MEDIEVAL FASTING AND ANOREXIA NERVOSA
AS GOAL-ORIENTED ASCETIC PRACTICES

Lauren J. Miller
Washington and Lee University, Class of 2011
Candidate for Bachelor of Arts in Religion with Honors
Advised by Alexandra Brown and Jeffrey Kosky
April 8, 2011
Abstract: This paper analyzes various theories of asceticism and the body and assesses those theories in the context of two behaviors typically considered to have ascetic components: medieval female fasting and modern anorexia nervosa as it emerges in women. In the context of medieval fasting, the contributions of Rudolph Bell and Caroline Walker Bynum, among others, are considered. This research pays particular attention to Bynum's theories of active and goal-oriented medieval asceticism, and proposes ways that these theories could apply to anorexia. In the modern context, the ascetic and religious components of anorexia are explored through an analysis of memoirs of anorectics, advertising and media, and psychological research suggesting implicit links between holiness and thinness. The paper evaluates various ideas concerning the validity of forging comparisons between medieval fasting and anorexia, and it proposes that some forms of comparison between the two could be appropriate and helpful, to a greater extent than most scholars have previously argued. With respect to theories of asceticism, this work primarily deals with the notions of ascetic practice proposed by Max Weber and Sigmund Freud. Both medieval and modern forms of fasting are explored through the theoretical lenses provided by these scholars; it is argued that Freudian theory has been incorporated into an overly myopic view of ascetic practice, and that Weberian concepts of "inner-worldly," active asceticism should be considered more thoroughly in these contexts. Lastly, the work speculates on some other ways of viewing anorexia nervosa as a religious phenomenon, touching on the contributions of religious theorists such as Emile Durkheim, Mary Douglas, and Karl Marx.
Preface and Acknowledgements

When I embarked on this project in May 2010, I knew that I wanted my senior thesis to combine research in religion and psychology, my two predominant areas of academic interest, as well as to address an aspect of women's experience. At first, I was unsure what the specific nature of that project would be. During my research in summer 2010, I became increasingly interested in religious theories of the body and asceticism, particularly theories concerning how medieval women's fasting could be classified as ascetic behavior. I discovered that an emerging area of research considers not only medieval fasting, but modern anorexia nervosa, as forms of ascetic practice with significance for religious theory and experience. I became especially fascinated by the growing body of literature which seeks to identify aspects of anorexia which could be classified as "religious," including the emphasis on purity or morality which is often a component of this eating disorder. Nevertheless, I found what I perceived to be significant gaps in understanding this phenomenon, which I have sought to begin to address in the work which follows.

I do not write from personal experience with an eating disorder, so my interpretation of these phenomena could differ from the interpretations of those who have personally encountered anorexia either in their own lives or in the lives of loved ones. Nevertheless, I have found that aspects of this research have made me realize just how ubiquitous and powerful is our cultural enchantment with the slender and sculpted body, and how great a feat it would be to remain untouched by this force. I am sure that almost all of us have heard friends or family commiserate about weight, the desire to be thinner, and the struggles of dieting, however they may emerge. Or perhaps these issues have crept into the periphery of our thought when, at a restaurant, we've chosen to order salad when what we really wanted was steak—and a baked potato, and a
“sinfully rich” chocolate dessert. I have become increasingly aware that more and more religious and moralistic language has crept into our lexicon concerning the body and control of the appetite, and this paper theorizes about the role and significance of such language. I became fascinated—and also troubled—by how pervasive these issues and this language are, and what you are preparing to read represents my efforts to join this important discussion.

My methodology combines current psychological research with classical religious theory to illuminate an aspect of anorexia which I believe is only poorly understood. I have also included some discussion of sociology and physiology as it relates to this topic; in the footnotes I have included greater detail into neuroscience research related to anorexia. This paper is necessarily deeply comparative and theoretical in that I seek to assess both an ancient practice, medieval female fasting, and a modern one, anorexia nervosa, through the lens of religious theory. I have sought to use some understanding of the purposes behind medieval fasting to propose theories concerning possible purposes driving anorexia nervosa. Although many etiologies for this modern disorder have been proposed, very little research explores potential religious goals behind anorexia, and it is these which I have tried to illuminate through my work. Although the cultural and historical backgrounds for medieval fasts and anorexia are certainly different, I will argue that it could still be helpful to use some comparisons between the two behaviors to lead to greater understanding.

This project would not be complete if I failed to thank the many people who have helped it come to fruition, through their insights and encouragement. I would like to thank Meagan, Lauren, Connie, Jamie, Xinnan, Laura, and Catherine for all of their support. I am also grateful to my dear friend Anna for offering support in a thousand ways during this process. I am indebted to those who read drafts or portions of drafts and offered their comments, including
writing center tutors, various professors in the religion department, friends, and family members. Finally, I greatly appreciate the support and guidance of my advisor, Professor Alexandra Brown, in helping this paper to take shape the way that it has. It is my hope that this work would make a genuine, even refreshing, contribution to the field of religious studies. But beyond being a purely academic endeavor, perhaps it may open up a new dialogue with women who feel that their primary route to salvation, morality, or goodness is through fasting.

Lauren Jill Miller
Lexington, Virginia
Spring 2011
My honors thesis is dedicated to Granvil Keith George, a fellow member of Washington and Lee's class of 2011. Your life, though much too short, will inspire me for as long as I continue to live mine. You are missed and loved.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories of Asceticism and the Body</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weber, Freud, and Theories of Asceticism</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asceticism as Self-Hatred, Self-Punishment, or Obsessive Pathology</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudolph Bell and Medieval Fasting: Holy Anorexia</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasting as a Route to Holiness and Encountering the Divine</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasting as Imitation of Christ through Suffering and Service</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasting as Manipulation of Family and Environment</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparisons between Medieval Asceticism and Anorexia Nervosa</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Religious Language and Goals of Anorexia Nervosa</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Instrumental Goal: Hunger as Pleasure and Power</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Theoretical Applications for Anorexia as a “Religious Behavior”</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected Bibliography and Endnotes</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you.” (Isaiah 58: 6-8)

“The notion of ‘thinness is holy,’ the association of nutritional and spiritual purity, is as ancient as civilization.” (Francine du Plessix Gray)

“One woman said that her boyfriend had threatened to leave her if she didn’t lose five pounds. ‘Why don’t you leave him,’ I asked, ‘and lose 160?’” (Jean Kilbourne)
Introduction

In her riveting memoir of her struggles with anorexia and bulimia, Marya Hornbacher plunges into the world of a woman with an eating disorder, discussing in vivid—and sometimes lurid—detail her experience of starving, binging, purging, and watching the weight disappear in what might seem a frenetic and obsessive pursuit of thinness. She describes the physical, social, and emotional drama of extreme hunger, leaving the reader with no doubt that her life for many years was dominated by her anorexic tendencies and a compelling desire to obtain the so-called "perfect body."

Many scholars of anorexia nervosa would consider Hornbacher’s eating disorder an extreme example of the pursuit of physical perfection, often accompanied by cognitive distortions about the body or precipitated by the social pressures of a culture that seems to venerate thinness more than physical health or wholeness. It would also be tempting to regard her actions as a representation of hatred of the self and a drive to destroy the body as punishment for its imperfections. Yet beyond an urge for the perfectly slender frame, Hornbacher offers penetrating insight into a deeper desire or goal driving her anorexia, a goal which appears in many anorectic women’s memoirs and has been largely ignored or misunderstood by scholarship in this field. She pens candidly, “I chose an eating disorder. I cannot help but think that, had I lived in a culture where ‘thinness’ was not regarded as a strange state of grace, I might have sought out another means of attaining that grace.” She explains that she began to develop an eating disorder not merely out of dissatisfaction with her body and weight, but also out of a need for “salvation.” Comparing her anorexic fasting to the ascetic fasting practices of the medieval saints, she speculates that “God . . . would tell [me] to starve for general sins.” In language
almost certainly derived from traditional religious terminology, she muses, “Anorexia was my . . . savior. [It] looked like the path to my salvation.”

Hornbacher is not alone in using such language to describe the deeper purposes giving rise to anorexia nervosa. Other anorectic women use similar terminology, emerging from a religious or moral lexicon concerning the body and appetite. These individuals write of the purity, absolution, holiness, honor, and salvation which they believe they will acquire through highly restrictive eating, or through not eating at all. Many see eating as a sin of primal origins, with fasting as the necessary redress for this transgression. For example, one woman wrote, “I was able to convince my mind and my body that feelings of purity were much better than any fattening food . . . I believed that the kind of food that went into my body had the power to absolve or disgrace me.” Another wrote that fasting made her feel “deserving” and “pure,” and that “food . . . led to feelings of impurity.”

As Hornbacher's memoir hinted, some would suggest that modern women with anorexia draw from a deep, centuries-old reservoir of religious precedent for their actions—the fasting behaviors of medieval women, who pursued holiness and other religious ideals through their refusal to eat. To modern sensibilities, many of the behaviors of these women seem not only extreme, but bizarre. For instance, scholars attest that fasting for weeks or months at a time was relatively common for many women in the Catholic tradition, specifically in the period ranging from approximately 1200 to 1500. Moreover, these ascetic fasting practices were much more common in women than in men. Although women made up a small percentage of those considered saints, they made up much larger percentages of the extreme ascetics or those with physical illnesses as a result of their practices. The extant evidence from the medieval period
suggests that men and women alike both considered eating or abstaining from food to be more “central in women’s piety than in men’s.” In a medieval world where women generally could not control economic resources, food was in some cases the only resource that they could or did control. Ascetic practices related to food and fasting did encompass men as well. Yet, according to Caroline Walker Bynum, food “is a theme, not the theme, in male lives.” As a result, food and fasting behaviors constituted a uniquely feminine sphere of influence during the medieval period.

In spite of the marked differences in historical period and cultural context, this work seeks to identify some important connections between medieval fasting and the behavior of women like Hornbacher, whose self-starvation is one characteristic of the standard definition of “anorexia nervosa” given in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). According to the DSM, individuals diagnosed with anorexia weigh less than 85% of what is expected for their age, height, and body build. This extremely low body weight is coupled with cognitive distortions related to the body, including a strong fear of gaining weight or a belief that one needs to continue to lose weight even when to do so would endanger health. Another diagnostic criterion (in females) is the emergence of amenorrhea as a result of the inability to maintain normal body weight. Anorexia nervosa typically emerges in adolescents or young adults, and it has two subtypes: the “restricting” type and the “binge-eating-purging” type. The restricting type occurs when the individual severely limits food intake; the latter type can include “binge eating or purging behavior” along with highly restricted food consumption. Additionally, there are multiple etiologies of anorexic behavior which encompass genetic, social, and psychological theories.
Hombacher and other women with similar stories are prototypical examples of an enigmatic phenomenon—the incorporation of religious language, ideals, and goals into the mindset and behaviors which characterize anorexia nervosa. Anorexia is often purported to originate from biological, psychological, or social causes, and few have adequately considered why and how many modern women seem to link religious ideals like salvation, holiness, and purity with starving, in much the same way as medieval women seem to have done (as will be argued). Nonetheless, it is unquestionable that the disease is on the rise. According to one study, a shocking 20% of college-aged women suffer from some type of eating disorder. Up to another 40% manifest certain behaviors towards food which are similar to an eating disorder, such as occasional binging and purging as a means of weight control.\(^\text{11}\)

Various scholars have referred to both anorexic behavior and medieval female fasting as types of asceticism. Traditionally, asceticism has been understood as a form of self-denial which is believed to accompany the pursuit of some religious goal. Although a large number of experts claim that medieval fasting and anorexia should not be compared, many do propose that either or both behaviors are characterized by a version of asceticism which represents self-punishment; hatred or destruction of the body; pathology; masochism; and neurotic, obsessive, or excessively ritualized tendencies. This view implicitly derives much of its force from theories of asceticism and religion purported by Sigmund Freud and his followers. Nevertheless, understanding anorexia as a purely pathological, masochistic, or destructive behavior fails to take into account the significance of the explicitly religious language and goals which many anorectics envision as the purpose of their self-starvation. Understanding medieval fasting as asceticism through the same Freudian lens ignores many of the goals of that behavior which can shed light on religious purposes which may underlie anorexia nervosa in some of its sufferers.
Sociologist and religious theorist Max Weber took an entirely different approach to understanding and interpreting ascetic behavior. He proposed that the genuine ascetic was actively involved in the world, and that asceticism was a goal-directed and methodical practice for attaining religious salvation. He argued that it was a means to seek out and maintain an individual’s “state of grace”—an idea strongly reflected in Hombacher’s language of thinness as the modern “state of grace.” Weber’s idea of asceticism as an active and goal-directed behavior, which seeks out specific religious ideals, is a much better way to interpret the ascetic behavior of the anorectic female than are Freudian ideas of asceticism as purely pathological and obsessive. Weber’s ideas of goal-oriented asceticism have already been applied to cases of medieval fasting by scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum, but research in this field has yet to apply his understanding of asceticism as an appropriate lens through which to view anorexic behavior; this work seeks to begin to fill this gap in understanding.

Although medieval fasts and modern anorexia are not precisely the same phenomena, a Weberian, active understanding of asceticism could be applied to anorexia as well as to medieval fasting. The majority of scholars who oppose comparing the two behaviors are averse to comparison on the grounds that the “ideal states” which are being pursued are vastly different—namely, holiness for the medieval fasting woman, and thinness for the modern female anorectic. However, I will argue that “holiness” and “thinness” as ideal states are not perceived as differently as scholars seem to suppose, deriving evidence for this assertion from psychological research and the language used by anorectic women to describe their disorders, which is often replete with concepts which suggest the pursuit of specific religious goals (including holiness) through self-inflicted starvation. This similarity of ideal states (informed by Weber’s theory of “ideal types”) will serve as my basis for forging a theory of comparison between the two
phenomena. Furthermore, this common ground allows for comparing Bynum's application of Weberian theory to medieval fasting with a similar application of his theories to anorexia.

It is no longer adequate to regard anorexia through a primarily Freudian lens, as pure pathology or self-punishment, if anorectic females believe that they will acquire salvation, grace, or other desired religious goals by means of self-starvation. This is not to suggest that anorexia does not have some pathological or destructive elements; it is widely recognized as a disordered behavior which requires treatment and can lead to severe illness or even death. At the same time, understanding the disorder as purely pathological or destructive eclipses deeper motivations which may play a significant role in giving rise to anorexia. Moreover, one's theoretical orientation offers multiple ways in which anorexia could be called a "religious" phenomenon, some of which will be discussed at the end of this work, by applying some of the ideas of religious theorists such as Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx within the context of eating disorders. Thus, I will argue that Weber's theory of active asceticism should be applied to an understanding of anorexia nervosa as a disorder which often emerges in active pursuit of specific religious ideals.

Theories of Asceticism and the Body

"Is there anything about people that is not a feature of their bodies?"12

As indicated, both medieval fasts and anorexic self-starvation have been classified as ascetic practices. I will offer a general introduction to theories of asceticism and the body, and then consider both Freud's and Weber's views of asceticism, followed by an assessment of how predominant theories of asceticism today have tended to echo primarily Freudian ideas.
Asceticism and its accompanying behaviors have played a role in many cultures and religious traditions for centuries. Asceticism could be defined as a way to limit lifestyle excesses in pursuit of specific goals, typically religious ones. Wimbush and Valantasis proposed the following general definition, encompassing both negative and positive elements of asceticism:

Asceticism occurs either in the search for or in response to a believed-in sacred reality... within the wide spectrum that begins with commitment, dedication, singleness of mind, purity of heart, and self-discipline in prayer or meditation; that extends into practices of pilgrimage, fasting, vigils, celibacy, poverty, and obedience; and that may go on to further and sometimes extreme austerities, which border in the end upon clearly pathological excesses.  

Some categorize types of asceticism into functional opposites, such as “natural” and “unnatural” forms, claiming that “natural asceticism” is living simply but not purposely suffering, whereas “unnatural asceticism” seeks out extreme austerities, suffering, and even physical pain. Others simply focus on the practical aspects of asceticism as an “exercise” with certain goals in mind. French philosopher Michael Foucault, as an example, stated that an ascetic practice is essentially “an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being.”

The ancient Greek traditional philosophies from which asceticism emerged have lent themselves to vigorous debate concerning the modern meaning of the term. The word “ascetic” is derived from the Greek term askesis, which, according to Teresa Shaw, was related in the Greek Cynic and Stoic traditions to discipline, the avoidance of pleasure, physical discomfort, and the endurance of suffering. To the contrary, Ware emphasizes the more positive aspects of the Greek notion of askesis, calling it “training for happiness.” Others disagree somewhat with Shaw’s more negative concept of the Greek term, arguing that Plato and Aristotle used askesis simply to refer to training, and considered it similar to training for athletic competition—with an
emphasis on discipline and endurance, to be sure. At any rate, the Greek notion of *askesis* reflects the cultural origins and etymology of the modern term “asceticism,” and is not meant to reflect a modern functional definition of the word.

Scholars do tend to agree that ascetic behaviors are intricately related, in one way or another, to religion or religious goals. In fact, the body itself has long been viewed as a potential site of interaction between the human and the divine. This perspective tends to be particularly evident in religious traditions which value mystical experiences, spirit possession, or other such encounters which tend to meld the bodily and the spiritual in unique ways. Asceticism of any kind is intricately linked to the body, and the body has often been associated with both power and control. Indeed, Susan Bordo claims that the body is an “arena of control.” Yet she also recognizes that bodily control can be challenged, asserting, “the body is the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control.” She suggests that women may be more susceptible to “cultural manipulation of the body” because women have traditionally been associated with the body. In fact, Bordo argues that this cultural control over the female body has been vital to the continuation of the balance of power between the two sexes. She also describes other perceptions of the body which date back to the ancient Greeks, including the body as “alien”; the body as a prison; and the body as “the enemy.”

Furthermore, the body has also frequently been perceived as a site of power; Bordo claims that it is both “an instrument and medium of power.” Foucault also understood the relationship of the body to power. He wrote, “The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.” Other ideas focus not
primarily on the body as a source of power but on the unique interplay between body and soul. For instance, Margaret Miles argues that at its core, asceticism presumes that the body is connected with the soul; thus, what affects the body also affects the soul. Miles has proposed three attitudes of the body which she claims are characteristic of asceticism, particularly in the Christian tradition. They are “the body as foil for the soul, the body as problem, and the body as human condition.” When the body is a foil for the soul, it can be “ignored or denied for the sake of the soul’s health.” When it is seen as problem, it is “blamed” for the problems of the soul. Miles, however, believes that “asceticism takes the body as a condition when it makes it the intimate partner of the soul in learning, suffering, and salvation,” thus taking a relatively positive perspective on the use of body in ascetic practices.

Theories specific to the female body have also emerged; many stem from interpretations of ancient Greek ideas of the female body being inferior to the male body. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber proposes that this view derives from such Greek origins as Aristotle’s view of the female as an imperfect or incomplete version of the male. Moreover, in Galen’s ancient model of the female body, “the female sex is defined in large part as a cold, defective, incompletely developed version of the male.” Hesse-Biber argues that Aristotelian views of the body exerted tremendous influence on Christian doctrines concerning female physicality and the nature of gender itself. For instance, she cites St. Thomas Aquinas’ claim that the woman was “defective and misbegotten.” She further claims that modern culture continues to exert control over the female body. These varying notions of the body inform a modern understanding of female asceticism and its relationship to religious belief or practice.
Several of the classic religious theorists, particularly Max Weber and Sigmund Freud, also pondered on the links between asceticism and religious practice, and even on the nature of religion itself. Their views have proved influential for modern ideas concerning the characteristics of asceticism.

**Weber, Freud, and Theories of Asceticism**

"Had I lived in a culture where 'thinness' was not regarded as a strange state of grace, I might have sought out another means of attaining that grace."\(^{30}\)

In his seminal work *Economy and Society*, sociologist and religious theorist Max Weber (1864-1920) defined the ascetic lifestyle as such: "We shall designate [an] attitude toward salvation, which is characterized by a methodical procedure for achieving religious salvation, as 'ascetic.'" Additionally, he defined salvation as "the distinctive gift of active ethical behavior performed in the awareness . . . that the actor is an instrument of god."\(^{31}\) Thus, the very nature of Weber's concept of asceticism regarded it as a goal-oriented method for attaining a religious aspiration. He further defined asceticism as fitting into one of two categories: "world-rejecting"\(^{32}\) and "inner-worldly."\(^{33}\) He defined "world-rejecting asceticism," his first category, in this way:

Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the 'world': from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities—in short, from all creaturely interests.

This world-rejecting asceticism contrasts with Weber's second type, which is exemplified when the religious individual sees himself as the "elect instrument of god" in the world and believes it is necessary to participate in a transformation of the surrounding world. This latter category is "inner-worldly" asceticism. Weber went on to argue that while ascetics may regard aspects and activities of the world with due disdain, many of them feel compelled to be involved with the
world as their only arena for expressing ethical behavior and ideals. Without this opportunity for ethical behavior, the ascetic may not be assured of his "state of grace"—salvation. According to Daniel Pals' interpretation, Weber asserted that the world offers "myriad temptations, not only in the pleasures and diversions it offers, but also because it promotes complacency in an individual and distracts her from the uniquely necessary concentration on active achievements leading to salvation."35

Weber claimed that the ascetic can be continually certain that he remains in a "state of grace" as a result of his realization that he possesses the "power to act" and to "serve god." In defining the ascetic lifestyle, Weber focused predominantly on the relationship between asceticism and goal-oriented, methodical activity. In fact, the idea of inactivity or passivity was far more characteristic of the mystic's "flight from the world" than it was of the ascetic individual's life. He argued that the mystic ceases all activity in order to experience a profound state of union with the divine. Contrasting the functional roles of the ascetic and the mystic, he argued that the ascetic sees herself as the "instrument" of God, whereas the mystic sees himself as the "vessel" of God. Such a distinction implies that Weber applied a much greater agency to the ascetic than to the mystic. Both have ready access to divine power, indeed, but it is the ascetic more than the mystic who actively uses this power to accomplish God's work in the world. In fact, Weber suggested that the ascetic not only would fail to embrace the passivity of the mystic, but also would be disgusted by it, regarding it as an "ascetically reprehensible self-indulgence." Weber continued to emphasize his central argument, that the ascetic "finds the certification of his state of grace precisely in his behavior in the world... for the ascetic, the certainty of salvation always demonstrates itself in rational action."36
Scholars such as Huline-Dickens also emphasize that Weber’s idea of asceticism as disciplined and rational was a key component of the “spirit of capitalism” among Protestants. It is this ascetic spirit which he argued drove economic success in his landmark work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Indeed, Weber’s “spirit of capitalism” is characterized by this disciplined, thrifty, ascetic behavior he described—a “new ethic” applied within the world.

Weber also presented theories concerning ritual and how it might be incorporated into a broader religious framework. These notions suggest that he would not have regarded asceticism as overly ritualistic—rather, he would have been more prone to characterize mysticism in that way. He suggested that ritual, which would traditionally be most readily associated with asceticism, could actually be linked with a mystical experience. He strongly emphasized that asceticism and mysticism were two extremely different means of approaching the world, primarily based on their relationship to activity and passivity. He wrote, “In contrast to asceticism, contemplation is primarily the quest to achieve rest in god and in him alone. It entails inactivity,” because activity may distract the contemplative mystic from his ultimate goal of union with the divine.

Weber argued, “When the occasional devotion induced by ritual is escalated into a continuing piety and the effort is made to incorporate this piety into everyday living, this ritualistic piety most readily takes on a mystical character.” He even claimed that “in ritualism the psychological condition striven for ultimately leads directly away from rational activity.” In fact, Weber likened “pure ritualism” to magical practices. Thus, having characterized rational activity as the predominant sphere of the ascetic, and ritualism as the opposite of this activity,
Weber and his theory stand in stark contrast to an idea of asceticism as overly ritualized or obsessive. Indeed, he claimed that "the person who lives as a worldly ascetic is a rationalist."41

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and his daughter Anna Freud proposed ideas concerning ascetic behavior—and religion as a general construct—which differ markedly from Weber’s views. Although probably best known for his work in the field of psychology and for pioneering the psychoanalytic (also called the psychodynamic) theory, Freud was a theorist of religion as well. His diverse scholarship in both psychological and religious subject matter make his work an important source for integrating insights from both of these disciplines into an analysis of medieval fasting and anorexia nervosa. His definition of religion laid the foundation for ideas on asceticism which stem from his theory.

Freud called religion a “universal obsessional neurosis.” In a 1907 article entitled “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” he began to develop this idea after observing many similarities between the practices of religious individuals and the “neurotic” patients that he treated in his clinical practice. More specifically, Freud noted that both groups of people tended to be focused on performing rituals and were likely to experience guilt if they failed to follow these rituals appropriately. As a result of these perceived commonalities, Freud came to argue that religion was essentially synonymous with mental illness.42 He also believed that religion was similar to the immaturity of childhood, and that religion as a form of neurosis often follows a childhood trauma.43

In his classic work on religion, The Future of an Illusion, Freud argued that religion imagines God in order to have a source of comfort or solace in a world where humans face the uncertainty of suffering and death. In this sense, he called religion an “illusion,” believing it to
be a childlike characteristic that could and should be outgrown with the maturity afforded by reason and science. Freud further argued that religion arose as a response to emotional distress or weakness; once psychoanalysis could adequately deal with these problems, he predicted that religion would cease to be a key component of the human experience. He specified that the "illusions" to which he referred were not necessarily errors. Instead, he suggested that the primary feature of an illusion was that it served to fulfill "the strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind." He argued that religion as neurosis was puerile and that growth inevitably involved a rejection of religion as a denial of reality. In fact, he called religious practice a "childhood neurosis" out of which mankind eventually grows. He also claimed that religion could be readily incorporated into his widely-known "structural" theory of personality, concerning the id, ego, and superego. Specifically, he theorized that religious practices emerge in response to the suppression of the base instincts of the id, a guilt resulting from temptation by instincts, and a fear of punishment. He also argued that penitential acts among the religiously devout were direct manifestations of the religious person's "obsessional neurosis."

Influenced by her father's theories of religion as neurosis, Freud's daughter Anna elaborated on how asceticism, not only religion as a general construct, might be obsessional or neurotic. In her work The Ego and Mechanisms of Defence, she proposed that asceticism was a key defense mechanism adopted during the period of adolescence. She believed that asceticism during the adolescent years tended to grow more severe and restrictive over time. However, she felt that it, at its core, represented conflict between the forces of the ego and the instincts, along with repression and defense. This echoes Freud's own assertion that religious teachings represented "the effects of repression." Thus, she seems to have believed that asceticism could
become an obsessive practice which came to take over more and more aspects of the young person’s life, threatening healthy development of ego and instinctual drives. 49

The ways scholars have interpreted Freud demonstrate the strong impact which his link between neurosis and religion continues to have today. Glucklich has summarized Freud’s views in this manner: “All forms of religious activity—from simple rituals to self-mutilation—were expressions of deep underlying psychic causes, ranging from neurosis to clinical masochism.” 50 Thus, Freud seems to have introduced the link between religious ritual and masochism, and Anna Freud seems to have developed the connection she perceived between asceticism and neurosis. In fact, Freud specifically defined a masochistic action as “a tendency which has self-destruction as its aim” and one “in which satisfaction is conditional upon suffering physical or mental pain.” 51

As I will now discuss, Freudian views of the masochistic, neurotic, and pathological nature of asceticism and religion seem to have predominated in modern analyses of asceticism, while Weber’s theory of active asceticism has been largely ignored, leading to problematic conclusions concerning the ascetic nature of both medieval fasts and anorexia.

_Asceiticism as Self-Hatred, Self-Punishment, or Obsessive Pathology_

Although there seems to be a thriving debate concerning the issue, the perspective on asceticism which has come to predominate views ascetic practice through a rather myopic lens which relies too heavily on Freud’s ideas or their derivatives. This is not to say that Freud’s ideas are fully wrong; nonetheless, the views to which they have given rise are incomplete. The characterization of asceticism which consequently emerges is incomplete for understanding either medieval fasting or anorexia nervosa as manifestations of an ascetic—or religious—mindset. The modern popular view of asceticism is that it is a form of masochistic self-denial or
a particularly insidious form of psychopathology which wars against the body. This view labels asceticism with terms like these: pathological, masochistic, self-punishing, excessively self-denying, neurotic, obsessive, self-hating, and aimed at bodily destruction.

Sarah Huline-Dickens is one scholar who seems to readily endorse this view. She has suggested that the ascetic refusal to eat is a form of punishment or penitence for a woman, arguing, “According to the scriptures, eating brought sin into the world.” She writes that a woman’s greed for the “forbidden fruit” led to the fall of man, and thus, abstaining from food is “penitential and the means to redeem the sinner.”52 She further asserts, “In the pursuit of asceticism, masochistic satisfaction can be procured from renunciation and self-mortification.” Huline-Dickens’ view is exactly the sort of caricature of asceticism which is incomplete, and even somewhat misleading in the case of how it can aid in understanding anorexia nervosa. She directly compares anorexia to other forms of religious asceticism, but even her comparison is rife with Freudian terminology. She writes:

There are plainly many features common to both contemporary anorexia and the religious ascetic: the pursuit of an impossible or unrealizable ideal, passivity and sacrifice for others, and heroic behaviors such as relentless self-discipline and self-denial. There is additionally excessive guilt associated with a drive for self-punishment and tendencies to obsessional and ritualistic behaviors . . . these observations may be conceptually useful for understanding the relationship between neurosis and religion.53 Just as Freud did, she essentially endorses a direct connection between neurosis and religious ascetic behavior, as well as an idea of asceticism as self-punishment.

As another example, David Rampling also sees connections between the ascetic and the modern anorectic which typify the predominant view of asceticism as being self-hatred, self-punishment, or neurotic pathology. In his article “Ascetic Ideals and Anorexia Nervosa,” he
argues that Catherine of Siena (one of the medieval saints known for her fasting behaviors) and modern anorectics are connected both in terms of self-hatred and in their relentless pursuit of perfection. He then claims that “the asceticism of anorexia nervosa may appear perverse rather than good, debased rather than noble, foolish rather than heroic, but even in its most misguided forms it may contain within itself an ineradicable element of the numinous.” Helen Malson also embodies this typical view of anorexia as a form of ascetic self-punishment. She mentions that this eating disorder has often been deemed a form of “self-pathology,” also claiming that the behaviors of anorexia “are often construed in terms of self-punishment.”

Other scholars seem to view asceticism only in terms of its accompanying self-denial, while ignoring the goals which often accompany it. Some have even generalized all forms of self-denial as variations on the common theme of asceticism. For instance, Freiberger suggests, “Raising asceticism to a more abstract level of cultural theory, we can consider all self-restraint and self-denial ‘ascetic.’” Owsei Temkin stated that the idea of the ascetic who tortures the body, yet still lives a long life, is “almost a necessary postulate of hagiography,” aptly capturing the way the Freudian notion of asceticism as masochism or neurosis has permeated our cultural imagination with respect to the term.

Caroline Giles Banks explains that this view of asceticism has thrived not only in academics, but in clinical circles as well. She writes, “Clinicians working with contemporary women with anorexia nervosa have commented on the ascetic component in anorexia, meaning their self-denial, heightened morality, opposition between body and spirit, asexuality, and denial of bodily death.” Fassino et al. conducted a psychological study on the occurrence of asceticism in 154 patients with anorexia nervosa, and their research and definitions of asceticism
reveal the influence this view has exerted clinically. The authors of the study explain that one of the most commonly used questionnaires to understand eating disorders (also called EDs), the Eating Disorders Inventory 2 or EDI-2, includes a subscale concerning asceticism, defined as such: "Asceticism measures the tendency to pursue spiritual ideals such as self-discipline, self-denial, self-limitations, hypercontrol over body needs, and self-sacrifice." They also strongly capture the popular notion of asceticism as related to social or psychological deviance. They explain that "asceticism has often been referred to as a deviant behavior motivated by subconscious guilt or masochism." This demonstrates that the way asceticism is defined could have long-ranging diagnostic and therapeutic consequences for subjects with anorexia. Indeed, Fassino et al. claim that asceticism, defined this way and assessed by the EDI-2, predicts poorer prognoses in anorectic individuals. The authors of this study used multiple linear regression models to establish that asceticism, defined as above, was correlated with anger and "pathologic perfectionism" in the anorectic subjects. Others, like Glucklich, even relate asceticism on some level to the self-mutilation of some psychiatric patients today, again focusing on the "pain" of asceticism and the view that it is synonymous with bodily destruction.

Additionally, Susan Bordo has briefly hinted at how strongly a Freudian, pathological orientation has governed modern understandings of the etiology of anorexia nervosa as a form of asceticism. Indeed, she claims that while scholars certainly give culture or other factors some credit in giving rise to anorexia, they typically consider culture to be little more than a contributing factor to an "existing pathological condition," rather than a driving factor. In other words, the core of anorexia is seen as a pure pathology, while other motivations behind these behaviors are often undermined. These views of asceticism are incomplete because the ascetic behaviors of both medieval women and modern anorectics are performed not in order to destroy...
the body, but rather as a direct means to accomplishing certain highly valued religious goals. It is inaccurate to call the behavior of these women simply self-punishment, pathology, self-denial, or masochism if the women believe(d) that their actions will be instrumental in achieving grace, purity, salvation, holiness, or other related goals. Moreover, to deem their behavior purely pathological or self-punishing relies too heavily on Freud while missing Weber’s contribution considering the ascetic’s rational activity as a method geared towards religious ends, such as the achievement of salvation.

Because Weber believed that the goal of asceticism was to acquire salvation, which can only be certain through rational action, it follows that he would be unable to endorse any notion of completely pathological asceticism—or even any separation of ascetic behavior from the agency and choice of the individual. Indeed, the popular notion of the ascetic’s behavior as masochistic or pathological is nowhere to be found in his conception of the term. On the contrary, he asserted that “activity in the world” is virtually non-negotiable for the ascetic to achieve her goal, which is “a capacity for action by god’s grace.” The assurance of salvation for the ascetic always comes through “rational action . . . governed by principles and rules.”

Thus, ideas of asceticism as primarily self-punishing, obsessive, masochistic, and ritualistic, rather than active and goal-oriented, derive a much greater portion of their legacy from Freud than from Weber. Freud’s theory is certainly not without merit—for instance, a focus on ritual does appear to play some role in the experience of many anorectics, and it is possible that Weber did not fully consider the role that ritual can play in the ascetic experience. However, Freud’s understanding of asceticism was quite limited and failed to recognize factors which are central to ascetic practice. Freudian theory and subtle, even “unconscious,” adaptations of it have
largely permeated modern scholarly conceptions of asceticism, leaving a major gap in popular understanding of the term.

Rudolph Bell, one of the most central scholars of medieval female asceticism, also seems to have heavily endorsed Freudian theories in his work, causing him to present an incomplete picture of these practices which Bynum’s scholarship later sought to rectify. It is to these medieval scholars that I now turn.

**Rudolph Bell and Medieval Fasting: Holy Anorexia**

Rudolph Bell penned his seminal work *Holy Anorexia* in 1985. Although not linked to his central thesis, Bell offers a concise and helpful analysis concerning some possible origins of religious asceticism. He asserts that the “ascetic impulse” was rooted more in Greek or Eastern traditions than Judeo-Christian texts. For instance, the New Testament does not present a precedent for holy anorexia. Bell implies that perhaps the opposite is true: “Indeed, injunctions against excessive fasting and indifference to strict Jewish dietary laws abound.” Furthermore, in addition to this view presented in the Gospels, the epistles of the apostle Paul caution readers against “false asceticism.” Bell argues that Greek and Eastern beliefs of the dualistic nature of body and soul lend themselves more to asceticism than the early Christian texts. For example, he cites the dualistic ideas of the Pythagoreans, Euripides, and Plato as foundational for asceticism.66

Bell’s overarching theory in *Holy Anorexia* is that medieval women embraced asceticism through fasting in order to rebel against the limitations inherent to their patriarchal society and their social position. He writes that the phenomenon he calls “holy anorexia” occurred when the
“obedient and submissive girl . . . rebels against the world around her in a desperate effort to establish a sense of self.” Bell further argues that the extreme fasting which characterized holy anorexia was not only rooted in a rebellion against women’s social position, but was also directed against dominant aspects of the religion of the time. For instance, he writes, “The holy anorexic rebels against passive, vicarious, dependent Christianity . . . she actively seeks an intimate, physical union with God.” The central theme of Bell’s book is that women embraced holy anorexia out of a desire to shape their own destinies.

Bell proposes that women, in addition to wanting to command their own destinies, often engaged in patterns of holy anorexia in order to be perceived as being holy. The pursuit of holiness through fasting is a recurring theme. For instance, concerning Clare of Assisi, Bell writes that her “destruction of bodily desires . . . was presented as an ideal [of holiness] to be emulated by all pious women.” He explains that many women who modeled holy anorexia “ultimately were canonized as glorious examples of heroic virtue.”

Nonetheless, Bell argues that this type of fasting behavior began to lose its credibility over time, particularly in the early part of the sixteenth century. He explains that this change occurred as male ways of assessing and judging female piety shifted dramatically with time, claiming:

Holy anorexia was an accepted behavior pattern indicating God’s special favor bestowed upon a woman of enormous interior strength. With the Reformation, however, autonomous female piety came to be seen variously as insane, demoniacal, and heretical . . . male responses [to women’s piety] became increasingly suspicious and negative.

He also argues that eventually the interpretation of holy anorexia as heretical gave way to its interpretation as an illness. But, “illness was not saintly, and so holy anorexia disappeared as an
inspired mode of religious self-assertion." In other words, holy anorexia eventually died out as male authorities adopted a pathological interpretation of it. Bell offers a few explanations for this change in male perception; he explains that religious literature circulating at the time came to focus more on the lust, disobedience, and weakness of women; these literary ideas, rooted in sources as varied as the story of Eve and the myth of Pandora, may have served to inculcate some of this increasing male suspicion. Moreover, the cult of Mary Magdalen was gaining force at this time; it focused on channeling lust and heightened sexuality into extreme ascetic behaviors, ultimately further denigrating the reputation of women. Ultimately, according to Bell, women’s goals of self-assertion and control were thwarted: “Whereas men might achieve sainthood as champions of the faith who spread the true word around the globe, women’s path to official recognition confined them to a sickbed.”

Although Bell’s assertion that women fasted in order to be regarded as holy and to acquire greater self-determination appears valid, and is substantiated by other scholars, his work contains a subtle yet significant weakness. Bell concludes by arguing that the phenomenon of holy anorexia, which arose as a way for women to challenge their social and religious positions, disappeared when it failed to be recognized by male authorities as a route to holiness. If this argument is accurate, it implies that the phenomenon of holy anorexia was controlled by male opinion, rather than being a genuine—or ultimately successful—way to challenge women’s social position. If holy anorexia rose in popularity and then declined in response to male opinions of its validity, then it was merely a reaction to social structure, not a legitimate challenge to the social world of the day, as he seems to suggest. In the afterword to *Holy Anorexia*, clinical psychologist William Davis agrees with Bell’s final assertion, claiming, “Self-starvation lost its appeal for Catholic women when it became irrelevant as a means to gain the highly valued state
of holiness." It seems that the key flaw in Bell's methodology is that he proposes holy anorexia as a challenge to, even a rebellion against, patriarchal authority, but yet he believes that its appearance rose and fell directly in response to the legitimacy it was afforded by this same source of authority.

Bell uses Freudian theory extensively in his analysis, and it seems plausible that, although he does not directly reference Freudian views of asceticism and religion, he was sufficiently influenced by Freud's views to be unable to describe ascetic fasting as a truly active and rational phenomenon, instead painting it as merely reacting to male opinion. If Bell endorsed Freud's views of asceticism and religion, it would be a leap indeed to move from Freud's pathological orientation to adequately describe ascetic fasting as a goal-oriented method of shaping destinies and acquiring holiness. Thus, Freudian influence may have prompted Bell to ultimately give the reader a picture of holy anorexia as reactive rather than truly destiny-shaping.

As evidence that Bell may well have internalized Freudian views, he takes a highly psychodynamic approach to the issue of medieval fasting, proposing that women's experiences in childhood and even infancy, as well as their family structures, helped to give rise to the phenomenon of holy anorexia. He describes the classic pattern of holy anorexia as occurring when a "superficially obedient but deeply strong-willed child is brought up in great religiosity... in her early teens her father takes over and presses her to marry." Next, the daughter refuses, displaying the "classic anorexic syndrome" as a way of resisting her father's will. Eventually, the woman becomes actually unable to eat, but ultimately recovers to a less extreme but still rigorous pattern of fasting. Through it all, Bell claims that the woman struggles against men who "interfere with her desire to experience God directly and personally as a fully autonomous
individual.” In a manner highly reminiscent of Freudian theory, Bell proposes early childhood experiences which he argued often contributed to holy anorexia; among them are a doting mother or the girl’s traumatic experience of the death of a loved one at a young age. Bell even focuses on how experiences of infancy could affect later behavior. For instance, of Catherine of Siena, he writes, “Catherine’s infancy left her with an enormous capacity for faith and with a very strong need for autonomy”—both of which he argues strongly influenced her trajectory into holy anorexia later in life. Thus, these psychodynamic influences in Bell’s work suggest that his theories of holy anorexia were formed with elements of Freud’s theory.

Moreover, Bell clearly indicates that he ultimately conceptualized medieval female asceticism as being rooted in a desire to obliterate the body, which is very reminiscent of Freud’s conception of masochism. He claims, “Holy anorexics . . . believed their bodies could not be purified and actively sought to destroy them.” Bell asserts that these women had a “drive for destruction of the body.” He writes about the medieval woman’s desire to become the bride of Christ, and he theorizes about how her view of her body evolved in this process: “In this quest their bodies became impediments, painful reminders of the earthly realities they sought to transcend.” Thus, his arguments align with the idea of asceticism through fasting as a largely pathological means for self-destruction. He directly echoes Freud’s view of masochism as “a tendency which has self-destruction as its aim.” With his emphasis on destruction of the body, Bell’s interpretation of medieval asceticism seems to incorporate Freudian perspectives on ascetic practice.

Other scholars of medieval ascetic practices—Caroline Walker Bynum and Joan Jacobs Brumberg, among others—present a significantly different view of these behaviors than Bell.
They suggest throughout their research that medieval women actively engaged in ascetic fasting for specific purposes, often religious ones, and they do not endorse the view that their asceticism was primarily a reaction to male authorities or originating from an urge for destruction of the body, as Bell seems to do. Thus, their views of asceticism employ Weberian theories of ascetic practice much more than Freudian theories. The active purposes of medieval fasting, or the goals to which it was oriented, encompass several essential categories: asceticism for the purpose of being viewed as holy or encountering the divine; as imitation of Christ through suffering and service; and as manipulation of family, culture, and religious authorities. Each of these categories will be discussed in turn, along with an analysis of how Weberian theory may have directly or indirectly influenced this more active conceptualization of ascetic behavior.

**Fasting as a Route to Holiness and Encountering the Divine**

Joan Jacobs Brumberg seems to interpret medieval fasting along the lines of Bordo’s theories of body related to control and power, rather than according to the more spartan ideas of the ancient Greeks. Her arguments suggest that fasting was a behavior directly linked with positive opinions of the women who engaged in it; for example, it was related to perceptions of female behavior as being both miraculous and holy. Brumberg states that in medieval Europe, “many women refused their food and prolonged fasting was considered a female miracle.” Catherine of Siena and Columba of Rieti are both examples of women whose ascetic behaviors resulted in their being popularly perceived as holy. According to Brumberg, fasting was generally not considered to be an abnormal behavior in the societal periphery. Rather, “in the medieval period, fasting was fundamental to the model of female holiness.”
Brumberg proposes that the physical gap left by extreme fasting was often filled by profound religious or spiritual experience. She writes that women who survived without eating "found other forms of food" such as prayer and the Eucharist. Brumberg further argues, "Many medieval women spoke of their ‘hunger’ for God and their ‘inebriation’ with the holy wine. Many fasted in order to feast at the delicious banquet of God."

Bynum concurs, asserting that medieval people wrote of "eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God." As a matter of fact, a medieval Christian was required by church law to fast at certain times and to receive communion at least once a year—"thus, the behavior that defined a Christian was food-related behavior."

Teresa Shaw also argues that fasting was prominent in the medieval period at least in part because it was purported to provide one with the best possible access to the divine, and also was a way of rectifying sin. Early Christian writers such as Chrysostom suggest that human fasting is a redress for the first sin, the eating or "gluttony" in the Garden of Eden. Shaw proposes an interesting theory to explain why fasting may have been so intricately linked to connections with God or the divine:

By fasting we imitate or return to the original state of humanity before the fall... fasting recalls the early state of innocence and detachment from concerns for acquiring food and maintaining a food supply. To fast is symbolically to remove oneself from the worldly obsession with food and the fear of hunger and death, and to align oneself instead with those who were free to contemplate and to commune with the divine... In the Genesis story of creation, the fall and punishment of the first humans was made perpetually real in the experience of the human body... In the same way, progress back toward intimacy with God is also played out in the body.

Scholars therefore acknowledge, often quite readily, that asceticism through fasting was a key part of female holiness and related to experiences or encounters with the divine. This active
pursuit of holiness through fasting could be analogous to the attitude of Weber’s inner-worldly ascetic, who actively pursued ethical behavior through various forms of asceticism.

**Fasting as Imitation of Christ through Suffering and Service**

Another active purpose for medieval ascetic behaviors which scholars have identified is to imitate Christ through fasting. This could also help to further explain the gender differences in ascetic behavior; traditionally, women were seen as being more physical, while men were viewed as being more spiritual and rational. Thus, the physical was the predominant arena in which women were capable of imitating Christ. Medieval theology also focused on the crucifixion and the physicality and agony of Christ as the vehicle of salvation. These themes resulted in a strong link between food behaviors, suffering, and salvation. Women were viewed as a representation of Christ’s humanity. The flesh of Christ was associated with his mother Mary, and by extension, women in general. Indeed, in rituals like the Eucharist, “women ate and became a God who was food and flesh.” Bynum even uses sexual language to refer to the ascetic’s experience of imitating Christ “through asceticism and through eroticism.”

Bynum also explains that the self-starvation of women was often viewed by the women and by their hagiographers as “redemptive suffering.” In fact, one of the primary models which seems to have played a role in women’s ascetic experiences was the idea that suffering in the flesh could be substituted for later suffering (in purgatory or otherwise), and that “by suffering one could redeem others as well as oneself.” Beyond theory, Bynum offers many examples in support of her points. For example, she gives an arresting vignette of the life of Lidwina, who fasted to extremes and eventually, as it is reported, came to eat nothing at all. Lidwina specifically displayed this idea of asceticism as suffering; she perceived fasting and illness as
being the same phenomenon, and both as being forms of “redemptive suffering.” Lidwina gave to others the food that she herself would not consume—she saw her ascetic suffering as purposeful, for it was a service and substitution for others.86

Bynum emphasizes that the women themselves, such as Lidwina, saw their fasting as “redemptive suffering” and “service.”87 She argues that women “sometimes had an almost quantitative, calculating sense of the results of their pious activity”—some women literally “counted the number of souls they were allotted to remove from purgatory.” Bynum claims that both feeding and fasting were used by women to express love for others as well as love for God.88 Thus fasting was purposeful self-sacrifice, and the lines between charity, service, and asceticism were often blurred. For instance, many women would feed the poor, cure others, and fast or become ill while considering their suffering to be on behalf of those in purgatory. In so doing, their fasting was not oriented towards bodily destruction but towards service of others. This emphasis on charity and service reflects the Weberian idea of orientation toward, rather than away from, the surrounding world.

Fasting as Manipulation of Family and Environment

Along with suffering in service to others, fasting and other food-related behaviors, such as consumption of the Eucharist, were also a way for women to “manipulate religious authorities.” For example, it is often reported that women were able to detect unconsecrated hosts or corrupt priests when the Eucharist was administered. In fact, Bynum suggests that this role was a decidedly female one: “criticism of corrupt clergy was . . . the special role of religious women.” In addition to religious authorities, ascetic fasting could be used to humiliate or manipulate family members. For instance, it was a way to reject family values (or family
members, for that matter), and to avoid or reject arranged or undesired marriages. Bynum asserts that “women’s food practices were effective ways of shaping their lives, of rejecting roles they did not desire, of criticizing and redirecting the values of husbands and parents.” The goal of rejecting family values or planned marriages through fasting is, in many ways, a wholly secular one; nonetheless, although not a “religious” goal per se, it still demonstrates the active (and even manipulative) goal-oriented purposes behind medieval asceticism. In some ways, it reflects Weber’s notion of the ascetic’s offering a social critique and seeking to transform his society. Thus, any number of these instrumental goals could underlie a medieval woman’s ascetic experience.

I would argue that one of the reasons that Bynum in particular develops her understanding of medieval ascetic fasting as so active and goal-directed is her reliance on Weber’s theory of inner-worldly and world-rejecting asceticism. Although she argues that Weber’s strict dichotomy of the two types might not apply extremely well to medieval cases, she does seem to favor his theories of asceticism to some extent because she finds his ideas more accurate than those of many medieval scholars (presumably scholars like Bell himself), who see “asceticism as self-punishment or self-denial based in some kind of practical dualism (that is, a sense of matter or body as evil).” She agrees with Weber’s conception of asceticism as being focused on “discipline and method.” Bynum does offer one modification to Weber’s general theory (in addition to her caveat that his two categories cannot be purely applied to medieval women). She claims that medieval female asceticism was “inner-worldly” to an even greater degree than Weber assumed—in her analysis, medieval women were involved in many charitable and other related activities which oriented them towards the public sphere. Bynum, overall, seems to generally embrace most aspects of Weber’s theory of asceticism—quite
possibly because he portrayed asceticism in the “active” sense of which she in her own writing is a strong proponent. In attempting to apply his ideas to medieval female ascetic behaviors, she suggests that the medieval women embodied, essentially, all of Weber’s categories. Bynum argues that these women were both ascetics and mystics—because their “ascetic suffering” was capable of producing mystical union “with the suffering Christ.” Thus, Bynum and Weber do not see eye-to-eye concerning the relationship between asceticism and mysticism, but Bynum still readily endorses the key aspects of his theory of inner-worldly asceticism. These many examples of possible motivations for female ascetic fasting all work against the myopic, but common, description of the religiosity of medieval women as “masochistic and pathological.” Bynum argues instead for a completely different understanding of asceticism as “systematic, disciplined, determined self-manipulation with the understanding that the result of such manipulation is both beneficial to neighbor and a path to God.”

Interestingly, when comparing the theories of Bell and Bynum, Bell attempts to embrace both sides of the view of asceticism that Bynum believes are fundamental opposites: asceticism as a masochistic bodily destruction, and asceticism as “active and seeking.” For example, he writes the following of Catherine of Siena, the prototypical medieval ascetic who engaged not only in fasting but in other ascetic practices such as self-flagellation and sleeping on a wooden board: “Her anorexia did not in itself determine the path of her religious expression, nor the reverse. Rather, the entirety of her active and seeking asceticism developed out of a personality forged in a familial context that Catherine never abandoned.” Thus, Bell does not seem to view fasting as an active, goal-directed behavior and fasting as a destruction of the body as mutually exclusive or even functionally opposite categories, as Bynum seems to do.
An understanding of asceticism as active, rather than self-destructive or reflecting bodily hatred, can be influential for perhaps understanding some of the instrumental purposes behind anorexia nervosa in modern women, which is frequently considered a type of "modern asceticism." Weberian-influenced theories like Bynum’s ideas can be applied, on some level, to offer a clearer or more complete understanding of the goals which may underlie the fasting which characterizes anorexia nervosa.

**Comparisons Between Medieval Asceticism and Anorexia Nervosa**

Scholars debate on the issue of whether medieval fasting should be considered to be anorexia nervosa, and, conversely, whether modern anorectics can be said to fast for essentially the same reasons as medieval women did. A number of researchers agree that some underlying constructs may be present both in medieval fasting and in modern anorexia nervosa. Richards makes a claim to this effect: "Many [scholars] agree that ancient self-starvation or asceticism and modern anorexia nervosa are both fueled by women's need for more control, autonomy, and individuation in a male-dominated society." Scholars such as Gail Corrington also discern key similarities between the two sets of behaviors. Corrington claims that both modern anorectics and medieval ascetics associated fasting with sexual abstinence, both arenas for self-control. She writes, "Anorexia is described by anorectics themselves as a form of *askesis*, a discipline of the body for the sake of a 'higher purpose.'" She also refers to the notion of spiritual fulfillment coming about through physical fasting and the freeing qualities of genuine asceticism, citing Teresa of Avila’s advice to "forget the body a little and cultivate the spirit." Corrington concludes that, "*Askesis* is not experienced as self-destructive, but as self-liberating."
Susan Bordo ascertains that one can compare medieval ascetic fasting to anorexia nervosa because of the deep spiritual, psychological, and moral components of our cultural fixation on thinness—some of the same components which she believes characterized the ascetic fasts of the saints. She suggests that, “Women’s projects to transcend hunger and desire . . . reveal some continuous elements.” Bordo also argues that there are certain “axes of continuity” which enable comparison between the two sets of phenomena. The three axes are the dualist axis, the control axis, and the gender/ power axis. These are essentially three lenses through which she believes a comparison between medieval and modern asceticism is viable. The dualist axis is based on the idea that existence is separated into two areas: body and all that accompanies it, and mind or spirit. It is within this axis of continuity that Bordo locates her theories of the body being alien, a limitation, and an enemy. She believes that the desire to control the body, and to cause it to be subjugated to the mind, is just as applicable today in the life of the anorectic as it was in the times of Plato or Descartes.

Bordo also identifies another axis of continuity which she calls the “control axis.” This is the axis on which she locates the incredible urge of the anorectic to exert total control over her body and, ultimately, her life. She notes that the anorectic is often a perfectionist who begins a diet and then unwittingly gets enmeshed in the control and accomplishment she believes it offers her, thus continuing to lose more and more weight. Bordo implies that this focus on control of one’s own life is just as applicable now as it was for medieval saints. Her third axis of continuity is the gender/ power axis. This is the idea that the anorectic, just as much as the fasting saint, fears womanhood and, more specifically, cultural notions of femininity. She claims that the anorectic is afraid of the “archetypal image of the female: as hungering, voracious, all-needling, and all-wanting.”
In spite of these proposed similarities or forms of continuity, a large number of scholars, including Bynum and Brumberg themselves, have reservations about comparing medieval fasting behaviors to modern anorexia. Bynum says that this fasting, just like anorexia today, seems to have biological causes, but it is also deeply grounded in a cultural context. She points out that neither dieting nor thinness were considered important in the medieval world, so this is not a lens through which one could call the women’s fasting behavior “anorexic.” She concedes that it is possible that some other conceptions of modern anorexia could be applied to medieval cases, though problematically.¹⁰¹ One of the reasons that Bynum is so hesitant to compare medieval fasting and modern anorexia is because she claims that differences in social and cultural factors play into these behaviors more than biological explanations. She says that anorexic behavior is, at its core, a learned behavior; she supports this assumption with the claim that a purely biochemically rooted behavior would never fluctuate as widely with time and place as anorexia is known to do. Ultimately, anorexia must be placed in its cultural context, which she claims is very different from the medieval period. She explains also that varying theories of etiology take entirely different approaches to understanding anorexia, and she asserts that the psychodynamic approach does view it as a form of neurosis.

When Bynum discusses whether it would ever be possible to compare medieval fasts with anorexic self-starvation, she emphasizes that it is important to differentiate between “primary” and “atypical” cases of anorexia. Primary anorexia is a way of exerting power and control over body and self, while atypical anorexia involves an obsession with food that does not correspond to significant changes in body size. Bynum argues that it is easier and more accurate to relate some medieval fasting behaviors to atypical anorexia rather than primary anorexia because of their odd behaviors related to food and eating. She also explains that many medieval
fasting women experienced the "euphoria," "hyperactivity," and other symptoms which also characterize anorexia nervosa. Thus, she does discern some possible similarities. Yet, she writes that the psychodynamic theory of anorexia is "both reductionistic and individualistic in its approach to causation." Ultimately, she argues that while some modern psychological factors may have played a role in medieval fasting behaviors, the cultural setting must be recognized.  

In a similar vein, Brumberg’s primary concern about comparing medieval and modern scenarios of asceticism is that such a comparison would be "reductionist" and fail to take into account the vastly different cultural contexts which are at work in both cases. She also argues that the routes to "holy anorexia" and anorexia nervosa are very different. She claims that modern researchers tend to assume that if medieval women stopped eating and developed amenorrhea, they had anorexia—when even today, those symptoms do not necessarily imply a diagnosis of anorexia. She writes, "Although Catherine of Siena and Karen Carpenter do have something in common—the use of food as a symbolic language—it is as inappropriate to call the former an anorectic as it is to cast the latter as a saint." Brumberg concludes her argument by suggesting that the claim that medieval saints had anorexia nervosa is reductionist because it converts a complex human behavior into a simple biomedical mechanism. Yet, even modern anorexia nervosa is far from a "simple biomedical mechanism"—as will be argued, in many cases it is deeply related to the active pursuit of religious or other goals.

Other scholarly reservations to asserting comparisons between the two behaviors seem to fall into the same overarching category: many argue that the cultural contexts which govern the behaviors—the pursuit of holiness and the pursuit of thinness—are simply too different to enable comparisons. For example, Vandereycken and Van Deth adhere to this opinion, arguing that it is
not possible to equate the two phenomena or to make “retrospective” diagnoses of anorexia in medieval holy women. Michelle Lelwica agrees that the main difference between medieval fasts and anorectic fasts is the ultimate motivation: holiness versus thinness. However, she simultaneously asserts that both sets of behaviors “reflect a common struggle for purity and power.” Additionally, Sarah Huline-Dickens emphasizes that Bell himself differentiated between “holy” and “nervous” anorexia, based on the ideal or goal being sought by the individual refusing to eat. As she interprets his argument, she writes that holy anorexia had as its goals “spiritual health, fasting, and other forms of self-denial,” while anorexia nervosa of the modern age is characterized by entirely different goals—“thinness” and “self-control.”

Thus, scholarly opposition to comparing medieval fasting with anorexia can be summarized based on the claim that the two behaviors pursue two fundamentally different ideal conditions. As aforementioned, many scholars’ key reservation to comparison is the assertion that holiness was the state which medieval ascetics sought, while the ideal state for the anorectic is thinness or physical perfection. These scholars imply that these two states are very different; while it does seem to be a fair assessment that the medieval ascetic did not seek thinness, the corresponding underlying theory is that holiness is not a desired goal for the anorectic. Nevertheless, an emerging body of research suggests that this is not the case; instead, it appears that a pursuit of holiness, morality, or goodness is a key aspect of the anorexic experience for many women. I would argue that the pursuit of holiness and other religious goals through thinness in modern anorexia provides the necessary continuity with medieval fasting to enable comparisons to be made between the two behaviors. With that continuity in mind, Weber’s theories of active asceticism could be applied to modern anorexia as well as to medieval fasting, as Bynum has already done.
Weber proposed a theory of “ideal types” which could be useful for illuminating the notion of holiness and thinness as ideal states. This theory seems to encapsulate one of the key issues which may drive goal-oriented anorexic behavior—a desire for the “perfect body,” so that one can be viewed not only as being thin, but also as being moral and good. Daniel Pals interprets Weber’s notion of an “ideal type” as being a “purposeful exaggeration, or maximum outline” of what a certain construct, person, or concept should be. One of the main postulates of the theory is that no person, state, or concept will realistically meet all the criteria inherent in the ideal type; nevertheless, it serves as an analytical tool which allows for comparisons between, for example, different types of political or economic states. Examples of ideal types might include democracy, capitalism, Greek civilization, king, church, and sect. Although perhaps an even more abstract idea than those examples, it seems plausible that conceptions of femininity could serve as ideal types for modern society. Bodily symbols, such as those found in the media that are often blamed for pushing women towards self-starvation, could be ideal types which prompt comparisons between types (consider the adolescent girl who continually compares her own body to the perceived “ideal” of ultra-thin models she admires, and constantly berates herself for falling short of this ideal). Bodily symbols of femininity could be considered an ideal type precisely because no woman can ever fit into all the characteristics expected of the perfect concept of femininity, yet it still drives her behavior in socially significant ways.

Speaking to the elusiveness of the ideal (body) type, Jean Kilbourne notes, “The ideal body type today is unattainable to most women, even if they starve themselves . . . only the thinnest 5% of women [even] approximate this ideal.” Marya Hornbacher also echoes the notion of Weber’s ideal type, claiming, “We speak as if there was one collective perfect body, a singular entity that we’re all after. We grew up with the impression that underneath all this
normal flesh... there was a Perfect Body just waiting to break out... somehow we [would attain this body] in defiance of nature.\(^{110}\)

Without explicitly referencing Weber’s theory, some scholars, in writing about comparing medieval fasting with anorexia, echo the notion of ideal types by referring to both holiness and thinness as “ideal states of being.”\(^{111}\) For example, Huline-Dickens has argued that the central commonality between medieval fasting and anorexia nervosa pertains to a subject’s “idealization,” or imagination and pursuit of an “ideal state of being.” However, as most scholars seem to do, she claims that the ideal state was holiness in the medieval period, and thinness today. However, she does note some interesting parallels between the two states, although she argues that they are essentially different. For example, she argues for these parallels between the pursuit of holiness and of thinness: “In both types are described excessive activity, perfectionistic tendencies and constant vigilance... and a preference for caring for others rather than receiving care for themselves.”\(^{112}\) Finally, Huline-Dickens argues that “idealization as a psychological mechanism may be associated with the development of anorexia, and in society it is a necessary process for the existence of religious ideals.”\(^{113}\) Thus, Weber’s ideal type theory seems broadly applicable to this notion of “idealization” of certain desirable states of being. Yet the states being idealized—holiness and thinness—are not really as different as scholars tend to think. On the contrary, holiness is often perceived as being attainable through thinness in the perception of the modern anorectic. This demonstrates that the two “ideal states of being” in medieval fasting and anorexia are sufficiently similar to engender a comparison between the behaviors.

Hovend and Sibley’s recent psychological research offers rather compelling support for this claim. They conducted a fascinating study using a psychological measure of unconsciously held beliefs or opinions known as the Implicit Association Test, or IAT. The IAT, conducted on
a computer, measures a person's reaction times while requiring the subject to “match target
c憩念s with attributes as quickly as possible.” Essentially, it assesses how long it takes a
person to match a particular concept with attributes which fall into specific categories. The
reaction times are expected to reveal whether people have forged unconscious links between
certain concepts and attributes, even if these associations exist outside their conscious awareness.
For example, people more quickly link names of flowers (tulip, rose) with positive words
(happy, peace) than they do with negative words.

In this particular study (which consisted of three related components), researchers used
the IAT to analyze how quickly people associated moral words or standard words with several
conditions (exercising or inactivity, as well as dieting and obesity). The IAT consisted of words
such as devout, moral, righteous, sinful, wicked, and evil, in relationship to physical activity/
inactivity. People implicitly associated exercising and health with positive moral terminology.
Hoverd and Sibley found that subjects more readily related the morally positive words to
exercise than they did to inactivity. Another portion of the study employed “faces of people who
were obese or thin” as the initial stimuli. Subjects demonstrated faster reaction times when
linking positive moral terminology (moral, devout, virtuous) to the thin faces. Throughout these
tests, the research revealed that “people explicitly rated health-related behaviors such as
exercising and dieting as more pious and less sinful than their negative counterparts.” Hoverd
and Sibley stated that the results showed “that people have a strong implicit association between
morality and the condition of the body.” They conclude that obesity is widely perceived as being
actually immoral, not simply negative.
Interestingly, a large percentage of their sample size was not adherents of any religion, but yet their participants explicitly rated not exercising and overeating as more sinful than dieting and exercising regularly. Thus, people do implicitly evaluate the condition of the body using moral discourse. Hoverd and Sibley also clarified that “effects were not moderated by religious identification or gender.” They rightly suggest that this research has implications for understanding the motivations behind anorexia. These studies reveal that people, both explicitly and implicitly, consider obesity to be less moral than dieting or thinness; thinness is associated with virtue and morality, which could be a major reason why it such a sought-after ideal state.

Just as the medieval fasting women believed they could attain greater holiness through restriction of food, these empirical findings suggest that the same is true today. This is one key similarity between medieval asceticism and modern anorexia which has not been adequately detailed in the literature. As discussed, a number of scholars believe that the primary motivation for medieval fasting was the pursuit of holiness, while the main driving factor behind anorexia is a desire for thinness. They tend to claim that these are entirely different pursuits, thus indicating that an understanding of the purposes behind medieval fasting cannot be used to elucidate the goals which may underlie anorexia. However, as the aforementioned research demonstrates, the pursuit of holiness is not a foreign concept for the modern anorectic. Indeed, the opposite appears to be true—a desire to be seen as moral, holy, and good seems to be a major factor which could give rise to anorexic behavior in some women. Women also use this language in their memoirs, and it imbues media and advertisements, to suggest that it is a psychological or symbolic reality which emerges in explicitly religious discourse. This religious language seems indicative of some of their goals through anorexia, which are highly reminiscent of Weber’s
active, “inner-worldly asceticism” in pursuit of salvation. Examples of this religious language will now be considered.

*The Religious Language and Goals of Anorexia Nervosa*

“I felt that being full rendered me an inadequate vessel for the divine spirit.”

As the stories and history of fasting medieval women indicates, the association of food-related behaviors and religiosity is not new, although its meaning and interpretation has changed with time. Today, religious language permeates the culture with respect to the female body and whether she eats, or does not eat. Often, such language comes from anorectic women themselves, who in memoirs or other personal writings describe their struggles with anorexia in religious terms.

As aforementioned, anorexia nervosa typically involves a failure to maintain at least 85% of normal body weight, along with significant cognitive distortions regarding body image and a fear of gaining weight. To provide slightly more detailed insights into this condition, Hilde Bruch and others have commented on the physiological and psychological processes which accompany the mild to severe starvation of anorexia. Bruch has noted that anorexia nervosa impairs gonadotropin release, renal functioning, and maintenance of electrolyte balance. Psychologically, starvation can engender symptoms ranging from obsession with food to heightened selfishness, apathy, and irritability. Both hyperactivity and inactivity can be symptoms in the anorectic at varying stages in the starvation process. Some of the basic physical symptoms of anorexia include anemia, dry skin, the growth of fine hair on the body, chronically low body temperature, and other neurological or endocrine disruptions. Other research has demonstrated a wide variety of additional psychological or physiological symptoms...
of starvation. Yet beyond these basic diagnostic elements lie deeper motivations for engaging in anorexic behavior; the explicitly religious language used by many women to describe their struggles with anorexia demonstrates that anorexia, as a form of asceticism, is not purely focused on self-punishment or hatred and destruction of the body. Instead, for many women, their anorexia appears to function as a means of helping them attain to individualized religious goals in an increasingly secular society, where the authority structures of traditional religions have waned dramatically. In her work “The Imaginative Use of Religious Symbols in Subjective Experiences of Anorexia Nervosa,” Caroline Giles Banks argues that anorectics construct language and meaning related to their anorexia so that they see themselves as being devout or religious. She suggests that women specifically use language to “give meaning to . . . self-starvation.” For this reason, it is essential to understand that the modern anorexic experience is fraught with religious and moral language—for it is such language which gives meaning to a woman’s struggle with anorexia.

This language is so pervasive that even writers who do not claim affiliation with any religious tradition in their written work still use markedly religious language to describe their anorexia nervosa. This seems to show that such vocabulary is assimilated from within the larger culture, but being used to denote similar instrumental and active purposes. In fact, much of the language distinctly echoes the previously described categories of goals for medieval fasting. One could certainly make the argument that if such terminology is used by otherwise non-religious women and is assimilated from culture, it is a social or cultural phenomenon rather than a religious one. However, scholars such as Huline-Dickens claim that even if the language comes from the broader culture, its religious significance need not be lost: “Even in secularized societies, religious elements of socialization remain significant.” Thus, simply because this
language may be acquired through socialization in a secularized society, its characterization as “religious” need not be discarded.

It is also worth noting that subscribing to the views of one religious theorist over another would strongly influence how one defines anorexia as having religious components or language, or even being a form of religious practice. For instance, if one were to focus solely on some of the rituals which sometimes characterize anorexia, or on its components which could be deemed obsessive, such as its accompanying intense fear of gaining weight, anorexia would be viewed as “religious” primarily in the Freudian sense of the term. This understanding of anorexia as a form of religious behavior would focus predominantly on any obsessive qualities of this eating disorder, just as Freud felt that religion was dominated by obsession and neurotic qualities. On the other hand, assessing anorexia as a religious behavior through a more Weberian lens would consider it to have religious elements because it is so often associated with the active pursuit of grace, or considered to have salvific value. Thus, an understanding of ascetic anorexia as an active pursuit of religious goals is strongly Weberian; an analysis of it as pure pathology is strongly Freudian.

From a Weberian perspective, religious asceticism is “rational action ... governed by principles and rules” and a “methodical procedure for achieving religious salvation.” Ascetics believe they have “a capacity for action by God’s grace” and that they are used by God in the world to accomplish his purposes. Because it reflects these and similar goals, language related to anorexia can often qualify as religious language.

For instance, much of this language includes terms familiar to Weber’s perspective on asceticism, using words like “grace” and “salvation” to describe what the anorectic pursues
through her behavior. For example, Maura Kelly, who began her struggle with anorexia as a preadolescent after her mother’s death from cancer, wrote about how she searched for salvation through methods of strict bodily control (reflecting Weber’s idea of a “methodical procedure”), which for her included a focus on numbers: numbers of calories, of pounds lost, or of exercises completed. She explains, “I felt like I was moving toward some great new salvation. Instead of praying . . . I’d turn to the numbers, like my grandmother to her wooden rosary beads, and they’d calm me down.”¹²³ In her reference to the rosary, Kelly exemplifies the trend followed by many of these writers, which is to adapt specific rituals or practices from traditional religions (in her case, her own tradition of Catholicism) to suit the context of fasting behavior.

Kelly also refers frequently to her desires for penitence and purification for food-related “sins,” ideas which were doubtless related to her pursuit of salvation through control of the body. For instance, she writes of trying to “purify [her]self” and explains that her need for purification came about through eating: “It wasn’t just through physical actions that I tried to make myself God’s favorite . . . during Mass, I’d recite the Penitential Rite . . . I’d feel gravely sorry about all my transgressions: how I’d once again stuffed myself with chocolate-chip cookies and marshmallows.”¹²⁴ Over time, as Kelly’s eating disorder continued to develop, she seems to have deeply internalized a connection between restrictive eating and bodily control, governed by specific rules, with goodness or morality. She claims, “I did want something to believe in . . . I wanted proof that I was good. Dieting eventually became a replacement religion for me, with its own set of commandments and rituals.”¹²⁵ It may be noted that some of these statements refer to dieting, rather than to the self-starvation which is characteristic of anorexia nervosa. However, scholars note that the two behaviors are really not as different as may be assumed, and that they actually exist on a sort of spectrum in which excessive dieting often blends rather seamlessly
with anorexic behavior. Extreme dieting is often the first step toward the development of full-blown anorexia. Naomi Wolf has also asserted that a number of popular diets are essentially synonymous with self-starvation. For example, she writes that Jews held in the Lodz ghetto during World War II were allocated “starvation rations” of 500-1200 calories per day, while at Treblinka, 900 calories were allotted—the same amount allowed to patients at many of the nation’s popular weight-loss clinics. 126

In her memoir of anorexia, Solitaire, Aimee Liu has similar conceptions of the relationship between eating behaviors and the pursuit of religious goals. Like Kelly, she spoke of penitence being needed to atone for the consumption of food, which would allow her to embark on the path toward “redemption.” Liu seems to have fully endorsed a connection between eating and sin. She claims that the temptation to binge was an “abominable temptation to sin . . . I can’t imagine what evil motivates me.”127 She describes her actions after a binge on “Mallomars and brownies . . . ice cream, Jell-O, and cheese”: “Staggering to the bathroom, I presented myself for penitence . . . No doubt about it, eating was evil . . . It sent me into spasms of remorse over my greed and propelled me into a program of redemption.”128 As Kelly does, Liu also describes bodily practices or ritual actions in terms which conjure images of traditional religious practices. For example, she writes of a time when she prepared to be able to weigh herself after a long period with no access to a scale: “I looked forward to our first reunion. Like a Catholic going to confession, I was both eager and dreading.”129

Another interesting aspect of Liu’s understanding of her eating disorder was her connection of bodily control with honor or worth. She writes candidly, “I kept examining the fluctuations of the bathroom scale with the zeal of a religious fanatic . . . loss of weight had
become my personal path to honor.”130 One woman wrote, “My sense of worth was entirely contingent upon my ability to starve.”131 Another anorectic woman wrote of her perception of her body as “shamefully flabby,” suggesting that starvation could be perceived as a way to rid oneself of shame.132 Statements such as these reflect deeply rooted notions of honor and shame as they are played and experienced within the body. Perhaps, Liu’s pursuit of honor through starving could be analogous to the medieval pursuit of holiness through fasting. In any event, notions of avoiding shame and seeking honor seem to drive the experience of anorexia for some women.

In her writings on her experience with anorexia, Ilana Kurshan, like Kelly and Liu, also seems to link eating with sin on some level. Moreover, in her descriptions, she derives some of her language from her own religious tradition within Judaism. For example, she discusses making a “sin offering” for “the sin of having eaten and enjoyed.” Kurshan states that she associated fat with “sloth, evil, and sin.” Yet her bodily control did not emerge only from a desire to avoid sin. It also seems intricately connected to her desire to have encounters with the divine. She implies that hunger assisted her in pursuit of unity with the divine, claiming, “For awhile, I found it impossible to pray after I ate; I felt that being full rendered me an inadequate vessel for the divine spirit.”133 A claim like this one certainly seems related to the medieval ideal of connection with God through fasting.

In her poignant memoir of anorexia, Wasted, Marya Hornbacher readily relates her eating disorder to themes of grace and salvation, again reflecting ideals from Weber’s theory of asceticism. In fact, she suggests that one of the reasons she became engaged in anorexic behavior was in pursuit of these religious ideals. Hornbacher describes her struggle with loneliness and
anxiety when she left home as an adolescent to attend boarding school. She describes herself and many of her classmates as being “lost” and in need of “religion” or “salvation”; she states that she pursued these ideals in “food and in thinness.” She explains that she pursued grace by means of starvation because cultural ideals inevitably pushed her in that direction. As referenced previously, she writes, “I chose an eating disorder. I cannot help but think that, had I lived in a culture where ‘thinness’ was not regarded as a strange state of grace, I might have sought out another means of attaining that grace.”134 This quote almost eerily echoes Weber’s idea of the ascetic trying to maintain a “state of grace” within the world, by means of rational, methodical activity. Hornbacher expresses this theme when she describes the “systems” related to eating to which many anorectics strictly adhere. Many of these systems simultaneously exhibit the goal of channeling rational activity into the pursuit of salvation, and the idea of purity and sin with respect to food. She writes:

They are systems of Safe Foods . . . [t]hese are usually ‘pure’ foods, less likely to taint the soul with such sins as fat, or sugar, or an excess of calories. Consider the advertisements for food, the religious lexicon of eating: ‘sinfully rich,’ intones the silky voiced announcer, ‘indulge yourself,’ she says, ‘guilt-free . . . ‘I would have a hard time putting into words the passion we have for our systems. They are as near and dear to us as any saving God.135

She also claims that society essentially views food as a sinful “desire of the flesh,” much the way St. Augustine spoke of the “desires of the flesh.”136 Hornbacher also speaks specifically of her own ascetic tendencies as she defined them. She writes, “The pain is necessary, especially the pain of hunger . . . Your ability to withstand pain is your claim to fame. It is ascetic, holy. It is self-control.”137 In statements such as these, Hornbacher recognizes that her asceticism has painful components—but at the same time, it serves as a religious outlet and a source of the salvation and grace she seeks; thus, it cannot be purely masochistic or arising solely from self-
hatred. Instead, to her it is evidently a part of a “methodical procedure” for remaining within a “state of grace.”

Interestingly, Hornbacher even uses the language of idolatry and heresy in her memoir, giving evidence for how deeply ingrained many religious themes appear to be for those struggling with anorexia. She writes that the broader culture has “a strange idolatry of at once consumption and starvation.” She even writes of her journey away from anorexia nervosa and her new “terms” which relate to being able to eat and enjoy: “My terms amount to cultural heresy. I had to say: I will eat what I want and look as I please and laugh as loud as I like and use the wrong fork and lick my knife.”

Examples of the language of purity, absolution, good, and evil with respect to eating imbue the writings of many other anorectics, indicating that this notion is far from an isolated phenomenon. For example, one woman wrote, “I was able to convince my mind and my body that feelings of purity were much better than any fattening food . . . I believed that the kind of food that went into my body had the power to absolve or disgrace me.” Another writes that fasting made her feel “deserving” and “pure,” and that “food . . . led to feelings of impurity.” One woman, in vividly memorable terms, describes a post-starvation binge as being intensely evil. She states, “I had been caught red-handed . . . in an animalistic orgy . . . I felt so evil, tainted, pagan . . . I had been whoring after food.”

Jennifer Egan, in her personal narrative of anorexia and recovery, also clearly describes food-related behaviors in explicit terms of good and bad: “I had absorbed the notion of Good and Bad with regard to eating, and knew that I was Bad.” Other writers also indicate that they linked hunger to a positive spiritual state, or even to holiness, which is very reminiscent of the
desire of the medieval fasting woman to be considered holy. For instance, Gray writes of her journey into anorexia, saying, “These privations were accompanied by a new fixation for feeling ‘empty,’ a state I associated with mental clarity and spiritual worth.” She also describes the traditional idea that “to be thin is to be holy”—making explicit the similarity between the two as ideal states. Michelle Lelwica, who writes from her own religious background in Catholicism, claims that a desire to be holy served as a driving force for her anorexic behavior: “I wanted people to wonder whether it hurt to be so hungry . . . I wanted to be holy.” Yet another woman directly compared herself to medieval saints, declaring, “[Thinness is associated with] absolute purity, hyperintellectuality, and transcendence of the flesh. My soul seemed to grow as my body waned; I felt like one of those early Christian saints who starved themselves in the desert sun.”

Michelle Lelwica has proposed an extensive theory which integrates many of the notions of methodical, food-related systems of eating and fasting in order to obtain salvation or purity. In fact, she so strongly argues for the use of religious terms in relationship to body, weight, and appetite that she has analyzed this system of terminology and called it the “religion of thinness.” In her book by that same name, she identifies the tenets of this postmodern quasi-religion. According to Lelwica, the religion of thinness essentially tells people that control of the body will offer them control of their lives. It teaches that the route to happiness is the attainment of the “perfect body,” and it produces feelings of “moral superiority” in those who control their appetites and eat the right foods. She also emphasizes that it offers rituals, icons, symbols, and even an idea of “ultimate purpose—the ‘salvation’ that comes from being thin.” Lelwica argues that this new religion stems, at least in part, from the diminishing role of traditional religions in the lives of many women as a result of the increasing secularization of society.
Overall, Lelwica grasps the idea of religious undertones in anorexia nervosa and the sharp regulation of appetite when she argues that model bodies such as those portrayed in the media, which many women aspire to obtain, “construct a salvation myth of female slenderness: a quasi-religious fantasy that promises fulfillment through a body that is thin.” She claims that the moral or religious connections between eating and sin, and fasting and salvation, are localized in religious perceptions of the appetite, a “religious legacy that defines spiritual virtue through the denial of bodily appetites.” Lelwica argues that what she dubs the “morality of thinness” has been deeply internalized in our culture. She cites the example of a 7th-grade girl who was asked to describe a recent conflict she had experienced. The girl reported having trouble deciding “whether I wanted the calories of two [pastries], or should I only have one.” She explained that the essence of her choice was “whether or not I wanted the calories or to be good.” Clearly, this moralistic or religious language regarding the appetite is being internalized, or assimilated from culture, at very young ages.

Lelwica borrows a portion of her analysis from philosopher Michael Foucault, who suggested that, in her words, “power is never purely repressive.” She adds that “even the power of controlling one’s appetite serves a highly productive function, giving a woman a sense of agency in the face of difficult feelings and a sense of accomplishment in a culture that worships thinness.” This would suggest the productive, goal-oriented nature of ascetic forms of bodily control. Malson, like Lelwica, also analyzes Foucauldian notions concerning the productivity of power. Foucault said, “Power produces; it produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.”
Religious themes related to the body are present not only in women’s first-hand accounts of anorexia nervosa; they also imbue media advertisements related to the body and the appetite. One magazine advertisement for running shoes, depicting a woman sweaty from exercise, says the following: “This is not about guilt. It’s about joy. Strength. The revival of the spirit. I come here seeking redemption in sweat. And it is here I am forgiven my sinful calories.”

Images of joy and spiritual revival through discipline of the body strongly suggest the active purposes behind much modern asceticism. Lelwica also refers to the role of religious language in media and advertisements related to appetite and the body, such as the idea of food being “sinfully delicious.” She mentions the common association with full-fat food as being sinful, and with diet food being virtuous, and deems these judgments a form of “food orthodoxy.”

Jean Kilbourne is one scholar who has performed extensive research concerning the role of religious thematic elements and terminology in advertisements related to women’s bodies and appetites. She argues that the language of temptation and salvation, in particular, has imbued advertising for diet products, claiming quite simply, “If the food is the temptation, the diet product is the salvation.” For example, one advertisement which demonstrated this phenomenon labeled a chocolate sundae as “temptation,” while a low-calorie diet shake was dubbed “salvation.” Kilbourne also writes about how food advertising is rife with the discourse of guilt and being “bad” because of having eaten. Another advertising tactic for diet products is to promote the notion that with these foods, one can “indulge without guilt.” She even argues that this perception of guilt, and a polarization of good and bad with respect to the body and eating, has come to nearly exclude other more traditional perceptions of behaviors which can incur guilt. Kilbourne writes, “If a woman says she has been ‘bad,’ we assume that she broke her diet. The
ménage a trois a woman is made to feel guilty about is the one with Ben and Jerry (of ice cream fame).”

Roberta Seid echoes Kilbourne’s claims concerning the “morality” considered to be intrinsic to strict control over what one eats, or does not eat. She discusses how biases against obese people have extended to include explicitly moral or religious terminology. Seid says, “The fat are seen as weak-willed, morally flabby, and immature.” She explains that eating and the appetite have come to be increasingly permeated with moral ideas; society claims that one must be good enough to “deserve” to eat. Interestingly, Seid argues that obesity is essentially the only condition which is still widely believed to be wrong for moral reasons. She claims, “Fatness alone remained a result of moral failure. Other habits and behaviors that had once also been deemed moral failings were recategorized.” For example, drug and alcohol addictions came to be regarded as physiological rather than moral. Homosexuality, once regarded as both deviant and pathological, is now perceived as an acceptable sexual alternative rather than a behavior with moral implications. Following the restructuring of moral ideas, Seid claims that “fatness alone remained a ‘crime’ and a sin for which the individual had to take total responsibility.”

Although the origins of these moral injunctions against obesity are somewhat unclear, Francine Prose speculates that it is rooted in long-standing notions considering gluttony to be a sin.

Seid argues that these ideas are “perhaps the only suitable religion for a secular age, the only outlet for those seeking a clear moral system, or spiritual comfort, or salvation.” She claims that society has lost “religious rapture” and meaning in its secular age, which could lead to these other outlets. However, she claims it is an empty, “solipsistic” religion. She writes, “Our new religion has trapped us in a painful and futile quest. It offers no salvation, only a perpetually
escalating cycle of sin and precarious redemption. Ultimately, Seid asks, “Is this a philosophy to bequeath to the future?”

These issues indicate that the connection between control over the body and goodness, holiness, or morality is still very much intact, although its form has changed dramatically since the days when fasting was a central part of female holiness. Perhaps much like medieval women, many modern women may develop anorexia at least in part as an extreme response to the societal view of thinness as being “holy,” “moral,” and “good.” In fact, research indicates quite definitively that people (even those who do not call themselves religious) associate obesity with immorality and dieting (which often becomes outright fasting or disordered eating), exercise, and bodily control with goodness. These varied forms of evidence from different fields counters the suggestion that the language of female memoirs is merely semantic, making it easier to refer to a complex phenomenon. They instead lend support to the idea that this language actually constitutes a distinctive jargon which possesses important symbolic and cognitive meaning.

These various examples seem to clearly indicate underlying religious constructs in many women’s experiences with anorexia. It does not appear that their behavior, as a form of asceticism, stems primarily from self-hatred, a desire for bodily destruction, or pathology. Rather, these women seem to have adopted instrumental purposes which drive the forms of self-denial in which they engage. The desire for salvation, in particular, reflects specifically Weberian constructs of the motivation for asceticism; it is not primarily a reflection of Freud’s theories concerning asceticism or masochism. It may also be noted that not all of the goals which are potentially driving anorexic behavior are specifically religious ones; the same was true in medieval fasting behavior (for example, fasting so as to avoid an arranged marriage was not necessarily a religious goal.) Nonetheless, these other goals also attest to the goal-oriented, rather
than pathologically destructive, nature of anorexia. An example of a non-religious goal which is not discussed frequently is hunger as pleasure, which could be a motivation for anorexic fasting.

**One Instrumental Goal: Hunger as Pleasure and Power**

"Hunger made me feel alive and creative, emotionally sensitive and intellectually sharp."\(^{162}\)

One effect of self-starvation which is mentioned relatively infrequently in the literature is the pleasure which often accompanies hunger. Yet research does suggest that hunger is often experienced as pleasurable, although some scholars suggest that this is a trained response, more of a "mind-over-matter" phenomenon than a genuine hedonistic experience. Hunger, Lelwica writes, is a way to *experience* the body "in a more concentrated way." One anorectic explained that the sensation of hunger was replete with "anticipation, fantasy, and promise."\(^{163}\)

Many anorectic women have written that hunger enables them to feel creative, alert, and powerful. Perhaps as a result of these effects, Margaret Miles has gone so far as to call anorexic asceticism a "female strategy for imagining and achieving pleasure." She views anorexia as a way for a woman to achieve pleasure, although she recognizes that it is often deemed destructive. She writes, ""Negative' or destructive behavior could have not merely productive but even pleasurable effects." Miles also argues that these pleasurable effects of hunger can be so intense as to override the "self-punishing" aspects of anorexia, at least from the subjective perspective of the anorectic. She claims, "Theoretically positioned as *effects* rather than as causes or motivations, punishment of self and others [through anorexia] appears as secondary to its production of pleasure." She also situates this argument within the broader history of ascetic behavior, mentioning that ascetics have always argued that their behaviors lead to "more—not
less—pleasure.” For example, one classic idea holds that the senses, such as that of taste, are renewed and “dehabituated” through ascetic fasting.\textsuperscript{164}

Indeed, the memoirs of recovered anorectics are replete with this language of pleasure and intensification of the senses accompanying starvation. Such examples seem to substantiate Miles’ bold claims, and they even suggest that hunger as a “strategy” for attaining pleasure could be an instrumental goal behind self-starvation. For instance, in her memoir of anorexia, Aimee Liu alludes to the idea of attaining pleasure through starving, which sheds new light on possible motivations behind anorexia and casts further doubt on the predominant view of anorexia as being rooted in pure self-hatred or a desire to obliterate the body. Liu explains that both she and another anorectic friend felt that their “senses [had] come alive” as a result of not eating: colors were more vivid, and they had more energy. Concerning hunger, her friend claimed quite simply, “It makes me feel good about myself.”\textsuperscript{165} Interestingly, these effects of starvation sound very much like the effects of certain psychoactive drugs.\textsuperscript{166} Indeed, Kate Taylor writes, “Prolonged hunger offered many perks. I used it like a drug, the way some people take Ritalin or Adderall. Being hungry kept me awake, alert, and focused. It also made me feel unusually imaginative and empathetic.”\textsuperscript{167}

The experiences of other writers seem to corroborate the nature of this pleasurable effect. Kurshan wrote of the intense alertness that accompanies hunger, saying, “Intense hunger acted on me like a double espresso; I was wired, energized, alert, and intensely charged.”\textsuperscript{168} Lisa Halliday explains of her anorexic experience: “I began to experience the altered consciousness of being hungry as something like a drug-induced high... Music acquired a crystalline quality. Words in books appeared more starkly and urgently against the page... hunger can also expand
one's aesthetic sensitivities."\textsuperscript{169} Halliday also talks about her "addiction to hunger."\textsuperscript{170} One anorectic woman, one of Hilde Bruch's patients, actually described her hunger as being analogous to a state of intoxication such as that induced by alcohol.\textsuperscript{171} Moreover, the addictive qualities of the hunger experience are widely attested in the literature on anorexia. Hornbacher writes of the ability to become attached or addicted to an eating disorder when she talks about the "incredible loss" and "profound grief" that is experienced when the anorectic attempts to move beyond her disorder and begin a healthier lifestyle. She also argues that eating disorders are addictive for a variety of reasons. The main reasons are "the pure adrenaline that kicks in when you're starving" and "the heightened intensity of experience that eating disorders initially induce."\textsuperscript{172}

In addition to pleasure, power or control could be a central, active goal of anorexia as a form of asceticism. Michelle Lelwica explains that a major driving or motivating factor behind not eating is the desire to be in control. Many women indicate that the food they consume and how they treat their bodies is the only aspect of their lives which they feel they can control. One woman said quite candidly, "I felt powerful as an anorexic." Lelwica claims that this pursuit of control reflects a woman's "desire for agency" in this culture and even a way to "rebel" against society (in language which is reminiscent of Rudolph Bell).\textsuperscript{173} Concerning power and hunger, Hornbacher writes, "My thoughts returned to the ache in the pit of my stomach, the heart­pounding feeling of absolute power."\textsuperscript{174}

Given these goals, ranging from the clearly religious to the more secular, it seems that Weber's idea of "inner-worldly asceticism" better characterizes the purposes of anorexia nervosa than does "world-rejecting asceticism." While anorexia does not fully embody one or the other
of these, the anorectic typically does not express a desire to abandon family ties, renounce possessions, or avoid the interests of the world. One way in which Weber’s analysis certainly resonates with the anorexic experience, as expressed overtly by many women who have recovered from the disorder, is that he recognizes asceticism as a conscious way to achieve salvation—in his words, to both acquire and maintain a “state of grace.” This goal (or some variation of it) has been a recurring theme in the language of the memoirs.

Mary Louise Bringle has noted that the popular modern conception of asceticism fits into Weber’s category of world-rejecting asceticism, rather than inner-worldly asceticism. Bringle also argues that the current cultural and scholarly perception of the meaning of asceticism may be too narrow and short-sighted, lacking many of its positive connotations. In fact, she argues, “Genuine asceticism serves as the ally, not the enemy, of sensuous indulgence.” For instance, she claims that some renunciation or austerity can sharpen or re-awaken senses which become “dull from excessive use.” She argues that the denial of pleasure for a time makes the individual all the more responsive to the pleasure when it is finally granted. She suggests that inner-worldly asceticism best captures this healthier, more life-affirming notion of ascetic behavior. In fact, Bringle asserts that indulgence and discipline are not functional opposites as much as complements to one another.175

**Other Theoretical Applications for Anorexia as a “Religious Behavior”**

Initially, it may seem entirely counterintuitive to view anorexia as a form of religious behavior. Just as any theory of etiology is not applicable in every case, so too, certainly not all cases of anorexia have religious underpinnings. Nevertheless, it seems a sufficiently significant motivation to engender greater discussion and research. As I have sought to demonstrate,
Weberian theories of asceticism and religion are more helpful to apply to anorexia as a religious activity than are those of Freud. One implication of this idea is that certain religious theories lend greater credence to the motivations behind anorexia than do others. I will now discuss some other religious theories which offer insights into ways in which it could be valid to call anorexia nervosa "religious," further validating these claims.

Mary Douglas' religious theories of the role of symbols in society, which seem related to Weber's theory of ideal types, demonstrate the power of symbol in religious behavior. In her work *Natural Symbols*, Douglas claims that "one of the most obvious forms of religious behavior . . . is the use of bodily symbols to express the notion of an organic social system." More recent scholarship has adapted aspects of this notion to apply it to some anorexic behaviors. For instance, Lelwica applies Douglas' theory of bodily symbols to popular "icons of womanhood," or images of femininity portrayed in the media. Lelwica suggests that "images of the human body both express and shape the order of the social body." She suggests that this theory maps onto media images of prototypical femininity. In other words, she uses Douglas' theory to imply that media images of model women, as bodily symbols, serve a regulatory function in society, expressing the limits of what is appropriate and helping to maintain the social order. Informed by Lelwica's analysis, one could suggest that anorexic behavior, widely attested to be driven at least in part by cultural symbols of the slender female body, has religious undertones or purposes as defined by Douglas: "Religious behavior . . . is the use of bodily symbols to express the notion of an organic social system." Susan Bordo also writes in a manner reminiscent of Douglas' theory of bodily symbol when she argues, "The slender body codes the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self"—she goes on to suggest that social pressures exerted on women prompt them to seek to control their bodies. Lelwica also draws on Clifford Geertz's theory when she
argues that media images of ideal women's bodies are used as "models of" and "models for" femininity.\textsuperscript{181}

In assessing the social role of bodily symbols in driving anorexia as a quasi-religious behavior, it is also useful to consider theories of asceticism, society and religion proposed by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). As a sociologist, he believed that the constructs of society and religion were inextricably intertwined. Indeed, in one of his central works, \textit{The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life}, Durkheim proposed that "the idea of society is the soul of religion." In terms of asceticism more specifically, he theorized that most religions value "ascetics," which he defined as those who practice extreme self-denial. Durkheim suggested that the veneration of the ascetic stems from the understanding that their self-sacrifice is for the good of the group, clan, or society. Their self-denial is, according to Durkheim, the ideal prototype for behavior which is best for the prosperity of the group.\textsuperscript{182} Thus, Durkheim saw an intricate connection between ascetic behavior and the larger social setting in which it occurred. Later theorists on medieval asceticism, most notably Rudolph Bell, also discern strong connections between the behavior of the ascetic and the social world, although not in exactly the same way. Additionally, Daniel Pals makes a key, helpful distinction between the views of Weber and Durkheim with respect to their ideas of the ascetic. He notes that for Weber, the ascetic (like the Protestant) was intended to work within the world to transform his society; he possessed a revolutionary role. On the contrary, Durkheim's ascetic had the role of serving as a prototype for appropriate societal behavior; he (or she) was responsible to maintain, rather than alter, the existing social order.\textsuperscript{183}

Durkheim also proposed the theory of totemism, which is based on the idea that societies or clans worship the "totemic principle." This offers a helpful understanding of the interplay between society and religion. In Durkheim's view, when a society worships a god, it is
essentially worshipping “the image of the clan” or what it values most about itself. It is projecting its most highly valued characteristics onto God. It seems that Durkheim might suggest that modern society venerates the slender, “perfect” body, in some cases almost as a deity, because that is what the society values in itself. Lelwica’s “religion of thinness” seems to suggest that the societal ideal of thinness is a form of God, and worship of the “totem,” or God, is actually worship of society, according to Durkheim’s theory. This is yet another lens through which anorexic behavior could be interpreted as being a form of religious expression or oriented towards the pursuit of religious goals.

Furthermore, Durkheim discussed the interplay of soul and body. He essentially argued that the soul was the “voice” of the clan or of society embedded in the self, providing a conscience. He believed that the body often seeks to express its desires, which frequently conflict with social demands, internalized in this principle of the soul. Durkheim proposed that “religion asserts the claims of the social and is therefore sacred.” The voice of normative social behavior, embedded within the body, could be compared to social norms of thinness warring against the needs of the individual to satisfy physical hunger.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) also proposed religious theories which could prove useful to potentially understanding anorexia as a religious phenomenon. Marx spoke of religion as a form of alienation and a form of illusion. He believed that religion projects characteristics and ideals onto an alien being—God. Essentially, people anthropomorphize God by projecting human characteristics onto him. He theorized that religiosity was escapist by nature. Scholars like Pals have argued that Marx’s interpretation of religion’s role was that it served as “divine justification for the status quo.” Marxist themes of alienation abound in any astute analysis of
anorexia nervosa, such as the one Susan Bordo has performed. For instance, Bordo has written about the experience of the body as “alien, as the not-self, the not-me.” Some of Hilde Bruch’s anorectic patients in fact spoke of their bodies in this way, expressing a separation from the body as if “my body” and “my self” were two entirely different things. Bordo also notes that anorectics often cannot experience bodily sensations, such as hunger, cold, heat, and even emotions, normally; they often regard them as “foreign” and do not seem to recognize that they originate within the self. Bordo even links this perceived break between body and spirit with St. Augustine’s dualistic notion of the “two wills,” one serving the flesh, and the other the spirit, tearing him apart. It is as if the anorectic, perceiving her body as separate from herself, projects her emotions and needs onto the “body,” alienating herself from her own needs. She pursues bodily perfection with an alacrity which suggests that she is ruled by a bodily ideal, and finds this a way to escape from other issues, such as deeper desires to acquire honor or to be viewed as a moral person according to societal standards.

Michelle Lelwica makes a similar point about the application of Marxist theory to these bodily issues. She writes that putting faith in the “religion of thinness” distracts attention from what is truly important in the world, and it allows individuals to avoid other problems by focusing the majority of their energy on “some hoped-for salvation in the future—when [they] are thinner.” With Marx’s classic statement about religion being the “opiate of the masses” in mind, she writes that the religion of thinness offers people “the short-term pain relief of obsession.” According to Marxist theory, anorexia could be considered religious for these reasons, which are very different than the ways in which Weberian or Freudian theory would deem it a religious behavior.
Thus, the implications of one’s theoretical orientation are far-reaching and can serve to either validate or ignore deeper motivations behind anorexic behavior.

Conclusions

Lelwica writes of the fundamental “irony” of asceticism, perhaps more astutely than many other scholars. She writes, “While such self-denial seems to represent an outright war against the body, it also makes the body central to spiritual progress.” For example, her analysis of fasting claims that it is, one the one hand, a form of denial of bodily needs, but on the other hand, a way to experience the body more deeply. She says, “Asceticism illustrates the ambiguity of the body . . . its role as both obstacle and vehicle in the quest for salvation.” She claims that this ambiguity reflects the “ambiguity of power” itself:

“Perhaps women’s attempts to control their appetites reflect not just an obsequious desire to create a perfect body, but also a desire to feel empowered . . . perhaps women’s desire for thinness reflects not just a desire to diminish their bodies, but also a longing to inhabit these bodies, to live fully and deeply in the home of their own flesh. Perhaps the behaviors . . . that seem so obviously self- destructive mask an even deeper yearning for salvation, a hunger for wholeness.”

Lelwica, however, hesitates in how far she is willing to go with this notion. She does, however, conclude by stating that women’s pursuit of bodily perfection “conceals a tragic attempt to transform the female body from obstacle into vehicle for salvation.”

However, Lelwica herself cautions against overly endorsing Bynum’s and others’ claims which she suggests may “affirm the ingenuity of medieval women’s asceticism.” While this caveat may certainly hold some validity, the evidence overall suggests that the women themselves (both medieval and modern), as active participants in asceticism, perceive(d) their behaviors as instrumentally related to holiness, salvation, service, and other religious goals.
Given this consideration, it would be a mistake to disregard these women’s experiences or motivations. Even if the evidence indicates that many women actively pursue anorexia for religious or other goals, an understanding of this point is by no means an endorsement of anorexic self-starvation. Instead, it can be used to deepen both scholarly and therapeutic understanding of how to manage, and even prevent, cases of anorexia nervosa.

In some sense, one could argue that all forms of asceticism, by definition, are rooted in religious pursuits and are thus goal-directed behaviors. Nevertheless, it seems that scholarly focus up to this point has been on the means to those goals rather than the goals themselves. When too much focus is placed on ascetic practices as pathological or self-punishing, the nature of the goals sought can begin to fade into the background. Without understanding the motivations to seek these goals, an understanding of anorexia nervosa is not complete. It seems that further developing notions of how asceticism is played out in anorexia could potentially even assist in the formation of new diagnostic measures for this disorder (for instance, a revision of the diagnostic “asceticism subscale” previously discussed, so as to more fully reflect these motivations). Thus, social, psychological and therapeutic implications emerge from understanding the instrumental, and often specifically religious, goals that many women possess with respect to their self-starvation. This phenomenon should be understood not by regarding these behaviors as “ascetic” or “religious” primarily in the Freudian sense—as pathological, masochistic, or based on bodily destruction—but rather by considering them to be ascetic in the Weberian sense of the term, acknowledging that they could serve valued religious purposes for some individuals, including the pursuit of salvation. Moreover, theorists like Durkheim, Douglas, and Marx can also illuminate an understanding of anorexia as not merely a physiological or psychological phenomenon, but also perhaps a distinctly religious one.
Yet the caveat remains that no theory—psychological, religious, or otherwise—can fully encapsulate such a complex phenomenon as anorexia nervosa. Moreover, different analyses of these theories could lend themselves to markedly different conclusions, which leaves the path clear for future study and exploration, discussion and debate. Additionally, this analysis should not be perceived as claiming that anorexia is utterly devoid of pathological elements, or that it does not need treatment and guidance toward healthier cognitions about the body and more life-affirming behaviors. However, it is meant to propose that deeper and often ignored goals may cause manifestations of anorexia as “modern asceticism,” and that these goals may in many cases be even more central than any underlying elements of pathology, obsession, or self-punishment. It then becomes a crucial societal challenge to guide women to the resources they need to achieve their desired goals—ranging from pleasure and power to purity and morality—apart from the pain of self-inflicted hunger.

Perhaps, as this challenge is grasped, women will come to no longer view their bodies as the only means to ensure their “state of grace.”
Selected Bibliography


In this paper, I will follow the scholarly convention of using the word “anorexic” to refer to the behaviors and practices which characterize anorexia nervosa, while using the word “anorectic” to refer to the individuals who engage in these behaviors.


This will necessarily bring up the issue of whether it is viable to compare behaviors occurring in the Catholic tradition with the behavior of anorexia, which is not bound to any one religious tradition. Although this discussion cannot be adequately addressed in this paper, in my section on comparisons I will discuss, in more general terms, why and how an implementation of a comparative theory could be helpful.


One particularly interesting etiological model described by Michelle Lelwica is the “affective variant hypothesis,” which proposes that anorexia is caused by the same physiological mechanisms as depression—in essence, anorexia is a symptom of depression. Some evidence for this view is the positive responses which many patients with EDs have to antidepressant drugs (Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*, 24).


In the original Greek, ἀσκησις. Having taken several semesters of ancient Greek, I felt compelled to include some in this paper!


Shaw, The Burden of the Flesh, 67.

Hesse-Biber, The Cult of Thinness, 33-5.

Hornbacher, Wasted, 6-7.


In the original German, "weltablehnende Askese."

In German, “innerweltliche Askese.”

Weber, Economy and Society, 541-3.


42 Sigmund Freud, as cited in Pals, *Eight Theories*, 64-5.


46 Information on this theory can be found in virtually any psychology text.

47 Huline-Dickens, “Anorexia Nervosa,” 69. Please refer to Freud for more information concerning the interplay of id, ego, and superego.

48 Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 44.

49 Anna Freud, as described in Huline-Dickens, “Anorexia Nervosa,” 73.


55 Rampling, “Ascetic Ideals,” 94.


58 Owsei Temkin, as cited in Freiberger, *Asceticism and Its Critics*, 185.


61 Fassino et al., “Clinical, Psychological, and Personality Correlates,” 601.

62 Fassino et al., “Clinical, Psychological, and Personality Correlates,” 600.

63 Glucklich, Sacred Pain, 81.

64 Bordo, Unbearable Weight, 49.


67 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 55.

68 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 116, 168.

69 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 51, 127.

70 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 158, 170.

71 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 172, 179.

72 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 177.

73 William Davis, Epilogue to Bell, Holy Anorexia, 190.

74 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 56.

75 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 51.

76 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 52, 117-18.

77 Bell, Holy Anorexia, 115, 149.


79 Brumberg, Fasting Girls, 47.


I will follow Bynum’s convention of refraining from attempts to establish—or challenge—the actual “truth” or “reality” of reports of medieval fasts. Please refer to Bynum for more information on this scholarly convention.

Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 114, 120.


Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 73-75.


Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 52.

Richards, *Spiritual Approaches*, 22.


Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 69.

Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 142.

Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 149-60.

Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 197-204.


Pals, *Eight Theories*, 156.
Some of these processes arise as a result of starvation, but research has also indicated that some genes may be implicated in predisposing certain individuals to developing anorexic tendencies. These genes include brain-derived neurotropic factor (BDNF); genes related to the serotonin neurotransmitter system (related to mood); and genes related to the dopamine system (linked with reward). See Cynthia Bulik’s research for more information on research into genes which have been implicated in anorexia (Gura 214-15). Also, hypothalamus functioning seems to be somehow involved in anorexia (the hypothalamus regulates hunger, satiety, and various processes related to metabolism and maintenance of homeostasis) (LeLwica 24).

Some of these processes arise as a result of starvation, but research has also indicated that some genes may be implicated in predisposing certain individuals to developing anorexic tendencies. These genes include brain-derived neurotropic factor (BDNF); genes related to the serotonin neurotransmitter system (related to mood); and genes related to the dopamine system (linked with reward). See Cynthia Bulik’s research for more information on research into genes which have been implicated in anorexia (Gura 214-15). Also, hypothalamus functioning seems to be somehow involved in anorexia (the hypothalamus regulates hunger, satiety, and various processes related to metabolism and maintenance of homeostasis) (LeLwica 24).


107 Hornbacher, Wasted, 47.

108 Davis, Epilogue to Bell, Holy Anorexia, 181-2.


112 Hoverd and Sibley, “Immoral Bodies,” 402.


114 Some of these processes arise as a result of starvation, but research has also indicated that some genes may be implicated in predisposing certain individuals to developing anorexic tendencies. These genes include brain-derived neurotropic factor (BDNF); genes related to the serotonin neurotransmitter system (related to mood); and genes related to the dopamine system (linked with reward). See Cynthia Bulik’s research for more information on research into genes which have been implicated in anorexia (Gura 214-15). Also, hypothalamus functioning seems to be somehow involved in anorexia (the hypothalamus regulates hunger, satiety, and various processes related to metabolism and maintenance of homeostasis) (LeLwica 24).


117 Please see Russell’s book Hunger: An Unnatural History for more information on this. For example, Russell explains that levels of the “hunger hormone” ghrelin peak in anorectics (22). He also explains that not eating causes the body to convert amino acids from muscle tissue into glucose as an energy source (37-38). When glucose is not coming into the body through sources of nutrition, the body adopts another strategy for energy: it begins to convert fatty acids into ketone bodies, which can be used by cells which ordinarily rely on glucose for their functioning. The ketone bodies behave like insulin and are also able to increase the efficiency of the metabolism. Eventually, the body’s basal metabolic rate and blood pressure drop significantly. For more information on the psychological effects of starvation, see Russell’s chapter on the Minnesota experiment, in which volunteer subjects went through a six month semi-starvation period followed by three months of ordinary food consumption.


128 Liu, Solitaire, viii.

129 Liu, Solitaire, 68.

130 Liu, Solitaire, viii.

131 Hornbacher, Wasted, 4.


133 Kurshan, "To Poison an Ideal," 31, 32, 42.

134 Hornbacher, Wasted, 6-7.

135 Hornbacher, Wasted, 245-6.

136 Hornbacher, Wasted, 53.

137 Hornbacher, Wasted, 64, 69, 123-4.

138 Hornbacher, Wasted, 118-19, 131.

139 Hornbacher, Wasted, 5-6.

140 Lelwica, Starving for Salvation, 82.

141 Gray, "On Thin Ice," 60.


144 Gray, "On Thin Ice," 58, 65.


147 Lelwica, The Religion of Thinness, Introduction.

148 Lelwica, Starving for Salvation, 52. Emphases added.

149 Lelwica, Starving for Salvation, 55-6.


from Feminist Perspectives, 410-11.


158 Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 181.


161 Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 304-16.

162 Taylor, *Going Hungry*, Introduction.


164 Miles, *Fullness of Life*, 49-54.


166 Namely, certain types of amphetamine or hallucinogens.


168 Kurshan, “To Poison an Ideal,” 35.


170 Halliday, “Earthly Imperfections,” 174. Research suggests that starvation can lead to euphoria by changing levels of neurotransmitters in the brain. Moreover, studies are beginning to suggest that areas of the brain involved in pleasure and reward, specifically the anterioventral striatum and the caudate-dorsal striatum, function differently in individuals diagnosed with, or recovering from, anorexia. Essentially, the latest findings indicate that anorectics “live in the future,” and are unable to process rewards or pleasures on a moment-to-moment basis because of actual variations in neurophysiology (Gura 215-17).


178 Social order, perhaps, or better yet, the social status quo.


180 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 201-2.

181 Llewica, *Starving for Salvation*.


184 Pals, *Eight Theories*, 100-105.

185 A view he purported with the classic statement, “Religion is the opiate of the masses.”


187 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 144. Emphasis in the original.

188 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 144-7.


192 Llewica, *Starving for Salvation*, 68.