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Raj K. Patel

April 16, 2014

Weight Loss as a Religious Culture

by

Raj K. Patel

Gary Laderman, Ph.D.  
Adviser

Department of Religion

Gary Laderman, Ph.D.  
Adviser

Arri Eisen, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

James B. Hoesterey, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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Raj K. Patel

Gary Laderman, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

### Weight Loss as a Religious Culture

By Raj K. Patel

This honor thesis contributes to the on-going debate amongst religious scholars about a “religion of thinness” or “religion of dieting” replacing established religions, such as Christianity, in the United States. By drawing up American religious history, regarding the mind-body-soul relationship, popular culture, and contemporary weight loss, diet and fitness programs, this thesis argues that the “Religion of Weight Loss” functions religiously. But, the thesis concludes that the Religion must ultimately exist in parallel with the increasing individualistic American ideas of religiosity and spirituality, as it lacks the “essence” that religions provide.

*Keywords:* weight loss, diet, fitness, religion, thinness, mind, body, soul, fasting, food, exercise, Christianity, Weight Watchers, NutriSystem, Jenny Craig, BeachBody, Men’s Health, religious culture, American religion, rituals, regimens, community, authority

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## Introduction

For the last decade, most Americans have made the resolution of losing weight, every New Year's. This pattern might be because their obesity rates have continually increased, since the 1980's, and Americans are simply trying to get fit again ("New Year's Resolution Trends" 2011; "Popular New Year's Resolutions" 2014). Interestingly, as of 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that Americans' obesity rates have plateaued (Belluck 2010). Many commentators in the media have offered explanations for these new numbers: either Americans cannot get any fatter or that the fat people are dying off and new ones are simply replacing them (Belluck 2010; Neighmond 2010; Stein 2010). Yet, despite their varying opinions, almost all agree that Americans have a robust desire for and pursuit of thinness or loathing for fatness. Not inconsistent with the media pundits, religious scholars (i.e. Griffith 2005, Lelwica 2010, Gardella 1998) argue that Westerners' obsessions with thinness, including the abhor of fatness, originates from the Ancient Greeks and, more strictly, through the Christian traditions' concepts of the mind-body-soul relationship. Yet, only since the New Thought Movement and Progressive Era, have these embedded desires become a part of "secular" American popular culture,<sup>1</sup> with distinctive and evolving norms, myths, rituals and regimens, communities, and authorities of losing weight (Griffith 2004, 1-18; Chidester 2005, 5; Lelwica 2010, 63-6). As a result, religious and cultural studies scholars (e.g., Griffith 1997, 2001, 2004 and 2005; Gardella 1998; Stinson 2001 and 2007; Lelwica 2010; McKenzie 2013) are in disagreement about the plausibility of a "religion of weight loss," with the ultimate goal of living a happy and fit life, replacing established religions amongst Americans.

Nonetheless, in 2013, the weight loss industry grossed over, \$65 billion (DiVirgilio

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1. David Chidester (2005) argued "that much of the...[basis]...of popular culture involves changing or leaving the body" (5).



2013). And, a few of the popular and top-selling fitness programs and/or diets, currently, include American P90X, Insanity, Focus T-25, Weight Watchers, NutriSystem, Jenny Craig, Slim Fast, OptiFast, and the Atkins, South Beach, Paleo, Raw Food, Acid Alkaline, and Fast diets.

Therefore, by drawing upon American history and popular culture, I argue that these diets and fitness programs, through their different corporate and personnel authorities or “denominations” and “prophets” or “ministers,” provide varying interpretations of rituals and regimens, forming unique communities or “sects” with their own liturgies, commandments, and lifestyles, within the larger religious culture of weight loss, fueled by an evolving myth of weight loss.

### My Background and Interests

In fact, I speak as an insider of the “religion of weight loss.” I have been “losing weight,” being on a “never-ending diet,” since I was a five feet, three inches tall, 200 pound freshman in high school. Therefore, I am always trying to attain a new weight goal, never happy with where I am. The reasons why I am dieting vary each time. Sometimes, I am on a diet to maintain my weight loss. Othertimes, I am trying to stop gaining weight. Most times, like right now, I simply want to get back to my “fittest,” when I still thought I was “fat” but happier with my body, which involves losing a few pounds only. Nonetheless, each time, I use a new diet or weight loss program, in trying to get there, and know my life will be better thinner and fitter. As I tried new weight loss programs, I noticed that the rituals and regimens changed, despite the fact that the marketing for the different programs were similar. For example, some diets exclusively tell people to create a large calorie deficit by controlling food intake. Other programs employ both dietary restrictions and exercise regimens. Yet, the various programs’ ultimate goal remained the same: change the body by reducing excess flesh/fat and enhance and take control of your life.

During certain times, I turned away from maintaining a cautious diet, only to come back to losing weight to make my life “better,” which is not only subjective but also a loaded term that I cannot fully grasp or describe, in this context, except that I know I am better off closer to 150 pounds than 200, beyond medical reasons. I have re-gained the weight that I lost since freshman year in high school, only once. But, I lost it all again, by relinquishing any and all “unhealthy” delicacy that South Korea, as I was studying a board there, had to offer and drew upon the motivation of increasing my electability on a big campus where I did not 95% of people, as I have been reified to believe some of the stigmas against fat people. Additionally, I would not completely be truthful, if I omitted stating that President Barack Obama’s “fitness” inspired me too, but Senator Kirsten Gillibrand’s weight loss transformation, much of which was happening during her special election for the senate in 2010, symbolized to me as marking her change of status of being a Member of the US House of Representatives to succeeding to Hillary Clinton’s seat, which was in the more “elite” house of Congress, the US Senate. Nonetheless my inspiration was bipartisan, as I started following *Men’s Health* only after they featured Congressman Aaron Schock, a Republican Illinois. Nonetheless, as I have not been able to allocate time to exercising, with the time commitment and stress of student government and my academics, I have gained two percent body fat from October 2013 to January 2014, but, needless to say, my New Year’s resolution, is to lose that and maintain it, and a few pounds since January. I think I will be able to reach my goal in the summer.

Clearly, losing weight has been a large part of my life and determines how I live it. Therefore, I would say that I am a part of the religious “weight loss” community. Needless to say, I am an “insider” and have been for at least the past seven years and probably will be for the rest of my life. While this is a religious studies paper, I believe that my inside perspective only

adds to my research, as I will “re-describe” my primary sources by using existing existing scholarships, whose authors’ arguments are historically based.

### Research Methodologies and Methods

#### *Significant and Existing Scholarly Works*

Throughout this thesis, I will look at many primary sources and gather my own data. In arguing that weight loss is a religion from cultural and anthropological perspectives, I largely draw upon Ruth Marie Griffith's (2004) and Michelle M. Lelwica's (2010) books, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* and *The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers Behind Women's Obsession with Food and Weight*, respectively. On the one hand, Griffith (2004) provided a historical analysis of the contemporary American obsession of body image and weight loss, dieting, and fitness programs, concluding that the craze is religious and rooted in Christian history. On the other hand, Lelwica (2010) analyzed the undying pursuit of thinness, as both an observer and insider, by mainly applying feminist, historical and cultural study methodologies. Moreover, while I scarcely reference the interviews in Jean Renfro Anspaugh's (2001) book, *Fat Like Us*, discussing a psychological research of a weight loss community on the Rice Diet, in Durham, North Carolina, the capital of Diet Culture, the interviews' replications and her lengthy analyzes were extremely helpful in understanding other people's on-going journeys of losing weight.

Nevertheless, Griffith (2004), Lelwica (2010), and Anspaugh (2001), along with every other major scholar I reference, all examine the historical and contemporary roles of the mind in shaping the body and soul but study different parts of the religion of weight loss. For instance, Griffith (2004) focuses on primarily on fasting rituals through American history. Lelwica (2010) concentrates on women's and Christianity's idealization of thinness. And, Anspaugh (2001)

concentrated around diet culture. While the scholars employ different terminology, I consider their studies to be a part of the religion of weight loss, sharing a common history. In fact, as aforementioned, Lelwica (2010) argued that fasting, dieting, and fitness concerns are indistinguishable, with the same common history originating from American Protestant fasting rituals.

### *Collection of Original Data*

My thesis argues that the religion of weight loss is a popular culture phenomenon. Therefore, I collected data from TV infomercials, YouTube videos, magazine covers, and various websites. Initially, I concentrated around two of the major weight loss programs Lelwica (2010), Weight Watchers and NutriSystem. But, after I read existing scholarship, I noticed that much research has not been conducted on understanding men's perceptions of their bodies, in relations to the mind, body, and soul, though Griffith (2004) states that men and women have equally shaped contemporary American notions of the body and fitness culture (5, 112-3 and 239-50). Therefore, I also began to collect data from companies that target mainly men, including Weight Watchers' and NutriSystem's men's sections and *Men's Health*, BodyBuilding.com, and Mike Chang Fitness; I analyze my data by employing a "Lelwican method" while keeping in mind Griffith's (2004) and R.W. Connell's (2005) understandings of the men's bodies with losing weight, related mainly to professional and socio-economic gains (Connell 2005, 35, 44-50 and 130-1). Furthermore, I also analyzed the infomercials, websites, and programs, specifically those of American P90X and Focus T-25, sold by BeachBody, LLC, one of the nations largest health and fitness companies ("Beachbody Executive Team"). I collected and studied popular diets and weight loss programs that I saw on Google, and reference some of their advertisements, weight loss programs, and cultural phenomena throughout my

paper.

In my anthropological analysis, I do two things. First, I connect my data to the concepts in Griffith's (2004) and Lelwica's (2010) books; secondly, I show the various components of religions, such as rituals and regimens, community, and authority, in the religion of weight loss.

### Defining Religion and Popular Culture

For each section, I apply a theory of understanding religion or popular culture. Though, I offer a few overall understandings of how religions and popular cultures can be understood, which I will carry throughout my paper. First, is a functionalist definition of religion. According to David Chidester (2005), religions provide "ways of being a human person in a human place" (vii). Second, Clifford Geertz, in his book, *Religion as a Cultural System*, gives a cultural definition of "religion" as the "formation of communities of shared meanings and values, the presence of ritualized behaviors, the use of language of ultimacy and transcendence, the marking of special, set-aside 'sacred' times and spaces, and the manipulation of traditional religious symbols and narratives" (qtd. in Mazur and McCarthy 2001, 06). While, traditionally, Americans' religiosity has been judged by emphasizing the connection with the sacred, Gary Laderman (2009) in *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States*, shows that religious experience can be found in the unlikeliest places of society, such as in sports, celebrity, and music, through an anthropological, historical, and cultural survey (xiv-xviii). I use these as the overall laying definitions and premises throughout my paper.

## History of the Mind, Body, and Soul in the West

Throughout history, many societies have understood the mind, body and soul to be separate entities, with the body often considered a burden and obstacle for the soul on its route to a good afterlife. The mind has been largely responsible for taming the body and ensuring that the soul can be saved. This belief is explicitly visible in Western societies from as early as the three great ancient Greek philosophers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. As a result, Greek ideas of the body and soul undoubtedly influenced Christian thought, which then became secularized in many parts of American society today. While concepts of losing weight, as Americans know them today, do not appear explicitly until the medieval time period and even more explicitly, in their current sense, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the religion of weight loss pulls from the dualistic battles between the body and soul. Therefore, understanding the history behind the relationship amongst the mind, body and soul is important because it has shaped Westerner's understanding of attaining a perfect body and helps understanding the religious nature behind "secular" weight loss groups, especially, since some theorist understand religion an inherited notion that is passed along generation from generation.

### The Ancient Greeks

According to Kenneth Kramer (1988), Socrates, the forefather of both Plato and Aristotle, understood the soul with a close connection to death and dying (113-9). To Socrates and many of the Greeks, the soul (or the "psyche") was the "vital core of selfhood," which was "eternal" and "immortal," unlike the body, which was simply "an outer garment for the soul" that was "dualistically opposed to each other" (Kramer 1988, 116-7). Socrates' understanding of the body's inferior position can be more explicitly understood when he stated, in *Phaedo*, that, upon death, the soul is released from its entrapment in the body, which dissolves into the earth.

Pure souls continue to be with the gods, after being judged by Hades, the god of the underworld, and impure souls reincarnate to live out their past lives' desires (Plato as quoted in Kramer 1988, 116-9; Plato 63a-c).

Plato built upon Socrates' philosophy. Unsurprisingly, because Socrates was Plato's teacher, much of Plato's philosophy, including his famous understanding of the polity, was based upon the purity of the soul (Boeree 2000). First, Plato held that that "the phenomenal world strives to become ideal, perfect, complete" (Plato as quoted in Boeree 2000). Imperfection in the world is due to flaws in "raw material," not the sacred (Boeree 2000). Likewise, Plato extends this "dichotomy to human beings," calling the body (material) a "prison" from which our souls long for release" (Boeree 2000; Plato as quoted Lelwica 2010, 142). The soul was considered imprisoned for two reasons: first, because it was literally understood as being captive in the body and, second, metaphorically, because the body easily diverted the soul from its natural attraction to good and life's ultimate purpose of "self-realization" (Boeree, 2000; Lelwica 2010, 142). Therefore, the only way "a person [could attain] knowledge and truth was 'despising the body and avoiding it, and endeavoring to become independent of it'" (Lelwica 2010, 142). Additionally the, the body was seen as a trap for the soul, because, according to Greek mythology, if the body was not buried according to proper death rituals, then it could not continue onto the afterlife (Boeree 2000; Kramer 1988, 118-9; Lelwica 2010, 142).

While this is a cursory understanding of Plato's body-and-soul dichotomy, he had a much more complex understanding of the soul, divided up into three parts within the body, each paralleled with a form of "pleasure," exclusively, which manifest into modern weight loss

programs (Boeree 2000; Lelwica 2010, 142).<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the mind was in charge of controlling the soul. Boeree (2000) offered a brief explanation:

First is sensual or physical pleasure, of which sex is a great example [*eros*]. A second level is sensuous or esthetic pleasure, such as admiring someone's beauty, or enjoying one's relationship in marriage [*thymos*]. But the highest level is ideal pleasure, the pleasures of the mind [*logos*]. Here the example would be Platonic love, intellectual love for another person unsullied by physical involvement.

Paralleling these three levels of pleasure are three souls. We have one soul called *appetite*, which is mortal and *comes from the gut*. The second soul is called *spirit* or courage. It is also mortal, and lives in the heart. The third soul is *reason*. It is immortal and resides in the brain...

Plato is fond of analogies. [*Eros*], he says, is like a wild horse, very powerful, but likes to go its own way. [*Thymos*] is like a thoroughbred, refined, well trained, directed power. And [*logos*] is the charioteer, goal-directed, steering both horses according to his will [emphasis added].

What is interesting to note here is an intrinsic battle between at least two parts of the soul, the first and third, because of their opposite characteristics. Ideally, it is *logos* that must reign over the other two souls to govern ultimately; and it is *thymos*' responsibility to support *logos* (Plato 2006, 141-3; Hoffman 2006). To connect with *thymos*, Aristotle encouraged exercising, a fundamental ritual of losing weight (Gardella 1998, 111-2; Lelwica 2010, 142-4; Albala and Eden 2011, 14). Connecting with *thymos*, according to the Greeks, was necessary for all humans to achieve their overall fullest potential, something only human beings could uniquely control among all other creatures, another concept that reappears in weight loss religion (Sandel 2011; Gardella 1998, 111-2; Griffith 2004, 14; Lelwica 2010, 142-3). While it not clear whether or not the locations of each part of the soul has had a significant impact on future perceptions or understandings of the body, the three philosophers, especially Socrates and Plato, made important classifications of the soul that overtly made it into modern Christian and American

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2. Later, Aristotle further developed these partitions of the souls, which eventually become known as the "ide" and "ego" (Boeree 2000).



understandings of the mind-body-and-soul relationship: mind (“reason”), body (“appetite”), and spirit (Boeree 2000; Lelwica 2010, 257; Griffith, 2004, 247; Albala and Eden 2011, 9).

## Christianity

### *Early to 18th Century*

However, first, in early Christianity, apostles, generally, viewed the body, because of its innate desire to stare away from the word of God, as an obstacle for the soul on the path to salvation, rather than a “prison” (Lelwica 2010, 142-3). As a result, Christians quickly established “ritual” of “self [infliction]” and abstaining from worldly “pleasures” to “tame the body so that the spirit could be freed” (Lelwica 2010, 143). For women, fasting became an easy way to abstain from worldly pleasure (Bynum 1988, 13-48 and 189-237). Nonetheless, since the fourth century, when Christianity became the dominant religion in the West, church leaders such as Father Ambrose even blamed the body for the both committing the original sin and the fall of humanity (Lelwica 2010, 96-7 and 1). It is not until ten centuries later that such a view reappears in Christianity. “Erasmus of Rotterdam, a church reformer and Christian humanist during the Renaissance,” blamed the body for both the original sin and fall of humanity. Eve, made from Adam’s rib, represents the “carnal ... part of man,” while Adam represents both mind and spirit (Erasmus as quoted in Lelwica 2010, 96-7). According to Erasmus’ analogy, it is the body that gave into the serpent's temptation despite knowing it was wrong to eat the fruit. Therefore, Eve, as a symbol of the body, shows the same Platoian desires of the body’s lack of control (96-7).

Interestingly, the original sin, was actually more closely identified “with gluttony,” in early Christian morality:

Thence proceed all other cardinal sins as well: avarice, or the failure to practice charity with surplus food; pride, in showing off one’s bounty; sloth, in the consequent torpor that derives from overeating; envy, from the desire to obtain luxuries enjoyed by others, and most importantly, wrath and lust, which were considered the physiological by-products of

gourmandism. (Albala and Eden 2011, 14; Lelwica 2010, 144)

Therefore, the body, by giving into temptation or gluttony, caused the seven deadly sins to appear. Yet, while the body was perceived as the cause of many downfalls, it was still adept for some positive, as the “doctrine of Incarnation,” not only affirms the “intermingling of body and spirit” but also shows that the body is capable of housing the Holy Spirit, which “became flesh in person of Christ” (Lelwica 2010, 143-4; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). For Christians, throughout history, exerting control over the body, especially in forms of fasting, became key for keeping the body worthy of the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, based on “strong medical logic,” the ascetics called for “simplicity and abstinence,” especially in their diets, as they were fearful of “[overtaxing]” their body “by excessive feeding” (Albala and Eden 2011, 14). These early Christian diet regulations were undoubtedly inherited from the Greeks and Romans, especially Socrates and Plato, who “believed that in order to attain virtue the needs of the body should be adequately met but never exceeded. . . Thus, gluttony. . . was seen as a base and brutish . . . individuals should maintain an abstemious diet, avoiding luxuries, which only weaken and enervate the mind, and stick to a constant regimen year round” (Albala and Eden 2011, 13-4). Overall, strict abstinence from food caused thinness amongst ascetics. On the one hand, thinness became a sign of piety. On the other hand, “outward excess of fat” became an external sign of diverting from strict dietary regime, which in turn served “as a sign of inward moral weakness” (Albala and Eden 2011, 17). Therefore, the myth that a person’s exterior (size and shape) reflects his or her interior, in fact, sees much of its genesis in monasteries (Albala and Eden 2011, 17; Lelwica 2010, 142-3; Griffith 2004, 124).

Yet, uniquely, early Christians held that it was not only the quantity but also quality of food that impacted a person’s character, behavior, and livelihood (Albala and Eden 2011, 14-5).

Ascetics formed strict rules and regulations to ensure not only moderation and control over their daily diets but also selectivity. For example, “many early Christian writers encouraged their fellow celibate brethren and sisters,” to help them keep their vows, to avoid any type of meat, because blood was seen as impure and aroused sexual urges, and eat mainly vegetables (Albala and Eden 2011, 14-5). The formation of these dietary rules was a bit ironic, as verses in Bible, such as “Matthew 15:11” and “Acts 10:10-16,” explicitly rescinded Mosaic kosher law (Albala and Eden 2011, 11). Nonetheless, these monastery ideals, in looser form, quickly spread throughout the “lay community,” during the early Middle Ages. For instance, impure foods became substituted their purer alternatives, such as dairy milk with almond milk. Many Catholic dietary and fasting rules see their genesis around this era, including fasting during Lent, and were constantly revised afterwards (14-7). While such diet rules lasted until the 1960s, a time when American diet and weight loss saw a growth, in the Catholic community, the food regulations also served as fuel and a key concentration for the Protestant Reformation (Albala and Eden 2011, 14; Griffith 2004, 52-7).

### *The Protestant Reformation and Puritan Perspective*

As is evident from the movement’s title, the leaders, especially John Calvin and Martin Luther “[aimed] to purge ritual practice of anything not found in Scripture” (Griffith 2004, 24-5; Albala and Eden 2011, 16). The Reformation, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, emphasized “[perfection of] the mind through regulations of the body” (Griffith 2004, 24-30). Both Calvin’s and Luther’s beliefs reformed the Roman Catholic’s practice of fasting for redemption and salvation. The Puritans, ultimately, adopted John Calvin’s fasting and dieting regulations, as a way control the body, “preserve it from licentiousness,” or ask for forgiveness to appease God was followed by the Puritans (Griffith 2004, 25 and 29-30). The Puritans quickly extended these

concepts into their everyday lives, and the distinctions between the Roman Catholic and Protestant rationale of fasting quickly diminished (30-1).

Devotional fasting remained vastly a part of American Protestant culture through the 18th century (Griffith 2004, 33). Calvin explained that fasting symbolically recreated “the cycle of conversion, fasting ‘carried people out of ordinary time—or out of time’s decay—back to that moment when all things were ‘new,’ when time was everlasting, when the ideal coincided with reality” (Griffith 2004, 30). As a result, individuals were born again upon the completion of their fast. Additionally, some held that “[f]asting mortified body and soul together, preparing them for the worthy reception of Christ’s broken body and blood,” which was again used during the revival period (Griffith 2004, 33-4 and 41). Closer to the turn into the 20th Century, reasons for fasting mutated for attaining fitness and weight loss goals (239-41).

#### American Society

##### *New Thought and Body Reading*

Yet, early in the 19th Century, closer to the end of the scientific revolution, “Samuel Miller (1796-1850), a professor of ecclesiastical history and church government at Princeton Theological Seminary,” championed to “focus upon fasting spiritual, physical, and intellectual benefits” (Griffith 2004, 35-6). He was able to use “medical reports of overeating” to remind people about the sin of gluttony, which easily and more explicitly becomes associated with fatness and shapes religion of weight loss (Griffith 2004, 36; Lelwica 2005, 174-80). Other health reformers, such as Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg, quickly followed suit, and contributed to his rhetoric and revived and continued to establish “the body’s use as a visual indicator of piety steadily mounted” (Griffith 2004, 39 and 42). While Graham’s and Kellogg’s concentrations were on food, and motivated by their Christian upbringings, their emphases on

physical fitness and the overall exterior body was “secular” (Griffith 2004, 42-6; Sacks 2000, 187-90). In fact, in 1858, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and Unitarian minister, equated the nation’s struggles with slavery and national security to the lack of “physical exercise” (Griffith 2004, 47). Moreover, Higginson stated that ““good health”” was necessary for anyone wanting permanent success and for a nation to be fit (Griffith 2004, 47). As a result, it becomes Americans’ patriotic duty to be in their best shape, and society set expectations upon both men and women by judging the exterior body. Expectations were now from both God and the nation, and many times from within (64, 67 and 109).

### Physiognomy

Miller, Graham, Kellogg, and Higginson were all influenced by the work Jonathan Edwards, one of America’s most noted Reformist philosophical theologians and author of the 1746 book *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, who stated that the soul not only impacted “bodily effects” but that the body impacted the soul (Griffith 2004, 55-8). In society, specifically, people could observe individual responses to God’s glory (57-8). Just prior to the 1800s, Johann Caspar Lavater, the Swiss Protestant theologian, wrote specifically on physiognomy, noting that “virtue and vice,” could be read on the facial features, but later extended his theory to the rest of the body, which could also help read each person’s degree of “[animalistic], moral, or intellectual” characteristics (Griffith 2004, 58).

### Phrenology

Nonetheless, in the early and mid-nineteenth century, with Americans inheriting “unshakeable faith” in “somatic evidence” of the soul and connectedness to God, Orson Squire Fowler and his brother Lorenzo Niles Fowler “Americanize[d]” phrenology, a theory of body-soul correspondences that claimed to prove “that the character of any individual could be read”

by a trained individual “in the anatomical details of the skull . . . as the organ of the mind,” which was later “extended . . . to other parts of the body” (Griffith 2004, 58-60). The Fowlers capitalized on phrenology’s revolutionary qualities, because it allowed for people to shape their own destiny by working on their shortcomings and maintaining their strengths simply by getting a reading of their skull. For Christians, “phrenology promised to satisfy Christian hopes for authenticity and transparency, teaching that physical traits . . . perfectly disclosed the inner worlds of their bearers” (Griffith 2004, 58-64). To explain Christianization and the Americanization of phrenology, Griffith (2004) stated:

[P]hrenology’s] aim of discerning basic inclinations left some room for self-improvement. Indeed, believers imagined that the possibilities for perfecting the self would increase by the bluntly accurate self-portraits supposedly revealed by phrenological means. With one’s best and worst characteristics revealed under the faultless light of empirical science, *self-development could become a systemic and feasible project with clear goals, reliable techniques, and virtually guaranteed results. Its success displayed itself unerringly in the body’s changing landscape...* [I]t was here, perhaps even more than in the contemporaneous realms of fasting and diet reform, that a broad swath of Americans grew accustomed to reading skin and bones as literal map to the human beings who inhabited them [emphasis added]. (64)

The emphasis is not only on the skull and mind but also that contemporary scientific and religious thoughts worked in harmony, leading people to “[reunite] the body and soul in a way that seemed at once divinely inspired and coolly sensible” (Griffith 2004, 64-5 and 58). With such guaranteed readings of shape, the idea quickly got adopted for “practical needs, amusements, aspirations, and comprehension of ordinary working people, creating a so called ‘bourgeois phrenology’” (Griffith 2004, 60). Its complex terminology, categorization, mappings, and techniques were unique prior to any accepted science of its day prior to it, ultimately, leading people to create “[systemized]” methods of improving the mind, body, and soul (Griffith 2004,

61-4 and 240-1).<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, as Americans began to see themselves more and more as the makers of their own destinies, a vision shaped by both the Protestant reformation and nationalism, this belief gave people who were dieting and losing weight a sense of purpose to continue their efforts (Griffith, 2004, 65-67, 71-5 and 83-6). Griffith (2004) cited Hattie Harlow, a simple Massachusetts housewife, whose ideas inspired weight loss authority figures, such as William Walker Atkinson, the founder of the Atkins Diet, and Bernarr MacFadden, the founder of the first major American fitness magazine, and reappeared in other somatic-related industries, such as “cosmetic and beauty” (62, 64 and 66-9):

If form corresponds with and indicates character, it must change with the latter, and be, like that, measurably under our control. If the builds up, molds, and remolds the body, it must do it in accordance with its organization and to suit its changing disposition and wants...Physical comeliness, then, may be acquired (as well as inherited) like health, or good manners, or correct morals. (67-8)

Griffith (2004) stated that regimes such as “diet, exercise, and improved hygienic habits” served as people’s “artifice” to attain their inner and outer “beauty” (67-8). But, crucial to Harlow’s statement is her circular premise that people’s body shapes adapt to lives they “lead and the character [they] form” (Griffith 2004, 67). According to Harlow, this was important because the mind enabled people to “direct and control [their] thoughts” (Griffith 2004, 67). Therefore, “[a]s we look, so we feel, so we act, we are are” (Griffith 2004, 67).

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3. During the 1950s, as Griffith (2004) explained, William Herbert Sheldon conducted a study of “body reading” or somatotype, where he numbered people based on physical appearance and then compared his judgment based on a qualitative test of their personalities (138-40). Without any surprise, his judgments and actual results were inconsistent (139-40). While the scientific community today rejects this notion today, Lelwica (2010) and Griffith (2004) clearly argued that society does not. Lelwica (2010) stated that the perception of the exterior factors into myth-making and how people understand reality; ultimately, leading people to select a path of weight loss (86-97).

*Mainstreaming During the 20th Century and Fitness*

The religious and secular ideas influenced by each other lay the foundation of the 20th and 21st centuries' weight loss industry and "intensified until the activity became its own supposed type of religion...[echoing] the old theme of body as dangerous yet revelatory of purity and perfection, or else filth and decay" (Griffith 2004, 69-71, 80 and 108). Some "truths," then, of the era, and still seen today, are "Right thought, Right Medicine, Right Exercise, and Right Diet" (Griffith 2004, 104). On matters of the mind, it could be described as "'idealistic dualism,'" the idea that "God vies against the errors of 'matter,' 'mortal mind,' and 'malicious animal magnetism'" (Griffith 2004, 69-71 and 80). Food/eating, specifically, became seen as associated as an act of impurity, replacing its "pleasure" with that of God (Griffith 2004, 80 and 99; Lears 1994, 80, 111-4, 140-4 and 160-80). Fasting become more masculinized, said to give not only spiritual strength but also physical (117-8):

The New Thought currents of the day cloaked fasting in the sacred garb of mystical transcendence without undermining its profoundly materialist end. Fasting's ultimate enticement, eternal life, may have remained unrealized, but its intermediate pleasures, from weight loss purification to the felt experiences of strength, control, and transcendence, would live on for many hopeful seekers of regeneration, men and women alike. (Griffith 2004, 125)

Gluttony and any form of fat was looked down upon: "'Too much flesh means too much eating, and it *never* means anything else'" (Griffith 2004, 99, 102 and 163; Lears 1994, 60, 111-4 and 160-80). Inner purity is displayed by the exterior: "the body [became thinner]...it in turn helps the mind and the soul in the realization of every higher perceptions, and thus body helps mind the same as mind builds today" (Griffith 2004, 79 and 99; Lears 1994, 111-4 and 140-4). As a result, most significantly, the ideal body image for women significantly changes during this time period, and continues to change only to become thinner (Griffith 2004, 70; Lelwica 2010, 65; Lears 1994, 160-80). Men's body image does not go under a significant change, except for a



restored emphasis of muscles as a sign of masculinity, but there is still a greater emphasis on overall health and reduction in “abundance” as aforementioned (Griffith 2004, 70-1, 104-09 and 110-20). While, for women, the body remains a sign of inner quality, men’s body also symbolize “financial and social success” (Griffith 2004, 112-3 and 97; Connell 2005, 35, 50 and 130-5). Exercise was used to either attain or maintain that “perfect shape” (Griffith 2004, 104-5, 115-8, 125-6 and 167-70). Interestingly, all major rhetoric from “1890-1930” about health was led by men (Griffith 2004, 112-13). During this time period, the “flapper movement” was also going on. As a result, women began to take on masculine roles, including in shaping the body, such as exercising, though it is still not a large concentration in women-specific weight loss movements (118-24). The most significant things about this era were not only that men led the rhetoric for both only men’s and women’s health issues but also that the use of the “before and after” photos in magazines, such as *Physical Culture: The Personal Problem Magazine*, which act as icons/symbols for people, showing readers of the results and “success” of this lifestyle began (Griffith 2004, 112-13 and 118-9; Lelwica 2010, 91-6; Lears 1994, 160-80).



Figure 1. Cover of a June Issue of *Physical Culture* Magazine.  
 Source: Adapted from *Physical Culture the MacFadden Way Digital Media and Preserving the Past*.

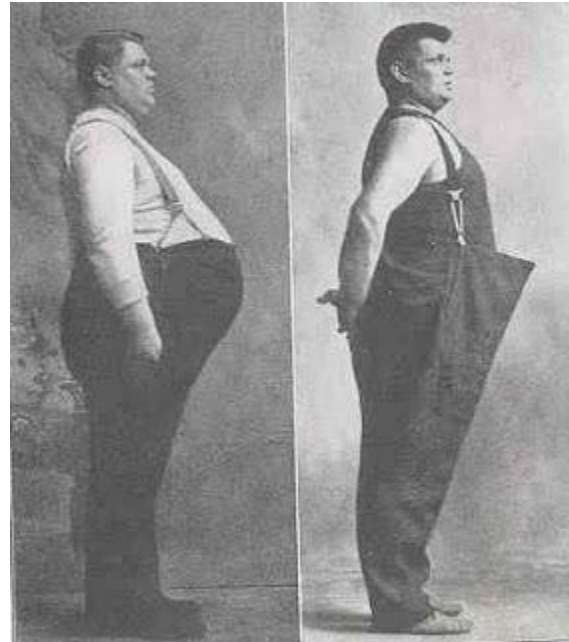


Figure 2. Unknown Man Before and After Condition from *Physical Culture* Magazine.  
 Source: Adopted from Barclay 2013.

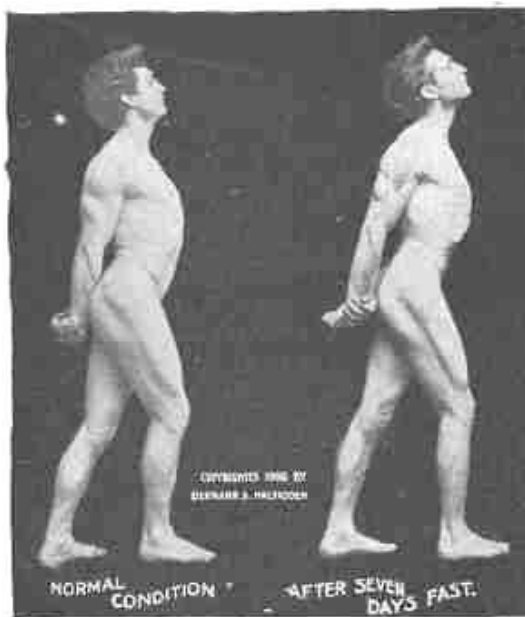


Figure 3. Bernarr MacFadden, “Normal Condition” and “After Seven Day Fast,” Fasting—Hydropathy—Exercise, 74.  
 Source: Image Adapted from Griffith 2000, 613.

### Devotional v. Secular Dieting

Overall, as the century progresses, women's body ideals begin to get thinner and thinner.

Technology, eventually, further promotes certain body types as being ideal. Multiple weight loss groups emerge, promising to create the body that Americans respect. Griffith (2004) identified faith-based weight loss programs and "secular" ones. The former emphasizes losing weight to enhance one's relationship with God, primarily, and attain salvation. The latter is focused mainly on enhancing people's lives, relationships, careers, and self-confidence. Nonetheless, both types of weight loss programs draw upon Christian history about the mind, body, and soul. For my analysis, I look only at "secular" weight loss programs.

### **Weight Loss as a Religious Culture**

To understand weight loss as a religion, it must be studied by applying religious metaphors and methodologies for studying myth concurrently (i.e., Lelwica 2010, 61-80; Stinson 2001, 120-3). Initially, there is a “call” or an awakening that leads people to wanting to be a part of this religion, by either society and culture through friends, media, other influences forces or because of medical intervention, especially for obese individuals (Stinson 2001, 120-3; Stinson 2007, 313-23; Anspaugh 2001, 48; Lelwica 2010, 61-80). Nonetheless, for disciples of the religion, losing weight is meant to not only bring back control into their lives but also to attain another goal beyond losing weight, such as acceptance by others, health satisfaction, or career advancement. Regardless of the reason, losing weight consists of rituals, morals, symbols, language, material, food, community, sacred space and time, sacrifice, and, authority figures that contribute to its myth and culture, as shown in advertisements and other mass media components, all of which vary in their impact upon individuals case by case. The fueling myth of weight loss emerges from American and Protestant culture and is seen in marketing strategies. Therefore, it is important to notice the components of traditional religion in the weight loss community. Additionally, these forces emerge and vary in different denominations and sects of the religion. Throughout the study of weight loss as religion, Christian history has “embodied” our “culture and conscience” (Lelwica 2010, 142-6). Lastly, what helps make a religion a religion is that once people are either born into it or saved by its gospels and convert to it, very few ever leave or stop adhering to it (Anspaugh 2001, 173-216).

#### **Myths in Advertisements**

Contrary to Schleiermacherian scholars, such as Paul Tillich, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Russell T. McCutcheon (2001) stated that religion is an “ordinary

[public] social behavior” and, therefore, should be studied by using a social formation theory (McCutcheon 2001, 10-5, 24-6 and 34). He explained societal change and social formation in Durkheimian terms, as society selectively promoting certain “ideals” or “social values *as if they were universal,*” over others, due to historical, political, and economic factors (McCutcheon 2001, 32-3). Therefore, “mythmaking” impacts people’s social formation, as they continue to make myths (McCutcheon 2001, 32). As a result, myths are the fuel of religious experience.

Lelwica (2010) explained:

[The] *Myth of Thinness*--the belief that *thinness equals happiness*, a primary tenet of The Religion of Thinness--disguises a much deeper longing for a meaningful and fulfilling life. It addresses our need for a sense of purpose, a calling or vocation that gives us direction and makes our days feel worthwhile. This longing is rooted in the fundamental mysteries of life: *Why are we here? Why do we suffer? How should we live? What happens when we die?* While no one can answer these “big” questions conclusively, we all need some kind of faith or worldview to orient our journeys through life’s uncharted waters.

Religious and cultural narratives play a pivotal role in establishing the beliefs we have about our place in the cosmos... Their tales of gods and goddesses illustrate the multiple ways in which seekers can come to know the divine...

Despite their differences, these symbolic stories--the myths--of established religions have a common function: they connect believers to a greater reality. Spiritual myths employ the power of metaphor to engage the imagination and stir emotions, speaking to us in ways that narratives based primarily on reason cannot. They become especially important during times of crisis and despair... [and] help us cope with life’s various pressures--from traumatic experiences to everyday frustrations... Like myths of traditional religion, the basic storyline of the *Myth of Thinness--lose weight and you will be happy-pretty-successful-carefree--* provides a blueprint not just for how we should appear, but more importantly, how we should live [emphasis added]. (62-3)

Similar to McCutcheon (2001), Lelwica (2010) continued to state that myth’s “omnipresence ensures that [people] absorb [the Religion of Weight Loss’] meaning” (Lelwica 2010, 63; McCutcheon 2001, 32-3). Therefore, myth’s power comes from multiple parts of society embarrassing the ideology it promotes (Lelwica 2010, 65 and 181). One of the most visible and “public” parts of society in which myth’s ideology is easily promoted is through marketing

campaigns through the mass media (Lelwica 2010, 67). A large part of the Myth of Weight Loss' message is that people will get their "[lives] back" by getting back in control of their bodies; in doing so, the media amplifies the "war" amongst the mind, body, and soul (Lelwica 2010, 68-73, 142-7 and 180).

Lelwica's (2010) analysis of these concepts is intentionally quite pithy, as her work also functions as a self-help book for those facing eating disorders, but Griffith's (2004) historical background of the origins of the myths is very helpful in understanding Lelwica's (2010) argument of myths. In this section, I expand upon various examples and concepts that Lelwica mentions in her survey. First, I look at NutriSystem, a popular diet program that Lelwica (2010) analyzed and Griffith (2004) mentions, and Weight Watchers, the first major weight loss company that many faith-based weight loss groups, as Griffith (2004) discussed, use as a model (174-6). Then, I extend these myths to men-specific weight loss and fitness magazines.<sup>4</sup> The bodies portrayed through advertisements, ultimately, become symbols, which raise unique Greetzian "moods and motivations,"<sup>5</sup> for people losing weight (Greetz 1973, 90 and 94-8).

### *Concept of "Change Your Life"*

#### *In Women's Marketing*

First, looking at the banner advertisement of NutriSystem's website, the three words that grab the viewer's attention are "change *your* life." The viewer may not even know what the

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4. I chose not to analyze NutriSystem's and Weight Watchers' advertisements for men's programs because the companies are fighting a "stigma" that their programs are meant only for women, despite the fact that both companies claim that their programs have served both men and women ("Announcing the Launch of Weight Watchers Online for Men"; "NutriSystem For Men"; "Nutrisystem® Success™ Programs").

5. Greetz (1973) defined religion as "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (90).

website is about but that it can help change his or her life. Next, the visitor to the website sees that it is NutriSystem and losing weight is what will change his or her life. Then, the visitor might look at some of the quotes or transformation stories conveniently located next to those three lines, despite the fact that the fine print reads, “Weight loss on a prior Nutrisystem® program” (“NutriSystem Home Page” 2014). Nonetheless, all of these women lost an incredible amount of weight, stating that they feel “happier, too” and have “more pride” in their lives (NutriSystem Home Page 2014). The only thing the visitor to the site has to do to begin the transformation and convert to the Religion of Weight Loss is click “GET STARTED” (“NutriSystem Home Page” 2014). I have reproduced NutriSystem.com’s Home Page I accessed in January 2014 in Figure 4.

The screenshot shows the NutriSystem.com homepage. At the top left is the NutriSystem logo. To the right is a call-to-action: "Call Now: 1-800-435-4074" with an "ORDER NOW!" button. Below this is a navigation menu with links: Home, How It Works, Women's Plans, Men's Plans, Diabetes Plans, Our Menu, Success Stories, and Tools & Community. A purple banner across the middle contains the text: "SPECIAL OFFER: Lose 5lbs. in 1st week with Fast5 FREE!\*" and a "See offer details" link. Below the banner is a large image of three women. On the left, text reads: "See how losing weight with Nutrisystem can change your life". A "MONEY BACK GUARANTEE" badge is on the left. A "GET STARTED" button is in the center. A testimonial box features a "Before" photo of a woman and text: "Looking better is great—but I'm happier, too." -Ramona Y. lost 71 lbs.\*. Another testimonial for Kathy H. who lost 70 lbs.\* is visible on the right. A "Click to change your life" link is at the bottom of the testimonial box. Fine print at the bottom left states: "\*Expect to lose 1-2 lbs per week on Nutrisystem. Compensated customers. Weight lost on a prior Nutrisystem® program."

Figure 4. NutriSystem HomePage on January 11, 2014.  
Source: Adapted from “NutriSystem Home Page” 2014.

Similar themes are seen in the second banner which states, “Lose Weight and Have it All this Fall” (“NutriSystem Home Page” 2013). The website uses the word “fall” equivocally, associating it both with losing weight and a period of the time of year when social gatherings,

such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, led to temptations of eating and weight gain (“NutriSystem Home Page” 2013). Therefore, by getting the respective women’s or men’s plan of NutriSystem, people can get the strength and support they need to lose weight. I have reproduced NutriSystem.com’s Home Page I accessed in November 2013 in Figure 5.

NutriSystem® Questions? Call **1-800-435-4074** Express Buy

Home How It Works Women's Plans Men's Plans Diabetes Plans Our Menu Success Stories Tools & Community

**Lose Weight and Have it All this Fall**

Show off a beauti-FALL new you just in time for the holiday season with a proven program designed to help you give those extra pounds the cold shoulder.

VIEW WOMEN'S PLANS

VIEW MEN'S PLANS

**FALL INTO SPECIAL SAVINGS**

**SAVE UP TO 50%**

On 28-Day Auto-Delivery orders<sup>1</sup>

Choose your plan:

Women Men Diabetes

**\*Results not typical.**  
Expect to lose 1-2 lbs. per week. Weight lost on prior NutriSystem® program. Continuing with Success.

Erin lost 110 lbs.\*

Get your **FREE** Diet Analysis

Height  ft  in

You Have Nothing to Lose But the Weight

See Details

**MONEY BACK GUARANTEE**

Figure 5. NutriSystem Home Page on November 7, 2013.

Source: Adapted from “NutriSystem Home Page” 2013.

Lelwica (2010) mentioned that NutriSystem has stuck to a similar marketing strategy of sharing stories of those who feel “saved” by the program and connecting weight loss stories to other aspects of life because potential customers have already been socially formed to believe that weight loss leads to other things, such as happiness and perfection (67-72). Yet what is more powerful is that NutriSystem is not explicitly trying to sell the religion, simply inviting people to explore it, which is backed by its money back guarantee. Analogously, Shaun “Shaun T” Thompson (2013a), founder of Focus T-25, in his infomercials, states, “[G]ive me 25 minutes, I’ll give you a life.” Lelwica (2010) stated that the meaning of bringing “change” or “attaining” a life by changing the exterior body cannot be described in words but is in our



collective consciousness, leading each individual to have his or her unique interpretation of the advertisements, leading them to hold “religious power” (67-78). Lastly, Nutrisystem’s women’s and men’s sections of marketing strategy and success stories tend to vary in theme, which is consistent with the varying historical reasons men and women tend to lose weight or strive for an “ideal” body, as aforementioned (Griffith 2004, 97, 112-3 and 239-50).

### In Men’s Marketing

Men, in general, as evidenced through men-specific magazines, are primarily worried about improving their professional lives before their personal lives, though this is not always the case. In the success stories of various weight loss programs, men are even introduced with their professional titles, such as “the engineer who lost weight,” whereas, women are described in more familial titles, such as “Mother [and] Wife” (Mike 2014; Amy 2014; “Success Stories” 2014). The appeal for men to lose weight is best understood by looking at companies targeting them exclusively, which is similar to Lelwica’s (2010) method in her extensive study regarding primarily women.<sup>6</sup>

*Men’s Health*<sup>7</sup> magazine, which calls itself the “BODY BIBLE,” is a prime example. *Men’s Health* promotes getting a “Better Job, Better Body, and Better [Self]” by losing weight (2014b). Notice the “GREAT FOOD, GREAT BODY, and GREAT LIFE!” quote in Figure 6 below. Under a “Lelwican” interpretation, a viewer sees that the key to getting a “GREAT LIFE” is having a “GREAT BODY” and eating “GREAT FOOD.” The words “GREAT

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6. Though Lelwica (2010) analyzes primarily weight loss programs, she holds that weight loss and fitness companies market indistinguishably (257).

7. *The New York Times* reported that “[s]ince its debut in the late 1980’s, the magazine has surpassed traditional men’s books like *Esquire* and *GQ* by following the formula of best-selling women’s magazines — by catering to men’s anxieties about their bodies and sexual performance (Kinetz 2006).

BODY,” which are followed by “GREAT LIFE,” are provided in different colors to further accentuate the importance of having the former for the latter. All it takes is eating the right foods and “The Ultimate Cardio Plan[, which is] [j]ust 15 minutes a day!” The magazine will shows readers how to “EAT LIKE A MAN!” and comes with “the Complete Instruction [or rituals].”



Figure 6. June 2008 Special Edition Cover of *Men's Health* Magazine  
 Source: *Men's Health Magazine* 2008.

Though this cover in *Men's Health* magazine is from the Special Nutrition Issue on June 2008, the success stories on NutriSystem's and Weight Watchers' websites and in Anspaugh's (2001) interviews indicate that men's "moods and motivations" are raised by these symbolic words (Greetz 1973, 90 and 94-8).

Figure 7 shows the March 2014 issue of *Men's Health*, featuring with Jimmy Fallon on its cover, highlights "Burn Fat 24/7" and then a Spartacus Workout, connected with the sequel to *300* the movie. Then, the reader sees "Win Over a Tough Crowd" and "Talk Your Way into a

Dream Job,” both dealing with career advice. *Men’s Health’s* March 2013 featured Adam Levine, as shown in Figure 8 below. Analogously, Levine tells men about “The 28-Day Fat Torch” that lead them to the “31 Money Secrets Rich Guys Know” and “All [their]” DREAMS [are] explained.”



Figure 7. March 2014 Cover of *Men’s Health* Magazine

Source: *Men’s Health Magazine* 2014.

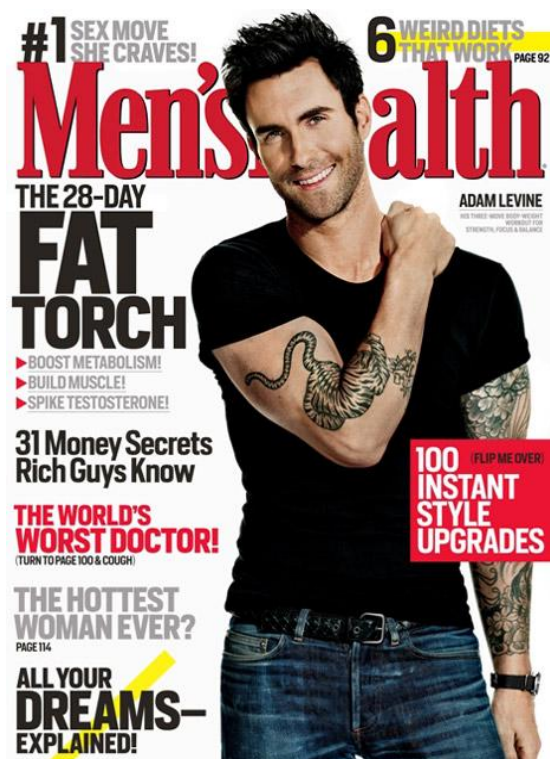


Figure 8. March 2013 Cover of *Men's Health* Magazine

Source: *Men's Health Magazine* 2013.

Therefore, using a “Lelwican” approach, *Men's Health* magazine can be seen as fueling the myth that losing weight will lead to professional success, an idea deep rooted in Protestant and American culture (Griffith 2004, 97 and 112-3). In fact, in 2001, David Kohn, a journalist at CBS, reported that the magazine has shifted men's idealization of bodies in American culture, placing a larger emphasis on “a picture-perfect body” (Kohn 2001). Consequently, without much surprise, Dave Zinczenko, the former Editor-in-Chief of *Men's Health*, stated, based on two decades of marketing research, that “[w]henver we put 'Lose Your Gut[!],' or 'Build Better Biceps' on the cover, it sells great," as it aims to “turn[] health into a concept every guy would want to embrace, starting with the healthy guy on the cover” (quoted in Kohn 2001; Quigley 2009; "How Healthy Is Men's Health?" 2007). In fact, many phrases, including “Lose Your Gut!” and “Strong Body[,] Strong Mind: Your Guide to a Balanced Life!” are repeated on *Men's*

*Health's* covers over 20 percent of the time (Quigley 2009). As a result, Dr. Joseph Donnellan, the leader of an eating disorder clinic, stated that an increasing number of men are developing eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, in order to get control in their lives (Kohn 2001). The only difference I could find in Donnellan's and Lelwica's (2010) research about men and women, respectively, was that men tend to develop eating disorders after many years of trying various rituals and regimens to loss weight, whereas women develop them much quicker (Kohn 2001; Lelwica 2010, xxiii, 29, 39, 232-40, 260, 272 and 278).

#### Roots from American Protestant History

While these advertisements, including testimonials, and mythmaking phrases are formed around bringing individuals into the religion, an overall goal of the Religion of Weight Loss is for the "good" inner part of the individual to triumph over the body, which has been portrayed as giving into temptation, therefore, the cause of sin, including gluttony, and lacking self-control, as aforementioned. These beliefs, tracing back to the ancient Greeks, assimilated into Christianity and were reinterpreted throughout American and Protestant history. They delineate a "war" among the mind, body, and soul that is pervasive in amongst weight loss advertisements (Lelwica 2010, 142-7).

#### *The War on the Body*

Phrases such as "Melt Fat," "Blast Belly Fat," "Fat Torch," "Burn Fat 24/7," "Trim the Fat," and "Food that Fight Fat" indicate not only that fat is bad but also that there is an ongoing "war" against it and the body (Lelwica 2010, 145; *Men's Health Magazine* 2014). Additionally, TurboFire, a weight loss program, invites people to burn "9x more fat than traditional cardio" in its "12 fat-sizzling classes" and "change your body, change your attitude, change your life" ("TurboFire Workout"). Tony Horton's 10-Minute Trainer aims to "annihilate fat" and help

“master your metabolism” with its “fat torching workout” (“10-Minute Trainer Workout”). Interestingly, TurboFire, 10-Minute Trainer, Insanity, P90X, and others all claim to be clinically tested or based on scientific data, which help add to both their and the myth’s legitimacy (“10-Minute Trainer Workout”; “TurboFire Workout”; “The Insanity Workout”; “P90X3 Workout”). Additionally, liquid and pill fat burners also serve as indicators of the urgency of getting rid of fat (Lelwica 2010 143-5). Nonetheless, the body remains the external appearance and symbol of the soul’s purity and mind’s control over both. Fat, which shapes the body, remains as a sign of weakness, gluttony, sin, lack of control, and failure, while thinness remains perfection.

Additionally, phrases, such as figuring out the “mind/body connection” and “Eat better, Think Smarter,” tend to imply that the mind is what will save individuals from fat and the sin of gluttony (Lelwica 2010, 177). After losing weight, individuals (of both gender) tend to discuss the relationship among the mind, body and soul. For example, a female that Anspaugh (2001) interviewed stated that losing weight “[cured] the soul as well as the body” (183). Testimonials from a male disciple of Nutrisystem stated, “I wouldn't be here in this great state of mind that I'm in without Nutrisystem” (“Nick G.”). Overall, rituals, morals, community, food, and sacrifice, etc. help conquer the behemoth--the body--in attaining an ideal image shown on these various weight loss programs.

### *Ideal Bodies as Symbols*

As Lelwica (2010) mentions, many people chose to lose weight to achieve an ideal physique (92-6). These ideal body images, rooted from the American and Protestant history of the mistrust of fat and fight against the sin of gluttony and idealization of thinness, as aforementioned, are illuminated by the mass media through advertisements. People want their bodies to become the very symbols or icons, as they are connected with positive “moods and

motivations,” such as success and happiness, they aspire to resemble, in order to attain the same virtues these symbols raise (Greetz 1973, 90 and 94-8). Unfortunately, though, it is not always easy to turn into the symbols because the weight that an individual aspires for might be neither necessary nor sufficient for the ideal physique he or she wants. For example, an advertisement might show a model with an esteemed body type, but might not necessarily mention his or her height, waist size, and, most importantly, weight. As a result, companies have tried to make it easier for people in not only losing weight but also achieving the ideal body image he or she desires, especially, with the use of technology.<sup>8</sup>

For example, Bodybuilding.com formulates customized rituals and regimens for people, based on their current weight and height, in order to achieve their ideal body images. From the BodySpace page, the social media outlet provided by Bodybuilding.com, under the “Weight & Body Fat Goals,” users select their ideal body image. After some simple steps, including entering in body weight, height, age, choosing their ideal physique, and intensity (or level of commitment), users receive their formula, or rituals and regimens to finding happiness. Interestingly, before users select their ideal body type, they are asked about their overall goal, one of them being transformation. Consequently, users are selecting how large they want their conversion to be, simply losing ten pounds or even a few hundred. The website serves both men and women. The male section allows users to choose from the following ideal body types: “skinny ripped, male model, athlete, body builder, strongman, and pro bodybuilder” (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). The women’s page features ideal physiques of “fashion model, swimsuit, fit woman, fitness model, and bodybuilder” (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”).

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8. “Michael Thurmond's 6 Week Body Makeover Weight Loss VHS Kit Meal Workout Plans” was the first omnibus program that I could find that customized its programs based on each individual’s statistics and the ideal physique he or she wanted to achieve (“6 Week Body Makeover”).

I calculated how long it would take for the average American man and woman, who are either overweight or obese, to attain certain body images, based on statistics that the CDC reports, which are reproduced in Table 1. First, I entered the height, weight, and waist for the average women, 63.8inches, 166.2pounds, and 37.5inches, respectively, and man, 69.3inches, 195.5 pounds, and 39.7inches, respectively, as of 2012 (“Body Measurements”). For an average American women to attain a fashion model physique, she would have to have to lose 50.8 pounds and be 115.2lbs (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). To be considered a “fit woman,” the average woman would have to have to lose 43.5 pounds and be 122.5lbs (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). In regards to weight, both of these amounts are consistent with the “normal weight range” (“Body Mass Index Table”). For average American men to transform to a “skinny ripped” physique, he would have to lose 34.3pounds of fat and gain 5.7pounds of lean body mass and be about become 166lbs (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). For a “male model” physique, men would have to loss 32.7pounds of fat and gain 13.7pounds of lean body mass and be about 176lbs, being seven pounds above the “normal weight range” because of extra needed muscle mass (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”; “Body Mass Index Table”). All of these body types would take the average American approximately one year to attain, according to the BodySpace ideal physique calculator.



Table 1. Measured average height, weight, and waist circumference and normal weight range for adults ages 20 years and over

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Height (inches)	69.3	63.8
Weight (pounds)	195.5	166.2
Waist circumference (inches)	39.7	37.5
Normal Weight Range (pounds)	125 to 169	107 to 144

*Sources: Adapted from “Body Measurements and “Body Mass Index Table.”*

My point here is not that BodyBuilding’s recommended weight goals are inconsistent with the CDC’s recommended ranges. Rather, my emphasis is that BodySpace describes each of these ideal body images with a short description. “Skinny ripped” tells the story of “hard work and sacrifice” (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). Male model is described as a “body [that] is gym-built with a mainstream appeal...[f]eeling good is looking good” (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). The “fashion model” for women is considered to be one of “confidence” (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). And, “[e]very woman needs [a ‘fit woman’ physique]” (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”). As BodyBuilding is a “healthier” website for losing weight, so many of the more “extreme” stigmas are not included on its websites, unlike in other parts of society, such as the mass media, as the aforementioned scholars and I have analyzed. Yet, it is still important to notice that BodyBuilding.com’s ideal physique calculator indicates that, while theories of phrenology and somatotype, as discussed above, have been reigned in by the scientific community, different body types still raise different feelings amongst members of American society. Individuals can begin their transformation and their rituals and regimen by clicking “GET PLAN” (“Weight and Body Fat Goals”).

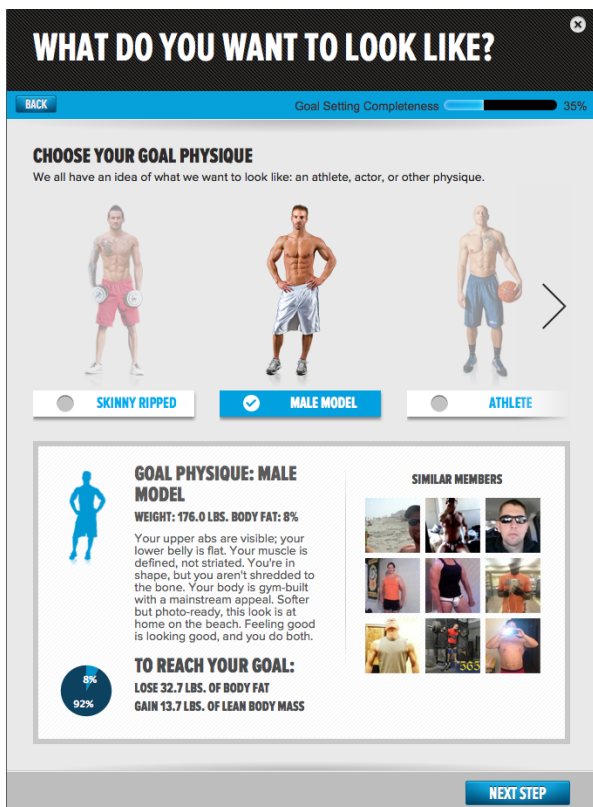


Figure 9. Male Selection of Ideal Physique  
 Source: Adapted from “Weight and Body Fat Goals”

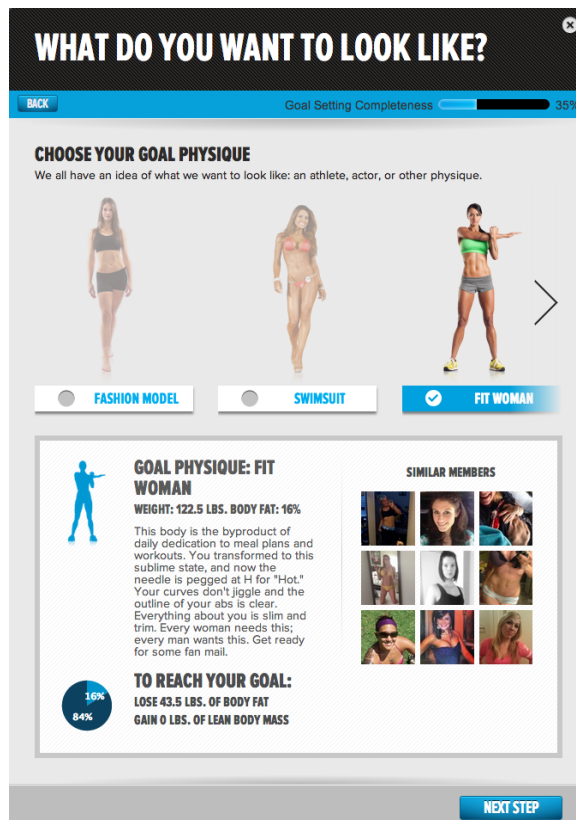


Figure 10. Female Selection of Ideal Physique  
 Source: Adapted from “Weight and Body Fat Goals”

Overall, different companies have differences in marketing strategy for men and women. Testimonials on not only WeightWatchers’ and NutrisSystem’s websites but also Anspaugh’s (2001) interviews prove that both men and women are seeking different forms of satisfaction through losing weight, but still connected with the American and Christian ideas of the mind, body, and soul (97-8, 169 and 180-3). As a result, these companies and people engage in mythmaking, or being in a dialectic relationship, one reaffirming the other. Throughout the remainder of this paper, I show how these differences between women’s and men’s desires, goals, and intents of losing weight shapes their experiences and impact the religious culture of weight loss. Yet, common to all people losing weight is the concept of rituals and regimens.

## Rituals and Regimens

Lelwica (2010) defined “[r]ituals [as] symbolic actions performed in a formulaic and repetitious manner that help [people] move through the big and small changes of [their] lives by providing a sense of stability” (131). These rituals and regimen, mostly concerned with food selection, exercise, and the body, are the steps in the Religion of Weight Loss that help practitioners help measure progress in reaching their ultimate goal (Gardella 1998, 8 and 114). Some major rituals are “counting calories, carbohydrates, and/or fat grams (before, during, and/or after eating) // weighing yourself on the scale // calculating body fat // measuring waist size,” exercising, and comparing body images as good or bad (Lelwica 2010, 134).

### *Regarding Food*

Food selection is a ritual, especially because many authority figures consider it to be 75 percentage of the weight loss journey, with the other 25 percent coming from exercise (Steffen 2010).

### Shopping for Food

First, shopping for food is ritualistic for those losing weight. Susan Powter, creator of the “Stop the Insanity Diet,” emphasized the importance of reading the nutritional information before buying food. According to Powter, people should apply her “fat formula” to all foods before buying it:  $\text{fat grams} \times 9 = X$ , where  $X \div \text{total calories} = \% \text{ of fat per serving}$ . She stated that every calorie is not the same and the war is exclusively on fat. Any amount of fat calories above 20 percent is considered too high for her method of losing weight, as she reminds people that “to get fat out of you, you have to take it out of your food” (“O My God!!?!”). She points out alternatives to fatty foods, such as non-fat, low-fat, low-carb, no sugar, etc. types of food. She discourages drinking soda and avoiding any food made up of “empty calories,” food

that does not keep people feeling full for at least two or three hours (“O My God!!?”). She advocates for people to plan their meals for the week, check what ingredients they need to make for their meals, and make a shopping list, and buy only the items they need according to the list. Not only does the list formulate people’s shopping experience but also helps fight temptation of buying fattening foodstuffs, which is often experienced by people losing weight. Powter opposes all oils, as they are 100% fat. But, she and many program leaders suggest buying olive oil or coconut oil, ideally in their spray forms, for moderate use in cooking, if people must (“O My God!!?”; Steffen 2010).

Regardless of weight loss program, food quantity and quality, and mealtime are extremely regulated. Therefore, eating becomes a systemized ritual. Depending on the program, individuals are suggested to eat every two to four hours. They should split up their meals by calories, protein, carbohydrates, and fats. Like Powter, most programs suggest that individuals plan and/or cook their meals for the week, so they know exactly when and what to eat it. Nonetheless, many popular weight loss programs, such as Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, NutriSystem, Atkins Diet, and the South Beach Diet, provide pre-cooked meals. One could argue that these programs take the “ritual” out of shopping and meal planning. Rather, these popular weight loss programs increase the ritualistic characteristic in losing weight.

Specifically, Weight Watchers assigns a point value to foods. Therefore, counting the point value of each food and the number of “points” eaten is the primary mathematical and systematic ritual for a person on the Weight Watcher diet. Though Weight Watcher has an extensive line of pre-numbered foods, it states that its diet is all about both eating “[r]eal food for a real life” and “eating the food you love and still losing weight[, as] [t]here are no mandatory premade meals and no forbidden foods, so everything is on the menu” (“What You’ll Eat”). Like

many weight loss programs, Weight Watchers emphasizes making lifestyle changes and states that dieting and monitoring food intake “[is] not some punishing *regimen*; it’s a livable way to eat smarter” (“What You’ll Eat”). As a result, Weight Watchers does not dissuade people from eating at fast food chains or restaurants because their food selections are higher in calories. With its point system, Weight Watchers claims to have made counting calories “really, really manageable” (“What You’ll Eat”). Consequently, Weight Watchers capitalizes on being able to provide its disciples with stabilization and the ritual and regimen of living in and dealing with “real everyday” situations (“What You’ll Eat”).

### Ordering Food

Moreover, for people trying to lose weight, either on the Weight Watchers diet or not, ordering food becomes more ritualistic, especially at restaurants. The first step is to ask the waiter not to bring the complimentary bread or chips. Second, individuals are expected to order off of the restaurant's diet section or menu, if it has one. For example, popular chain restaurants, such as Applebee’s<sup>9</sup> and the Cheesecake Factory<sup>10</sup>, feature diet or low fat sections on their menus (Paturel 2014).<sup>11</sup>

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9. Weight Watchers has an existing partnership with Applebee’s and endorses and pre-assigns some of its menu items. The endorsement is accompanied with the Weight Watcher’s logo and a point value (“Applebee’s”). I will explore more of this throughout this section.

10. The Cheesecake Factory’s diet menu is called the “Skinnylicious ® Menu.” Everything on it is under 590 calories and symbolizes the “good” in a restaurant filled with fattening foods and much of its foods over 1200 calories each (“Eat Light, Feel Right”; “The Right Path to Enlightenment”; Paturel 2011). In fact, the Cheesecake Factory, marketed its Skinnylicious ® menu aboard at popular vacation cities for Westerns, such as Dubai, with the following phrases: “Eat Light, Feel Right” and “The Right Path to Enlightenment” (“Eat Light, Feel Right”; “The Right Path to Enlightenment”). Despite the slogan used, each advertise included the following: “Get ready to lift your spirits with the new Skinnylicious Menu at The Cheesecake Factory! Savor a selection of healthy dishes made to feed both your body and your soul. Get all of the flavor, without any of the guilt” (“Eat Light, Feel Right”; “The Right Path to

Nonetheless, the next step is to make items on the diet or “skinny” menus even “skinnier.” Consequently, all foods should be made without cheese and condiments. Effectively, salads are ordered with croutons on the side; dressings should be either omitted or replaced with either non-fat or low-fat ones, on the side. Ideally, all disciples should replace their dressing with freshly squeezed lemon juice (Steffen 2010). Burgers should be eaten with only half of their buns. At subshops, the bread from the inside should be removed, so it only holds the meat and vegetables; in fact, Jimmy Johns features lets dieters turn any sandwich into a “low carb lettuce wrap,” replacing the bread with leafs of lettuce (“Jimmy John's Menu & Nutrition Calculator”). After ordering the food and/or when the server brings it, on larger orders, disciples should eat only half a portion. Appetizers and desserts are not an option. If anything, they should be replaced with black coffee or a small portion of fruits.<sup>12</sup> The decision to take leftovers should be made solely on how “skinny” or “health” the food is made.

The last step is to record meals in a book of deeds, or the daily journal of caloric intake and dissemination. The journal has become electronic, and each major weight loss company’s website and smartphone application, including Weight Watchers’, NutriSystem’s, BeachBody’s, and BodyBuilding’s, provide a tracking journal, customized for its foods, if applicable, and rituals and regimens. Conveniently, each website and application allows for their disciples to access their respective bibles or gospels, as a method of referring to the commandments and

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Enlightenment”). As a result, eating foods off of the Skinnylicious® Menu enhances both body and soul.

11. Even fast food chains, such as McDonald’s and Taco Bell, feature diet menus, “Favorites under 400 Calories” and the “Fresco Menu: Less Fat. More Taste,” respectively (“Favorites under 400 Calories”; Jussel 2009).

12. These diet menus show that the religious culture of weight loss is interacting with “regular” culture. Losing weight can be seen as a way to get accepted or get back into society, get the “mainstream body” and “start living.”

remembering the good from the bad. An online advertisement of the Weight Watchers' application, stated that disciples are "in control[,] anytime, anywhere. The concept is that the sacred (Weight Watchers) is always with those who believe (its customers) and will help them to fight any temptations and lead to success in losing weight, and, therefore, a better life.<sup>13</sup> Rituals, overall, help provide the stability in people's lives, and recording not only diet but also exercise, weigh ins, and body measurements are crucial, especially, since measurements are key indicators of measuring progress and seeing how close or far away an individual is from the good life.

### *Regarding Exercise*

While diet is considered 75 percent of the religion, exercise is only 25% of it, but weighted, as exercise is the prayer in the Religion of Weight Loss and is not only ritualistically scheduled but also a ritual itself, allowing people to feel a sense of both transcendence and connection with community (Gardella 1998, 109-120). First, and on a more superficial level, people are recommended to have a set time for exercising at least three to six times a week. Like saying a different prayer each day, different days of the week are dedicated on focusing on a different part of the body, though disciples can also alternate amongst different cardio and aerobic exercises, such as jogging, running, interval training. Furthermore, as individuals progress in their weight loss program, they enter into different levels or phases of exercise, which is similar to the changes in eating rituals. For example, Focus T-25 features rotating

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13. People not using one of the major weight loss programs are not excluded from having technology to track their rituals and regimens. Take for example, the smartphone weight loss application Lose It!. The application helps people keep track of their daily caloric intake, weight, exercise length and calories burned, and much more. Lose It!, like many of its competitors, operates on a freemium basis; individuals wanting additional features, such as measuring body fat percentage and waist size, can select to pay \$39.99/year (and \$29.99/year every year afterwards) to access them. Interestingly, Lose It! uses imagery that evokes religious or spiritual emotions in getting smartphone users to buy its premium account level (FitNow, Inc.).

workout DVD, such as Total Body Circuit, Ab Intervals, and Lower Focus. Focus T-25 exercise's intensities and expectations progress throughout the program, in three phases: Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. All are focused on burning fat and "changing your life," so that you will never want to go back to your old self" ("Focus T25 Workout").

Needless to say, getting ready to exercise is a ritual in itself. It is the preparation for a special time of day, a time to redeem any "sins" since the last workout. Exercisers must also resist the temptation to quit in order to stay on the right path and reconnect with oneself. An Optimum Nutrition, a reputable company that sells fat burners and other supplements, commercial portrays an ideal routine for going to the gym<sup>14</sup> and reminds people what exercising can lead to:

Alarm sounds. Up early. Focus. Prepare... Out the door before the paper arrives. Get to the gym before the guy who owns the gym. *This is the push that makes the future appear.* The hard work that makes the luck happen. The honor of *a routine*... Always preparing what's next because the minute you step back and rest on what you did, *you're done* [emphasis added]. ("Platinum PRE- Motivation")

Like morning mass or prayer, the commercial is precise in its message of starting the day by going to the gym, yet the statement's ending of "*you're done*" is ambiguous and portrays a sense of fear and an ultimatum: either stick to the "routine" or have your "dreams" crushed, which also adds to the Myth of Weight Loss ("Platinum PRE- Motivation").<sup>15</sup>

Conveniently, at-home exercise videos bring the gym to people's living rooms and bedrooms. Individuals simply have to put in the DVD and turn their home into a sacred space.

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14. 14 seconds into the video, Steve Cook, the bodybuilder featured in this video, walks into Gold's Gym, which markets on its communal aspects, as I discuss below (Platinum PRE-Motivation).

15. At 38 seconds into the video, viewers see Cook walking with a famous bodybuilder that I cannot identify. Then the viewer sees the Cook walking on the streets, walking back into the gym focused on something; due to the narrator's dialogue, and then Cook looking at the same poster in between sets again at 45 seconds, makes me think that he uses the bodybuilder as her role model and the ideal physique he wants to attain ("Platinum PRE- Motivation").



Shaun T, creator of Focus T-25, tells his followers to pray only for 25 minutes a day with 100% energy, give his workout “100% for only 25 minutes,” and it “will give [them] a life” (“Focus T25 Workout”). It is 25 minutes of constant fat burning exercise that challenges people to challenge themselves, in order to reach their weight loss goal. Other at home exercise videos, such as P90X, 10 Minute Trainer, 21 Day Fix, and TurboFire, are marketed around similar concepts.

Gardella (1998) compares exercise to the three steps of prayer: purgation, illumination, and unification (109-127). He starts by stating that the idea of exercise is embedded in Western society’s “collective conscious,” originating from the Greeks (Gardella 1998, 109-110). Like prayer, exercising requires “an act of will” and “resisting the desire to quite, choosing discomfort in service of a goal” (Gardella 1998, 111). In fact, “[t]he term *ascetic*, denoting those who renounce the world to devote themselves to prayer, comes from the Greek *ascesis*, exercise” (Gardella 1998, 111). The Greeks, “especially since Aristotle’s *Ethics*,” used exercise as method of character development (Gardella 1998, 111). These ideas later reappear in the rules of dietary restriction and the role of exercise in maintaining the body, especially during the beginning of the 20th century, as seen in MacFadden’s *Physical Culture* magazine, as Griffith (2004) discusses (112-131). Nonetheless, the act of exercising does “religious work” (Gardella 1998, 110-13). There are three classifications of forms of exercise which are analogous to three different parts and phases of prayer:

[Aerobic exercises], which bring in the whole body in play, moving the mind with the body, burning many calories....[Harmonic] [e]xercises such as yoga and tai chi harmonize mind and body...Precision exercises such as ballet, modern dance, and Asian martial arts fill the body with awareness. Although bodybuilding with weights seems brutal and its results grotesque to many, it forms a subset of the precision exercises; intelligent weightlifters work with awareness of every movement and every muscle to promote an ideal shape.

The moods induced by aerobic, harmonic, and precision exercises seem naturally suitable to three kinds of prayer: aerobic exercise to prayers of petition and praise; harmonic exercises to prayers that induce meditative trance; and precision exercise to the simple practice of presence that is sometimes called contemplation. These three aspects of exercise and prayer correspond in turn to the stages of purgation, illumination, and union that Western writers of many centuries have described as phases of spiritual life. (Gardella 1998, 111-2)

Gardella (1998) continued to state that Christian prayer is primarily redemptive and concerned with petition (114). The fundamental question for petitionary prayer is “does that goal matter enough to pray for it?” (Gardella 1998, 114). He states that the Christian request to “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” has made it in Americans’ attitudes today (Gardella 1998, 114). Specifically, in comparison to the Hail Mary, individuals who exercise imagine the ideal body shape or “sacred symbol” and become fixated on achieving and drawing power from it, as the prayer is meant to “[fix] the mind on a single image and a single mood” (Gardella 1998, 114-5; Lelwica 2010, 275-81). The Hail Mary is repeated “whether in private or unison,” as is exercising (Gardella 1998, 114-5). While the Hail Mary and other prayers remain complex, “people can move through purgation into illumination,” like by exercising and following a strict regime, but the challenge remains the “distance between subject and object that would seem to prevent going beyond illumination into union” and “closing the gaps between our minds, bodies, and spirits” (Gardella 1998, 120; Lelwica 2010, 280). Attaining union with the sacred or ideal is the ultimate goal that both churches and weight loss programs help claim to achieve (Gardella 1998, 110-23). Exercising constantly and going into an aerobic stage lifts the spirit and makes people feel as if they are illustrating, but praying and exercising repeatedly is the only way to attain union or becoming like the ideal body shape.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, exercising properly, along

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16. Gardella (1998) stated that, while athletes follow the same ritual of exercise, their reasons for going into an aerobic state of pain is purely for competitive reasons, therefore, they do not an enhancement of the mind-body-soul relationship (109-20). While I have not studied

with an appropriate diet, leads to changing the exterior, which leads to meeting society's standard of an ideal body and the releasing the stigmas that follow, at least.

### *In Other Parts of the Religion*

While the rituals in Religion of Weight Loss are primarily concerned with diet and exercise, as they account for approximately 75% and 25% of the weight loss goal, there are other rituals that must be noted. In fact, even before individuals start dieting, they eat a “Last Supper” (Anspaugh 2001, 71-5). In the Christian tradition, the Last Supper symbolizes the night before “[Jesus] was about to do on behalf of all mankind: shed His blood on the cross thereby paying the debt of our sins” (“The Last Supper”). According to Anspaugh (2001), the “Last Supper” in religion of weight loss is the last meal that disciples have before they begin their regime (weight loss program or diet) to pay for their sin (of being fat) (71-9). Consequently, the day of the initiation marks accepting the religion of weight loss into their lives. The “baptism ritual” begins with an initial weigh in, followed by getting bodily measurement, according to strict precision, and ending with taking photos. Everyday individuals will follow the aforementioned diet and exercise regime, recording each moment. Each Friday ends with feeling “skinny” for most people, as research shows that people tend to weigh the least on that day (Oz and Roizen 2014).

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athletes performing weight loss rituals, Steve Cook seemed to be aiming for “higher” reasons than just winning a competition, as he connects it with his “honor” (“Platinum PRE-Motivation”). Additionally, Charles Barkley, a former National Basketball Association (NBA) athlete, stated that he did not feel like he could be a role model, as he let his body get out of shape (Leonard 2012): “I am still not a role model. But, may I can change that. Maybe, if I tell you that I am losing weight and getting healthy. Maybe, if I stopped making excuses and started making progress, you'd do the same. And, maybe if I told you that I was doing it with Weight Watchers, you'd join me” (Leonard 2012).” Commentators perceive his weight loss as the transformation “from rebel to an elder...[and] a hypermasculine black baller...[to a] ‘the round mound of rebound[,]’ ... a refined, desirable and civilized role model (Leonard 2012).

Therefore, while Gardella (1998) argument holds for some cases, I do not think that is a standing rule, as Barkley connects his weight loss with becoming happy with himself, so he can be a role model. Additionally, without any additional comments from Barkley, the media connected his transformation to larger societal and communal aspects (Leonard 2012).

As a result, Monday's should begin with a weigh in, as most people tend to "sin" during the weekend, either by not eating correctly or working out. Some people weigh themselves every day, but it is only the Monday weigh in that "counts." Knowing one's weight is extremely important, as "it is your very existence on this earth" ("How to Embrace Your Weight"). The completion of six weeks marks a milestone for the average person trying to lose weight, as it is the time when most people can start seeing "noticeable results" (Perry 2010). As a result, the baptism ritual is to be repeated. All of this information is then to be recorded in each individual's respective journal. Moreover, individuals are encouraged to take and publish their progress photos online, in order to engage with the weight loss community, which is like going to church every Sunday, in Puritan times, and fellow churchgoers judging each other's self-control and closeness to the sacred, by the size of the body. These rituals, therefore, serve as "prescribed actions or behaviors that express *communal* and/or religious meanings," which is one [emphasis added] (Clark 2012, 86).

### Community

In fact, one of the key social performance of religions is that it leads to or includes the formation of community (Peterson 2005, 127). For example, every Sunday, the millions of American Christians reform the ritual of going to church to connect with both their fellow churchgoers and God. David Chidester (2005) understands "religion" providing "ways of being a human person in a human place" (vii). It is concerned with "the transcendent, the sacred, and the ultimate" (Chidester 2005 paraphrased in Scholes 2012, 144). Religion accomplishes its goal by doing "three primary tasks[:]...by *forming a human community*, focusing human desire, and *entering us into human relations of exchange*" [emphasis added] (Chidester in Scholes 2012, 144). In his analysis of popular culture, Chidester (2005) "looks at baseball as a church (human

community), Coca-Cola as a religious fetish (focuses human desires) and rock 'n' roll as that which gives its freely to fans (brokers human relations of exchange) in order to argue that these and other expressions of popular culture do indeed perform religious work," thinning the line between "humanity [and] the transcendent/sacred/ultimate" (quoted in Scholes 2012, 144-5). In previous parts of this paper, I have shown how "human desire" is focused on the process of losing weight (Scholes 2012, 145). I have hinted on the communal aspects of the Religion of Weight Loss. In this section, I will emphasize the communal bonds in the Religion of Weight Loss that help foster "human community" while focusing desires (Scholes 2012, 145).

### *Going to "Church"*

According to Griffith (2004), going to church, in New England, was a time for not only people to connect with the sacred and listen to sermons but also individuals to reveal his or her (lack of) accomplishments and the community to judge accordingly. Analogously, Weight Watchers is well known for its weekly routine meetings and public weigh ins (Lelwica 2010, 210). Yet, since its incorporation in 1963, technology has enabled Weight Watchers to expand its community onto the Internet (Griffith 2004, 173-6; "History & Philosophy"). In fact, Weight Watchers, NutriSystem, BeachBody (Team BeachBody), and BodyBuilding (Body Space) all feature an online community. Greg Peterson (2005), the author of "The Internet and Christian and Muslim Communities," explores the phenomenon of online churches and mosques, states that "[l]ike the mass media, the internet both reflects and shapes cultural developments, including religion, in both obvious and subtle ways" (124).

In regards to Weight Watchers' meetings and weigh ins, individuals weigh themselves and enter their information on their community page. Peterson (2005) argued, while the average American web surfs in solitude, "[it] automatically links one person to others--their attitudes,

their feelings, even their innermost thoughts. Despite this connection, you probably have no idea who people you meet on the internet really are” (126). While individuals might not go to meetings, they are always connected with the company’s professionals and their fellow churchgoers who will judge each other’s progress and give tips on adhering to the program’s rituals and regimens. Furthermore, individuals may ask questions about different struggles or obstacles they might face. Users rated the following tips on the Weight Watchers Community message board as their “Top Tip,” notice the several connections to the Myths and Rituals of Weight Loss:

- "I brush my teeth when I get cravings. I love the fresh, minty feeling, and it fools my sweet tooth. I don't even mind the stares in the office bathroom."
- "I imagine a particular food super-glued to my rear, hips or stomach. It isn't so hard to resist when I realize where it's going after it leaves my taste buds."
- "I keep lots of healthy snacks in my car and my desk. If I get really hungry, I will grab at anything, so this works well for me."
- "Try new things. I discovered this weekend that I actually like raw spinach. I'm willing to try almost anything to keep my diet interesting and healthy."
- "I list all the reasons I want to lose weight and put them in random places around the house, along with older, thinner pictures of myself."
- "Wear tight clothing. I wear tight jeans so that I stop eating when I feel 'fat.' It works for me!"
- "Go to the grocery store every week and stock up on healthy foods. If you're well-prepared, it's easier to have a successful week."
- "Set small goals and reward yourself with fun stuff. When I reach 10 percent, I'm going to get a massage."
- "Only eat the reduced-fat foods that *really* taste good to you."
- "I don't put anything in my mouth unless I write it down and hold myself accountable for it."
- "Don't deprive yourself. It usually leads to eating lots of substitutions that won't satisfy you, and you'll end up having the chocolate, anyway."
- "My favorite tip? I look at myself in the mirror. I like where I'm headed, but I'm not there yet." (Savarese)

Nonetheless, other sites, such as BodySpace, allow individuals to rate how motivated they feel to achieve their weight loss goal. Figure 11 shows an example of the rating and status, which instantly gets shared with the world. Other users might comment with words of encouragement.

Body Building strives to imitate personal connections as much as possible; therefore, it encourages people to upload progress photos and share them with the world (“BodySpace Home Page”). Going to church and weight loss meetings extends its community over the web.

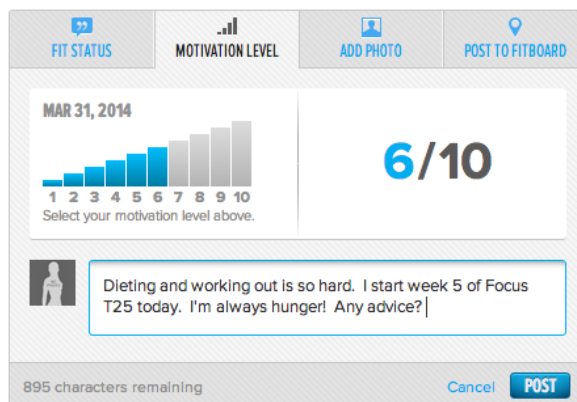


Figure 11. Status bar on BodySpace  
 Source: Adapted from “BodySpace Home Page”

Kenny Smith (2010), the author of “Gold’s Gym & Scientology in an Age of Authenticity” compares Gold’s Gym to the Church of Scientology. Unlike Scientology, which emphasizes individualization, “Gold’s Gym [] refers to itself as a community, an institution to which one must commit oneself to receive the desired rewards” (Smith 2010). Gold’s Gym advertisement states, “This is more than a gym,” three times, as it draws upon its four-decades long history with transforming people’s lives (Smith 2010). Likewise, all of the major weight loss companies market about how advanced their community feature. For example, Team BeachBody’s Community Page states:

You made the decision to transform your body and your health—now let *your friends in the Team Beachbody community* help you turn that goal into reality. Our unique social networking features will give you all the accountability, support, and motivation you need to achieve your best body ever! (“Team Beachbody”)

The community page also states that it can help find people “workout buddies” who will keep each other “accountable,” or focused, in attaining their goals, or desires (“Team Beachbody”).

These communal concepts that BeachBody is able to do is because of the Internet; a person never

has to actually physically meet his or her workout buddy. Yet, for at-home workouts DVDs, such as Focus T-25 and American P90X, workout buddies come to people through their TV screens, turning people's homes into sacred communal spaces. Nonetheless, each workout buddy and regime remains individualistic. But, when joining Gold's Gym or buying a BeachBody product, individuals are initiating into a certain community.

### *Individualization*

While there is an advanced weight loss community, the above "Top 12 Tips" is a prime example of how individualistic and varied people's "moods and motivations" and coping methods are when losing weight (Savarese; Greetz 1973, 94-8). Each individual is free to say as he or she pleases, answer questions he or she please, engage as much as he or she pleases, and reveal as he or she pleases. Peterson (2005) noted that message boards and the Internet might actually increase our individualism but "also leads to community" with a new method of interaction (128-9). Other forms of online communities exist, such as blogging about both Christendom and the Religion of Weight Loss, of the most important aspect about the Internet is the ease of access to varying interpretations of the Religion of Weight Loss and its gospels.

Peterson (2005) stated that technology not only increases "individualism" and people's ability to get access to information but also invites people to "explore[]," and "foster[] community" (125-6). As a result, anyone who wants to loss weight can simply Google "top weight loss diet" and will notice that Weight Watchers Diet is currently ranked number one, according to the *US News*, followed by the Jenny Craig Diet and the Biggest Loser Diet, both tied at number two ("Best Weight-Loss Diets" 2014). People may also Google "exercise or weight loss regimens," which will eventually led to many weight loss and fitness programs discussed in this thesis. The democratizing nature of technology and social media allows



individuals to select their own method and the “right” program for them. Nonetheless, businesses have realized the need to individualize, such as by gender or age, the gospels of losing weight, as aforementioned.

*“Witnessing/Spreading the Gospel” and Advocacy*

Certainly, businesses and the mass media have spread the Gospels and Myth of Weight Loss in multifaceted ways, as discussed above, yet, mouth-to-mouth advertising remains the most effective form of marketing. For example, both Michelle Obama and Dr. Oz encourage people to tell their friends and family about the benefits of losing weight. In fact, Michelle Obama’s campaign against childhood obesity is called “Let [*us*] Move” (“Let’s Move”). Dr. Oz tells his viewers the benefits of losing “just 10 pounds” and ends his shows by asking people to tell their friends and family of “losing” with them (“The Just 10 Challenge”). As a result, telling people that they need to lose weight becomes people’s moral obligation. Such advocacy is also seen through “success stories” on infomercial and the weight loss companies’ websites, as discussed above. Additionally, various forms of advertising and marketing, especially infomercials and those discussed in this thesis, shows businesses engaging in an expansionist mission.

Individuals have formed communities, whether through meetings, over cyberspace, or at the gym, all of which “broker[] human relations,” while keeping people focused on their desires, and helping them lose weight (Scholes 2012, 145). Communities and religions are intertwined because rituals of religious actions are “regulated by community” and performed “amidst a crowd of fellow believers” (Peterson 2005, 126). Therefore, as different communities<sup>17</sup>, in the

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17. For instance, one can be a part of the Weight Watchers or NutriSystem community, both of which focus on controlling diet, or BeachBody’s or BodyBuilding’s, both of which

religion of weight loss exists, different people and authorities are judging people's body, and therefore, their characters (Lelwica 2010, 209).

#### Authority

Lelwica (2010) argued that the Religion of Thinness has no boundary and is fueled by the Myth of Thinness, which is in a dialectic relationship with many other components of society, including weight loss organizations and the mass media (207-10). Additionally, I have shown how the Myth of Weight Loss is a part of everyday life and that millions of people identify themselves as a part of the weight loss community, making it a popular culture, which the scholarly community cannot easily define, but, at the core of all definitions is that it must be desired by a large number of people within a society and with relative ease of access (Scholes 2012, 141-2). But, the problem arises of how culture is made "popular" (Scholes 2012, 142). According to Jeffrey Storey (2009), "'popular culture,' suggests that...[it] 'originates from the 'the people'" (quoted in Scholes 2012, 141-2). Yet, popular culture has also been argued of being 'imposed on the 'the people' from above'" (Scholes 2012, 142).<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, as I have shown, Western, especially, American, religious society, has been very hierarchical. Therefore, a significant role of authority should not be an anomaly for those studying popular culture. I argue that the religious weight loss culture has many levels of authorities, ranging from behemoth multi-billion dollar companies to their prophets and ministers, along with the lay people.

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provide rituals for both diet and exercise. In fact, reading a magazine, such as *Men's Health*, even exposes and makes people a part of a different community within the same religion.

18. Storey (2009) stated that "in today's society, it is nearly impossible to find cultural materials...that have not been touched or more likely, produced by a corporation (think Facebook)... 'The fact remains that people do not spontaneously produce culture...themselves. Whatever popular culture is, what is certain is that...[it is] commercially provided'" (quoted in Scholes 2012, 142).

### *Companies as Denominations*

Storey's (2009) argument of popular culture as being "'imposed on the 'the people' from above'" and being commercially fueled is most visible by understanding the goal's of the founders of weight loss companies and the way they are incorporated (Scholes 2012, 142). Throughout this thesis, I have mainly drawn examples from Weight Watchers, *Men's Health* Magazine, BeachBody, LLC., and BodyBuilding.com. Therefore, in this section, I will show how each of these companies, along with Jenny Craig, have unique interpretations of the weight loss gospels and diverse loyal following, ultimately, impacting popular culture and myths of weight loss.

#### Weight Watchers

Weight Watchers, the nation's top weight loss program, was founded by Jean Nidetch, a New Yorker who has struggled with her weight throughout her life, in 1963 (Griffith 2004, 173-6 and "History & Philosophy"). Nidetch began her weight loss journey by attending a New York City Board of Health obesity clinic ("At 87, Weight Watchers Founder Keeps Pounds Off"). Due to her dissatisfaction, because of the "discourag[ing]" tone of the clinic's meetings, Nidetch began conducting confessional meetings for compulsive eaters at her house ("At 87, Weight Watchers Founder Keeps Pounds Off"). She strived for creating a more positive meeting environment, where people would be empowered to control their eating habits and loss weight, solely by reducing caloric intake ("At 87, Weight Watchers Founder Keeps Pounds Off"). Therefore, despite the fact that Nidetch is no longer the leader of the corporation, Weight Watchers' meal plans still reflect her dietary ideology, and its "History & Philosophy" section states that it wants to help people "make the positive changes required to lose weight, // [guide] you to make positive behavioral changes in [their] lives, // [inspire] you with our belief in your

power to succeed, // [and motivate] you every step of the way” (“History & Philosophy”).

Therefore, Weight Watchers’ ideology is that fat people are generally addicted to food, and changing the addiction will lead to weight loss.

BeachBody and BodyBuilding.com

BeachBody, LLC and BodyBuilding.com, LLC, are “focused on a holistic approach to fitness and weight loss” (“Beachbody Executive Team”; “Bodybuilding.com”). On the one hand, Carl Daikeler, Chairman and Founder of BeachBody, began the company in order “to create the largest community of health and fitness–related peer support in the world, devoted to a three-pronged approach: (1) stay active, (2) improve [people’s] nutrition, and (3) share the experience with [other] people” (“Beachbody Executive Team”). His motivations were “to maintain his own health and fitness and his perception of the health care crisis due to obesity” (“Beachbody Executive Team”). BeachBody’s biggest contributions have been helping to rethink in-home fitness, as it is has created American P90X, Insanity, Focus T-25, and many of the other in-home fitness programs I have cited throughout this thesis. In fact, it spends \$100million a year on advertising, which is an industry-leading amount, in order to spread its way of life (“Beachbody Executive Team”). On the other hand, Bodybuilding.com wants to “change lives...empower, facilitate, and cultivate positive change...[is] the technology and tools [people] need to burn fat, build muscle, and become [their] best self...[and] change the world” (“Bodybuilding.com”). Nonetheless, while both BeachBody and BodyBuilding are expanding in providing advanced nutritional guidance, the companies’ main focuses are promoting efficient workouts and exercise rituals and regimens as the best methods of losing weight.

Jenny Craig

Similarly to Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig “offers a comprehensive food/body/mind approach to healthy weight management that includes three essential success factors: creating a healthy relationship with food, building an active lifestyle, and developing a balanced approach to living” (“Company Backgrounder” 2014). Jenny Craig has gone through many corporate ownerships, including Nestle, which was its subsidiary (Lelwica 2010, 69-71; Moss 2013, xii-xv). This ownership raised a lot of controversy, as Nestle is the marker of many foods that make people fat (Lelwica 2010, 69-71; Moss 2013, xii-xv). As a result, Lelwica (2010) noted that Nestle is, first, getting people addicted to its processed and high fat foods and, then, using and contributing to the Myth of Weight Loss to sell not only its low-fat products (which are still addictive) but also Jenny Craig, which has disputed results (Lelwica 2010, 69-71; Moss 2013, xii-xv).<sup>19</sup> Recently, in November 2013, the North Castle Partners (NCP), a “leading private equity firm focused exclusively on Health, Wellness and Active Living companies” that has previously owned the Atkins Diet and currently owns Curves Fitness, acquired Jenny Craig from Nestle (“Company Backgrounder” 2014; “NCP: Current Portfolio Companies” 2014). As a result, the NCP intends to change Jenny Craig’s ideology of losing weight by mainly controlling dieting with moderate movement to magnifying the role of exercise in losing weight, in partnership with Curves Fitness, in order to “[create] a one-of-a kind wellness company that offers consumers an array of diet and fitness tools to meet their individual needs” (“Company Backgrounder” 2014). Clearly, ownership of Jenny Craig has certainly impacted and will continue determine its ideology and philosophy of losing weight.

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19. Kraft Food Groups, Inc. is also the owners of the South Beach Diet, which is another ownership that has been controversial for many of the same reasons (Lelwica 2010, 69-71; Moss 2013, xii-xv).

### *Men's Health Magazine*

Men's Health aims to provide “men [with] the tools they need to make their lives better” in order to get “greater control over their physical, mental, and emotional lives” and is the number one selling men's lifestyle magazine in the US (“Brief History” 2014; “Men's Health” 2014). It was launched, in 1988, by Rodale, Inc. Rodale, Inc. was founded by J.I. Rodale, who championed restoring organic farming in order to heal Americans' health, in 1930 (“Brief History” 2014). After his death, Rodale's children inherited the corporation, and they expanded it into the health and fitness industry. During their tenure, Bob and Ardie Rodale “spread[] the message ‘You can do it’ . . . reflecting the philosophy that people really can take charge of their own lives” (“Brief History” 2014). As a result, maintaining and attaining “the good life” became a lifestyle in Rodale, Inc.'s philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, Men's Health focus, as aforementioned, is to re-orientate men's understandings of their bodies, concentrating not only on diet and exercise but also other somatic embellishments, such as fashion and sexulaity, by applying to masculine desires of wealth, success, and mind-body control (“How Healthy Is Men's Health?” 2007). Therefore, men should not not only look fat but also live “feel[ing] fat” (Lelwica 2010, 218-20).

### *Branding of Denominations and the Role of Success Stories*

While companies vary in their ideology of losing weight, mainly varying on the role of food and exercise, my concentration is how they are selling their weight loss philosophies and

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20. Currently, Rodale, Inc. owns not only *Men's Health* but also *Women's Health* and other health and wellness lifestyle magazines, such as *Prevention*. Additionally, Rodale, Inc. has published top selling books, such as *Picture Perfect Weight Loss*, *The South Beach Diet*, “Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite*, *The Flat Belly Diet*, and the *Eat This Not That!* book series” (Brief History & Company Timeline). As a result, Rodale, Inc.'s website describes the company as the “authoritative source for trusted content in health, fitness, and wellness around the world....[reaching] more than 70 million people” (“About Us” 2014).

shaping the larger religion. An overall emphasis is providing meaning to and selling, or branding, the Religion of Weight Loss. Brands come in many forms, such as “signs, logos, symbols, etc., that serve as the *identity* of a product or service...Hence brands are carefully constructed by companies and their marketing/advertising apparatus to generate the kind of meaning that will garner consumer loyalty” (Scholes 2012, 139). Moreover, according to Douglas B. Holt, ““a brand has success in the marketplace when, “various ‘authors’ tell stories that involve the brand’ or a collective narrative or story begins to build around the brand (quoted in Scholes 2012, 140). These stories contain “plots and characters, and they rely heavily on metaphor to communicate and to spur our imaginations” and *can be told by “customers, critics, sellers or company itself...it is in and through these stories that a brand embeds itself into the personal narrative of a consumer”* and when “*these stories collide in everyday social life, conventions eventually form*” [emphasis added] (quoted in Scholes 2012, 140).<sup>21</sup>

Within the Religion of Weight Loss, several companies and organizations have used success stories to reify their brands. Throughout this thesis, I have shown “laymen” and “laywomen” give their success stories of what the different companies did for them, hinting on the same notions of the good life, rituals and regimens, which change people’s lives, by winning control over the body by fighting fat. The companies are ultimately competing for the same Americans, simply branding and telling their stories differently. Furthermore, the companies’ logo and key words, such as “diet,” “skinny,” “low-fat,” “low calories,” “zero calories,” etc., serve as a reminder for their respective philosophies of weight loss and their ultimate goals for

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21. Jeffrey Scholes (2012) commented on David Chidester’s (2005) notion of the Coca Cola Company’s brand doing “[religious work]” and stated that for it “the taste of the drink and the look of the bottle matters[,] but they matter less than the *meaning* of the brand, which encourages consumers to think of the relationship between themselves and the product in a [religiously] deeper way” (Scholes 2012, 139).

their respective disciples (Greetz 1973, 90-100). For example, Weight Watchers' logo on menus remind its disciple of its gospels, rituals and regimens on food intake, everyone's ultimate goal. Additionally, the word "beachbody" has taken a commercial meaning, due to BeachBody.com, LLC, and appeals to both men and women and raises different images, feelings, and other desires.

Nonetheless, James Twitchell (2004) stated that "brand stories act like religion not just by holding people together but also by holding individuals experiences together...; we live through, around, and against them. (quoted in Scholes 2012, 139)." Therefore, a celebrity spokesperson is used in almost every major weight loss companies' marketing strategy, as they are able to connect to larger audiences, usually, because they can connect to larger audiences (Leonard 2012). Even magazines, such as *Men's Health* and *Women's Fitness*, portray celebrities advocating a new diet or exercise regime that lead people to believe losing weight correlates with changing other parts of their lives (Lelwica 2010, 256-7). Nevertheless, the results are never typical. Nonetheless, these stories help reify the brands' identity and bring people into the Religion of Weight Loss, regardless of denomination, by letting them live vicariously through them.<sup>22</sup> Comparatively speaking to the Christian church, believers

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22. The most successful brands are able to provide "something for the consumer that would otherwise go unaccomplished or not be recognized at all as something that needs to be accomplished" (Scholes 2012, 140). There is a dialectic relationship between brands and myth/convention, as aforementioned, because they must "embody the ideas [that consumers] admire" and "help [consumer] express who they want to be" (Douglas B. Holt quoted in Scholes 2012, 140). All brands are not created equal. Few brands, such as "Apple, Nike, Budweiser, McDonald's, [and] Coca Cola" are "iconic brands" because they appeal to larger communities and "consumers can construct desirable identities for themselves, and they do it (how the brand came to be), character-driven (who is running the company, who is buying the product), or functional (what the product can do for you), helps make a brand iconic through the use of legendary stories, whether they are actually true or not (Scholes 2012, 140-1). A perfect example of consumers trying to find their story in the brand are with the Apple consumers: "I'm a Mac" or "I'm a PC" (Scholes 2012, 140-1). In my opinion, in the religious culture of weight



(celebrities and people telling their success stories) are going on stage (the TV, Internet, magazines, etc.) and explaining to the church members (audience, viewers, browsers, readers, etc.) how their religion (of Weight Loss) is helping their relationship with the Sacred.

### *Ministers and “Prophets”*

Moreover, once in a weight loss denomination, individuals are guided by an expert, such as a trainer or program guide. These authority figures vary on their ability to empathize with those losing weight.

### Classification

Lelwica (2010) gives the example of how “[a] typical Weight Watchers meeting resembles the services of some churches... a minister, shares her ‘conversion’ story, describing the misery of her former life as an overweight person and offering strategies for successful weight loss and maintenance. She may give advice from the [denomination’s] philosophy and highlight the value of its various products” (211). The leader relives similar moments and goes through the journey all over again with her disciples, during that meeting, just like a minister explaining his or her pathway to finding God. Trainers, dietitians, and other professionals *who have struggled and have been reborned* serve in other roles of authority, such as a “minister.”

Additionally, the authority can be not only a “normal” person who has sinned and been born again but also a “chosen prophet” of the sacred/religion. “Prophets” or “lawgivers” are commissioned, sent to earth with a mission to save humanity from its sins against fat or obesity and make them thinner. These prophets/lawgivers, leaders, especially trainers, have always been

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loss, Weight Watchers and Gold’s Gym are two examples of “iconic brands” (Scholes 2012, 140-1).

fit or never been fat and cannot empathize with the people trying to lose weight for these same reasons.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, the status of whether a leader is a “minister” or a “prophet” factors into the message he or she portrays and the role he or she see himself or herself playing in their disciples lives. Regardless of the title the denomination bestows upon the leadership, they are not the worshipped; rather, the “authority” helps “[define] the worshipful,” which in the Religion of Weight Loss may led disciples to a stronger pursuit and desire for the ideal body and, therefore, improving their lives (A. MacIntyre quoted in Greetz 1973, 109-10).

#### Ministers v. Prophets

I focus my analysis on the following trainers: Jillian Michaels, Bob Harper, Chris Powell, Shaun Thompson (“Shaun T”), Tony Horton, and Mike Chang. I chose these trainers because they have some of the most frequent TV appearances and/or online presence, thus making them a part of popular culture. Jillian Michaels (JM) and Bob Harper (BH) are best known for the appearance on as the original fitness trainers on *The Biggest Loser*, an NBC nighttime television show featuring obese people going through transformations. JM is a “minister,” as she struggled with her weight through her teenage years, before she turned to turned to losing weight (“Jillian Michaels Biography”). BM is a prophet, as he has never struggled with his weight. Chris Powell (CP), a prophet, is most known for being the lead trainer on *Extreme Weight Loss*, ABC’s equivalent to *The Biggest Loser*. Unlike JM, BH, and CP who attained their fame by transforming the lives of obese people on television, Shaun T (ST), Tony Horton (TH), and Mike

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23. Drew Manning, a personal trainer and the author of *Fit 2 Fat 2 Fit*, intentionally gained weight “to inspire people to get fit...and give them hope that it IS possible to get fit and stay fit” (“Purpose”). But, he confessed that he could have never known what it is like to be fat, and going through this journey helped him under his clients more (Manning and Pierce 2012; “Purpose”).

Chang (MK) are best known for their at-home workout DVDs. ST, a minister, is the founder of Insanity and Focus T25, which are two of his most workouts. TH, a prophet, is the founder of the American P90X® and 10 Minute Trainer. Mike Chang (MK), a minister, is a YouTube sensation with his Six Pack Shortcut video phenomenon (“Mike Chang Fitness”). Consequently, we have three ministers and three prophets. In order to see how the individuals understood themselves and marketed themselves, I visited their official homepages’ biographies. It is clear that JM, BH, CP, ST, and TH have training certifications; MK’s website did not specify. All trainers they have worked with both men and women. Yet, JM and BH seem to appeal more to women and MC to men exclusively, per their products on their website.

Nonetheless, they make similar statements of what people will accomplish by changing their lives. But, their way of branding themselves differ. First, all three ministers want to form a unique connection with their disciples and re-live their “conversion” story frequently. They want to get to know their fellow church members, one on one. Both their biographies and quotes state similarly. JM and MC mention this in their first paragraph! ST’s website gives a chronological account of his life, but has the following in bold and enlarged text:

I always talk about **LIVING** the best life possible. I know that isn’t always easy. We **ALL** have struggles in our life that make living to the fullest difficult. I want to help you get through those struggles . I want to be more than just a fitness trainer to you, I want to be your life coach. I want to reach out and grab your heart and inspire your soul. (“Bio”)

The ministers know when it is hard to get control back in your life. They appeal from their own experiences. I have included the prophet’s and minister’s information in Table 2 in Appendix A.

Prophets, for the most part, make generic statements of wanting to help “people” rather than “you,” implying that their agenda concerns all of society (e.g., “About Chris” and “Bio”). They do not appeal to their life story, as they resemble the idols that Lelwica (2010) says we worship. In fact, prophets, such as TH and BH, primarily appeal to their accomplishments and

endorsements by different parts of the mass media and “idols” they “made.” Take for example, TH. He has been endorsed by *Men’s Fitness* and *Women’s Health* and has appeared on both CNN and CBS. As aforementioned, American P90X made him famous. Indeed, the program has lived up to its namesake, as TH has been recognized by leaders from both sides of the aisle: President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama and Congressman and former Vice President candidate Paul Ryan, especially since he used it to lose weight (“About”). TH promises to turn people into idols, “like Usher, Sheryl Crow, Bruce Springsteen,” all of whom he has sculpted (“About”; “Tony Horton’s Bring It Minute”). All you need to do is follow his nutritional and exercise regime. The images he uses resemble MacFadden’s photos in *Physical Culture* where he appeals to his readers by “flamboyantly” flaunting his own body; see Figure 3 and Figure 12 (Griffith 2004, 116). The appeal is directly with the body and how it should conform to society’s idealistic standards. His follower’s success stories and before and after photos act as people’s transformation stories. Overall, “[i]n a time when 62% of Americans exceed their ideal weight, and 54% want to lose weight, Tony [(a prophet)] is on a mission to get America back in shape!” (“Tony Horton’s Bring It Minute”).



Figure 12. DVD Case Covers of *P90X: Extreme Home Fitness*  
 Source: Adapted from “P90X Extreme Workout System”

Likewise, BH appeals to success stories and people he has transformed. He is an “[i]nspirational TV [t]rainer” who is trying to help “women and men” lose weight in a “[s]marter [w]ay” (“About Me”). However, he is unable to empathize with his clients, as he has never been obese.

Moreover, despite both BH and JM being affiliated with *The Biggest Loser*, CP, is portrayed as the last hope for extremely obese people, who also use other programs, such as P90X and Focus T-25, to lose weight. This is because CP is a “transformation specialist” (“About Chris”). He conquers bodies and obstacles that no one else can be using “his innovative techniques, education and expertise to guide extremely overweight individuals as they shed hundreds of pounds over the course of a year” (“About Chris”). While his branding is similar to TN’s, CP literally climbs mountains (or hills) with many of his disciples on TV. Mountains are symbolically important in the Bible as the word appears “over 500 times” and is the place where God reveals himself (Paprocki). The climb symbolizes people starting their weight loss journey, getting control of the mind, body and soul in harmony, and connect with God. CP is simply holding true to his belief “that everyone has the right to live a happy and healthy life” and will do so by making America fit again (“About Chris”). Despite the fact that this latter example might be a bit extreme, as he is helping obese suffering from diseases lose weight, there is clear Protestant-oriented symbolism present, in the commercial of his show, as in shown in Figure 13.



Figure 13. Advertisement of *Extreme Weight Loss* with Christian Symbolism  
 Source: Adapted from *Weight Loss TV Shows*

Among ministers, MC serves as an archetype. MC did not have the backing of a major weight loss company to promote his workout. As a result, he turned to the power of the Internet to share his Gospels of the Religion of Weight Loss, after he witnessed his close friends and family “transform their bodies, improve personal health, and[,] most of all [,] really living to the fullest for the first time in their lives” because they lost weight using his rituals and regimens he invented (“Mike Chang Fitness”). He began by promoting in-home videos for people of all fitness level. Because of YouTube, MC has been relatively successful. In fact, not only does he have over 2.4million subscribers and over 134,000,000 views of his videos but also started his own “denomination” called “Mike Chang Fitness” (“Mike Chang Fitness”).

## Conclusion

I have shown how Western ideas of the mind, body and soul have evolved from the time of the three great Ancient Greek philosophers, embedding itself into Christian thought, and soon arriving to the New World on the Mayflower, along with the Puritans. The scientific revolution gave birth to newer understanding of physiognomy, which eventually gave birth to phrenology. With their Christianization and Americanization, somatic faculty was used to determine an individual's character and piety. As a result, people began to slim their bodies not only for society but also for God, building upon the embedded ideas from the Puritans. Furthermore, as domestic national struggle arose, health and fitness was used not only for racial superiority but also for each side to win the war. Soon, the nation entered into a Progressive Era and men became the leaders in promoting the fasting as a way for the mind to attain control over the body and soul. Rhetoric soon re-emerged of getting “[s]lim for Him,” and a robust Christian and faith-based fitness and weight loss programs were born, in parallel with the “secular” ones.

An evolving Myth of Weight Loss fuels the weight loss and fitness popular culture. It appeals to our religious human desires and questions. The myths are portrayed through the media, rooted in the idea of getting back to a time when the mind, body, and soul were balanced. Nonetheless, different authorities, based on their values and worldview, have shaped the myth, forming individualized communities, crossing ethnic and socio-economic classes, with their own rituals and regimens. The religion of weight loss functions religiously, but is it a religion?

This question has divided the scholars I have referenced. It offers the answers that we seek from a religion. I think that the weight loss phenomenon is tied with the pattern of Americans forming their own religious understanding, oftentimes claiming they are unaffiliated with any traditional religion, or being spiritual and not religious. Regardless, Americans are still

seeking rituals and regimens from figures of authority, to find meaning in their daily lives, while they form their own spiritual understanding. Nonetheless, people are social beings, in my opinion, and, many rituals of weight loss provide the communal bonds that churches have historically done exclusively, as we seek to socialize with people who share similar worldviews. Additionally, they provide us with role models, or the individuals we try to emulate off of the magazine covers or success stories. Moreover, these secular weight loss programs are centered around improving people's lives. Therefore, I think that process of losing weight can provide people with the discipline needed in improving not only their bodies but also other parts of their lives, whether that is becoming a better parent or more financially stable, by getting inspiration from the idols. Consequently, I think the ultimate goal of losing weight is fitness and wellness, but only including its extrasomatic implications for worldly satisfactions.

Remaining in a state of fitness and wellness, somatically because people's diets do not remain as controlled or otherwise because people's desires change, becomes the challenge. People who have lost weight once, usually return to losing weight to help them restore their happiness. In fact, for programs like Weight Watchers, losing weight is a lifestyle change. The purpose is ending the Weight Watchers diet and becoming physically fit and well. Therefore, weight loss programs can provide people with daily rituals and regimens, such as going to the gym, a community, such as Weight Watchers meetings, and authorities, such as trainers. But, the true essence of what it means to be physically fit and well remains with the person. Myths provided through the media might shape some people's ideas but not all. Therefore, weight loss programs will have to exist in parallel with the increasing individualistic American ideas of religiosity and spirituality.



## Appendix A

Table 2. Classification of Trainers as “Prophets” or “Minister” based on One’s Experience

Trainer	Minister (M) or Prophet (P)	Excerpt from Official Website’s Biography	Products
Jillian Michaels (JM)	M	Perhaps considered one of the most inspiring people on television through her role as trainer, wellness expert and life coach on her hit TV shows and regular TV appearances, Michaels has created a brand name for herself...As a motivator and role model, Jillian has a <b>unique connection with her audience that stems from her own personal journey toward wellness. Before becoming a big media success, Jillian struggled with her own weight.</b> She was determined to reach her goals — and through dedication and hard work, she did.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Master Your Metabolism</i></li> <li>● <i>Unlimited: How to Build an Exceptional Life</i></li> <li>● <i>Slim for Life: My Insider Secrets To Simple, Fast, and Lasting Weight Loss</i></li> <li>● <i>Jillian Michaels Body Revolution</i></li> <li>● <i>Jillian Michaels Bodysherd</i></li> </ul>
Bob Harper (BH)	P	Harper’s first book “ <i>Are You Ready!: Take Charge, Lose Weight, Get in Shape, and Change</i> ” was published in 2008,...The release of his much anticipated and fan-demanded second book, “[ <i>The Skinny Rules</i> ]...Combining his wildly popular motivational style and expertise,..features a simple program with recipes and tips for sustainable weigh[t] loss methods. <b>The popularity of Harper’s fitness methods on [<i>The Biggest Loser</i>] inspired the launch of his DVD series, <i>Bob Harper - - Inside Out Method</i>, a high performance, results-centered training program comprised of four discs featuring strength, cardio, yoga and personal training workouts.</b> Harper then launched three separate DVDs in addition to the series, including <i>Ultimate Cardio Body</i> ...His cover of <i>Men’s Fitness Magazine</i> and features in <i>O Magazine</i> , <i>Men’s Health</i> , <i>Entertainment Weekly</i> and <i>People Magazine</i> , <b>have successfully mirrored what his fans and followers around the country crave: Harper’s motivation and inspiration to take charge of one’s life.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Are You Ready!: Take Charge, Lose Weight, Get in Shape, and Change</i></li> <li>● <i>The Skinny Rules</i></li> <li>● Bob Harper’s Smart Success</li> <li>● Bob Harper’s Smart 7-Day Cleanse</li> <li>● Bob Harper’s Smart Weight Loss Starter Kit with DVD, Smart Multivitamin, plus a cleanse formula -- Bob Harper’s Smart 7-Day Cleanse.</li> </ul>

Chris Powell (CP)	P	<p>Chris Powell is the trainer and transformation specialist on ABC’s highly rated “Extreme Weight Loss”....In the a documentary-style series, Chris travels the country and uses his innovative techniques, education and expertise to guide extremely overweight individuals as they shed hundreds of pounds over the course of a year. He is currently finalizing casting of participants for Season 4...adding best-selling author to his list of accolades, Chris’s first book <i>Choose to Lose</i>,...has soared to the top of the <i>New York Times</i> Best Seller list multiple times. <b>The book provides motivation, nutrition, exercise, tips, and tricks to help anyone lose those last twenty pounds.</b> His second book, <i>Choose More Lose More, For Life</i>, recently hit stands and <b>focuses on choices</b>...readers four different carb cycles, and twenty new workouts called Nine-Minute Missions that pack maximum results into minimum time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Chose to Lose</i></li> <li>● <i>Choose More Lose More, For Life</i></li> </ul>
Shaun T (ST)	M	<p>...with an amazing new weapon—an unlimited cafeteria food card (dangerously, also eligible at a local pizza joint). With great power comes great responsibility, and Shaun excelled at his duty to keep himself well fed! Eat like it’s a sport though and your body is bound to change...<b>One day, Shaun found himself in front of the mirror and what he saw peering back at him was something completely unfamiliar to him: for the first time in his life, Shaun recognized disappointment, a shocking departure from the pride and self control to which he was accustom.</b> This very day, Shaun turned the page and wrote his first sentence in a new chapter of life...Each day, <b>Shaun hit the gym devout in his resolution to create a better him</b>...I always talk about LIVING the best life possible. I know that isn’t always easy. We ALL have struggles in our life that make living to the fullest difficult. I want to help you get through those struggles . <b>I want to be more than just a fitness trainer to you, I want to be your life coach. I want to reach out and grab your heart and inspire your soul.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Insanity</li> <li>● Focus T25</li> <li>● Insanity Asylum Vol. 1</li> <li>● Insanity Asylum Vol. 2</li> <li>● Hip Hop Abs</li> </ul>
Tony Horton	P	<p>Meet Tony Horton, the master behind the best selling fitness program in America P90X®. Tony</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Bring It</i></li> <li>● <i>Crush It</i></li> </ul>

(TH)		<p>helps people get fit all over the world by keeping <b>them motivated in health, physique, and lifestyle</b>. Over the last 20 years <b>Tony has acquired, perfected, and shared his fitness expertise with countless individuals across America</b>. From professional athletes, sports teams, television and major movie stars, recording artists to the average American, Tony has helped people turn their lives around with the perfect mix of encouragement, humor, discipline and fun.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● P90X®,</li> <li>● Power 90®,</li> <li>● Ten Minute Trainer</li> <li>● Great Body Guaranteed!™</li> </ul>
Mike Chang (MC)	M	<p>It humbles me to know that I have so many fans out there that believe in me and <b>utilize me as an inspiration for their fitness goals. It's unbelievable, just to think only a few years ago, I myself was still struggling with my own fitness goals and didn't know where to turn to</b>. I still remember sitting in front of my computer for hours and hours trying to find the answers to a ripped body. Burned out and tired from so many fail attempts, it was that very night I decided to put all my much-collected research together and formulate a fitness program for myself focusing on the Afterburn Effect. <b>After seeing the success that I've gotten on my own body</b>, I decided to share it with all my willing friends and family...it was really awesome to <b>see people close to me transform their bodies, improve personal health, and most of all really living to the fullest for the first time in their lives</b>. With the word of my fitness program spreading, more and more request for my fitness guidance was in demand. I was so excited to see how my little home made program was helping so many people in my nearby community, I started think, "Wow, how could I do even more? How can I reach out to the masses and get everyone fit?" Then it hit me, YouTube! To be honest,..I knew I had to communicate two important messages across; this is something you can do anywhere without tons of equipment, and this is something you could do at any fitness level. With that mission and goal in mind, I set off to create my first video at my living room back in Houston,Tx and the rest is history.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Six Pack Shortcuts</li> <li>● Insane Home Fat Loss</li> <li>● Afterburn Fuel</li> </ul>

Sources: Adapted from "Jillian Michaels Biography"; "About Me"; "About Chris"; "Bio"; "Tony Horton's Bring It Minute."; "About"; "Mike Chang Fitness"

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