



# INTRODUCTION

We live in a culture that worships thinness.

Americans spend over \$60 billion per year trying to shed their “excess” flesh. Sales for weight loss products—from appetite suppressants to home delivered diet foods—are steadily on the rise. We are constantly bombarded with TV commercials and infomercials, Internet spam and banners, radio and print media advertisements—all peddling ways to help us tighten and trim. Marketing gurus in the book-publishing industry refer to January as “New Year New You”—walk into any bookstore franchise during this critical sales season and you’ll find it stacked with titles designed to help you lose weight, look “great,” and live “right.” Perhaps not surprisingly, diet books outsell any other books on the market—except the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

The weight-loss industry is, however, only part of the picture.

Need to buy groceries? You can’t miss the “women’s magazines” at the checkout counter. The cover of almost every one depicts a celebrity or model that both defines and is defined by a very narrow and relatively precise paradigm of female beauty. She is tall (maybe 5’10”), slender (about 110 pounds), and her body is meticulously toned. She is often a Barbie-type: white, blue-eyed, and blond-haired, although this long-

standing tradition is shifting to include more women of color. Alongside these “beautiful” (skinny) women are the familiar headlines: “Lose 10 Pounds in 10 Days,” “Fight Flab! Look Fab!”—or some variation on this monotonous theme. And, if you get bored staring at the collage of fat-free beauties while you’re waiting to pay for your groceries, you can always look at the *unflattering* pictures of these same women in tabloids with accusatory headlines about their extreme weight gain or loss.

Media images establish what it means to be a beautiful woman in our society. It doesn’t matter that the vast majority of us don’t look like the women we are taught to adore. In fact, that’s part of the ploy: the relative rarity of the “ideal” creates tremendous pressure for ordinary women to “improve” their appearance. Weight-loss is essential to this transformation, or so we are told with both words and pictures. And the more we come to believe this truth, the more we absorb other messages as well—ones that are less obvious (and perhaps more insidious for being so), but no less powerful. These messages teach us that our souls will only feel as good as our bodies look; that we can never be happy unless we strive for physical perfection; and that to be successful, loved, and satisfied we must try to emulate the images we have come to idolize.

Little wonder that in this cultural milieu the numbers of women with eating and body image problems are skyrocketing among female undergraduates. Some studies have shown that up to 20 percent of college women suffer from an eating disorder.<sup>2</sup> Another found that 40 percent of college women showed “anorexic-like” behavior—nearly half of them engaged in bingeing and purging—and all of them knew someone else with similarly disordered behaviors.<sup>3</sup> Another study discovered that a third of college women surveyed reported using “diet aids” in the past twelve months, including diet pills, fat blockers, diuretics, and laxatives.<sup>4</sup> There have even been reports of plumbing problems in dormitories due to widespread vomiting.<sup>5</sup> Binge eating without purging is more common than anorexia and bulimia combined.<sup>6</sup> One survey found that 67 percent of college women binge-eat.<sup>7</sup>

These behaviors are extremely debilitating—if not deadly. Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness,<sup>8</sup> and

survivors often spend months in the hospital and years in treatment. However, anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating are only one part of a broad continuum of difficulties women have with food, weight and body image.

How many times have you tried to lose weight? How many hours have you spent preoccupied with the size of your waist, hips, or thighs?

If your answer is “too many,” you are hardly alone. More than three-quarters of healthy-weight adult women in the U.S. believe they are “too fat,” and nearly two-thirds of high school girls are on diets.<sup>9</sup> Attempts to lose weight start very young: eighty percent of fourth grade girls surveyed said they had already been on diets. The same percentage of women in their mid-50s express a desire to be thinner.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, growing numbers of women of color are joining the ranks of those who chronically hate their bodies, and more and more men are worrying about the “spare tire” around their midribs or the layer of flesh that sags from their chins.<sup>11</sup>

Many people spend a lifetime struggling with their weight. Why? Is it really to fend off the health-related dangers we hear so much about and have come to fear? To be sure, the physical ailments that some studies link to excess weight—heart disease, diabetes, and certain types of cancer—are well known and cause for alarm. Indeed, many of us are more prone to eat too much and exercise too little than to over-abstain or exercise excessively. But, weight-loss is a precarious strategy for “getting fit,” especially in light of the growing evidence suggesting that thinner is not *necessarily* healthier. Some studies raise questions about whether being moderately overweight is automatically unhealthy and whether it should be treated at all.<sup>12</sup> In fact, research verifies that, like happiness and beauty, health is possible in a wide variety of shapes and sizes.<sup>13</sup> In the end, health risks may have less to do with our drive for thinness than other, less tangible factors.

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I propose that our obsessions with eating and weight mask the deeper needs of our spirits. We are looking for a way to maintain peace, order, and security in a world that seems out of control. We want to

be happy and healthy, to feel accepted and connected within a larger community. We need to sense that our lives are meaningful, that we have a greater purpose.

The traditional way to manage these kinds of spiritual yearnings has been through religion. In the west, Christianity has been the predominant faith since the 4th Century. However, in today's world the authority of Christianity, as well as other organized religions, is contested and in some ways declining.<sup>14</sup> This has made it possible for women in our culture to break out of the constraining roles they had been kept in for so long, but it has also created a vacuum, a feeling that something is missing. The need for meaningful symbols, beliefs, stories, and rituals by which to organize our lives and understand our purpose has not disappeared. In fact, we are starving for them.

In an attempt to fill this void, many women have adopted what I call "The Religion of Thinness." This "religion" teaches us that controlling our weight will give us a feeling of control over our lives. It offers us the hope of health and happiness through the idea of the "perfect" body, which we believe is attainable through diet and exercise. It teaches us to feel morally superior if we "eat right" (meaning fewer fat grams or calories), and connects us to a larger community of women who are trying to lose weight. It gives us rituals—like counting and burning calories—that create a sense of order. And it includes a plethora of icons and symbols in the form of models and actresses in whose image we are encouraged to recreate ourselves. Perhaps most importantly of all, it gives us an ultimate purpose—the "salvation" that comes from being thin.

But in the end its promises are hollow. The Religion of Thinness cannot fill the emptiness we feel inside ourselves. It cannot satisfy our deepest hungers. The hope it offers is an illusion, one that we have been fed by the media and other sources, and one that many of us have consumed with a religious-like fervor in our quest for meaning and purpose.

I know, because I too was once a disciple.

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