

## ABSTRACT

Christian Theology of the Body and the Body Positivity Movement

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In this thesis, I review theology of the body in Catholic and Protestant history and discuss what it means to use and misuse the body, investigating the theology of fasting and the muscular Christianity movement to explore nuances. Then, I review literature on the body positivity movement and find that it advocates for acceptance of all body types and self-love regardless of appearance. While this movement does not always neglect health, it almost always promotes moral relativism, putting the body in the service of personal pleasure. Contrary to the individualistic, affirmative nature of body positivity, Christianity understands that bodies ought to be humbly used in the service of God's Kingdom. I argue that conformity to the Christian view not only provides motivation for health, but also addresses the concerns that body positivity has about body image and self-valuation.

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AND THE BODY POSITIVITY  
MOVEMENT

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction . . . . .	1
Chapter Two: Literature Review . . . . .	4
Chapter Three: Case Studies . . . . .	29
Chapter Four: Analysis. . . . .	36
Chapter Five: Conclusion . . . . .	42

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

“It is no secret that young women growing up in America’s body-obsessed culture are more insecure than ever,” (30) begins Corrine Moore in her autobiographical article in Baylor’s *Focus Magazine*. Moore writes about her struggle with body image issues, how she felt fat and “unworthy” (30) when compared to the models she idolized. She ate very little and would daily engage in strenuous exercise to fight gaining weight from the few calories she took in every day. Moore eventually found refuge from her struggles in self-affirming thoughts, telling herself she “beautiful, worthy, and unique” (31). The messages Moore used to lift herself out of a downward spiral are common to what is known as the body positive movement. Looking at the very models that Moore did, body positivity advocates try to encourage people (especially women) to appreciate their bodies as they are, to love and cherish themselves regardless of appearance (Creekmore; Reid; Stanley). The movement has been gaining traction in popular culture with a rise of plus-size models like Ashley Graham and Tess Munster, magazines like *PLUS*, and pop stars like Meghan Trainor. Blogs and websites dedicated to fat acceptance (a form of body positivity) have arisen, focusing on individuals’ autonomy and right to treat their bodies however they want (Chastain, “Ridiculous Responses To Quitting Dieting”; Reid). These uplifting messages are becoming increasingly common and seem to reflect the Christian concept of human dignity and worth. As a secular movement with potential to be coopted by well-meaning Christians, the body positive movement’s concerns and critiques of society ought to be vetted through a theological lens. I contend that contrary to the individualistic, affirmative nature of body positivity, Christianity understands that

human physicality ought to be humbly used in the service of God's Kingdom. I further argue that conformity to the Christian view not only provides motivation for healthy practices, but also addresses the concerns that body positivity has about body image and self-valuation.

To begin, I review literature on traditional Christian theology of the body. In a religion that has faced philosophical questioning both from within and without over many centuries, the theology of the body has remained stable. A discussion of Scripture, thinkers from the Early Church, Doctors of the Church, and influential modern Christians such as Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright brings forth common themes on the nature and purpose of the human body. I then show how Christian fasting and muscular Christianity apply and elucidate nuances in the theology. I proceed to discuss major aspects of the body positive movement, such as Health at Every Size and critiques of healthism.

The third chapter consists of case studies from body positivists and contemporary Christian perspectives on the body. The purpose of this chapter is to provide specific cases from which a Christian response to body positivity may grow, either through affirmation or contradiction. This chapter includes body positive activists, a Christian fitness program, and a Christian organization's response to body positivity.

Chapter four is a response to each of the case studies in chapter three and a Christian critique of body positivity. Through addressing the themes in each case study and body positivity, this chapter shows how Christianity answers questions posed by body positivists and provides a practical application of theology of the body in contemporary contexts.

Finally, I conclude this honors thesis with a theology of the body grounded in Scripture and tradition. Christian theology of the body is not simply a relic of the past, but something redemptive and healing, needed as much today as ever.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review: The Theology of the Body and Body Positivity

#### *Introduction*

Theology of the body plays an important role in the Christian faith. It is central not only to the Christian hope of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12-19), but to mission as well (1 Cor. 6:20). Moreover, the body is the medium by which Christ uses His followers on Earth (John Paul II 104). In this chapter, I will examine what various influential theologians have said on the nature of the body and its purposes. This will be complemented and contextualized by sections on fasting and muscular Christianity. A review of body positivity's major themes follows to provide a more complete view of the movement; the Health at Every Size movement, fat acceptance writers, and critiques of secular perspectives on health are examined.

#### *Importance and Purpose of the Body*

Contrary to a Greek philosophical dichotomy between the physical and spiritual, the ancient Hebrew tradition does not distinguish between a man's body and self: man is an animated body, not an incarnated soul. The Old Testament authors did not think man to be a different substance from the creation he lived in – man is the “very good” crowning glory of a “good” creation and is material in nature (Gen 1:1-31; Aquinas I.65.1-2, I.93; Robinson 13). During the intertestamental period (c. 420 B.C.E – 30 C.E.), Greek thought affected Jewish anthropology towards a body/soul bipartite understanding of man, but there was a retention of man as a “psychosomatic unity” (Wilken 27) – human nature is neither purely immaterial (‘psycho’), nor merely physical (‘soma’), but the interaction and union of the two – that influenced the New Testament (Owen 180-

197; Robinson 13, 68-75; Wright 94). This concept, with more emphasis on body and soul as distinct, but unified, aspects of man, continues through the works of influential Christians who have consistently held that the body is part of what constitutes human nature and is intended for the actualization of God's kingdom (Keenan 331-332).

In the early years of the Church, the heretical Gnostic sects claimed that the material world was inherently evil, and that a man's spirit needed to be liberated from the trappings of the flesh – a philosophy that essentially divorced human nature from the physical. The major opponent of the Valentinian Gnostics was Irenaeus, a second- and third-century bishop of Lugdunum (modern-day Lyon, France) who wrote *Against Heresies* to challenge the Gnostic errors. Irenaeus taught that because humans were originally made in the body, the body is integral to human existence. This stance was corroborated by Justin Martyr, a second-century Christian philosopher, in his work *On the Resurrection* (297, VI). According to both Irenaeus and Justin, "the whole nature of man" is "body and soul in close unison" (Irenaeus 531; Justin *On the Resurrection* 297-8); neither the body nor the soul can independently be called 'a man' (Irenaeus 529-532, 541; Justin, *On the Resurrection* 297-8). This view was adopted by Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, among many others, and is now dogma in the Roman Catholic Church (vatican.va). In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine wrote that "the soul and the body constitute the man" (23, I.27). Centuries later, Aquinas cites Augustine's *The City of God* in his *Summa Theologiae*, "that man is not a mere soul, nor a mere body; but both soul and body" (qtd. in Aquinas I.75.4) and elaborates that the soul is "connaturally related to the body" (Maher and Bolland), and not the full nature of man. More recently, Pope John Paul II wrote in the *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) that man is a creature constituted

of both soul and body (84). This holistic view is not limited to Roman Catholicism but is found throughout Protestantism as well. John Calvin wrote in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.XV.2: “there can be no question that man consists of a body and a soul” (214), and later Reformed theology reemphasizes this, highlighting the indivisibility of the two aspects (Shults 165-171). John Wesley (1703-1791) also believed in a holistic view of humanity, describing “God [as] the Great Physician [who] desires to heal body and soul together” (Maddox). Wesley believed in the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit through his Church to achieve physical, spiritual, and social health (Maddox).

Likewise, Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35 – c. 107) referred to Christ as ““the physician of the body and the spirit”” (qtd. in John Paul II 47). Justin Martyr also calls Christ “our physician,” who “regulates our flesh with His own wise and temperate rule” (Justin, *On the Resurrection* 299). He remarks that Christ’s healing ministry foreshadows the wholeness of life in the Resurrection, and thereby demonstrates that Christ restores both body and soul. For Justin, the restoration of body and soul is not just a future event. It is the gift of the Spirit of God to a Christian on Earth, the spiritualization of the entirety of a human nature (*On the Resurrection* 295-298). This regeneration is often expressed by theologians based on 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19. For example, Irenaeus cites these verses in describing the regenerate Christian as possessing body *and* soul with the Spirit of God sanctifying both, a foreshadowing of the glory to come (Irenaeus 532-533). John Paul II uses Romans 8:11 in a similar manner: the Christian in the present life is to be “renewed by the grace of the Spirit...life has been bestowed upon us” and “we are called to act accordingly” (67, 79-80).

Pope John Paul II's idea of acting accordingly resonates with an interdenominational idea of community, holiness, and restoration in the present world:

life on earth is not an "ultimate" but a "penultimate" reality; even so, it remains a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters (2).

Likewise, Anglican bishop N. T. Wright (b. 1948) finds in Scripture a directive to actualize the heavenly kingdom as much as possible in the present life; eschatology reinforces the present mission. In *Philippians*, for example, Paul directs the young church to live in a harmonious society as a precursor to the heavenly kingdom (Engberg-Pederson 278, 290; Wright 133), and in *1 Corinthians* 3:16-17, Paul addresses the whole Corinthian Church as the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church, as the body of Christ on earth, is an important part in Christian life and is fundamental to how Christianity approaches the world (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 5). Like the individual body, the body of the Church is not to focus only on itself. Wright further writes that good works and evangelization should not just be oriented towards individuals, but towards social structures and communities as well (John Paul II 79; Wright 264-270). Archbishop Óscar Romero of San Salvador (1977-1980) wrote in his third pastoral letter, "The Church and Popular Political Organizations," that the Church is to advocate for justice in all situations, inside and outside of the Church (99). Through these writings, ancient and more contemporary, that theologians have understood God's call for Christians, both as individuals and as members of a wider community, to help actualize His kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10b; John Paul II 79, 95) using their physical body. In these ways, the body is understood as good, God-given, and in need of care to further God's dominion. Community is a means to become righteous, a medium upon which

righteousness is acted, and a channel through which righteousness is enacted; per John Wesley, ““there is no holiness but social holiness”” (qtd. in Maddox; Keenan 334; Robinson 68, 154). A Christian’s responsibility is not to transcend his current body, but to do good through it, concerning itself not only with others’ spiritual states, but physical as well (John Paul II 47). The Christian mission is grounded in the body, living in holy community, with faith acted out in good works – bearing “one another’s burdens,” which is “the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2; James 2:14-26; Isa. 1:16b-17; Heb. 13:2-3; Robinson 31; Wright 29; John Paul II 3, 19-20).

The body is not merely a tool to further Christian mission but rather is itself “valuable in God’s sight” (Justin, *On the Resurrection* 297), an idea reinforced by the bestowing of the Holy Spirit upon believers in the present life (1 Cor. 6:19). From the beginning, God commanded mankind to have dominion over creation and cultivate it – the most immediate realm sphere of creation that a man can tend to is his own body, and through this body mankind then interacts with the rest of God’s creation (Gen. 1:28). In his earthly ministry, Jesus Christ came in the flesh to redeem the flesh, and His healing ministry demonstrates the importance of the body (Irenaeus 527; Justin, *On the Resurrection* 295). Since the coming of Christ, there are good works to be done in Christians’ mortal bodies to bring about the Kingdom and begin the redemption of creation (Wright 194-201): As John Paul II states, “it is precisely in the ‘flesh’ of every person that Christ continues to reveal himself and to enter into fellowship with us, so that rejection of human life, in whatever form that rejection takes, is really a rejection of Christ” (104). This more global, underlying responsibility of all humanity applies not only to Christians, but to nonbelievers as well, as these arguments stem from an

understanding that all are created in the image of God, and thus have inherent dignity. (Augustine 23; John Paul II 75; Keenan 336; Robinson 68, 154; Wright 218). Neglect or abuse of any body is considered sinful, as is the misuse the body or giving into fleshly desires (John Paul II 3).

To summarize the traditional theology of the body, Christianity has continually regarded physical body in this life to be an important aspect of human nature. Human nature, both body and soul, are endowed with inherent value by God, and thus the body is Christ's instrument on Earth, to be used for doing God's work in communities and through the Church.

However, the importance of the body can be overstated, and while the earthly life is held in high regard, it is not the final one, and so spiritual integrity takes precedence. Jesus convicted his disciples to be willing to sacrifice even their lives for their faith:

...do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell...so everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven (Matt. 10:28, 32-33).

Since then, martyrs of the church have undergone horrific deaths to be faithful to their witness, a thing which is “precious in the sight of the LORD” (Ps. 116:15; Augustine 19; Keenan 337). To systematize how the body should be prioritized, Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine* and Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* write about the proper order of charitable love, agreeing that God is to be loved first, then one's own soul, then a neighbor, and finally one's own body (Aquinas II-II.26.2-5; Augustine 23, I.27). Since the body is meant to be directed towards actualizing the kingdom of God, a Christian's physical health and well-being could be considered are worthy to be sacrificed for it. However, this was taken to extremes in the practices of

some ascetic groups, which used fasting as a method to enlighten their souls, but in doing so either rejected and damaged the body (Crislip 190; Newman 91- 92). *Fasting*

Fasting has long been an important Christian practice to dedicate oneself to God.

In the first century, Clement of Rome (35-99 C.E.) wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians that it was more important than prayer (Arbesmann 40). However, considering its history and stigma of emaciation and self-harm, it is useful to be put under scrutiny so the nuances of the theology of the body can be better understood. To combat bad theology and malpractice, many theologians and monastics have discussed fasting's limits and purposes (Behr 1, Foster 47).

The biblical basis for fasting is broad, as it is widely practiced throughout the Old and New Testaments. David fasts in supplication and pleading with God before the death of his first son with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:16-23, Ps. 35:13-14). In Ps. 69:10, David “humble[s] his soul with fasting.” Elijah and Moses both fast for forty days before communing with God (Deut. 9:9, 1 Kings 19:8). Jesus’ prepares for his ministry by fasting for forty days in the wilderness, using his abstinence to recognize God’s sustaining power (Matt. 4:1-4, Luke 4:1-4). With his disciples, Jesus did not command fasting, nor say ‘*if* you fast,’ but rather expected it, saying “*when* you fast” [emphasis added here] (Matt. 6:16, Foster 52). In Acts 13:1-3, fasting is presented as a form of worship, and in 14:23 as part of dedicating oneself to God. There are further examples in Luke 2:36-38; 1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11:23-28; Acts 9:9; 10:30-31. Early Christians were therefore very familiar with fasting. Yet, in the face of heresies and controversy, Christian fasting had to be well defined.

Fasting practiced to the end of self-harm or rejection of the body was denounced at the Council of Ancyra in 314 CE, which addressed the self-destructive practices of the

Encratites and other sects that sought to liberate their souls from their bodies through abstinence (Arbesmann 33). Rudolph Arbesmann's (1895-1982) work on fasting in the ancient world notes several influential theologians, including St. Jerome of Stridonium, St. Leo the Great, Origen, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Augustine, who all promoted moderate fasts not for the sake of diminishing the body, but for discipline. Leo the Great wrote that ““the very essence of our fast does not consist in the mere abstention from food, and fruitlessly do we deprive our body of nourishment if the soul is not made free from sin”” (qtd. in Arbesmann 38). The *Shepherd* of Hermas, an early Christian text that was considered for canonization, describes the Christian fast as abstinence from evil deeds, keeping oneself pure from evil desires, maintenance of faith, and keeping God's commandments, rather than just denying food (Arbesmann 38). Basil of Caesarea (329-379) writes in his *Shorter Rules*, “a collection of 313 questions and answers about the ascetic life,” (Crislip 188), that to fast beyond one's physical strength undermines the purpose of fasting, which is to give up one's will to a spiritual master or God. Augustine, in *On Christian Doctrine*, rejects fasting as a method of self-harm when he says those who fast should “not act so that they may not have bodies,” but to correct the “inclinations of the spirit...they are taking care of their health” (21); Augustine further writes that fasting is to purge oneself of “ungodliness and worldly lusts, [that] we may live temperately and justly and piously in this world...but [fasting is] only a foundation on which other virtues may be built” (qtd. in Arbesmann 38-39). Centuries later, Aquinas does call fasting a virtue, but only for the merit of it being directed to virtuous things: taming desires of the flesh, contemplation, and in repentance for sin. He grounds himself

both in Scripture and tradition with citations of 2 Corinthians 6:5-6, Joel 2:12, Daniel 10, and a sermon of Augustine (Aquinus II-II.147.1).

Of course, these theologians were not critiquing ascetic practices in a cultural and historical vacuum. Despite verses such as Colossians 2:23, “asceticism and severity to the body...are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh,” self-mutilating askesis had a foothold in Christianity. Extreme askesis was seen in the early church in the practices of self-starvation, continuation of fasting to the point to severe bodily harm, and fasting while ill, a practice which led some to death (Crislip 196-197). During the Middle Ages, some monks would consider the flesh their “enemy” (Newman 92), and would starve themselves, while others would torture themselves to dull sensual temptations or to achieve union with Christ through imitation of his Passion (Kinnard 136, Newman 96). Many Christians would practice asceticism, with St. Antony considered a paragon of the ascetic life (Crislip 181). *Life of Antony* (4<sup>th</sup> century CE), a hagiography attributed to Athanasius, was and is a widely-read account of St. Antony’s travails in the Egyptian desert. Athanasius describes Antony’s life of extreme self-denial: total fasting for days at a time, very plain food when he does eat, and sleeping on a rush mat. According to Athanasius, even though Antony was pushed to the brink of death by his activities, he was able to survive by the strength of his soul what would have been fatal to others. Even in the face of such trials, Antony emerges from this extreme fasting in good health (“neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons” (qtd. in Crislip 183)) because his soul, empowered by the denial of sensual pleasures, had strengthened his body. Athanasius in *Life of Antony* promotes an ascetic lifestyle not to the end of increased health, but to develop intense self-control and

resilience in the face of sensual temptations; health is a benefit, not a goal. He relates fasting even more closely to health in his work *On Virginity* (4<sup>th</sup> century CE), praising fasting as a medical cure-all, and thereby reaffirming that fasting is not at all about rejecting the bodily aspect of existence; if anything, it promotes physicality by making the body healthier (Crislip 181-186). Even Athanasius, one of the most influential authors on an ascetic life, does not reject the body through his fasting exercises, but understands his denials as strengthening it through disciplining the soul.

Though Christian theologians widely considered fasting to be for personal discipline and turning away from illicit sensuality, there were communal and mystical uses as well. It was a widespread practice that the money saved from fasting should be given as alms to the poor. For some, such as St. John Chrysostom, caring for the poor out of the resources saved by fasting was a defining aspect of the practice. Similarly, Augustine preached that fasting must be joined with prayer and donation to the poor for it to truly be fasting. Fasting was also considered a method to ward off temptations, a mystical prevention rather than simple self-discipline; it was a way to dedicate oneself to God or to prepare oneself for an important spiritual event, and was frequently used in penance, mourning, sacrifice, supplication, and accompaniment to prayer (Arbesmann 36, 39-40, 51, 57, 61, 67; *Didache I, VII*; Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* 183; Foster 33).

When monks engaged in fasting improperly, however, they courted the sin of vanity, or “the sin of singularity” (Newman 96). “Bernard of Clairvaux described a hypothetical monk” who, during meals, would look around to make sure that he was eating less than everyone else – the monk did “not so much want to be better as to be seen to be better” (Newman 96). Bernard is reaffirming a very old idea, that the vice of

pride awaits the ascetic who attempts to laud himself merely from abstinence of food and does not actually reform the soul through fasting. St. Jerome of Stridonum (347-429 C.E.), 600 years before Basil cautions against thinking oneself better than others for fasting for a longer period and advises to beware deteriorating health, which may hinder the development of faith (Arbesmann 38-39). Other sins were associated with excessive fasting, such as Evagrius of Pontus (345-399 C.E.), who recognized it as the “demon of gluttony” (Crislip 191) that tempts ascetics to extreme abstinence since they would not overeat. To prevent monastics from starving themselves, Evagrius warned against taking St. Antony as an example – instead, a monk ought to fast with a “disciplined care for the body’s health” (Crislip 191). Basil of Caesarea (329-379 C.E.) emphasized care for health and moderation of fast to perpetuate humility and obedience. also saw extreme fasting as the spirit of gluttony, cautioning against cultivating a body either ““disordered by obesity”” or ““rendered sickly [from fasting]”” (qtd. in Crislip 188). Fasting could be taken to an extreme that the suffering of the body became the focus of the fast, rather than God – instead, a monk should eat to have strength to fulfill the work set before him by God (Newman 97). Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian monks (1090-1153 C.E.) later paralleled Basil’s ideas of fasting and eating in moderation to strengthen the body to do physical labor and God’s work (such as serving the poor and obedience in the monastery), contrasting it with gluttony and fasting in the ‘sin of singularity,’ which undermines true piety (Crislip 187-194).

Clearly, the traditional theology concerning asceticism warns against excessive fasting, as it leads to vanity, focusing on one’s own body rather than God, rendering us unable to perform our Kingdom duties in this life. Though Christian ascetics sometimes

practiced with a dualistic intent of freeing the spirit from the body (Newman 91-92, 102; Crislip 193, Arbesmann 33-35), prominent theologies have often described fasting and its purposes in direct opposition to them. The body ought to be subjugated and disciplined, but it is also an instrument by which Christians increase their faith and minister to others, a divine duty that often necessitates health.

Fasting took a different turn during the nineteenth century. In England and the United States, scholars and followers of the muscular Christian movement sought to bring men back into the church, to create masculine disciples who were willing and able to serve others, to promote mission work around the globe, often in support of British imperialism as a means of evangelization (Putney). In practice, muscular Christians advocated health and self-mastery in the service of God, what Uppingham School headmaster Edward Thring called “true fasting” (Tozer 166).

### *Muscular Christianity*

In the mid-nineteenth century, a different manner of disciplining oneself to be subservient to Christ originated in England and spread to the United States and the colonies (Bundgaard 18-19). The muscular Christian movement arose, advocating for strengthening and disciplining of the body for Christ. Muscular Christianity sought to make the body wholly subject to the soul, much like the spirit of fasting, but in a manner where the body is intentionally built up in a Christian pursuit of health and character, “physical vigor, courage, and strength” (Bundgaard 25, 28). Though ascetic practices were at times denounced (Bundgaard 160, Tozer 103), the core principle of disciplining the soul, via physical hardship, for Christ remained in muscular Christianity. The

movement had prominence in English boys' schools (such as Rugby School and Uppingham School), and in Christian Socialism, which many of the ideals emerged from (Tozer 44-49, 79; Lucas 456-458). Muscular Christianity had a strong imperialistic ethos, desiring to spread Christianity and civilization through the expansion of the British Empire (Tozer 288-290). Despite critiques that may be levelled at muscular Christianity for its participation in colonialism, its primary goal was that of the Great Commission, to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19-20). Its values are well seen in the headmasters and authors that are considered paragons of the movement.

Thomas Arnold, headmaster at Rugby School (1828-1841) and a prominent figure of muscular Christianity, believed that "pastoral welfare was as important as classroom teaching" (Tozer 276). He would preach in the chapel and attend to his students' faith, as he saw the school as an opportunity to realize "the ideal Christian-Platonic society" (Tozer 71). His priorities were, respectively, to cultivate his student's faith (a practical faith, not one purely of theory and philosophy), then their character (making them each a 'gentleman'), and finally to educate them (Lucas 257). Arnold's ideals were reflected in the actions of Christian Socialists, such as author Charles Kingsley, who focused their physical service efforts toward ameliorating the lives of England's poor. Muscular Christianity bore much resemblance to the old chivalric code, teaching that a true man would be "loyal to his king and to his God, bound to defend the weak, succor the oppressed and put down the wrong-doer" (Tozer 72). In these ways, muscular Christians put the fruits of their discipline towards helping the downtrodden, like John Chrysostom and Augustine's view that fasting should be paired with donation to the poor.

Edward Thring was another headmaster (Uppingham School 1853-1887) with strong muscular Christian principles. Thring's approach to physicality reflect the ideas behind asceticism and fasting. He distills out the core principle of self-mastery and applies it to a physically vigorous lifestyle: daily hardship and physical cultivation to the end of instilling a will with perfect control over the body. Thring wanted his boys to have ““an utter disregard for the body when it stands in the way of good work, and a careful regard for the body when regard means good work, and the power of good working”” (qtd. in Tozer 166), and hardness, the ability to endure physical or emotional pain. The desires of the body were thus to be wholly second to duty and to good works (including ministry to the poor). Thring, like the theologians of fasting, describes muscular Christianity’s complete subjugation of body to soul in contrast to self-destructive askesis (Tozer 104, 166). This was in the same spirit of Basil of Caesarea, who taught ““to be indifferent to the pleasure or pain of the flesh, but to avoid immoderation in either direction,”” (qtd. in Crislip 188). Thring breaks from the usual rhetoric of fasting when he explicitly advocates for the cultivation of strength. Thring understood the Christian’s body as a temple of the Holy Spirit as a motivation for strength and health out of respect, but also a directive. All strength cultivated needed to be in service of God’s kingdom, including empathy and care for the least in society (Heb. 13:1-4). Yet, Thring, ever cognizant of the pitfalls of physical prowess, spoke against idolizing strength and power and taught his students to understand that God would judge them based off how they used their abilities, not what abilities each one had. That is, God would judge the inclination of their heart and that they made the best of their gifts (Tozer 168). In this way, Thring fostered humility among his students, where pupils were not praised solely for their

achievements, but their character; Thring sought to instill “a Platonic harmony...in body, intellect and soul” (Tozer 179). He supported integrity, humility, and courage foremost, emblems that a pupil had submitted his intellect and body to God (Tozer 164-181).

One way that muscular Christianity became popularized world-wide was through novels, one of the foremost of which is Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown* books. Hughes’ novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857) is a classic coming-of-age work, showing the development of a young boy into a courageous and just young man. In the sequel *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), Tom Brown encounters a cadre of muscular Christians, affording Thomas Hughes an opportunity to detail his opinion on muscular Christianity. Hughes distinguished the movement from self-serving bodybuilding – classifying the members of the groups as “muscular Christians” versus “musclemen” – saying that the only similarity is their value of “strong, well-exercised bodies” (122). For Hughes, the major difference was the ‘why.’ For muscular Christians,

a man’s body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth which God has given to the children of men...For mere power, whether of body or intellect, he has...no reverence whatever (Hughes 122-123).

Hughes assigns to muscular Christianity similar motivations to those found in fasting, particularly discipline of the soul, service, and humility. Almsgiving and serving of others (as Hughes says, “protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes” (123)) were important parts of the Christian life, and the theology of fasting formed around them (Crislip 189, Arbesmann 40). Like traditional theology of fasting that discourages severe asceticism because it can oppose humility, Hughes’s description of

muscular Christianity incorporates an assurance that vanity and self-aggrandizement are discouraged in the movement.

Hughes, a member of the Christian Socialist movement, promoted British imperialism to the end of spreading Christian civilization throughout the world – not for the sake of England’s empire, but for the sake of those who would receive the Gospel from the British. Likewise, Thring, though explicitly denouncing Christian Socialism (Tozer 105), still strongly supported spreading the Gospel through British imperialism. Both men had faith in a Christian society built by England, unifying and promoting the faith in its colonies worldwide. Kipling’s poem “White Man’s Burden” contains many of the same themes, evoking Biblical images, referencing the Exodus of the Bible as analogous to the ‘White Man’ leading foreign cultures to Christianity and civilization. While the contemporary reader may critique Hughes and Thring for being colonists, they were so not for personal glory, nor for glory of the British Empire, but for evangelization. Though the methods bear critique, their intentions were still pure, originating in the Great Commission and reflecting muscular Christianity (Kipling; Tozer 288, 308).

By the latter third of the nineteenth century, schools that strongly emphasized athletics had begun to lose the Christian aspect of their muscularity, resorting to what Thomas Hughes distinguishes from muscular Christians: “musclemen” (*Tom Brown at Oxford* 122), the ordinary jock who does not respect intellect, praises physical prowess alone, and readily engages in condescension and bullying. The ‘cult of athleticism’ and ‘*esprit de corps*’ which had begun within the muscular Christianity framework had superseded the faith that had been present in Thomas Arnold’s Rugby School or Edward Thring’s Uppingham (Tozer 276-280; Lucas 456).

Critics of muscular Christianity condemn it as a movement of the privileged.

Robert J. Higgs accuses the muscular Christian of “prospering economically, always well dressed and well fed as he witnesses for Christ” (91). Despite the attempts by many schoolmasters to discipline their pupils via sports and training, the boys never know true hardship, leaving them “unfit for the *real* work of life” [emphasis mine] (Tozer 210). Its members “testify in sartorial splendor..., have never missed a meal or even known any *real* anguish of spirit” [emphasis mine] (Higgs 92). Those raised under the yoke of muscular Christianity do not end up any more capable of performing true labor, as all they have experienced is an artificial, competition-based environment. Higgs describes muscular Christianity as a gospel for and by the prosperous, using the material wealth and impressive stature of its proponents to convert. He does give it some credit, however, by acknowledging its lofty goals of spiritually preparing oneself to evangelize, and knowing and loving Christ, but its downfall is that it is “facile, accessible, and anti-intellectual” (Higgs 93).

Despite the pitfalls of the movement, muscular Christianity associates itself with fasting and asceticism insofar as it promoted disciplining of the soul through physical hardship, mostly in sports. Through enduring “hunger and cold” (Tozer 165), like the schools of asceticism, muscular Christians sought to become ready to evangelize and endure hardships, in addition to strengthening their spirits and will in humble deference to God. Thring called this “true fasting” (Tozer 166), as he sought to instill discipline in his students. However, this view neglects the myriad of more mystical purposes ascribed to fasting (penance, sacrifice, supplication, preparation for baptism and receiving Eucharist, etc.) by past theologians. Furthermore, though the movement makes no

explicit claims about the “psychosomatic unity” (Wilken 27) of body and soul, it certainly implies it with its desire to alleviate suffering and use the Christian body to do good work in the world and the regard for the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (Tozer 169). Another common thread between muscular Christianity and theology surrounding fasting is humility. In fasting, theologians strongly discouraged competition, or fasting to receive accolades. Similarly, Thring does not highly value his students’ intelligence and physical prowess, but their character (Tozer 179), and Hughes’ *Tom Brown at Oxford* claims that sheer power, of either muscle or mind, did not hold the respect of muscular Christians (122-123). Though the more metaphysical side of fasting is neglected, the physical and practical mission is taken up with zeal: self-discipline, humility, almsgiving, service, evangelization, and ministry all receive their due in muscular Christianity.

As mentioned earlier, muscular Christianity changed in its emphasis to become more clearly the “cult of athleticism” (Tozer 280), and the focus on amateur sports and health continued long after the demise of the movement, influencing secular culture. This influence is felt in ‘healthism,’ the moralization of health and the scorning of the obese (Hoverd and Sibley 391), amateurism in the Olympics (Lucas 456, 460), and the elevation of celebrity athletes as moral ideals (Meyer 15; Parker and Watson 10). In response to portrayals of obesity as negative or immoral today, the body positive movement arose, critiquing healthism and beauty standards, and demanding respect for those perceived as fat or unhealthy.

### *Body Positivity and Fat Acceptance*

Body positivity as a movement is primarily concerned with body image in the West, especially with the perception of fatness and self-valuation with regards to an aesthetic view of health (LeBesco 81). The common ideology of body positivity promotes autonomy and rejects the moralization of health. Though body positivists agree on the detrimental effects of contemporary beauty standards and combat body dysmorphia with advocacy and self-esteem, they usually have one of two different foci. Some body positivists advocate for health and self-love regardless of adiposity<sup>1</sup>, while others advocate for self-love regardless of appearance or health. The body positivists that promote health can be exemplified in the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement, which focuses on destigmatizing bodies that have generally been viewed as overweight or obese<sup>2</sup> but are, in fact, fit (Harry and Sutherland). HAES still promotes health over unhealthiness but does so in a way that is not moralizing (LeBesco 78). Alternatively, there are body positivists that do not see any morally compelling reason to be fit – it is okay to be unhealthy, and it should be accommodated rather than stigmatized in society (Chastain, “Asking Forfor Accommodations As A Fat Person”). This movement strongly critiques any infringement on autonomy or criticism of a person’s size, and often goes by the name ‘fat acceptance’ (Chastain, “Ridiculous Responses To Quitting Dieting”; Reid; Stanley). but in their repudiation of beauty standards and a desire for societal acceptance of all bodies, claiming that fat shaming damages self-image (Grabe 460; Moore 30; Young) and perpetuates inequality by providing a foundation for moralizing class

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<sup>1</sup> Adiposity refers to the amount of fatty tissue on a person’s body.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Overweight’ and ‘obese’/‘obesity’ refer to placement on the Body Mass Index (BMI).

stratification, as obesity is “inversely related to income and education” (Townend 171; Levitt ; Orbach 67).

The HAES movement fights to remove the stigma of unhealthiness from people who are fat, often relying on scientific studies to argue that fatness does not reflect fitness or lifestyle (Bacon 127-138; Harry and Sutherland; Meadows 1, 6; Young). Rather than give insight into health, body size reflects genetic influences and how a person’s metabolism uniquely deals with caloric intake (SBS 2014, Bacon 13-26; Meadows 7). Proponents of HAES contend that those with a relatively high percentage of body fat can be, and often are, cardiovascularly fit and have good respiratory and muscle health. The stigma of fatness as unhealthy, pitting aesthetically-oriented ideals of health or fitness against fatness, is thus unjust (Bacon 215; Meadows 1, 4; Wilson 92). Overall, HAES promotes mental health as much as it does physical health, with a look to self-acceptance and functionality in society (Bacon 31, 34, 215-234; Lebesco 78).

Dr. Linda Bacon’s 2010 book *Health at Every Size* is defining for the movement of the same name. The book discusses evidence from hundreds of studies for the possibility of being fat and fit<sup>3</sup>, critiques using BMI, weight, or appearance to measure health, and tips on developing a healthy lifestyle. According to Bacon and other proponents of HAES, BMI does not have strong correlation with actual health, as it measures a weight/height relationship, and not fitness, low-density lipoproteins (LDL, ‘bad cholesterol’), or blood pressure. Cardiovascular and muscular fitness matter for health, while adiposity (whether high or low) does not. To become healthy or maintain health, other methods besides trying to lose weight need to be considered, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Having good cardiovascular determined by various stress and endurance tests

lifestyle changes involving physical activity and healthy diets – without the explicit aim of losing weight – are required. With such changes, health improves irrespective of weight loss, as does overall happiness (Bacon 215-234; Gasser 31-54; LeBesco 80). HAES asserts that fatness does not have many, if any, of the poor side effects historically associated with fatness, challenging the studies that supposedly show that certain diseases are caused by fatness (some cancers, diabetes, atherosclerosis, etc.). Instead, proponents claim that some of these conditions are caused by yo-yo dieting<sup>4</sup> rather than fatness; other studies are critiqued for their research methods, interpretation of correlative data, or cherry-picking of studies (Bacon 48, 127-136; Campos 55; Gasser 31-54; Meadows 5-10). Some evidence indicates that there are protective factors in being overweight or obese, reducing chances of developing certain diseases (e.g. certain lung diseases, anemia, type 1 diabetes), and is implicated with increased longevity in the face of others (e.g. cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension), when compared with ‘normal’ or ‘underweight’ individuals with the same disease (Bacon 137-138; Campos 56). Overall, most HAES proponents see concern for health as an excuse often used to ‘fat-shame’ someone. However, shaming fatness lowers self-esteem and subsequently lower self-control, making it harder for a to lose weight, perpetuating negative cycles; beyond psychological impact, there are biochemical links between stress hormones (i.e. stress from being shamed, or having a poor perception of oneself) to weight gain and

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<sup>4</sup> Also known as weight cycling, yo-yo dieting is losing weight in a diet, then gaining it back again because it was a damaging and unsustainable loss of fat or other (e.g. muscle) tissue. It is likely due to persistent metabolic change when the body loses fat past a healthy equilibrium. It is a common occurrence with weight-loss diets. Dr. Bacon advocates moderate indulgence of the body’s cravings instead as a means for healthy nutritional intake (Bacon 11, 52, 131, 193-198; Fothergill et al. 1612-113).

increased incidence of disease (Bacon 54-56, 130; Meadows 7-8; Robinson et al. 1721).

HAES's response to fat-shaming is acknowledgment of different metabolisms and engaging in healthy practices, allowing that a person can be healthiest in a state of fatness (Bacon 33; LeBesco 78).

HAES's concern for mental, physical, and social health is in line with Christian thinking – though the movement does not address true spiritual health, which, per Augustine, is “to cling steadfastly to...God” (Augustine 20). There is also room for fasting and self-discipline in HAES, even in the general narrative of moderate self-indulgence. However, HAES places the individual (not God) as the final authority regarding the body. For example, Harriet Brown, a HAES supporter and professor at Syracuse University, is quoted as saying that if someone wants to live an inactive life eating candy, then it is entirely a personal choice (Haskins, “Does the ‘Body Positive’ Movement Promote Health?”). By decoupling fatness and morality, HAES can blend into a form of body positivity that, via an individualist viewpoint, sees no sufficient moral incentive to advocate for physical health.

Rather than try to reduce stigma by breaking down the view that fat people cannot be fit, body positivists like Brown promote individual choice and body diversity to justify what could be considered unhealthy lifestyles. The focus is on liberation from oppressive societal standards so that people may live happy, satisfied, and free of judgment, regardless of their choices concerning their bodies (Chastain, “When Is It Okay To Be Fat?”; Levitt; Meadows 1; Reid). In an exposé on body positivity by the Australian Special Broadcasting Service, interviewee and activist Natalie Perkins defines fat acceptance as “the radical notion that fat people are human beings and deserve respect.”

Perkins remarks that even though she knows that she is unhealthy, she is “doing the best [she] can to live a great life” (SBS 2014). The right to live life however one wishes is a theme amongst body positivists, a self-centered message in contrast with the historical Christian perspective which emphasizes self-sacrifice and social responsibility. In her blog “Fat Heffalump” Kath Reid discusses how the movement is all about individual rights, stating:

health never comes into the equation when it comes to the rights of anyone, of any size, to live their lives in dignity and respect. Even the fattest, or thinnest, or sickest, or most incapacitated person has the right to live their lives without vilification and discrimination.

For Reid and other fat acceptance advocates, self-care, health, girth, or any other physical descriptor is unimportant regarding human worth. What matters is that each person has value as a human being and deserve full autonomy over their bodies. There is no moral imperative to become healthy, so each should live the way that he/she wants (Chastain, “Yes People Are Allowed To Diet”; Reid).

Health at Every Size and the more radical fat activists all critique the healthism concept of health as an “unqualified good” (Metzl 6), that the pursuit of biomedical health is unquestionably a moral enterprise. Jonathan Metzl and Anna Kirkland’s book *Against Health* (2010) is an anthology of essays reexamining and attempting to redefine health, especially by questioning the moral moorings health has in contemporary culture (Metzl 6). Metzl writes that the current biomedical understanding of health is “based on an unattainable ideal” that does not allow for the living of a ‘full’ life by pathologizing “suffering, aging, dying, [and] other natural processes” (5). An alternative to the biomedical view of health is presented by Richard Klein, an author that has written several books against healthism. Klein advocates an Epicurean perspective, centered on

pleasure. Like Dr. Bacon and other advocates, Klein promotes indulgence in gustatory desires. “Pleasure may thus be a form of intelligence, an intuitive science” (Klein 21) that keeps bodies healthy by indulging (with moderation, as he qualifies) what the body desires, thereby fulfilling the needs of the body (Klein 21). Klein further writes that pleasures should be indulged not just as a measure of health, but that there is little point in pursuing health if it is joyless. The pursuit of health through pleasurable activity gives health more value by making health subservient to happiness (Klein 20-21).

Critics of the body positivity movement often accuse even HAES of promoting unhealthy lifestyles. Some argue HAES to be good in theory but not in practice, that it is used as an excuse for people to remain unhealthy, or that healthy obesity is not sustainable (Haskins, “‘Healthy Obesity’ Debunked”; Haskins, “Does the ‘Body Positive’ Movement Promote Health?”; Young). Many health professionals advocate for loss of weight even if cardiovascularly fit, due to potential joint issues from the added weight stress (such as osteoarthritis and lower back pain, issues not addressed by Dr. Bacon) (Roland; Shiri et al. 135). Some opponents of HAES defend of the methods used to determine that fatness exacerbating several diseases, methods critiqued by Bacon and others, and reinforce the idea that there is a global obesity epidemic that requires attention (Kim and Popkin 60-65). There is much debate regarding whether concerns about health and fatness are founded. Body positivists, however, tend to be more concerned with rights, autonomy, and health beyond the physical than scientific evidence against certain lifestyles.

Body positivity’s primary goal is to destigmatize fatness (e.g. the word ‘fat’ should just be a descriptor and the concept of fatness should be neutral, not negative),

perpetuated by beauty standards in contemporary media (Campos 58; Levitt; Orbach 67; Reid). Still, the critique of modern culture goes beyond beauty standards and addresses the cult of ‘healthism’ as well (Metzl 9; Hoverd and Sibley 391; LeBesco 72; Townend 171). Body positivists are often also aware, and critical, of racial and economic discrepancies in body size, arguing that the societal stigma against fatness reinforces inequality of other social indicators (LeBesco 77; Levitt; Reid; Townend 171). These different concerns bring up deeper questions from a Christian standpoint. There are questions of evangelization, adoption of secular values, and inclusion in the Church. The case studies to follow include body positivists that are cognizant of these issues but individually emphasize different points, followed by case studies of Christian responses to body image in culture and the body positivity movement.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Case Studies of Body Positivity and Christian Body Image

#### *Case 1: Ragen Chastain's Fat Acceptance Blog, "Dances With Fat"*

Ragen Chastain is a fat acceptance activist that often writes against healthism. She is a long-time fat activist, her blog active since 2005, and boasts close to 20,000 subscribers. She is the editor of *The Politics of Size: Perspectives from the Fat Acceptance Movement*, a collection of essays advocating body positivity. Chastain's blog, "Dances With Fat," espouses the viewpoint that no one is under any moral obligation to care for health. The core of her beliefs is bodily autonomy: "I believe that the fight is first and foremost for civil rights...[including] respecting bodily autonomy" (Chastain, "Yes People Are Allowed To Diet"). While she often defends fatness as not having a relation to health, this is to tear down the arguments of her opponents rather than to defend fatness.

For Chastain, the right to fatness is self-evident and should not need defense – especially against those that would moralize health. Regardless of the why, to have a stigma against fatness is to be discriminatory along the same lines as other prejudices like racism, sexism, and homophobia. In her post "When Is It Okay To Be Fat?", Chastain argues that fatness and thinness have no moral implications, regardless of health or self-esteem. No one is obligated to try to love his or her body, nor to be healthy. Moreover, "Nobody, of any size, owes anybody 'health' or 'healthy behaviors' of any definition," (Chastain, "When Is It Okay To Be Fat?"). However, Chastain expects accommodations for fat people. She uses the illustration of seating in airplanes, waiting rooms, and restaurants: "when a fat person asks for a seat they can fit into, they are not asking for

special treatment, they are asking for *what everybody else already has*” (Chastain, “Asking For Accommodations As A Fat Person”), and “People of all sizes have a right to exist and be accommodated at the size they are” (Chastain, “Fat People and Chairs – A Hate Story”). Chastain sees a societal and industrial obligation to fair treatment regarding comfort. “Dances With Fat” exemplifies the fat acceptance emphasis on autonomy and rights.

*Case 2: Against Health: Kathleen LeBesco’s “Fat Panic and the New Morality”*

Kathleen LeBesco’s essay “Fat Panic and the New Morality” (*Against Health* 2010) is part of an anti-healthism anthology that addresses the use of health as a measure of morality. As a complement to Chastain’s focus on autonomy and rights, LeBesco discusses another large part of body positivity: Health at Every Size and the rejection of healthism. Prior to the publication of her essay, LeBesco had been researching the politics of fatness for a decade. Her essay focuses on critiquing healthism and promoting Health at Every Size (LeBesco 72). She sees healthism as the rise of a new morality, taking the place and using the rhetoric of Judeo-Christian culture. She writes that the language of *sloth* and *gluttony*, two of the Seven Deadly sins, are used to shame fat people as a morally inferior group, perpetuating inequality. “If African Americans and Latinos are fatter than whites and Asians, and women are more likely than men to be fat, fatness haunts us as a reminder of deteriorating physical privilege in terms of race and sex” (LeBesco 75). To further exacerbate the problem, LeBesco says, poor interpretations of medical research have been employed to make fatness anathema to health – the negative effects of being overweight or obese are overblown, she writes, quipping “rumors of our deaths have been greatly exaggerated” (LeBesco 74). Fat people are

further perceived as inconvenient, like when someone's already-crowded seat on an airplane is further infringed upon by an obese person's bulk. All of this results in a generally pervasive idea that fat people are not as valuable or moral or healthy as thin people. LeBesco writes about two ways that she has seen people try to dismantle these prejudices: the more popular idea pins the cause of fatness on personal metabolism; alternatively, there are some who accuse capitalism and social structures that afflict the poor with obesity more than others (LeBesco 76-78). However, in her attempt to uncouple health and morality, LeBesco is not satisfied with blaming either personal circumstances or institutions for fatness. "Whether the individual or the larger structure is targeted, the tone is typically hostile and morally righteous: '*How dare they!*'" (74), the outrage buying into the moralization of fatness. The solution she settles on is to assert that one can be healthy at any size and that health is not a moral enterprise. LeBesco writes:

"HAES seeks to promote respect for bodily diversity; value eating practices that balance nutritional needs with hunger, satiety, appetite, and pleasure; and endorse pleasurable, individually appropriate physical activity rather than exercise aimed merely at weight loss. HAES seeks to broaden the definition of health to include typically neglected aspects, including the physical, social, spiritual, occupational, emotional, and intellectual...[it unmoors] 'health' from the morally selective underpinnings on which it now rests" (78).

While LeBesco lauds the movement for its holistic view of health, she warns that it could fall into healthism through its maintenance of "the healthy/sick distinction" (80). LeBesco has used the movement to promote healthiness and happiness, a liberating alternative to the restrictive nature of more typical weight-loss or fitness programs. She uses it to cut away at "traditional understandings of health...[i.e.] the lean, toned body as

a signifier of moral worth” (LeBesco 80-81). This is on the road to “true health” (LeBesco 81) in all dimensions of human life, not based in aesthetics.

*Case 3: Christian Fitness and Weight Loss: Carole Lewis’s First Place 4 Health*

First Place 4 Health (FP4H), or *First Place* as it was originally called, is a Christian weight loss program committed to helping its members become healthier in all aspects of their personal lives. FP4H was founded in Houston in 1981 by Carole Lewis as a form of ministry and has since spread to over 12,000 churches internationally (Lewis, “Revamped Weight”). First Place 4 Health echoes Health at Every Size and resembles traditional theology of the body, especially muscular Christianity.

Both First Place 4 Health and Health at Every Size espouse holistic takes on health. Like Health at Every Size, FP4H denounces yo-yo dieting and quick-fixes like gastric bypass surgery and fad diets, instead promoting “total health” approaches (Lewis, “Revamped Weight”). Lewis uses Mark 12:20 (“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”) to distinguish four personal aspects of health: emotions, spirit, mind, and body, which need to be balanced. However, this is where HAES and FP4H lose their similarity. HAES sees self-esteem and ‘total health’ as ends unto themselves, but FP4H believes that becoming holistically healthy is a way to honor God, a fulfillment of God’s will, and a method to better fulfill His plans (Gerber 412). To accomplish this, FP4H emphasizes subservience to God, use of health to fulfill God’s will, and Biblical inspiration. The program includes Bible studies, Scripture memorization, and prayer on top of exercise and change in diet. The program pushes discipline, a supportive community and long-term lifestyle changes that will provide a stronger faith foundation, obedience to God, long-term health, and

self-discipline in daily habits (Gerber 412, 416; Lewis, [firstplace4health.com](http://firstplace4health.com); “Revamped Weight”).

*Case 4: Christian Body Acceptance: “Compared to Who?” by Heather Creekmore*

Heather Creekmore is a Christian author and founder of *Compared to Who?*, a Christian organization that seeks to free women from insecurity about their bodies. Creekmore’s organization teaches that the only solution to body image problems is surrendering to God, an application of Christian theology that focuses not on appearance, but on faith. Her article “Do You Have to ‘Love’ Your Body? A Christian Perspective” deals with the body positive movement. Creekmore writes that body positivity comes “so close to the truth,” but does not reach it. Her article focuses on what, exactly, it means to love one’s body, and whether that is an appropriate Christian response to body image issues (Creekmore).

Creekmore’s critique of body positivity revolves around the alternate name she gives body positivity: “the ‘love your body’ movement” (Creekmore). She writes that the goal of a body positive website, to help people “overcome conflicts with their bodies to lead more productive lives” ([thebodypositive.org](http://thebodypositive.org)), does not tell the whole story. While the statement alone is something that Creekmore agrees with, she contends that body positivity advocates a self-love that is just as spiritually dangerous as placing one’s value in others’ opinions. To begin with, she says, a woman overly-concerned with her appearance will find it almost impossible to love her body. She will continually be dissatisfied with some aspect of it, trying in vain, with vanity as her motivator, to satisfy an impossible cultural standard of beauty. If a woman begins to love her body, that self-love simply repurposes the vanity that had tried to find validation in others’ opinions.

Creekmore sees common themes from body positivity as: “*Love yourself, accept yourself, find what you appreciate about yourself. You will feel better about you if only you stop and meditate on how wonderful you are,*” and “*you can’t love anyone else until you first learn to love yourself*” (Creekmore). Her alternative is neither to love nor despise the body: “As I read my Bible, we have to love Jesus and love others. That’s it. *End of the list...* We don’t have to love our physical forms. Rather, we must care for our bodies or be ‘good stewards’ of them” (Creekmore). Since Creekmore does not see self-love as redemptive or redeemable – a Christian should “kill” it – her alternative is “self-forgetfulness” (Creekmore). This is not a neglect of the body, as she affirms that the body, as the temple of God, demands “a standard of maintenance and self-care...respect and admiration” for the body as “a good gift from God;” self-forgetfulness is simply taking “the focus off of me” (Creekmore). This mindset allows the spirit to become oriented towards God and his purposes for the body. Creekmore’s solution is neither ignoring or abusing the body, but to do the best possible to fulfill “the unique purposes God intended my body to fulfill” (Creekmore). She advocates loving and obeying Jesus, not the body, and writes that the desire for acceptance is one that can only be satisfied in God. She cites 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, where Paul establishes the body as the temple of God and claims that body positivity makes the temple the object of worship, not the altar of worship (Creekmore).

Creekmore’s meaning of ‘self-love’ bears more investigation. In response to a comment on her “Do You Have to ‘Love’ Your Body?” article, Creekmore addresses Mark 12:31, where Christ says the second greatest commandment is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Her point of view is that this commandment does not demand self-

love, but expects it; it is “implied, not directed. The scripture assumes we already have enough self-love” (Creekmore). In fact, Creekmore argues against self-love in general, saying that “the mandate to love [our bodies] becomes an undue burden! It’s Christ alone [that satisfies us]…not Christ and body love.” She brings up verses warning against self-love, such as 2 Timothy 3:2 where “lovers of self” are part of a list of evildoers, and Philippians 2:21 which critiques serving one’s own interests. She agrees with another comment left on the same article, that “self-love [is] not biblical, and elicit[s] [p]ride in our hearts” (Creekmore).

Chastain and LeBesco reveal themes from the body positivity movement which holds the individual as the highest authority in exerting moral judgment about our physical bodies. Chastain’s articles promote autonomy and rights, while LeBesco is more concerned with sundering the popular connection of health and morality and providing a holistic alternative. Both Lewis and Creekmore display contemporary Christian views on the body, its purposes, and offer a variety of perspectives on how it is to be focused on serving God. Lewis’s organization justified fitness to evangelize and emphasized health of the whole person (body, mind, emotions, spirit) to be found in and subservient to God. Creekmore critiques the body positivity movement for its implied and explicit vanities, instead promoting love and devotion to God to find fulfillment in all things. All these case studies will now be examined in the next chapter from traditional Christian theology, incorporating previous themes and discussions and then analyzed within the aims of this thesis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Analysis: Responses to Case Studies

#### *Case 1: Ragen Chastain's Fat Acceptance Blog, "Dances With Fat"*

"Nobody, of any size, owes anybody 'health' or 'healthy behaviors' of any definition," ("When Is It Okay To Be Fat?") writes Chastain. On the contrary, the Christian perspective is that the good body given by God deserves care and respect. Health is not the ends, but a means by which God's kingdom is better served. In this light, Chastain is right that health does not need to be pursued without restraint. However, health is not the crux of Chastain's arguments; she primarily values autonomy (Chastain, "Ridiculous Responses To Quitting Dieting"). She sees upholding rights as the solution to fat-shaming, claiming that people have a right to be accommodated and that just treatment of fat people is a civil right (Chastain, "Yes People Are Allowed To Diet"). For the Christian, there is obligation beyond not infringing upon others' rights. Every Christians ought to strive in every way to fulfill their duties to God, the community, and other people, as clearly evinced in Aquinas's writings on the sin of omission (I-II.76.1-4). From this perspective, maintaining sufficient health is, in fact, 'owed' both to God and others. In Christianity, the issue is not rights, but goodness or sin. If a person is predisposed to be fat and further increases his girth through gluttony and sloth, the right to an obese body does not reduce the reality of sin. Self-indulgence into self-destruction is neither respectful nor respectable, and "are a supreme dishonour to the Creator" (John Paul II 3). On the other hand, the natural fatness of a person's body, if not perpetuated by nor causing sin, should be acceptable. Chastain's 'anything goes' policy eliminates social

and personal responsibility in a self-centered ideology that is almost entirely contrary to a Christian, God-centered ethic of the body.

*Case 2: Against Health: Kathleen LeBesco’s “Fat Panic and the New Morality”*

Kathleen LeBesco’s essay was concerned with increased social stratification from weight-related prejudices and promoted Health at Every Size as a holistic way to pursue health and happiness. LeBesco wrote that health, especially aesthetic standards that are purported to announce health, needs to be decoupled from morality to help approach ‘true’ health in all dimensions of life.

As this thesis examines values of multidimensional health, bridging social boundaries, and obscuring the line between healthy and sick from a Christian framework, I will not evaluate the validity of LeBesco’s sociological claims. However, Christianity is against social stratification and reinforcement of poverty and division along ethnic lines. The very message of Christianity is one that breaks out from the Jewish race to the Gentiles, bringing them into the fold (John Paul II 18; Luke 2:32; Acts 26:23; Ephesians 3:6). The Old Testament laws, history, poetry, and prophets continually testify that God uplifts the poor and oppressed, the theme continuing into the New Testament (e.g. Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 1 Samuel 2:8; Psalm 9:9, 103:6; Proverbs 22:2; Isaiah 1:17; Matthew 19:21; Galatians 2:10; James 1:27-2:1-3). Christianity looks to make all people brothers and sisters part of the Church of Christ and does not tolerate oppression.

Christianity has also tended to have a multidimensional view of health, often in an inner/outer contrast. True spiritual health, which, as Augustine states, is “to cling steadfastly to...God” (20)), takes precedence over physical health. This is clearly seen in Scripture, “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by

day” (2 Cor. 4:16), and in Augustine and Aquinas’s order of love, where the soul is given priority since it “is by the soul that we enjoy God” (Augustine 23). Inner, spiritual health implies mental and emotional health since it is by God alone that true peace and happiness are found (Augustine 25; John Paul II 5). Scripture likewise exhorts to a renewal of mind and to cast all fears upon God (Ephesians 4:23; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Peter 5:7; John 14:27; Augustine 25; John Paul II 5). It also urges to social harmony, giving commands for living in peace with one another (e.g. Matthew 18:15-22; Ephesians 4:26). Christianity takes an approach to health beyond merely being fit, expecting and aiding in reform and renewal of the inner life and social life as well.

Concerning LeBesco’s aversion to a healthy/sick distinction, Christianity does not devalue people for sickness or disability. However, there is real sickness and disability, even though it can be considered relative to an individual’s lot in life. Someone born blind, or with an autoimmune disease, lives with a different base standard of health than someone without these conditions. Christ acknowledged the disabilities of those he healed – there was a distinction made between health and sickness. He healed the sick and disabled not to make them fully human or more valuable, but to ease their suffering and “that the works of God may be displayed” (John 9:3; 5:6-9; Matthew 8:4; 20:34; John Paul II 97). In Henri Nouwen’s *Adam: God’s Beloved*, Nouwen shows how God uses a severely disabled man to touch the lives of those around him. In fact, God’s ministry through Adam was facilitated by Adam’s disabilities. God can use both the healthy and unhealthy, no matter the impairment (Nouwen 15; John Paul II 88). While Christianity affirms that bodily health is important, physical health alone is no measure of value or spiritual health. Inherent human value is only dependent on the common dignity

God gives to humanity (Augustine 23; John Paul II 75, 99; Keenan 336; Robinson 68, 154; Wright 218). LeBesco's concerns about just treatment, social stratification, and true health are all Christian concerns addressed in Scripture and tradition.

*Case 3: Christian Fitness and Weight Loss: Carole Lewis's First Place 4 Health*

First Place 4 Health tries to have a God-centered program, spirituality motivating health in all areas of life. This holistic approach follows in the steps of tradition, with FP4H distinguishing the inner life into more specific categories. The organization looks to grow its members in their emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental health, but courts estimating people based solely on physical appearance. While fasting and muscular Christianity both warn against judging by appearances, as does FP4H, the founder Carole Lewis seems to contradict this by calling fatness ““a moral problem”” (qtd. in Gerber 415). In her condemnation and the condemnation of members of the organization of fatness as physical evidence for gluttony, sloth, and a lack of self-control, FP4H exhibits the moral judgments in healthism. This is especially dangerous from a Christian perspective since sin is seen as a lack of God’s control in a person’s life and potentially has eternal implications. FP4H officially advocates for holistic and God-honoring health of the older traditions, but, like muscular Christianity, it risks falling into the trap of the prosperity gospel. Higgs’ critique of muscular Christianity, that its adherents are “prospering economically, always well dressed and well fed as he witnesses for Christ...in sartorial splendor...[having] never missed a meal or even known any real anguish of spirit” (91-92) could be applied here; Higgs warns against emphasizing prosperity, and the members of FP4H advocate using evident prosperity to spread the Gospel (Gerber 413). While it encourages its patrons not to judge for appearances, I

contend that the founder and many of the customers attempt to justify vanity by claiming that their desire to be attractive is placed in them by God and is to be used to spread the Gospel (Gerber 413-414). First Place 4 Health attempts a broad, God-centered view of health but tempts vanity and sometimes uses physical appearance as a measure of both spiritual and physical health.

*Case 4: Christian Body Acceptance: “Compared to Who?” by Heather Creekmore*

Creekmore’s solution of self-forgetfulness, “taking ‘the focus off of me,’” satisfies traditional theology insofar as promoting subservience to Christ. She recognizes that the body was made to act righteously and to do God’s will, and that it is a good creation, not something to be rejected. Traditional theologians often wrote similarly: humility, fulfillment of Christian duties, and honor due to the body are common themes in the theology of the body. Likewise, Augustine and Aquinas’s order of love, with God first and the body last, keeps the focus primarily on Christ (Aquinas II-II.26.1-6; Augustine I.27). At the same time, both these theologians promote self-love: Augustine promotes it through interpretation of Mark 10:31, writing that man ought to love his body “for God’s sake” (23), while Aquinas writes that love of body comes from an “overflow” of happiness, i.e. communion with God (II-II.26.5). However, Creekmore’s concern with self-love is navel-gazing self-adoration, not the charitable love of God. Aquinas denounces indulgent self-love (II-II.25.4-5), but Augustine does not see this self-adoration as love at all. He writes: “For it is inherent in the sinful soul to desire above all things, and to claim as due to itself, that which is properly due to God only. Now such love of itself is more correctly called hate... ‘He who loves iniquity hates his own soul’” (20). Augustine and Aquinas teach about charity towards one’s own body, a love and

tenderness that flows out of communion with God and emulates God's love of every man. The charitable self-love Aquinas and Augustine write of is the union of a person with himself, love of the body as an instrument of God, and the desire to attain truly good things for the perfection of our nature in God (Augustine 23; Aquinas II-II.25.4-5). Creekmore is correct in her critiques of body positivity and is focused on the right things – namely, a proper ordering of love and use of the body in God's will. While, by rejecting self-love outright, she risks devaluing the relationship a Christian should have with her body, Creekmore maintains its honor as God's creation, an instrument of God, and the seat of the Holy Spirit.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion: Christian Response to Body Positivity

The thesis of this work is that Christianity has a valuable and necessary voice in the debate over body size and morality. The Christian perspective ought to be one that does not compromise itself for the sake of being appealing, but one that is consistent with Scripture and restorative of soul. According to Lynne Gerber's review of First Place, evangelical Christianity has sometimes accepted the surrounding culture's anti-fat stigma to acquire influence and a broader draw. This adoption may not be intentional, but it can be seen in the moralization of fatness by evangelical weight-loss programs (Hoverd and Sibley 392). Gerber writes,

But the naked pursuit of cultural power in the form of bodily thinness is problematic for a subculture group which disassociates itself from so-called worldly values and whose faith commitments tend to critique the kinds of body-based stigmas the pursuit of weight loss trades in (409).

To avoid this contradiction and have meaningful input, Christians that advocate weight loss need to "distinguish themselves from their secular counterparts" (Gerber 410). I argue that, rather than try to justify a submission to secular cultural aesthetic standards, Christianity should reaffirm its long-standing theology of the body which, without compromising its Biblical and traditional heritage, provides answers to body positivists' concerns about fat shaming, healthism, holistic health, and racial and economic division while still critiquing the movement for having autonomy as the highest moral authority.

Regarding fat shaming, Scripture, the theology of fasting, and muscular Christianity all denounce vanity of appearance, whether for exceeding beauty, the most emaciated ascetic, or the most muscular weightlifter. Augustine writes that when a soul "aspires to lord it[s body] even over those who are by nature its equals – that is, its

fellow-men – this is a reach of arrogance utterly intolerable” (20). In Scripture, Christians are called to be cautious in judgment (Matt. 7:1-5), to show love to one another in “humility and gentleness” (Eph. 4:2), and “in humility count one other more significant than [them]selves” (Phil. 2:3). Christians ought to treat fatness in such a manner. As discussed in *Big Fat Lies* (Gasser 83-90) and *Health at Every Size* (Bacon 13-14, 54-59), a person’s adiposity is a complex interaction of environmental and genetic factors, beginning as early as the womb. Because of this, fatness should not be assumed to result from sin since it is the result of factors beyond gluttony and sloth. The Church, Christians, and Christian organizations therefore should not stigmatize body size, especially since unjust rebukes could drive people from the Church. For those who are acting sinfully and becoming fat through sin, the sin must be addressed, not the size of their bodies.

Nonetheless, a traditional theology of the body recognizes the body’s significance as an inherent part of human nature, making physical health important. Humans, endowed with dignity by their Creator, ought to honor the bodies they have been given. Health was emphasized by muscular Christians based on respecting their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit and evangelizing (Tozer 168), and by the theology of fasting to act righteously, maintaining humility and obedience in their service (Crislip 187-194). Excessive fasting and overeating both need to be avoided, not just to preserve the soul, but also to preserve the body out of respect and to fulfill social and religious obligation. Physical health, while good, is not its own end. It is meant to be in the pursuit of God’s kingdom, both publicly and privately. Regardless of health or girth, Christianity values people for their own human dignity. Christian tradition asserts that people “are by

nature...equals" (Augustine 20). People have value that is neither augmented nor reduced because of beauty, ugliness, thinness, girth, sickness, or health (John Paul II 99).

Christianity does not demand conformation to contemporary ideas of beauty and prefers humbleness to primping. If people find personal affirmation in conformation to modern aesthetic standards, Christianity asks them to reject vanity and embrace the deeper, far stronger value affirmed by God (Augustine 23; *Evangelium Vitae* 75; Keenan 336; Robinson 68, 154; Wright 218).

Like Health at Every Size and critics of healthism, the Christian conception of health deals both with the 'inner,' spiritual/mental/emotional, and 'outer,' physical/social, person. In Christian thought, renewal of the soul by Christ is more important than physical health; as Augustine states, "immortality and incorruptibility of the body spring out of the health of the soul. Now the health of the soul is to cling steadfastly to the better part, that is, to the unchangeable God" (20). Insofar as the pursuit or active maintenance of health promotes the Kingdom (whether in personal or public life), it is good; when it hinders the Kingdom, it is bad. To borrow an illustration from Bonhoeffer, "the polyphony of life" (*Letters and Papers from Prison* 385) requires each part to play in proper proportion, and not overpower another inappropriately. To focus on personal physical health to the neglect of more important tasks (e.g. evangelization, worship, service) is unchristian – unlike in healthism, Christianity does not view health as an unqualified good. It is part of a larger picture. True Christian health begins with renewal of the soul, which results in "true freedom, peace, and happiness" (John Paul II 5). This is desired for all people, of all races and socioeconomic statuses; the Church looks to uplift the poor and oppressed and deplores the tools of oppression that strip people of their

inherent worth (John Paul II 18). Body positivists likewise try to break down stigma that disproportionately affects minorities and lower socioeconomic statuses. Theirs is a worthy goal, but it does not attempt to improve the lot of the oppressed beyond removing barriers. Body positivism affirms human dignity but lacks the social and personal responsibility and higher calling of Christianity.

Christianity teaches the universality of human dignity regardless of physical condition, implying equality between people, but not ambiguity of morality. Ultimately, some practices affecting the body are good, and others deserve a call to reform. Pope John Paul II writes,

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as... wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity..., where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things...are a supreme dishonour to the Creator (3).

Being ‘free and responsible’ for oneself is important, and should not be violated, but it is not self-justifying. Indulging the flesh to the point of unsustainable corpulence – ‘willful self-destruction’ – should not be greeted with cries of revulsion and hate, nor with affirmation of the choice, but with loving correction (Luke 17:4; 2 Tim. 4:2; 2 Thess. 3:14-15). Contrarily, body positivists like Kath Reid and Ragen Chastain operate in a hyper-individualistic framework where what is done with the body does not matter so long as it does not infringe upon another individual’s right to do the same. The Christian focus is instead on redemption, goodness, and the nobler life that God extends.

Christian theology provides an extensive framework for engaging with body positivity. There is common ground in a desire for holistic health, for social inclusion, and a critique of healthism, there are also significant differences between the two. Body

positivity is morally relative, self-serving and hyper-individualistic, easily taken to the exclusion of responsibility (Chastain, “Ridiculous Responses to Quitting Dieting”). It is an attempt by a self-centered culture to become more inclusive by promoting greater self-centeredness. Christianity, by contrast, while concerned with personal faith, is also fundamentally a community-based religion – “‘there is no holiness but social holiness’” (qtd. in Maddox; Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 5). It incorporates personal and social responsibility, caring for the poor and each other on the spiritual and physical levels (John Paul II 3, 47, 79). The Christian theology of the body is far more radical than that of body positivity, seeking not simply equal perception and autonomy, but renewal in all aspects of life (John Paul II 101). Most importantly, Christianity recognizes the need for God and His redemption to truly make us whole, a need left void by body positivity (Augustine 20).

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