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BOOK PROFILE: *BORN AGAIN BODIES*

R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. xiv + 323 pp. \$55.00 (cloth) \$21.95 (paper). ISBN 0520242408.

IN AMERICA, BODY SIZE AND SHAPE have always been crucial for social acceptance and love. A beautiful body equates desirability and happiness. Often discrimination is thought of in terms of race or sex. However, a powerful bigotry exists that goes beyond skin color and gender. This intolerance is based on a view of proper body size and proportion.

Many are familiar with the notion that appearance plays a role in a person's success or failure in both the professional and social arenas. Griffith explores Protestantism's role in America's preoccupation with fitness and beauty. More specifically, the recent popularity of Christian diet programs. This study seeks to establish a correlation between the current Christian interest in fitness and earlier health betterment attempts. In addition, Griffith is searching for religious rhetoric in the secular American fitness craze.

To answer the research questions the author employs the historical method and ethnographic research. This analysis is divided into five chapters beginning with a look at connections between the body and the soul. Chapter one focuses on phrenology and the ability to gain insight into an individual's worth through outward appearance. In chapter two the New Thought era is chronicled. This period is credited for America's current idea of thin beauty. The New Thought period was marked by the concept of self-control, mastery over the body and the mind.

Chapter three continues the discussion of New Thought and explores the fasting masters, which were a group of famous turn of the century figures. This group saw fasting as the key to religious and corporeal wellbeing. Chapter four links overeating with sin through Deborah Pierce's book *I Prayed Myself Slim* (1960) and Charlie Shedd's *Pray Your Weight Away* (1957) which equates body fat as a

measure of sin. This chapter also introduces Griffith's ethnographic interviews with participants in Christian diet programs. One interviewee that participated in a program known as *Weight Down* appreciated the ideas of obedience and God's love as an earned privilege.

The final chapter explains the fears guiding the Christian diet culture into the present. The practice of fasting continues to flourish in the modern era packaged as a cleansing and beneficial practice. The twenty-first century has also seen the obsession over the aesthetic body image take individuals into the operating room. The overweight person is seen as the embodiment of filth and gluttony that no procedure, no matter how dangerous, is beyond consideration.

Griffith is highly critical of Protestantism and its role in the perceived image of beauty. Protestantism is further specified to mean white middle class, and the book's tone indicates the pressures are largely male to female. Women must fit a particular physical type in order to be attractive to God and earn his love. The book raises some interesting correlations between rituals in Christianity and current fad diets. However, many associations are a stretch. Griffith claims that anorexia nervosa is a secular form of religious fasting. The book concludes that the white Protestant view of the body and beauty is at its core racially and ethnically exclusive.

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