this), and non-profit organizations. This chapter is focusing on how religious organizations, (including faith based non-profits) have responded to obesity and eating disorders.

The first part will provide 1) a summary of eating disorders and obesity; 2) examine the religious responses to obesity and eating disorders and 3) provide an analysis of the religious response. Also, this chapter will provide separate summaries of obesity and eating disorders. It is necessary to have an understanding of the most common types of eating disorders, in order to have a clear picture of what these disorders look like. Also, even though individuals, who suffer from Binge Eating Disorder (BED), often do struggle with obesity, this still does not mean that all of those who are obese have an eating disorder. In addition, there are separate elements to each issue, which are important to examine on their own. For instance the fact that eating disorders are a type of mental illness, but the physicality of being obese is not an actual “mental illness.” However, both issues are extremely connected and both are impacted by the “language of sin” and shaming of fat that exists in America.

**Eating Disorders, Types & Causes**

In Chapter 2, we were shown how the rise of packaged and convenience foods, combined with an emphasis on dieting, resulted in a bigger and more aggressive diet industry. Dieting can lead to obsession and ultimately turn into an
eating disorder or a form of disordered eating. This is not to suggest that all eating disorders start with a diet, or that all individuals who diet will eventually develop an eating disorder. Eating disorders are complicated and should not be generalized as simply the result of a larger social issue. However, research shows that what triggers an eating disorder is mostly environmental, but there is a high correlation with genetic predispositions as well, “[ . . . ] before the onset of puberty, environmental factors made the strongest contribution to the risk of developing eating disorders; however, during and after puberty, genetic factors predominated, accounting for more than half of the risk.”¹ In America, the environmental triggers (use of the language of sin, constant bombarding messages from the diet industry and extreme fat fears) are difficult to escape. This can make recovering from an eating disorder particularly challenging.

The most commonly known eating disorders are Anorexia, Bulimia, and Binge Eating Disorder (BED).² However, there is also, Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS), which may involve a variety of similar behaviors


to Anorexia and Bulimia, and includes Binge Eating Disorder. Eating disorders are a type of mental illness and are defined in the, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th Ed.* (DSM-V), “[. . .] by severe disturbances in eating behavior [. . . .]” and indicates “A disturbance in perception of body shape and weight is an essential of both Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa.” The intensity at which an individual with an eating disorder is consumed with their body size and food intake is dangerous. Dieting is obsessive as well, however at some point there are distinctions. Distinctions between how far the dieter actually proceeds with the obsession, which may or may not determine the development of an all-consuming eating disorder.

Binge Eating Disorder (BED) is the repeated behavior of “out of control” eating incidents. A binge can be carefully planned out. A binge may also be an unexpected impulsive incident, almost like an “attack” that results in consuming large quantities of food. The individual feels taken over by their binge and often feels extreme shame afterwards. Binge eating can become like an addiction and

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
often will result in significant weight gain and obesity, but weight gain does not always result from the disorder.\textsuperscript{8}

Binging is sometimes a result of dieting, but Binge Eating Disorder is characterized by frequent and extreme episodes of “out of control” eating. According the Weight-Control Information Network (WIN), “People who are obese and have binge eating disorder often became overweight at a younger age than those without the disorder. They might also lose and gain weight more often, a process known as weight cycling, or “yo-yo dieting.”\textsuperscript{9} Binge Eating Disorder is the most common type of eating disorder.\textsuperscript{10} Overall, the binge eating puts stress on the body in various ways and will often lead to serious health risks.\textsuperscript{11}

In Chapter 2, Bulimia was mentioned in the section regarding the actual dieting process. This disorder involves the cycle of binge eating (incidents similar Binge Eating Disorder, involve planned and un-planned) and then purging in some form, which is described as “ [. . .] behavior that compensates for the overeating such as forced vomiting, excessive use of laxatives or diuretics,

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 3.
This cycle of binging and purging is also a part of the dieting process or at least the mentality. The dieter eats a “sin food” and will try to make up for this in some way. There are obviously differences, but the point here is that there is an “all or nothing” approach. In Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women, author Michelle M. Lelwica indicates that, “To highlight the continuity between anorexic and bulimic rituals and the eating practices of “normal” girls and women is not to erase the distinction altogether. Dieting is not the same as anorexia, however similar the reductive logic underlying these practices may be.” Thus, this dieting mentality (and the language of sin that is large part of it) may reinforce the bulimics behavior, in addition to the dieters. The act of purging is also a form of punishment for being gluttonous and out of control. The purging may feel like a way to re-gain a sense of control over one’s self.

Anorexia Nervosa has been the most “glamorized” eating disorder. Popular media images of celebrities that become drastically thin (Mary-Kate Olsen, Lindsey Lohan, Nicole Richie, Karen Carpenter, Victoria Beckham) are


14 Ibid., 99.
immediately put on the front covers of various magazines. Images of emaciated and sickly appearances of Anorexic celebrities are often very shocking, particularly if they are placed next to “before” photographs. For example, on the cover image from 1983, Karen Carpenter died of Anorexia Nervosa.\textsuperscript{15}

Approximately, 23 years later, in the October 2006 Issue, there are images of extremely skinny women on the cover.\textsuperscript{16} According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc., Anorexia is described as, “[ . . . ] a relentless pursuit of thinness and unwillingness to maintain a normal or healthy body weight, a distortion of body image and intense fear of gaining weight, a lack of menstruation among girls and women, and extremely disturbed eating behavior.”\textsuperscript{17} There is a fascination and a “glamorization” that exists in American popular culture with Anorexics. In \textit{Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems Among Girls and Women}, author Michelle Mary Lelwica explains that this type of glamorization is characteristic of, “[ . . . ] a society that beautifies women who rise above their needs and


\textsuperscript{17} The National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders, Inc., “Get Information – Anorexia Nervosa” \url{http://www.anad.org/get-information/get-informationanorexia-nervosa/} (accessed September 26, 2011).
cravings—especially their desire to eat—[. .].” Lelwica is pointing out how the image of a “good woman” in our fat phobic culture is tied to the thin woman. The thin woman is showing that she really cares about her appearance, which is a form of submission to cultural pressure.

However, the reality of this eating disorder is far from the imagined “lifestyles of the rich & famous” world. Some of the physical symptoms of Anorexia include, “Thinning of the bones (osteopenia and osteoporosis), Brittle Hair and nails, Dry and yellowish skin, Growth of fine hair all over the body (lanugo), Mild anemia and muscle wasting and weakness, [. .].” Anorexia, like the language of sin, is complicated and has many layers of mixed moral messages. Anorexia consumes an individual and literally shrinks the life out of their lives.

**Obesity**

Oddly, Anorexia and Obesity actually have a few things in common. Both cannot be hidden and both can lead to death. Both tend to take on a “freak show” type of appeal to the public. Both are seen at various degrees, or more or less noticeable depending on body types. Like the magazine covers of Anorexics,

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there are plenty of covers showing the morbidly obese. Finally, both depend on genetics as well as environmental factors.\textsuperscript{20}

However, Obesity is not currently classified as a mental illness or a disease, which is not the case for Anorexia.\textsuperscript{21} Although, many in the medical profession agree that obesity is a disease and that it should be classified as such, “[...] the American Obesity Association (AOA), observe that not long ago in U.S. history alcoholism was viewed as a personal choice or moral weakness, whereas today it is considered a disease.”\textsuperscript{22} This suggests that there is a morality debate happening in the U.S., posing the question, “Is it all your fault if you are obese?” This debate will be further analyzed in Chapter 5. This moral debate is connected to many aspects of this social issue, including the language of sin. As previously mentioned, the collective fear of fat creates a sense that the fat person is “immoral.” There is a big difference between being “overweight” and being obese.\textsuperscript{23}

In addition, it is difficult to define obesity because of variations in body type, and the fact that muscle weighs more than fat. In \textit{Weight in America: Obesity, Eating Disorders, and Other Health Related Risks}, author Wexler

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Wexler, \textit{Weight in America}, 22-23.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 7.
\end{itemize}
indicates that, “Obesity is also defined as an excessively high amount of adipose
tissue (body fat) in relation to lean body mass such as muscle and bone.”24 There
are serious health risks that can result from obesity, such as Type 2 Diabetes,
Heart Disease, Gall bladder disease, and cancer. Significant attention on obesity
prevention, particularly for children, for example Michelle Obama’s “Let’s
Move” Campaign has made knowledge of the health risks involved with obesity
to become generally well known. However, despite this common knowledge
Americans are not as a whole losing weight.

In regards to treatment of obesity it seems that the more obsessive and the
more judgmental Americans become of obesity, the worse it gets.25 In The
Impact of Weight Stigma on Caloric Consumption, the authors found that their
research indicated an increase in calories after the subjects viewed weight
stigmatizing content,

“These findings suggest that among overweight women, exposure to weight stigmatizing material may lead to
increased caloric consumption. This directly challenges
the notion that pressure to lose weight in the form of weight stigma will have a positive, motivating effect on overweight
individuals.”26

24 Ibid.

25 Natasha A. Schveyl, Rebecca M. Puhl, Kelly D. Brownell, and the Rudd Center for
Food Policy and Obesity, “The Impact of Weight Stigma on Caloric Consumption” Nature
Publishing Group 19, N.10 (October 2011)
http://www.nature.com/oby/journal/v19/n10/pdf/oby2011204a.pdf
(accessed September 29, 2011).

26 Ibid.
This research provides insight into how the language of sin, and in general the intense level at which Americans fear fat can do allot of harm. Those struggling with obesity may actually feel triggered by the obesity prevention campaigns, which will be addressed in Chapter 5. The desires to binge eat or to self-sooth by overeating could be a reaction to increased isolation and feelings of guilt for their “immoral” bodies. This is not to say that obesity should be ignored, but treatment and prevention is extremely difficult. How this issue of fat fears and stigmatization is approached, really does matter.

**Religious Treatment & Prevention of Eating Disorders & Obesity**

What does it actually mean to be “recovered” from an eating disorder or to have, “overcome” obesity? Christian eating disorder treatment centers and Overeaters Anonymous (OA) indicate that the inclusion of the belief in God is a core principle to one’s recovery. Treatment is very individual and what works for some, may actually trigger the next, but regardless there is a sense that when one truly recovers they have “found themselves.” How best to treat someone suffering from an eating disorder is not easily answered. Especially, in regards to religious and spiritual elements, how the individual was or was not exposed to religion may impact their response to various types of eating disorder treatments. For instance, eating disorder behaviors may be a way to rebel against religious parents, and thus the individual may feel triggered by religious or spiritual
language. This may also be the case for an individual on the opposite spectrum of a “religious house.” For example, if they grew up in an environment where the freedom to explore spiritual and religious possibilities was ridiculed, then they may find themselves rebelling against the treatment center, as a way to remain bonded with agnostic or atheist families. In other words, if they embrace religion, they simultaneously reject their families. Regardless, of these individual differences and complications, many are finding “salvation” in this type of treatment.

In chapter three, it was noted that more recently there has been an increase in religious dieting programs. There has been also been an increase in incorporating spiritual and religious aspects to eating disorder treatment. This increase is often in combination with the use of addiction treatment models.

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Although, not all addiction treatment models are based on the twelve-steps like Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), many do model this program. However, A.A., is not considered a “religious” organization, but the acceptance of a “higher power” is part of the twelve-steps. For instance, A.A.’s, step three states, “3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

Therefore, although the use of twelve-steps for recovery from an eating disorder, may not necessarily be considered “religious” treatment. It is still the use of a faith-driven program, originally created for addicts, and not those suffering from eating disorders.

Yet, there are obvious differences between having an eating disorder and being an addict. In The Eating Disorder Source Book: A Comprehensive Guide to the Causes, Treatments, and Prevention of Eating Disorders, author Carolyn Costin, explains that the twelve-step programs for eating disorders has seen allot of criticism, because having an eating disorder is different from an addiction.

Although, eating disorders and addictions do have similarities, including underlying issues of morality and sin.

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One major difference is that one cannot remove food from their life, whereas in the case of alcohol or drugs, removing the drug from one’s life is necessary and healthy. In the previous chapters, we have seen how difficult it might be for one to leave the dieting culture as well, considering how much it dominates advertising and the American life. This presents a unique challenge to those recovering from eating disorders and struggling with obesity. In addition, as we have seen in previous chapters, the language of sin reveals a connection to how food and the moral character of an individual are judged in America. This is a major aspect of how Americans think about food, so treatment programs, which directly address religious and moral values, are tapping into a core element of the American life.

Overeaters Anonymous (OA) addresses the individual’s spiritual and/or religious values, by using the twelve-step program\textsuperscript{32}, (as previously mentioned the acceptance of God in one’s life is a major part of the program). OA is also not only for those who have Binge Eating Disorder (BED), and is also not only for those who are overweight. Although, the majority of OA members do struggle with significant weight issues, and it is mostly for those experiencing binge eating episodes. The point here is that there are wide varieties of individuals who turn to this type of treatment.

The “treatment” for obesity will usually be similar to a weight-loss program, with the main goal of separating oneself from abuse of food. Therefore, in regards to obesity the lines between “treatment” and “dieting” are extremely blurred. As previously, noted religious organizations recognize that there is a real need for help in their communities regarding this social issue, (food & body issues, eating disorders and obesity).  

The religious response has mostly been from Christians, who have produced the majority of the religious treatment programs.

In “There Seems to Be a Growing Interest Today in Religiously Based Diet Programs—What’s Going On?” author Marie R. Griffith reviews one of the most influential Christian weight-loss programs in the last decade. This diet or workshop is lead by the Christian Gwen Shamblin, in her program, “The Weigh-Down Diet/Workshop.” Griffith explores the consequences that could occur from Shamblin’s diet workshop, in regards to the message of “fat as sin.” Yet, as we have seen throughout this thesis, this message of sin and fat has long been a part of the American culture.

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33 Griffith, “Their Seems to Be a Growing Interest Today in Religiously Based Diet Programs,” 185-186.
34 Ibid., 186.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
Although, that is not to imply that just because Americans have seen this before (a religious leader focusing on fat as a sin), any harmful consequences are excused. As Griffith suggest in regards to the issue of eating disorders, this is a particularly alarming message.\textsuperscript{38} It is important to recognize that this message is not a new concept to Americans and is seen in the language of sin, frequently.

The point is that there is a distinction between the message that being fat is a sin, and the message that being obsessed with fat is the actual sin. The message that being obsessed with fat and the food itself (regardless of weight) is the actual sin is what Shamblin’s “diet” indicates. This is the distinction that many religious treatment programs are getting clearer on, which is different from the dieting culture.

Shamblin’s *The Weigh-Down Diet*, does actually offer new insight into the treatment of obesity, because she in no way promotes “dieting.” Shamblin makes this clear in her introduction in which she indicates that, “Diets do not get to the root of the problem. In fact, diets aggravate the problem rather than alleviate it. Diets just boil down to making the food behave. Food companies have spent several decades and millions of dollars to pull out the fat and calories so that the

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 185-187.
Shamblin’s clear rejection of dieting is actually new information for many struggling to find help with obesity and/or food addictions. Shamblin also addresses the “language of sin” in her chapter titled, “Isn’t Broccoli Righteous and Haagen-Dazs a Sin?” Shamblin’s belief is that no foods are “sinful” and that no food is off limits, in other words her answer to the question above is, nope – actually broccoli is not righteous and Haagen-daz is not a sin. Ultimately, Shamblin’s message is that you can “fill up on God” not food and find freedom. There are other religious focused obesity treatment programs in America. Many share a similar belief in taking the power away from the food and giving it to God.

Treatment for an eating disorder can be difficult to find and is usually extremely expensive. Insurance coverage can be a challenge as well, which will be further addressed in Chapter 5. According to the Eating Disorders Coalition, “Treatment of an eating disorder in the US ranges from $500 per day to $2,000 per day. Outpatient treatment, including therapy and medical monitoring, can cost $100,000+. Eating disorders can be successfully and fully treated to complete remission, but only 1 in 10 people with eating disorders receive


40 Ibid., 23.

41 Ibid., 24.
treatment.”

The options for an individual suffering that does not have insurance that will cover the costs of treatment are limited and financially crippling. Religious eating disorder treatments can still be extremely expensive. However certain programs which offer less intensive treatments, are affordable.

Just as Shamblin’s program emphasizes filling up on God, (rather then food or food obsessions), eating disorder treatment programs suggest turning to God for recovery. New ID, Rock Recovery, Inc., Mercy Ministries, Ramuda Ranch, and A Place of Hope, are few examples of organizations incorporating spiritual and religious practices to the recovery process. Although, Shamblin’s *The Weigh-Down Diet*, includes a sub-chapter titled, “How to stop bingeing or purging” which provides the bold perspective, that an individual with these symptoms, “does not have a disease”, and that there are not really such thing as


“food addictions.” Shamblin’s workshop is not considered an actual religious eating disorder treatment program, nor does it offer residential treatments, outpatient care, or a specialization in eating disorders. Yet, Shamblin’s work does have the same underlying core message of many religious treatment programs. This section is focused specifically on religious or faith-based treatments of Anorexia, Bulimia, and Binge Eating Disorder.

As previously discussed, the use of the twelve-step addiction treatment models is more common among the religious programs. The six-week Christian eating disorder treatment program, NewID, is an example of what it means to be a “religious treatment option.” NewID, was founded by recovered anorexic and bulimic, Kim Hemsley. The materials for the course costs approximately $350.00 for a Church to run, and depending on the Church or organization may cost approximately $30 per participant. It is significant that this is so affordable, because cost is a major battle for those seeking treatment. However, many individuals struggling need serious medical intervention and a live-in residential treatment team monitoring their health 24 hours. Therefore, programs like NewID, are not final solutions to the need for eating disorder treatment options.


However, NewID is a religious response to the overall social problem, of the language of sin, body image, and dieting. The distinction is that a program like NewID, is very clear on the belief that religious, specifically Christian growth is critical to recovery. Therefore, this is an affordable treatment program with a values agenda attached. For example, in the second week of the course the title of the group meeting’s talk is, “Addictions and our Identity in Christ” which is presented by the founder Kim Hemsley.\textsuperscript{51}

Hemsley’s NewID program is providing a spiritual and religious path to recovery that does appear to be working for many individuals, but this path is through Christianity. This is an issue with many religious treatment programs is that they are not broad based enough to help those outside of the specific religion. Most of the religious treatment options are Christian, but there has been a significant increase in eating disorders among Orthodox Jewish women.\textsuperscript{52} Perhaps the reason that religious treatment options have mostly been Christian based, is because there is a real issue with acknowledging eating disorders in the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{53} The Jewish community is beginning to respond to the need

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
for treatment options and the issue of eating disorders in general. There as a documentary created by the Orthodox Union titled, “Hungry to be Heard” which reveals the painful truth about eating disorders in the Orthodox community. In addition, Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser has written a book titled, Starving to Live: An Inspirational Guide to Eating Disorders. Goldwasser’s book examines the issues of eating disorders and uses Jewish concepts to provide insight into treatment.

In addition, the Orthodox Union members have developed a prevention program that like NewID can be held at any local Synagogue or organization. The authors, Catherine Steiner-Adair and Lisa Sjostrom of, “Bishvili For Me: An Orthodox Jewish Guide to Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program, To Advance Girl Power, Health and Leadership” (Bishvili) address the Jewish relationship with food and strikes at the values embedded within this issue. However, this is still not technically a “Jewish Recovery Program” which specifically addresses eating disorders, whereas NewID is specifically a “Christian Recovery Program.”


In addition, the approach that the authors in *Bishvili*, take is different from the addiction treatment models. The spirituality of eating is looked at by examining the process of appreciating your food and paying attention to your bodies needs, (in Jewish philosophy). For example, the introduction of this program begins with asking the below list of questions, (note Brachot is a blessing said before eating).

**Discussion questions:**

1. What’s your opinion: Do Brachot matter?

2. Do you agree or disagree (and why): Brachot can transform the act of eating.

3. What do you think: Is eating a holy process?

4. What are some ways Judaism transforms eating into a holy process? What are some things you and/or your family do to make eating a holy process? Prompts, if needed: Do you say blessings before a meal? Does it feel different when you dip parsley or celery on Pesach than when you eat parsley in tabouleh or celery in salad?

This is a focus on food as a gift from God. To be thankful for the food (not obsessed) and provides the beginning of looking at eating as a spiritual moment. These are also values based questions that tackle the individual’s concept of eating and their relationship with food and God. However, if you have

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an eating disorder, this approach may be very healing but extremely difficult to understand. In addition, any language of sin is confusing to individuals recovering. If eating is a spiritual practice then perhaps this could justify an obsession with “good vs. bad, clean vs. unclean” food choices. The language of sin is an influential part of the American relationship with food. In regards to recovery, especially religious recovery focused assessment of food values underneath the language of sin need to be addressed. This program is interesting because it is a direct response from the Orthodox Jewish community to prevent eating issues in girls.

**Conclusion**

The possibility that one must look honestly at their spiritual and religious relationship in order to find freedom from their eating disorder has been made evident in this Chapter. The connection between the philosophy of living a “full and whole life” and finding freedom from the eating disorder is often mixed with themes of salvation. There is a sense that one must find this salvation, through spiritual work, in whatever variety that may look like for the individual. This is also seen in common themes of the mind, body, and spirit connection discussed in a variety of self-help genre resources. In, *Spirituality and Clinical Care in Eating Disorders a Qualitative Study*, this spiritual connection was apart of recovery for many of those suffering, “Spiritual practice appears to be helpful for some
patients in recovery from eating disorders, and spiritual development is synchronous with positive psychological changes."

Religious treatment options are focused on bringing the individual away from the food and body obsession. While approaches vary the treatments are attempting to strengthen the individuals relationship with God, as a substitute for the eating disorder. Christians appear to use the twelve-step addiction treatment model more often. Christians also incorporate the element of salvation within (true freedom from the eating disorder means handing control over to Jesus Christ). Jewish communities do not offer as a high number of treatment options. Yet, they are making major steps in the direction of prevention and addressing issues of stigmatizing the disorders. Jewish programs like the one referenced above, also incorporate the spiritual connections of eating. Recovery needs are just as unique as the individual in treatment however there does seem to be an element of spirituality that is a significant part of process. Religious eating disorder and obesity treatment programs emphasize the strength that one may receive by turning to God. The diet mentality is rejected and allows for cultural criticism. This pushes the individual to understand their personal values and how the language of sin has impacted their relationship food.

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CHAPTER 5
UNDERLYING VALUE ISSUES AND RELIGIOUS CONNECTIONS IN
GOVERNMENT OBESITY AND
EATING DISORDER PREVENTION POLICY

The historical connections between religion and food values in America are exposed in the use of the language of sin. Obesity and eating disorder prevention policies and related legislation reveal underlying values related to this language of sin, in the language used and in the actual arguments involved. The depth of complicated layers involved in determining how best to prevent obesity and eating disorders, makes this a difficult policy issue. As we have seen, language used in related legislation and prevention policies show that there is some confusion about who is to blame for the sin of fat.

The distinction between nutrition education and obesity prevention is blurred. This is not working. We have seen how the extremes of this larger social issue have evolved, which has resulted in the eating disorders and obesity examined in Chapter 4. How the religious communities response to this social issue ranges in intensity, however both Jewish and Christian organizations acknowledge the need for treatment and prevention programs.

The language of sin shows that food is not just food, but part of a larger values struggle within America. This chapter will examine what types of “food values” Americans hear from the government, which is often seen in the language of sin. Various Legislation, acts, and prevention policies in regards to obesity,
eating disorders, and nutrition, will be examined to reveal underlying value
struggles. The conclusion will provide what can be learned from the religious and
government responses to this social issue. As well as a final comment on how
grasping this big picture understanding of the language of sin can empower
Americans.

**National Wartime Nutrition Program: Clean Your Plate!**

The language of sin reveals the belief that the over consumption of food is
sinful, but there is also the belief that *wasting food is sinful*. In other words,
throwing food out is it’s own form of gluttony. The paradox of the language of
sin in America, it is a *sin to consume the forbidden foods* but it is also a *sin to not
enjoy the luxury of having plenty of food*. In a world where starving does exist, all
food is actually valuable. In general, Americans have been exposed to the
following iconic scene: traditional family (mom, dad, 2 children) sitting at their
kitchen table, waiting for their children to finish their food, while the parents bite,
“*Clean your plate! There are starving children in other countries.*” This
communicates the need to do something altruistic via food consumption.
"Cleaning your plate” became a tool to express your appreciation.

The “clean your plate” message is also showing that food is connected to
the outside world and the global economy, which brings us back to, *food is not
just food*. This was especially true during World War II when the US
Government lead the National Wartime Nutrition Program as we can see in the
The message is clear in this WWII poster, “do not waste your food” and the value placed on food is also clear, “Food is a Weapon.” Again we see that, food is not just food, food is a way for Americans to show their appreciation for their Soldiers and Country. Food is political. In addition, it is a way that

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Americans can help fight the war at home. Cleaning your plate shows devotion to your values, because you care enough to not waste food. Patriotism inaction is cleaning your plate. In addition, by cleaning your plate you are showing appreciation for your *full plate*, which also translates to a *full life*. Value packed messages provided directly from the government; influence the American relationship with food, simply by promoting the idea that food is a weapon. These types of messages have changed over the years but are still loaded with the problem of how food is connected to morals and values. Now by not cleaning your plate (and not being overweight), you are showing appreciation of your American life, because you want to “be healthy.” Values are in line with nutrition and are displayed in the rejection of the sinful fat body. The new moral message is demanding Americans to be fit, for the sake of life itself. So, the American “Clean your plate!” days appear to be long gone.

**United States Department of Agriculture: Eat less!**

Nonetheless, “Clean your plate” has turned into “Eat your veggies, lots of them, but eat less in general” however as shown in Chapter 2 the moral messages behind this language still persists. We have learned that the language of sin reveals connections between the American cultural experience with food and underlying values. The American people, scientists, the entire farm industry, grocery stores, food companies, research institutes & universities, government nutrition programs & government lead obesity/eating disorder prevention policies,
hospitals, schools, labor rights, and many more factors are intricately apart of the language of sin. Federal Government programs and campaigns can be an expression of something that is in need of regulation, an immoral behavior or issue. The American appetite needs to be regulated.

However, like the religious treatment programs looked at in Chapter 4, the approach to this deeply values based issue is important. When a social issue appears to be getting progressively worse while additional prevention policies have been or are in the process of being implemented, more reflection is necessary.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the updated food guidelines and changed the previously confusing food pyramid to an image of a plate. The pyramid image was changed to a plate, in order to provide a clearer picture of what a healthy diet looks like, according to the USDA press release on June 2, 2011, “Originally identified in the Child Obesity Task Force report which noted that simple, actionable advice for consumers is needed, MyPlate will replace the MyPyramid image as the government’s primary food group symbol as an easy-to-understand visual cue to help consumers adopt healthy eating habits consistent with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for

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The 2010 Dietary Guidelines: Selected Messages for Consumers, indicates three main ways for the consumer to “take action on” which include, “Balancing Calories, Foods to Increase, and Foods to Reduce.” The information on how to eat healthy is also apart of the message to eat less.

This is not just about what you eat, it is about how much you eat. The distinction is important. As mentioned above, there is a sense that the American appetite must be regulated. This is not to suggest that the USDA’s updated MyPlate, along with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines, is entirely the wrong solution. Yet, as indicated earlier the distinctions between nutrition education and obesity prevention are increasingly difficult to see. There is a clear promotion of calorie reduction and portion control. The fear of fat is alive and well in these messages. In addition, it will be interesting to see how children prone to eating disorders ultimately react to reading, “Balance Calories: Enjoy your food, but eat less. Avoid oversized portions.”

**Who is to blame? Mixed Messages in Obesity Related Legislation**

There is a plethora of information available on the epidemic of obesity, especially childhood obesity. There is also an extensive amount of government

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3 Ibid., 1.


5 Ibid., 1.
polices on the national and state levels, that are working towards the prevention of obesity and general nutrition education. Federal Government programs such as the USDA’s nutrition program discussed above are well known obesity prevention tactics. There are many related regulations, which include, “[ . . . ] legislative initiatives being considered are proposals to mandate nutrition information on restaurant menus, improving school lunch programs, and the imposition of taxes on high-calorie, low-nutrition food items.”

There have been numerous bills such as H.R. 554 The Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act of 2005 was sponsored by Rep. Ric Keller (R-FL).\(^7\) This was a direct reaction to fears of continuous lawsuits against fast food restaurants and the food companies in 2005.\(^8\) The concern was that obese individuals would begin suing for personal injuries related to health problems known to directly affect those struggling with their weight, such as Type II Diabetics.

The Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act is particularly interesting because it strikes at the heart of the obesity struggle, which is asking who is to blame? In Chapter 1, we explored how the underlying American values of hard work and personal responsibility have shown up in messages about food

\(^6\) Wexler, *Weight in America*, 130.

\(^7\) Ibid., 133.

\(^8\) Ibid.
and nutrition, especially in post-civil war America. The obesity blame debate is another element in this American theme of morality and fat. This is the underlying question that lingers over other health related prevention policies as well. What an individual believes about this question, determines whether or not they support these programs.

Is it really all the obese individuals fault or are their other factors that have contributed? Is it simply that the obese are lazy? In addition, why should a food company be responsible for the consequences of obesity, since there is freedom to choose other wise? Food companies are selling a product, which happens to be food and of course it is their job to make a product, “sinfully tempting.”

Yet, food is a in a very different category of goods and services, unlike iPhones and jewelry, food has real health consequences. As we have learned, food is not just food. Ultimately, the Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act was not passed into law, but the related Commonsense Consumption Act in Wyoming was passed which, “[ . . . ] prohibits an individual from suing a manufacturer, seller, trade association, agricultural producer, wholesaler, broker, or retailer of a qualified product for injury or death based on the individual’s weight gain or obesity.”

Again, the title of this act strikes at the heart of the obesity blame debate; “Commonsense” insinuates that, consumption

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
of foods, is clearly understood. This bill prevents fast food companies from the
destruction of lawsuits similar to those filed against tobacco companies, In *Food
Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, Marion Nestle
indicates, “Many of the lessons learned from the “tobacco wars” apply just as well
to food, especially the lesson that the industry will relentlessly counter even the
slightest suggestion to use less of its products.”

Therefore, as mentioned the obese individual is now prohibited from attempting to sue the fast food company
for related health problems.

Just like the title of the “Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption
Act” the message that it is simple and easy to take control over what and how
much you consume, is a values message. Personal character and strength make
the individual choose the moral path; in this case the moral path is using your,
“commonsense” when consuming food. This might make sense if there were not
so many other variables involved, and perhaps it applies to items other then food.
However, food is a special circumstance because it is what fuels humans and can
significantly impact quality of life. Americans have a plethora of food options,
along with limited budgets, and little time to ponder best options. Your ability to
control yourself from the “sinful” dessert is an issue of moral character, a “good”
American, eats the “good” food.

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11 Nestle, *Food Politics*, 366.
There are other factors to consider in this “commonsense” debate as well. Poverty-stricken “food deserts”\textsuperscript{12} which literally lack any easily accessible grocery stores. Also, endless mixed messages about food and health that not only confuse the consumer but also can be misleading.\textsuperscript{13} Food “Commonsense” in a culture of chronic dieting, and the language of sin, is buried deep in unreasonable portion sizes. Oddly “Commonsense” for those living in food deserts and/or on extremely small budgets, would actually involve consuming mostly fast foods.

For instance, why would one not simply walk to the fast food restaurant for a quick and hot meal, and save hours of travel time, along with significant amounts of money? Now that’s commonsense. It is not hard to understand how accessibility combined with the right price, makes the fast food option (at least in the short-term) more logical. Research does show a correlation, for example in \textit{Neighborhood Environments Disparities in Access to Healthy Foods in the U.S.} the authors reveal:

\begin{quote}
The highest levels of obesity (32\%–40\%) were observed in Census tracts with no supermarkets, with access to only grocery stores or grocery and convenience stores (32\%–40\%). These relationships were evident despite adjustment for several characteristics of individuals and neighborhoods, including gender, race and ethnicity, income, education, physical activity,
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{13} Nestle, \textit{Food Politics}, 315-319.
and the availability of other retail food stores.\textsuperscript{14}

The point here is “Commonsense consumption” is actually incredibly difficult to see or understand in the world of food. However, it is not all Wyoming State’s fault or the fast food industries fault. This is not a continuation of the blame game. This is also not a suggestion that the answer is for all obese individuals to start filing personal injury claims against fast food restaurants. However, this legislation is revealing in terms of the language used, because it appears to ignore all the other factors that come along with this social issue, and places the blame entirely on the individual.

This belief that obesity is entirely the individual’s fault regardless of incredibly difficult circumstances (such as living in a food desert) is not going to motivate change. The language of sin and the dieting culture, as seen in previous chapters, has been telling the “fat sinner” that it is all just a battle of their own willpower, for a very long time. This has not worked. It only isolates individuals more and creates confusion. There has to be a middle ground between the belief that obesity is simply the individual’s fault and the belief that the individual is absolved of all personal responsibility.

Sinful Deviant or Innocent Victim: Policy Implications for Defining Obesity?

This blame debate is also seen in the great battle to define obesity as a disease. This debate was briefly mentioned in Chapter 4. This is important because it determines health insurance coverage and treatment options available for the obese. It also as a rippling affect on future health policy, because it determines how prevention and treatment options will be designed. This question is emotional and stirs up questions of personal responsibility, equality, and compassion. There are genetic pre-dispositions, which make the likelihood of becoming obese higher.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, at the same time as we have learned there are so many environmental factors, which contribute as well.\textsuperscript{16} Obesity can also be difficult to understand, because it is an issue that is unique for each individual case, (like the way that so many food and body image issues tend to be). There are also negative consequences that could result from labeling obesity as a disease.

In addition, just because something is labeled a disease, does not mean that the individual loses all self-motivation in regards to their health. It’s doubtful that labeling obesity a disease means, “giving up” for those suffering. However, because it is a values issue, many feel that this label means the obese will simply “give up.” The reason for this belief (that the obese are looking for a reason to

\textsuperscript{15} Wexler, \textit{Weight in America}, 21-24.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.,21-24.
give up on weight loss) is because of this underlying morality message, obese=inhernently weak. This policy debate has underlying religious values as well.

For example, in many Addiction Model Christian treatment programs discussed in Chapter 4, the message that one must have the discipline to put recovery first is indicated. The discipline part is very important. It is perceived that the obese are not disciplined, fat is a sin because it is the sign of giving into temptation, (evil), and is a distraction from God. It turns into the question of true recovery into one of personal motivation, discipline to commit and the willingness to work hard to get better. This is different from saying that it is all an individuals fault if they have an eating disorder or are obese. However, it does not allow for one to simply “give up” either.

Yet, this powerful American value, which includes personal responsibility, discipline, and hard work, is in general offended by Obesity. Excess Fat on the body, goes against all of the hard work principles of Americans. Therefore, if obesity is a disease, these values are threatened. Ultimately, this debate forces the two major factors to battle it out. The question becomes which do you think plays a larger role in determining obesity, (mostly genetics = disease, mostly environmental = not a disease).

Regardless of the answer, it is actually hard to say if labeling obesity as a disease will help those suffering, or if it will create more stigmatization. Also, as
we will soon see, just because something is labeled a disease (like Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder) does not make it immune to denied health insurance coverage. Thus, once obesity is officially considered a disease, it is not necessarily going to mean that accessible and affordable coverage will become easily available.

**Childhood Obesity Prevention: Making it Worse?**

No matter what the challenge may be, everything is different when children become involved. Children are particularly vulnerable to advertising and certainly cannot be blamed for what their dinner options. Perhaps because the question of blame is removed in the case of children, prevention policies are aimed mostly at childhood obesity. The blame game is temporarily relieved and heavy moral values can be set aside, because children are always victims of their circumstances. Yet, despite the fact that adults may view children as victims of their circumstances, the children do not. Children have usually not developed a sense of the big picture and all the factors that may go into weight gain. This is part of the reason why childhood obesity prevention is challenging.

Encouraging children to fear fat and hate fate more then they already do, is counterproductive. There is no question that children understand that “fat is sinful.” In *Weight in America: Obesity, Eating Disorders, and Other Health Related Risks*, author Barbara Wexler explains the intensity at which obese children suffer:
One of the most immediate, distressing and widespread consequences of being overweight as described by children themselves is social discrimination and low self-esteem. Overweight and obese children and adolescents are at risk for psychological and social adjustment problems such as considering themselves less competent than normal-weight youth in social, athletic, and appearance arenas, as well as suffering from overall diminished self worth.\(^\text{17}\)

Children feel the burden of the language of sin, in many aspects of their lives and obesity prevention could re-enforce this harmful message of the fat “sinner.” However, showing no response to this social problem is not acceptable either. This issue is deeper then simply providing healthy options in schools, this is about a culture of shaming the fat body. Children mimic adults. The attitude that the fat child deserves to be shamed parallels the attitude of, “Commonsense Consumption.” Fat children hear the message loud and clear; that they are apart of a group which is unable to control themselves, despite, “Commonsense” advice that clearly indicates do not eat “sinful” foods.

As mentioned previously, we do not have a strong concept of what “commonsense consumption” is in regards to food. What happens if despite healthy options and nutrition education, are children still do not measure up? What happens if they grew deeper into their depression and shame? What happens if they believe the answer is to diet, until it becomes a full-blown eating disorder or obesity? At some point the confusing messages that children are given will

\(^{17}\) Wexler, *Weight in America*, 73.
need to be addressed. In Why Obesity Prevention is Making Us Fatter, More Poorly Nourished, and Less Fit—The Need for a New Paradigm for Weight by author Kathy J. Kater, explains that stigmatizing aspects of obesity prevention is actually making the problem worse:

Framing the goal of positive eating and physical fitness as “obesity prevention” stigmatizes and shames a significant number of people. If stigma or fear worked to motivate positive, long-term choices, we might be on the right road. But a growing body of evidence suggests that weight bias increases vulnerability to depression, low self-esteem, poor body image, maladaptive eating behaviors and exercise avoidance.\(^{18}\)

Children are struggling with the same issues of “good” and “bad” food choices every day. They are also particularly susceptible to the colorful and playful packaging that comes along with the many ranges of “kids foods.”\(^{19}\)

F.R.E.E.D. Act: Harmful Eating Disorder Cliché’s

Assumptions about eating disorders come from various sources, however the most cliché image that comes to mind consists of a young, rich, white, female college student, perhaps involved in a sorority with the reputation of, “high society.” She is grasping at straws, for some control over her own identity. She is also smart enough to know, that she is kind of a cliché, but a classy one nonetheless. She is desperate to fit in, yet desperate to be unique. She is desperate to keep up with the high expectations her successful, intense and powerful parents


\(^{19}\) Nestle, *Food Politics*, 180.
have clearly set. She might have gained 10lbs in her first semester of freshmen year and to her horror, her family commented on her increasing distasteful body fat. This of course leads her to diet, impressing her parents and giving her a renewed sense of self-control, this is the answer.

After all, she is better then the fat she is very, “Type A”, she believes in the American values personal responsibility, hard work and discipline. She is the perfect thin girl at heart, and her mom will get a new pair of $300.00 designer jeans once she loses the weight. Everyone is on board and her family wants her to succeed. And if she takes it to far, everything will work out fine for her. She knows her parents have the money to cover any costs of an eating disorder residential treatment program, just like the one a few of her friends have went to. Actually, maybe a treatment program will be a place for her to finally find herself, without all the distractions of the sorority and school. This is not meant to mock the pain and seriousness of a rich, anorexic, college student.

In fact it is the opposite. The point is that this cliché of eating disorders and the sometimes “glamorization” of the disorder is harmful and inaccurate. As we have seen in Chapter 4, the realities of eating disorders are far from glamorous. In addition, all of these cliché’s do not make the eating disorder any less painful. The physical and mental destruction is all the same. Although, having the financial means to afford residential treatment is one factor that does make recovery significantly more likely. In Chapter 4, we learned about religious
treatment options, which sometimes offer more affordable forms of recovery. Yet, they do not always offer intense enough treatment, particularly for those experiencing life-threatening health problems. In general, outpatient and residential treatment programs are needed for those suffering from serious eating disorders.

In addition, most of these religious treatment options are Christian based, and of course this is not right for everyone. However, most of the options available are not religiously affiliated. The majority of treatment programs are extremely expensive and this is a serious problem. This is a serious problem for a few different reasons. First the cliché above is not the reality of eating disorders, (all socio-economic, racial, ethnic, gender, and ages are impacted)\(^20\) and secondly because insurance companies often do not approve coverage, formal treatment just becomes improbable.

This is one of the main reasons for the H.R. 1448 Federal Response to Eliminate Eating Disorders (FREED) Act of 2011, sponsored by Rep. Tammy Baldwin (WI-2).\(^21\) Requiring insurance companies to include coverage for


residential treatment and outpatient clinical services is the proposed way to provide this access to treatment.\textsuperscript{22} The bill is comprehensive and includes, education and prevention and research initiatives as well.\textsuperscript{23} Like the language in the legislation mentioned previously, such as the “Commonsense Consumption” and “Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act” there are underlying value messages. This is evident in the, acronym for this bill, “FREED.”

\textbf{F.R.E.E.D. Act: Insurance Company Assumptions}

Overall, there is something that is undeniably different about Schizophrenia and an eating disorder. Perhaps, it is the “language of sin” that makes it different. It is a mental illness, with deep cultural and social factors triggering and maintaining it’s presence. This matters because it could create confusion in understanding eating disorders, just like in the case of labeling obesity as a disease. The fight to gain coverage for eating disorders in regards to dealing with insurance companies can be incredibly challenge. Perhaps insurance companies do not fully recognize eating disorders as a mental illness.

In addition, as we have seen, eating disorders are complicated and have similarities to addictions, such as alcoholism. This is why sometimes treatment programs incorporate the use of twelve-step programs for eating disorders and food addictions. The point here is that “Freedom” from an addiction is possible

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
and freedom from a mental illness is possible too. However, if something is a mental illness, it is a disease, then it is understood that one can never be totally, “FREED” from this illness, they can however go into “remission.” This is another element of the confusion around eating disorders.

It can be hard to grasp the idea of a mental illness that is, “half genetics, half environmental.” We tend to think of mental illness and disease, to be entirely physical, hereditary and/or genetically found. Yet, here we have eating disorders and obesity mixing these boundaries all up. Genetics and environmental factors in a blender of chaos and confusion, creates similar dynamics to the obesity disease debate. The fight for health insurance coverage for eating disorders reveals underlying value differences. Which is, the question of what do you value more or what do you think makes a bigger difference, (genetics = mental illness/disease, environmental=not a disease/cultural problem).

It is difficult to see that something like an eating disorder can be “out of the victims” control. If so many complicated environmental factors have contributed to the development of the disorder, then why is it considered a mental illness? Since, the assumption is that one can control their response to these environmental factors through hard work, personal responsibly and self-help techniques, (American Values), it can be puzzling from the outside looking in. America is a fat phobic culture that triggers these eating disorders, while at the same time an individual can have a genetic pre-disposition to the actual disorder
itself. The fact that there is even a need for the FREED Act exposes the harmful elements of the eating disorder cliché, and insurance assumptions. The language of sin creates a “morality of food.” The obesity blame debate and eating disorder misconceptions reveal our relationship with food is highly connected to American values of hard work and personal responsibility.

**F.R.E.E.D. Act: Language of Sin Connections**

The use of the word FREED, clearly presents the belief that eating disorders take the individual captive, in other words the eating disorder is their master. Unlike, in the case of the “Commonsense” values message, the control is not in the individual’s knowledge of commonsense nor is it about personal responsibility. It is out of the victim’s hands, they lack the control to stop their eating disorder. This is accurate in the sense that eating disorders, as we have learned are indeed considered to be a serious mental illness. Eating disorders also often do start off with the desire to have control over one’s life, and ultimately end up taking over of your life. However, there is another element to this theme of Freedom that relates to the language of sin. This is not to suggest that this was in anyway intentional by those who worked on the execution of this bill, nor is this a criticism. Particularly, because in general freedom is an important theme in eating disorder recovery language. It is simply, drawing connections between the language of sin and the idea of “Freedom” from the bondage of an eating disorder.
Freedom has different meanings for everyone. In the instance for religious treatment programs, freedom is about finding authority in God, not food. Freedom is also not just about stopping eating disorder behaviors, but no longer being mentally pre-occupied or obsessed with food and your body. This also takes a certain kind of mental strength, in which one must attempt to separate themselves from the constant media mainstream dieting culture. As we know from previous chapters the language of sin and pressure to be thin are powerful tools in American advertising. This is where the use of freedom is interesting, because many eating disorders begin with dieting. As we have seen, dieting can be like a religion and is used in a way that mimics, spiritual renewal. The desire to find a sense of personal freedom through dieting becomes a desire to find personal freedom from a full-blown obsession and mental illness. Freedom, in both instances requires finding a healthy way to cope with the language of sin and fat phobias of America.

**Conclusion: Policy Recommendations, Incorporate Values and Media Criticism**

The values aspect of this larger social issue may create differences in how individuals perceive messages about food and the body. Research on the variety of responses from individuals, specifically in regards to personal values and food is recommended. Eating disorders and obesity prevention policies and related legislation should be delicately handled. As mentioned previously, there needs to
be a middle ground between the belief that it is entirely the individual’s fault and the idea that no personal responsibility exists. The approach and language used to educate, can come from various sources such as religious organizations and government run campaigns. Public policy programs should address the issue of eating disorders because they are a large part of the way Americans have been impacted by this social problem.

As we have seen, the language of sin shows us that food values are real. We need to confront the language of sin in all forms, and evaluate how these values impact self-motivation and ultimately prevent us from having a positive relationship with food. The increase in food and body related issues are clear in the massive profits of the diet industry. Research on how best to address these issues and motivate positive results without becoming fat phobic should be a priority for the health of America. Americans already know about vegetables and they know about fat. One possibility is to incorporate a personal evaluation system, which can assist in the examination of feelings towards the mixed messages of the media, and the language of sin. This could provide opportunities for the individuals to assess how their relationship with food is impacted. Dieting is a symptom of an unhealthy relationship with food and should not be encouraged.

The more you fear something, the more powerful it becomes. The more we fear fat, food, and our bodies, the more powerful these issues become. Facing
the values struggle underneath this social issue will give Americans the strength
to separate themselves from the language of sin. A big picture understanding of
the religious, and historical elements involved in American food values can
provide freedom from the never ending diet. In order to move forward, the “sin
of fat” mentality needs to be addressed in a way that helps individuals understand
that they are not “bad” or “good” depending on their food choices. Ironically,
many individual’s who learn how to stop playing the fat fear game, stop chronic
dieting, and learn to truly listen to their bodies, actually find them selves biting
the apple.
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