Faith Born of Seduction

Manlowe, Jennifer L

Published by NYU Press

Manlowe, Jennifer L.
Faith Born of Seduction: Sexual Trauma, Body Image, and Religion.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15763.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15763
Disenchanting Faith and the Female Body:
Deconstructing Misogynous Themes in
Christian Discourse

Patriarchal religious messages have been passed down through the ages to define and reinforce women's "natural" inferiority. Such meanings condition women to crave paternal, spiritual, and bodily redemption. Female redemption through Christian virtues sets up any woman (or female child) who takes these messages literally to be a possible victim of abuse. Such virtues hardly empower female survivors of incest; rather, they enable them to spiritualize elements of their victimization.¹

The legacy of female bodily sin is exemplified in the lives of some medieval female saints. Though an in-depth exploration of the sexual abuse history of saints is not a focus of my work, I suspect that many saints and holy women preoccupied with dominating their flesh also had family backgrounds of physical and sexual assault. Modern survivors of abuse who have eating disorders and medieval saints may have in common not only patriarchal religious themes justifying their appetite dread and body disdain, but possibly previous experiences of sexual violation. Misogynous theology that disdains female flesh and demands female self-sacrifice not only facilitates the "rightness" of violence against a woman, it also sets her up to be in constant need of bodily redemption. Such a quest for redemption motivates a victim of sex abuse to mystify her "surrender" to her abuser and her chronic dieting patterns. In the cases of the women I interviewed, these thin (and often brief) "redemptions" are losses too heavy to justify.
I. Misogynous Christian Themes

Christian Goodness

I submit that the qualities that make a good Christian are the same qualities that make a female "feminine." Patriarchal religious discourse facilitates self-sacrifice for love, submission to an all-powerful male (or God pictured as male), reliance on external authority for direction, distrust of one's experience as authoritative in itself, and the belief that a male savior will redeem. Such ideals set the wheels in motion for men to abuse their authority and for females to submit to such abuse. The incest perpetrator's acts literally initiate a female into her proper "feminine" role. According to Judith Herman,

The victims of incest grow up to become archetypically feminine women: sexy without enjoying sex, repeatedly victimized, yet repeatedly seeking to lose themselves in the love of an over-powering man, contemptuous of themselves and of other women, hard-working, giving and self-sacrificing. . . . In their own flesh they bore repeated punishment for the crimes committed against them in childhood. [Emphasis added]\(^2\)

The social as well as the familial contexts into which female children are born set the stage for gender-role patterning. The act of incest both physiologically and psychologically works to mark the survivor indelibly with the lessons of her culture, *writ large*: in order to matter she must *please*. If an incest survivor's environment is a religious one, the images, symbols, rules, and expectations embedded in its values will play a major role in determining how she will "make sense of" her sexually traumatic experience.\(^3\)

Both the psychological literature and my work with survivors in groups support the conclusion that females who are abused as children become more dependent upon and more sensitive to their abusers and, by extension, to other potential abusers. They develop a kind of "sensitivity to the aggressor" that is not mitigated by traditional Christian theology.

My method in deconstructing some of the misogynous themes in Christian discourse is to start by taking some traditional Christian discourse at its word. To gain a larger view I step outside the enchanted forest that has, at one time, helped me and other survivors "make sense" of our victimized pasts.
Most of the survivors interviewed were awakening—still with sleep in their eyes—from an enchanted perspective: one that promises blessings for self-sacrificers, redemption to those who surrender to the Lord, hope in a just future that will be made so by divine intervention, and healing from their "original sin" of being human for those who have enough faith.

Those survivors who remain self-identified Christians have elected to revise the traditional discourse to fit a liberation-theological notion of Jesus as co-sufferer on behalf of justice in the family and advocate for mutually respectful relationships to one's neighbors and to the world. I will not explore how these few Christians can remain Christian; much has been written about how the oppressed work within a Christian framework by liberation and feminist theologians. Rather, I will explore the misogynous flaws that are exposed when Christian discourse is taken at face value.

The Ultimate Crime: Religiously Licensed Sexual Abuse

All of the nine survivors interviewed for this study came out of a Christian context. One of the nine grew up with grandparents who practiced Hinduism but insisted that she and her siblings attend Catholic schools and church. (Because I do not feel qualified to address the nuances of Hindu philosophy upon the developing psyche I have chosen instead to give fuller attention to the Christian theological and psychological influences.)

Feminist psychologists, psychiatrists, and religious scholars have done work revealing connections between patriarchal religion and incest. Some have gone back to biblical and talmudic texts to offer an extensive history of the religious and societal backbone that supports the sexual abuse of children. And others have looked at the patriarchal family and found biblical and cultural support for the notion that children and especially women are subject to the rule and sexual whim of the father. For "without an understanding of male supremacy and female oppression, it is impossible to explain why the vast majority of incest perpetrators are male and why the majority of victims are female."  

In patriarchal societies the rights of ownership and exchange of women within the family are vested in the father. These rights culminate in the father's relationship with his daughter. The biblical mandates
against incest, in Leviticus 18: 6-18, omit any specific reference to sexual relations between father and daughter, while almost every other conceivable breach of the incest taboo is explicitly named and condemned.7

There are twelve specific dictates forbidding incest with all female relatives, yet there is no specific mention of incest with the father’s daughter. The biblical law is addressed to men. It is assumed without question that men initiate and women submit to sexual relations. The wording of the biblical law makes it clear that incest violations are not offenses against the women taken for sexual use but against the men in whom the rights of ownership, use, and exchange, are vested.8 Every man is thus expressly forbidden to “take” the daughters of his kinsmen, but only by implication is he forbidden to “take” his own daughters. The patriarchal God sees fit to pass over father-daughter incest in silence. This is a glaring oversight.

Having interviewed several incest survivors in the Netherlands, theologian Annie Imbens and historian Ineke Jonker discovered that when women become conscious of their incest trauma they feel compelled to let go of their traditional patriarchal understandings of God.9 Such understandings of God posit “Him” as divine judge and patriarch who blames them for their sinful natures.

The nine survivors I interviewed claimed the God they no longer believe in was the God who did not answer their prayers for protection, who called them sinful, who demanded they forgive and submit to their offender(s), and who required them to remain silent in deference to their parents. In my opinion, this is the very God who in classical atonement theology could not forgive humanity until his own son obediently suffered, even to the point of death, for the promise of redemption. Such a glorified sufferer is the same one who many Christian believers are told to “pick up their crosses and follow.”

Religious language which promotes a sacred victim, male authority in the home, church, and state, and a heavenly male savior for long-sufferers, is dangerous discourse because it spiritualizes political and social passivity and female victimization in the home.10 Its impact is felt throughout Western society even in nonreligious homes.

In my research and in the work of Imbens and Jonker, gender roles and the position of the survivors from Christian milieux were very similar to those in nominally and antireligious families. Sexual abuse occurs so frequently that it is clearly indicative of structural flaws in
society that legitimate patriarchal domination. However, residual effects of Western religious tradition so sanction female acquiescence and male entitlement in domestic and public spheres that even the nonreligious have a traditional Christian (patriarchal) overlay operating in their minds. Both religious and secular worldviews, which privilege male domination, feed and sustain each other.

**Qualification**

For the purpose of this study, the question of the values conveyed by Christian religion is crucial. Religious values such as suffering, sacrifice, the role of the female, the role of the child, attitudes toward sexuality, and marriage are all prescribed and proscribed in certain ways within a biblical structure.\(^\text{11}\) I do not claim to be summarizing Christianity in total. I am aware that responsible Christian doctrine of suffering is far more subtle than I put forth here. But for reasons of illuminating the dangerous psychological effects of the twinning of literal Christian themes and patriarchal authority regarding “the good female,” I have chosen to be “wide-eyed” as I look to lay bare the worst outcomes of such theology.

According to religion scholar Sheila Redmond, children from Christian backgrounds learn five virtues:

1. The value of suffering and self-sacrifice;\(^\text{12}\)
2. The virtue of repentance and forgiveness;
3. The necessity of remaining sexually pure (especially for little girls);
4. The fact that they are in need of redemption; and
5. The value that is placed on their obedience to authority figures.\(^\text{13}\)

Let us examine each of these shared theological themes.

**The Value of Suffering and Self-Sacrifice**

I keep praying the Lord will give me His ability to withstand the pain. . . . After all, Jesus requires those who would follow him to deny themselves and pick up their cross. I guess this [the abuse] is my cross to bear.\(^\text{14}\)

The view of Christian love, or *agape*, has focused on the concept of other-regard often epitomized by self-sacrifice. Those theologians who
disenchanting faith and the female body

emphasize loving one's neighbor as the highest model of Christian love have had a dangerously critical stance toward self-love. This view of agape as self-sacrifice is rooted in a Christology that emphasizes Jesus' atonement: his self-immolation upon the cross in obedience to his father's will. Such a "satisfaction theory of atonement" model is deeply problematic for Christian survivors of incest who had to deny themselves in obedience to their father's will. Her self-denial for love's sake takes shape in her stance toward her body and in her stance toward those who promise to love her if she surrenders and obeys. Such self-denial is largely the source of the survivor's psychological, physical, and sociopolitical suffering in her present.

This self-sacrificing ideal causes a woman to develop morbid dependence. Karen Horney associated this term with a woman's longing to merge with a powerful other to escape the self (and self-related anxieties). The morbidly dependent "feminine type" places herself in the same danger in an intimate relationship that she fears from the outside world in general. Her dependency upon her loved one is experienced as a matter of life and death, and she complies with humiliation so as not to lose the superior other. The compliance reflects not simply clinging but destruction of her independent will as a condition of the merger. Loss of the desired object (usually an idealized male) causes her panic, for such a loss would mean the loss of the self, a kind of death.

These dependencies are predictable outcomes of feminized socialization but are acutely felt by survivors of incest. Survivors know too well the price they had to pay for parental "affection," and such a price usually felt better than the idea of no love from their parents. When religious discourse romanticizes self-sacrifice by celebrating Christ's death to self as required by his father and on behalf of humanity, a survivor cannot help but spiritualize her own self-surrender. Such religious discourse helps a survivor give meaning to her passive stance, ultimately facilitating her present and future victimization.

Suffering as Theologically Destined. Justification, or the honoring of suffering more often than not, has a destructive influence on victims of child sexual abuse. The intrinsic value placed on suffering in the Christian context has at least two important implications for survivors. On the one hand, the Christian God is just and merciful: if one has suffered, one must have sinned. Suffering is part of the punishment meted out to
those who disobey. And on the other hand, suffering and repentance teach humility and are the way back to forgiveness from this Christian god.21 There is a sense that suffering must make sense. The notion that “I must have done something wrong to have caused this” is often followed by, “Maybe if I pay my dues, I’ll be spared next time.” This reductionistic theology is much preferable to the cold notion that cruelty is random or worse, socially sustained.

Many religious and nonreligious people alike subscribe to the same forms of a just-world hypothesis: that you get what you deserve.22 Self-punishment can also be a vehicle to give content to grief unacknowledged. It is better to feel God is good and that one can earn “his” favor through the right sacrifice than to believe there is no end to suffering. Subsequently, the attempts to restore control in one’s world through atonement, in order to prevent further suffering, reflect internalization of this same superstitious popularization of Christian doctrine.23

**Virtue of Repentance and Forgiveness**

The Hebrew term *teshuvah* literally means “return,” clearly denoting repentance, a return to God after sin. In Judaism there is a distinction between sins against God and sins against people. For the former, only regret or confession is necessary. For the latter, a confession and some form of restitution is standard.24 In Christian teaching, the Greek word for repentance is *metanoia,* which literally means “to change one’s mind”—to have a change of heart or actually a transformation of behavior.25 Sins against people require admission of wrongdoing, asking for forgiveness of the person wronged or abused, and reconciliation, which can be accomplished only by a change in behavior.26

The New Testament passage regarding forgiveness in Matthew reads: “But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also.”27 This may be the most common biblical passage taken at face value. The Christian emphasis upon a ready flow of forgiveness, responding to *metanoia,* has given rise to a strange distortion of this belief. This literalization, as such, has hampered more than helped the victim of incest. Healthy reactions to sexual assault include anger and outrage over the betrayal of trust and the misallocation of blame. If such anger is not expressed it will surely be somatized. To the survivor, calls for her repentance assume *she* is at fault. Religious mandates that she be forgiv-
ing misread the context in which she lives. Such “calls” to repentance should be directed toward the perpetrator. In order to forgive one must not only hear a contrite apology from the one who is at fault, but must also see a consistent change in behavior—which, in the perpetrator’s case, demands ongoing mental-health intervention and social support.

Herein lies a paradox. Survivors are often told they should forgive and move on. Even in some incest literature the notion of forgiveness is espoused. We do survivors—and all oppressed people—a disservice by foisting upon them what reveals more about our own uneasiness than about our wish for their recovery. In some traditions (including the Twelve-Step ideology) a survivor is also called to repent or make amends. Such a call is outrageous, and is in my mind a second injury inflicted upon the survivor. Even in the case where a survivor has hurt herself or another, I feel she should be gently guided into forgiving herself and understanding the impossible context out of which such choices were made.

Regarding the offender’s apology—an extremely rare action taken—many psychologists caution that even the most contrite offender should never be considered entirely “cured.” Just as the alcoholic never loses susceptibility to addiction, even after years of sobriety, the offender can never be expected to lose sexual interest in her or his victim. Even after the offender has acknowledged full responsibility for the crime and recognized the harm done, that offender may still crave an incestuous relationship and may attempt to revive it in subtle ways. A person who has had many years of practice excusing and indulging an antisocial compulsion cannot develop secure inner controls in a few months of even the most intensive treatment. Offenders, like their victims, live in a patriarchal culture where child pornography is the largest-selling (underground) pornography.

An offender’s abstinence from indulging in the dangerous and destructive habit of eroticizing and sexually abusing children will require ongoing supervision as well as ongoing social support. While forgiveness and repentance are two themes that often arise in relation to family betrayals, in the case of incestuous abuse such themes must be deconstructed for their political content: Who does the forgiving? Who is benefited by such forgiveness? Who does the repenting? What is the result of such repentance? What behavioral changes can be measured?
Female Worth through Purity/Virginity

Women have been taught that their femininity is pure so long as their virginity is maintained, and that securing their virginity is their responsibility alone. The physical fact of virginity has historically indicated spiritual valor. For the religious woman a preserved hymen may not guarantee entrance into heaven but the inappropriate loss of the hymen diminishes the chances for eternal salvation. One religious scholar writes:

For the young [religious] virgin, sexual history and spiritual identity are difficult to separate, and when [she] “loses” her virginity because of rape, her spiritual life is damaged or diminished. Virgin rape is as devastating as incest in trespassing the boundary between the personal and spiritual self. The suffering that follows rape . . . is not just physical but also metaphysical and spiritual. The spiritual importance placed upon virginity makes [religious] women especially vulnerable following rape or incest.31

The veneration of eleven-year-old Maria Goretti is a modern example of such values. When Maria became a saint in 1950, the Pope spoke of her as a model for all Roman Catholic girls. Maria Goretti was murdered because she refused to be raped. Maria was assaulted by a nineteen-year-old male relative who had already approached her several times before the final assault. She fought her rapist, was stabbed fourteen times, and died later in a hospital. She has been used most recently as a model for Catholic youth in a papal address by Pope John Paul II in 1980. Her shrine was rebuilt in 1979.32

In many cultures, a man's honor is contingent upon his control of others, especially in regard to control of “his” woman's sexuality.33 A woman's honor is associated with her own sense of sexual inviolability.34 How others treat her affects her sense of self in relation to others. It is virtually a cross-cultural phenomenon that sexual transgressions committed against a woman reflect her own sexual shame even if she did not precipitate the transgression.35

Need for Redemption

The Christian focus on the need for redemption throws fuel on the already rising flames of a child-victim's sense of unworthiness. For the child who is sexually abused, the abuse can truly prove that she is in
need of redemption; it convinces her that she is unworthy of feeling safe or being valued and respected. Lack of validation is one of the deepest developmental deprivations a child can suffer, and yet, because of parental betrayal and emotional abandonment, it is the most common wound known to survivors of incest.

As I have said elsewhere, grief, guilt, and shame are chronic states for a survivor of incest. It is believed that guilt imposed on the victim by the perpetrator is taken in at the level of the perpetrator’s offense. He disavows his own guilt and transfers it to the victim who is left with the feeling that it is she who must atone for the offender’s behavior. His sin is now her sin. As children and even as adults, many survivors turn to their perpetrators for forgiveness. Redemption is something a survivor tries to secure by earning her abuser’s love through obedience. Like their prayers for deliverance from God, their perpetrator never redeems them. The perpetrator’s shame and God’s silence leave the child-victim with the sense that she is unredeemable. Ironically, most survivors continue to cling to the hope of an external rescue.

In Christian circles, the child will hear of freedom from suffering only in metahistorical terms. Her present experience must make sense to her, so she believes there must be something bad about her that is worthy of such abuse. Such internalization of someone else’s sexual crime halts movement toward resolution of the abuse. It also works to circumvent the process of seeking justice; muteness is always the enemy of authentic change.

When a survivor makes a public complaint or accusation regarding the offender’s activities, she defies the perpetrator’s attempt to silence and isolate her, and she opens the possibility of finding new allies. The survivor may come to understand her own legal battle as a contribution to a larger struggle, in which her actions may benefit others as well as herself. In later stages in their recovery process, some survivors have found that working within the system to defend the rights of women and children has helped them transform their personal grievance into a focused resistance to all forms of violence.

When a survivor stands up in private, she draws power from her ability to speak the truth without fear of the consequences. She knows that truth is what the perpetrator most fears. As she refuses to obey the offender’s rules, she breaks the silence of his secret, and in so doing she may, in fact, redeem herself.
**Value of Obedience**

Christian discourse frequently underscores the value of obedience to authority figures, especially parental or quasi-parental figures. The fifth of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt honor thy father and mother that thy days may be long on this earth,”\(^4\) has been proposed to be at the root of Western violence and its attitude toward children.\(^5\) The message relayed to the child is that the adult is not to be questioned, but revered. The foundation for this attitude toward authority is established both in the anthropomorphic conceptions of the Christian deity as male and in the human relationship to this God. Although the Christian theological position of monotheism argues that one cannot assign anthropomorphic characteristics to its God, attempts to “desex” or use multiple anthropomorphic terms for God have been met with strong resistance in much of Western Christian religious practice.\(^6\)

Many feminist theologians have encouraged using alternative gender images for the sake of enabling richer spiritual connections. Carol Saussy writes:

> When women image Deity in exclusively male terms, they relate to God (that is, male Deity) as “like the other but not like me.” The symbols used of this Jewish and Christian male Deity or God are most often symbols of power and authority: Father, Lord, Ruler, and King. When women image Deity in female terms, however, they relate to Goddess as “like me.” Symbols that speak to the Goddess are also powerful symbols but are more likely representative of nurturing and relational power and are perhaps more serene: Earth Mother, Life Giver, Comforter, Wisdom.\(^7\)

Evoking the Goddess can be enormously creative, challenging, and energizing for some survivors. However, replacing male imagery of the divine with essentializing female imagery is not a long-term solution, especially for survivors who were abused or neglected by women. Divinized anthropomorphic solutions are insufficient solutions to facilitating empowerment for survivors of childhood sexual abuse primarily because they sustain a paternalistic paradigm that mirrors the relationship where they were traumatized by betrayal. And such a paradigm is dangerous insofar as it sets the tone as to how a survivor relates to those in authority as well as how she relates to her own authority.
II. No Redemption

The Sin of Being Embodied as Female

It is my claim that men project their fear of death onto women by claiming women are more bodily in “nature.” Such myths have convinced women over time that they are innately sinful and their bodily appetites are dangerous. Because “woman” cannot control herself, so patriarchal myths tell us, she must be lead by, dominated if need be, by men. Such discourse supports the “rightness” of violence against her; it also sets her up to be in constant need of bodily redemption. Such a quest for redemption is behind both her surrender to her abuser and the chronic dieting patterns of the women whom I have interviewed. These thin (and often brief) “redemptions” are false. Theology that does not mitigate dominance against women promotes violence and female passivity. This is seen most clearly in her sacrificing relationship to her body.

Origins of a Cultural Illness

It is striking how often the imagery of anorexics includes Christian/ascetic themes, with a dualistic construction of mind/matter and spirit/appetite coded in terms of purity/contamination, and the ultimate goal of cleansing the soul of desire/hunger. “Out of the earth-womb vegetation and nourishment emerged, as the human child out of the woman’s body. The words for mother and mud (earth, slime the matter of which the planet is composed, the dust or clay of which “man” is built) are extremely close in languages: mutter, madre, mater, materia, moeder, modder.”

For centuries the feminine has been associated with the body, nature, and chaotic darkness. From the days of Aristotle (fourth century B.C.E.), nature and body have been relegated to a negative stature opposite to mind and spirit. In her essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?,” anthropologist Sherry Ortner postulates a universal devaluation of women based on a cultural assumption of the hierarchy of culture (the sphere of human control) over nature (spontaneous processes that humans do not control but are dependent on). According to theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether,
Women are symbolized as "closer to nature" than men and thus fall in an intermediate position between culture as the male sphere and uncontrolled nature. This is due both to woman's physiological investment in the biological processes that reproduce the species rather than in processes that enhance her as an individual and to the ability of male collective power to extend women's physiological role into social roles confined to child nurture and domestic labor. Female physiological processes are viewed as dangerous and polluting to higher (male) culture. Her social roles are regarded as inferior to those of males, falling lower on the nature-culture hierarchy.\(^{48}\)

The Christian tradition has not only maintained this hierarchical order of values but reified them by accepting Aristotle's most harmful charge against female nature—a fundamental weakness in morality.\(^{49}\) Wrote Tertullian:

You [woman] are the devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the Divine Law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die.\(^{50}\)

From a hetero-masculinist perspective everything about a woman is both grounded in and defined by her female body and, in particular, its sexuality, defined as the ability to arouse the male subject rather than to experience desire. Whatever is arousing about her (the female object), and even whether she intends to arouse, is also designated by the male subject. His feelings become hers, his desire her desirability, his admiration her measure of worth, his disdain her degradation, his ridicule her humiliation.\(^{51}\)

A woman's sexuality, her body and her appetite, have long been considered religiously symbolic. Her body and its cravings have been made to be responsive to the meanings given to them by religious discourse. Women's sexuality has been blamed for the fall of humanity as far back as the first century. The original Genesis story suggests women's co-responsibility for sin. But in the New Testament narrative of 1st Timothy 2:12-14 the blame is squarely placed on Eve: "Eve was clearly the one who was deceived and broke God's law, not Adam."

According to Ruether, women's subordinate status is viewed not only as a reflection of her inferior nature but as "just punishment" for her allowing evil to come into the world, thereby leading to the death of Christ. Read from this perspective, the death of Christ only deepens
female guilt, while it absolves Adam (and men in general) of any fault and allows men to represent the male savior as priests.\textsuperscript{52}

The fourth-century theologian and "Father of Catholicism," St. Augustine, claimed women lack the capacity in themselves to "image God." They reflect God's image only when viewed together with the male who is their head, but men represent God fully in themselves. In this scenario women are headless without a man.\textsuperscript{53} Augustine promoted the Pauline insinuation that only men can represent God fully and be "heads" in the church, in the home, and in secular society.\textsuperscript{54}

In the thirteenth century, Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas followed in Aristotle's footsteps.\textsuperscript{55} He, like Aristotle, claimed woman was defective by nature. Aquinas wrote in the \textit{Summa Theologica} that woman's subjugation existed prior to her sin—it was created by God.\textsuperscript{56} Her subordinate status was God's original intention.

Many of these patriarchal theories (in which men are divinely privileged in their capacity to image God in the world) were adopted during the Protestant Reformation of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In Martin Luther's \textit{Lectures on Genesis}, Eve is not considered inferior to Adam in Eden, but because of her willful disobedience she was punished by God, demoted, and all women born of Eve must suffer like her—her subjugation to the male is punishment for her sin. Luther wrote, "The woman bears subordination just as unwillingly as she bears those pains and inconveniences that have been placed upon her flesh. The rule remains with the husband and the wife is compelled to obey him by God's command."\textsuperscript{57}

John Calvin, considered (by many Protestant theologians) to be the greatest systematic theologian of the Reformation, saw the hierarchical order of men over women, children, and servants as the original order of creation. Male dominance was seen as ordained by God. For Calvin, "Any woman who challenges this hierarchy or flaunts her will against the divine male authority is sinful, disrupts the order of nature and society, and may very well be a witch."\textsuperscript{58}

Having a will and being appetitive, like Eve, who could not resist her curiosity and so ate from the forbidden tree, was surely her (and that of women throughout history) downfall. Two famous Dominican priests, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, also writing in the fifteenth century, link female sinfulness to her "appetitive nature." They write: "All
Disenchanting Faith and the Female Body

witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. . . . She is more carnal than man." 59

During the period called the Enlightenment, the greatest number of female witch persecutions occurred. Protestants and Catholics were equally involved in persecuting these marginalized women and their children.60 Women who were not male-dependent—those who owned land, midwives, and herbalists, old and young alike—were seen as a threat to patriarchal rule and were extinguished like a dangerous fire.

When There Is No Outside: Resistance through the Body

Several decades ago, Karen Horney noted that "the prerogative of gender [is] the socially sanctioned right of males to sexualize all females, regardless of age or status." 61 Christian patriarchy has coded women's sexuality, their will, and their appetites as proof of their innate sinfulness. Secular patriarchy has sexualized females through observing, evaluating, and using the female body for their own purposes. Both ideologies merge together in Western culture to give core meanings to male and female, masculine and feminine, in North American society. Although not all men may choose to exercise their theologically divinized right, no woman can choose to opt out of this system. There is no outside of a dominant patriarchal culture which is sustained by misogynous religious symbol systems. All women will be sexualized publicly and privately throughout life, and even if they are discarded or judged negatively, it is still against the standard of the indiscriminate and discriminate heterosexist male gaze.62

How such patriarchal traditions, norms, and values come to be symbolized on a body level is critical to explore. Such domination is translated by the incest survivor who develops an eating disorder into an internalized patriarchal voice or gaze that measures her worth by her body size and mastery of her appetite. The myth goes something like this: "If a woman suffers (or more benignly, surrenders) appropriately, she will satisfy the patriarchal tyrant, and be redeemed." Satisfaction maintained through bodily control goes against her physical needs and thus must be continuously policed.

Cultural philosophers inspired by Michel Foucault call this self-scrutinizing dynamic the indiscriminate normative male gaze63 which has
been internalized by women. One example of this despotic cultural internalization is described by an anorexic woman who speaks of "a dictator who dominates me," or, as another describes it, "a little man who objects when I eat." Such a relationship to food and fat signals supranormal feminine behavior.

The woman who is body, self, and appetite policing (regardless of her size) has internalized this male gaze. In Melinda's words,

When I go into stores to buy clothes, the mirrors in the dressing rooms are cruel. They are the most mean mirrors. All I see is flab that's normally hidden under clothes. There are all these layers and layers and even little layers of fat, it's really gross, it's really awful. It must be really awful to sit across from me and look at me all bloated and ugly.

The one who cannot see food and her body without critically commenting on the shape in the mirror or the size of a portion of food has internalized the masculinist voice—offenders in both her cultural and family environment. Gendered self- and appetite-policing has a long history.

**Religion and Eating Disorders**

Historically, both food and eating have had different meanings for women and men. During the Middle Ages, elective starvation was viewed to be a primary means for women to achieve spiritual purity.

In modern Western (and Westernized) societies that emphasize a highly individual and physical/psychological, rather than a spiritual, concept of the self, women still seek perfection through manipulation of the physical. This is a different, yet related, sort of perfection than their foremothers sought. Women's "perfect" body/appetite control is not overtly religious in nature but reveals her covertly sought-after gendered need for redemption. Such redemption is bought at too high a price by ridding her body of its decidedly female features—secondary sexual characteristics such as roundness in hips, stomach, and breasts—in hopes of finding freedom from the sin of being born female.

There are scholars who make connections between patriarchal religion and self-starving females. Religious historian Rudolph Bell coined the term "holy anorexia" to describe the medieval concern over whether such extreme fasting behavior was the work of God or the devil. Nearly
half of the forty-two Italian women who lived and died in the thirteenth century and came to be recognized as saints exhibited an anorexic behavior pattern.\textsuperscript{68}

Historical research demonstrates women exhibited an ethic that valorized food asceticism more than men. One theory posited is that because women had fewer vehicles for direct power in the church, their bodies became their primary symbol of what they could have control over.\textsuperscript{69} According to Caroline Walker Bynum, “Although women were only 18 percent of those canonized as saints between 1000 and 1700, they comprised 23 percent of those who died from asceticism and 53 percent of those for whom illness was central to their sanctity.”\textsuperscript{70}

Bell expands much of Bynum’s research. In his study of female ascetics he examines the vitae of 261 Catholic “holy women” from 1200 to the present. He documents the high number of cases of women for whom self-starvation was central to their asceticism. Bell narrows his focus to the Italian peninsula and to those 261 women recognized by the Roman Catholic church as saints, blessed, venerables, or servants of God. Bell demonstrates that for 39 percent of these women, an anorexic pattern is evident. The percentage is lower among the Franciscans (32 percent) and highest among the Dominicans (56 percent).\textsuperscript{71}

Both Bell and Bynum explore patriarchal contexts that sustain self-starving behavior in medieval women, yet they give little attention to the attempted rapes and family abuses that went on in some of the women’s histories. The connections between a woman’s self-depriving relationship to her body, her appetite, and her history of religious commitment need to be explored through analyzing her familial and social context.

The value of my work is that I can go into some detail regarding the family background of my respondents.

\textit{Survivors of Violence Seek Radical Purity}

This soul would fain see itself free, and eating is killing it.

—Teresa of Avila\textsuperscript{72}

A full belly does not make for a chaste spirit.

—Catherine of Siena\textsuperscript{73}
A purity agenda through food-refusal has historical precedent among Catholic saints of the late Middle Ages. Male biographers (frequently) and female saints themselves (occasionally) suggest that the body should be disciplined, defeated, or even destroyed, in order to release or protect the spirit. Female saints were recorded to be better fasters than males. This difference may reveal the female internalization of a masculine ideal—to be freed from the material, the finite, the body. Such female fasting may have been done to punish the flesh, to destroy or deny its urges, and to repress its sexuality.

Integer, integra, integrum comes to mind. Untouched. A man is more untouched than a woman. He is inviolate; he does not have to be pregnant. A man remains himself, does not have to assimilate, renounce; only women have to do that.

—Anonymous (modern) anorexic

Perhaps such restrictive behaviors among some fasting saints stem not so much from fear of desire but from a deep yearning for bodily integrity (a desire to be untouchable/inviolable). For example, Douceline of Marseilles, Columba of Rieti, and Lutgard of Aywières feared their physical appetites and developed obsessive fears over having any bodily contact. Lutgard panicked at an abbot's insistence on giving her the kiss of peace; Jesus had to interpose his hand in a vision so that she was not reached by the abbot's lips. She even asked to have her own gift of healing by touch taken away. Clare of Montefalco said she would "rather spend days in hell than be touched by a man." Both Columba of Rieti and Lutgard had indeed experienced physical and sexual brutality prior to their becoming fasting saints.

Although there are different reasons for the preoccupation with female appetite in different historical eras, abuse of a woman's body signals the worst (on a continuum) of her status as a sexualized object. This does not mean that any woman's problem with food or her appetite and body perception indicates past sexual abuse, rather, it is indicative of her status as sexualizable object. What is paramount though, and virtually a constant throughout history, is the very fact that it is symbolism and meaning that must be manipulated for women to seek approval and to avoid humiliation. Most religions demarcate order from disorder and sin from sanctity by reference to the female body. Anthropologist Mary Douglas claims, "The female body, site of processes men have
perceived historically as mysterious and potentially dangerous, offers a
most graphic symbolism of ultimate concern. Women carry potential for
order and meaning and for disorder and chaos in their very bodies." 82

Menstruation, gestation, lactation, and aging all testify to the tri-
umphs and tragedies of existence. Moreover, because religions choose
symbols not only to distinguish order from disorder, but also to effect
order and control disorder, the female body often has been religions'
symbol of choice. Because the female body is associated most closely
with life and death processes, authority asserted over a female body is
power asserted over the very forces of human life. 83

Besides their bodies, women must also accept their appetites as sym-
bolic in a patriarchal culture. Their appetite and eating must be made
responsive to the historically contextual meanings of weight and of
eating itself along with, or instead of, the physiological cues for hunger
and satiety. 84

If a woman can control, shape, purify her body, perhaps she can
control or overcome the violence against her in her life, the arbitrariness
of her gender assignment with all its existential-physical-emotional-be-
havioral meaning. If she is culturally acceptable (thin and compliant)
then maybe she will receive a valued place in her environment. Paradoxi-
cally, by gaining control of her body, she succumbs to her fate as a
woman. Once again, as she succeeds, she fails. This is a central double-
bind of female development.

Indeed, patriarchal religious meanings have seeped down through the
ages to make “sense” of women’s “natural” inferiority. Christianity’s
misogynous virtues, if taken at face value, can disempower any female.
Much of Christian discourse does not mitigate violence against women
but rather gives religious meaning to female submission and male do-
minion.

In briefly examining the outcome of the legacy of female bodily sin I
find that a woman’s search for spiritual redemption can mask a deep
belief in her “natural” inferiority—her sense of sinfulness. Unacceptabil-
ity is inextricably linked to her bodily nature. One can see these dynam-
ics in the lives of medieval saints as well as modern-day “eating-disor-
dered” women. Both time periods reflect a misogynous dread of bodily
desires that are projected onto women because they appear to be more
mysterious and body-oriented than men. Both sets of women have re-
sponded to that fear and are symbolically expressing that fear with their
very bodies. Paradoxically, they objectify their own bodies as proof that they are acceptable subjects—worthy of redemption—in a patriarchal culture. Even as they try to transcend the values and beat the system by purifying themselves, they ultimately become victims of a sick system that spells death for those who surrender to its values.