

Review of Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011, ix + 288 pp., ISBN-13: 987-0-226-28812-3

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Religions have long been in the business of regulating bodily desires, particularly those deemed 'unruly' or 'deviant'. In *Seeking the Straight and Narrow* Lynne Gerber analyses this effort on the part of two evangelical Christian ministries: a popular weight-loss program called First Place, and a network of ex-gay ministries called Exodus International. Based on fieldwork in each of these organizations, Gerber demonstrates how body size and sexual orientation are compelling issues of faith for their members. Her analysis is rich in complexity and nuanced by sensitivity to her subjects as she explores the tensions and ambiguities – between change and its limits, sin and salvation, sickness and health, morality and biology, discipline and freedom, godly and worldly ideals, and even success and failure – that permeate their efforts to lose weight and reorient sexuality. Ultimately, her study illuminates not only how religious faith is (re)produced in relation to the body through the process of (re)negotiating moral codes and physical urges, but also how such faith interacts with the culture around it in ways that call into question clear-cut distinctions between 'sacred' and 'secular' norms, ideologies, and experiences.

The book itself is organized into three main parts. The first examines how body size and sexual orientation are moralized through the categories and rhetorical strategies each ministry deploys. The language of 'sin' is central to both endeavours, though Gerber shows that this terminology is not without problems. While it provides a necessary basis for identifying what needs to be changed (whether in terms of body size or sexual desire), it also conveys a judgmental stance that could alienate those these ministries seek to save. In this light, the secular discourses of mental and physical 'health' that both ministries incorporate not only 'soften the blow of calling something sin' (p. 39), but also ease tensions between

these evangelical subcultures' norms and those of the cultural mainstream. Nonetheless, as Gerber's analysis shows, mental and physical health discourses prove to be more of a complement to the language of sin than a replacement. The lingering overlap between the two categories (that is, 'health' and 'salvation') is evident in the moral overtones surrounding notions of 'sickness' and 'sin'. Whether the aim is weight-loss or reoriented sexual desire, each ministry's notion of the 'godly' or 'healthy' body is constructed through containment of desire, which expresses the very faith it helps to generate.

Part II focuses on the strategies – both theoretical and practical – through which First Place and Exodus members pursue their respective goals. Gerber examines the theories of change implicit in each ministry, illuminating a tension between the notions that change is a choice (on the one hand) and that change is a process (on the other). Presuming the malleability of physical appetite (whether for sex or food), each ministry encourages its members to combat unwanted bodily urges by morally exercising free will and discipline. But as her subjects' testimonies reveal, the notion that change is based on a simple, freely-chosen decision defies the complex reality of disciplining and re-training somatic longing. Each ministry responds to this complexity with a more complicated version of how change happens – namely, by understanding it as an ongoing process. This approach 'defuses any expectations of sudden, miraculous, and complete transformation' (p. 103) and thus keeps the ministries credible to those for whom unwanted desire proves to be a stubborn opponent. While the physical disciplines these ministries encourage to regulate the body's appetites may seem punitive and restrictive to those outside these evangelical subcultures, Gerber sees them (with the help of Foucault) as simultaneously productive of the very faith they express.

The final part of the book analyses the extent to which both ministries produce the kinds of change they promise, and how each responds to the less-than-reliable results of their members' efforts. A common strategy for dealing with their members' failure to achieve their ostensible goals is to redefine these goals in terms that prioritize Christian faith (specifically, one's relationship with Christ) over weight-loss or re-oriented sexual desire. In the case of Exodus, for example, holiness – rather than heterosexuality – becomes the program's primary aim for those whose same-sex orientation proves persistent. Among First Place members who see limited success in their weight-loss efforts, trusting God becomes more important than a thin body. Indeed, Gerber shows how the aims of both ministries 'can stretch to accommodate a great deal of inconsistency and contradiction' (196), allowing them to remain relevant for those who continue to struggle against the tide of their own desires. For some, however, repeated failures lead to questioning the premise of the programs – i.e. that being fat or gay is necessarily a problem. At some point, some members decide that the profound stubbornness of their supposedly sinful urges may be an indication that they are God-given, rather than in need of conversion.

Gerber's discussion in Chapter 6 of movements that challenge the beliefs that being fat or gay is sinful amplifies a crucial point that remains somewhat muted in the preceding chapters, namely, the tremendously painful consequences of such beliefs for many people both within and beyond these ministries. While Gerber's study gives us glimpses of the often anguished struggles of those who seek to change their bodies or their sexual desires, her analysis is so deeply and consistently sensitive to the way her subjects think about these issues that its

critical potential is short-circuited. For example, Gerber discusses how Exodus ministries appeal to biblical texts that do not deal directly with homosexuality to support their opposition to homosexuality. This, she says, demonstrates that their anti-gay position 'is not simply unreflective obedience to the dictates of scripture but a thoughtful consideration of why God might deem same-sex eroticism sinful'. While such an analysis suggests that a pre-critical use of the bible (that is, one that does not engage a historical-critical method) may not necessarily lack its own internal logic, it stops short of challenging the questionable theological assumptions that underwrite this biblical hermeneutic, and it doesn't explicitly critique the unjust, exclusionary sociopolitical structures such assumptions perpetuate beyond the scope of Exodus International. At points I found myself simultaneously marveling at the complexity, sensitivity, and nuance of Gerber's analysis, while wishing that the analysis itself would do more to challenge the ideologies and assumptions that render the work of such ministries not only complex, but harmful.

It may be that Gerber's highly sympathetic analysis of her subjects' worldviews compensates for her own admitted disagreement with many of their assumptions. To be sure, my desire for more critical interventions in Gerber's analysis raises larger questions about the nature and purpose of scholarship, particularly that which pertains to women and/or other groups whose lives have been systematically marginalized, deemed inferior, and perceived to be in need of conversion. Is the scholar's job to describe, or to advocate? To what extent can we do both?

Such questions do not have easy answers, but they do relate to a final issue that deserves some mention regarding Gerber's book, namely the way gender factors into her analysis of both ministries. The gender analysis is strongest in Gerber's discussion of the ex-gay ministries' reliance on a 'reparative therapy' model, which assumes that no one is born homosexual and that same-sex desire is the consequence of faulty gender identity development, that is, the failure to become a 'real man' or 'real woman'. Even here, however, the critique of such essentialized notions of gender is more implicit than overt. Moreover, the gender dynamics of the thin imperative promoted by First Place are even less explicitly examined. This is surprising given the long-standing religious/cultural associations between women and 'the body', which, one could argue, have encouraged women to define and seek their worth through their bodies, in part by cultivating an 'attractive' (that is, 'feminine') appearance. Indeed, it would have been interesting to consider the gender dynamics of the weight-loss imperative in connection with the complimentary theologies of gender that guide the anti-gay ministries, as both seem steeped in heterosexist assumptions about what it means to be a 'man' or 'woman'.

In the end, a more explicitly critical-feminist analytical framework may have enabled Gerber to do what she already does so well – namely, sympathetically understand her subjects' worldviews, aspirations, and experiences on their own terms, including the internal logic and agency implicit in evangelical Christians' quests for the 'straight and narrow' – while also explicitly challenging questionable theologies that turn 'difference' into 'deviance' and perpetuate suffering for those who do not fit in.