Hello, and welcome back to Theologies of Liberation II. This week, we’ll be looking at a text that touches on several topics that will be familiar to you from both this module and the previous one: Lisa Isherwood’s *The Fat Jesus.* Isherwood is known for her work as a feminist theologian. Her research specialises in body theology – questions about how the body relates to faith, what faith can tell us about the body, and the challenges to Christianity posed by the diversity of bodies in the world and the political arrangements around them.

This week’s text looks at *fatness –* or more specifically, the ways it has been unjustly pathologized throughout history. As we shall see, this pathologisation has been embedded within, and continues to be reproduced through, Christian discourses around asceticism and salvation, particularly as they apply to women. Isherwood’s challenge to this picks up on a broad theme common in feminist theology: that women have long been expected to live ascetic lives in ways that, rather than bringing them to fulfilment, actually inhibit the expression of their full humanity. Correspondingly, many feminist theologians have been sceptical of asceticism, sometimes even going as far as to argue that things that are commonly seen as sins for men – things like pride, sensuality, and lust – are in fact virtues for women in the face of a society that disparages womanhood and denies women’s desires as a default. Following this line, for Isherwood, fatness is not something to be resisted through the ascetic refusal of food, or from which women need to be redeemed. Noting that the health risks of fatness are often overplayed, Isherwood argues that it has many virtues for women too: fatness is a feature of women’s bodies that marks them out specifically as feminine, signifies their desires, and gives them a physical presence in society that can be embraced. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves – on with the lecture!

# Part 1 – fatphobia and fat liberation

Before we begin, it is important to recognise that Isherwood’s book is somewhat oddly structured. It is written in what is described by the theologian Susannah Cornwall in her 2013 review of the book as a “rapid, almost stream-of-consciousness prose style”. This makes for a provoking book, bombarding the reader with new ideas that grow outwards with all of the vitality and boundary-fluidity of, as we shall see, the Fat Jesus himself. However, this also makes it quite difficult to teach -particularly if the teacher wants to frame it in terms of an easily-grasped cohesive thesis. I do want to do this, but be aware that in doing so I have had to reorder ideas and impose an alien structure on the text. In contrast, when you look at today’s reading, you will be plunged into its wild flow – and who knows what will emerge?

We might well start with Isherwood’s noting that liberation theology has seen a proliferation of Christs, as people have learned to see ever increasing numbers of formerly excluded groups in his figure. For example, in this module, we have already seen Christ the Prisoner, and the Disabled Christ.

However, she notes, fatness remains stigmatised – and this has received very little theological attention.

We are living in a time when fat phobia is at its height and to question this is seen as a sin, because the rhetoric is about making people healthy and caring for their well-being. When we look at the reality we see that there is a great deal of prejudice about fat people that does not speak of concern and respect – there is a mismatch in the rhetoric. Recently it has been suggested that fat children should be taken into care for their own good, because it was neglect by their parents that allowed them to become so large. In addition we are bombarded with programmes showing us young people being sent to camps because they are overweight. ‘Fat Camp’ is one such programme which has a regime akin to the worst excesses of boot camp. These young people cry and show signs of psychological distress, but because they are fat they are supposed somehow to deserve it. We are told overweight women may not conceive, and it has been reported very recently that overweight women were not employed by high street banks as they gave the wrong image.

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This is, for Isherwood, a crucial feminist issue. She argues that control over womens’ size is a primary form in which patriarchy exerts control over womens’ bodies today. This control is not really about health, because prevailing narratives about weight don’t care about it. Rather, they actively exhort women to starve themselves and live in ways that are objectively unhealthy in pursuit of thinness. Likewise, they have a distinct sexual dimension that is bound up in controlling double binds: patriarchal conceptions of the body sexualise certain features like breast size while denigrating the fat that accompanies it. The media also bombards women with patriarchal idealised versions of female bodies, while profiting from the tension between these images and the realities by then using the negative feelings and impulses to sell people products. In this context, Isherwood argues that the point of diet culture is rather more about women’s obedience to patriarchy, making them live in ways that revolve around living up to its standards.

Similarly, women are alienated from their bodies and their embodiment commodified when they are taught that their bodies are “commodities either to be dieted or to be paraded and adorned” (18). In this way, the media replaces actual women’s bodies with virtual images under which they are commodified. Furthermore, she argues that women internalise these images, because in identifying with them they can disidentify with their physical bodies and the thoughts, passions and desires that attend living as them – all of which are a basis for women’s agency, and thus inimical to this patriarchal system of control.

Indeed, she notes, eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia can be ways of exerting control over one’s body in this context – specifically by inhabiting the position of power of the male gaze that demands thinness. They are ways of becoming empowered by judging oneself according to the standards to which you are otherwise inescapably subject – but this is of course not real power at all. However, this political dimension must be disguised, so popular culture tends to view them as personal, psychological issues rather than signifiers of social injustices that must be addressed.

She also notes that there are numerous intersectional issues involved in fatphobia. Fatness is racialised, such that fatphobia becomes a way of enforcing White supremacy. Thinness is a White ideal, and White girls and girls within White schools are most subject to negative views of bigger bodies. It is also an issue of economic justice, as fat women face obstacles to employment.

For Isherwood, the heart of these dynamics, particularly as they pertain to women, lies in the way patriarchy turns women’s bodies into objects for the fulfilment of men, and teaches women only to relate to their bodies vicariously, through the men who consume them. Isherwood attributes this impulse to features of male psychology. In particular, she draws from psychoanalytic feminisms that argue that patriarchy is a response to male perceptions of the mother’s body, either as something that is lost to them, and which needs to be restored to them in controlling women’s bodies; or as a huge mass that threatens to engulf them even as it provides necessary nourishment, and which needs to be reduced to a nonthreatening size while also appropriated as a source of security – something which men achieve through penetrating women with their penis, and keeping their bodies small.

The result is that the patriarchal beauty ideal “is not about our own power and desire, it is about power between men”, dictating how women should be embodied in order to fulfil male needs and desires while thwarting their own. She argues that this continues to function even when women hit middle age and cease to be viewed as physically desirable, they are viewed as nurturers and providers without reference to their desires and needs. In both cases, women’s desires are erased.

Isherwood identifies a number of bad responses to this problematic. First, she argues that women cannot participate in this male appropriation of women’s bodies. Continuing the psychoanalytic argument, she argues that they have no penis with which to reappropriate the mother’s body; as a result, subscribing to the values which enshrine this male phallic power cannot provide them with the satisfaction they require.

Another bad response to this situation would be to look to consumerism as a solution. Capitalism offers women objects through which they can notionally pursue their desires. However, these objects are determined by patriarchal desires. Your choices are thus already bound up in patriarchal ideals about women’s bodies – hence the classic example of female consumerism is buying clothes, which enable you to meet patriarchal beauty standards.

Instead, women must look elsewhere for resources. This, for Isherwood, can be Christian theology. She argues that the Incarnation “shatters all our myopic earthbound ideas and makes them subject to change”. It inaugurates a “countercultural” way of living in opposition to worldly ideologies, possibilities, and injustices (100). This is significant because it enables us to intervene in the social processes that reproduce patriarchal discourses around women’s bodies.

Drawing from the French radical feminist, Monique Wittig, she argues that language is a series of acts that, through repetition, create ‘reality’ or the set of things we take as given. Part of this involves the devaluation of fatness. In this linguistic context, the idea of valuable fatness is “unintelligible”, or not figureable within the language of our society. Patriarchal society coerces people into speaking its language, with these limitations. Correspondingly, as she puts it, “there is no possibility of being a speaking subject” for fat women: they can only speak the language society foists upon them (100).

However, Wittig also says language is plastic and malleable. This allows her to argue for a reconceptualization of gender through linguistic intervention. Isherwood writes

It seems to me the same is also true about the shape and size of women, not simply the state of being female. It is urgent, then, that we use different language so that these alternative speech acts become embedded as fact, but as facts based on our perception of our bodies, not the perceptions of the male gaze and other vehicles of patriarchal order. In other words, we need to talk ourselves into a subject position; to talk ourselves into the real world.

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This linguistic focus also hints at the possibility of a theological response. Language is important in the Bible: God speaks and names the world into existence. Indeed, God is the Word, who is present at creation. Thus, she argues, in the Bible, Words can “create human reality; to shape our world”.

However, as I mentioned previously, this is a difficult challenge for fat women as it goes against the grain not only of our language, but of the social processes that often coercively reproduces it. She writes:

The fat female body… is invaded with comments and bombarded with pathologized hatred and fear. This is because fat women do not play by the rules and so in this way they embody a threat, a space-taking threat at that. They have bodies that occupy space in a way that violates the rules of sexual politics and of the body movement; they do not confine themselves to the meagre space allowed women in the public arena, and they have muscles and so do not fall down under their own weight. This is not as it should be: this is countercultural and has to be punished, which it is through language and through attempted social exclusion…

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Nevertheless, she states,

…we could argue that the fat body is demanding that society finds a new vision of embodiment that is no longer disdainful of the flesh, and that theology thinks again about how it engages with the realities of incarnation and the divine potential therein.

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This is the basic idea underlying her response to fatphobia.

# Part 2 – the pathologisation of fatness

However, to overcome this, we must first understand the way that today’s language around fatness is constructed – particularly in its theological dimensions.

Isherwood notes that, historically speaking, men’s bodies have been viewed as more in the image of God than women’s. Indeed, women’s bodies have historically only been accepted theologically as idealised saints or martyrs.

Drawing from the work of body theologian, James Nelson, Isherwood claims that this is bound up in phallic images of God. In His power and impassibility, God is seen as self-standing and hard. His transcendence is conceived in terms of going up into the sky, and grace is seen as coming down to penetrate creation. This phallic imagery is also captured in the kinds of bodies associated with God, with the ideal women’s body being seen as emaciated and ascetic.

In contrast, food and pleasure in eating have long been associated with sensuality; something captured in a theological register by the link between Eve’s eating the apple and the fall. Women’s relationship with food has historically been filtered through this association, and their eating is highly sexualised as a result, becoming the object of both taboo and titillation.

For example, in the Victorian era, thinness was seen as a sign of domestic virtue, whereas voluptuous figures were associated with sexually desirable but morally dubious figures like actresses. Significantly, certain forms of non-eating also became medicalised in this era. In both ways, thinness and fatness therefore both became individualised and privatised, as signs of both virtue and health.

As the food industry established itself, previous religious sentiments about purity ended up being reproduced in ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ food in a similarly individualised way. These narratives were levelled particularly at women, whose bodies have traditionally been viewed as passive objects determined by outside forces. The modern world has seen an immanentizing of the body, detaching it from any transcendent significance. They are now, as Isherwood puts it, only “mirrors of the self and nothing more” (70). In this way, women’s bodies, shaped by food, came to symbolise the moral status of women themselves as determined by the ’good’ and ‘bad’ food they ate.

Isherwood is particularly interested in the fundamentalist Protestant diet culture which arose in the late 1950s. You will look at this in more detail in the reading. However, a common theme among early examples of this movement was an association of food and fatness with sin: weight, to early Protestant diet culture, was an issue of faith, with dieting being a way to conform oneself to God’s model for humanity. Fatness was portrayed by these movements as a sign and effect of sin or the devil’s influence on one’s life; a disruption of God’s plan for human life. In turn, this positioned failure to lose weight as a failure of faith.

In the 1980s, the diet industry became more corporate and therapeutic. Correspondingly, religious dieting theology shifted slightly to one that saw fatness as a response to a lack of intimacy with God. Rather than straightforwardly seeing fatness as something to be fought as sin, fat people instead had to deepen their relationship with God in order to satiate the spiritual hunger that manifested in their lives as physical hunger. Isherwood notes that this therapeutic turn also has a sinister dimension: this deeper relationship was often conceived in terms of surrendering control of one’s life to God. This sets God up as a controlling masculine figure who governs mostly women’s embodiment and eating ‘for their own good’; something that in no small way resembles traditional patriarchal narratives around women’s sexuality, as well as abusive patterns of control in relationships. Correspondingly, the majority of these dieting groups also elicit testimonies from their members, many of which talk about their own lack of control, but praise their husbands and even their reprimands about their weight.

She also notes that this vision of God is also a highly individualised one, revolving around a private relationship bound up in self-concern, with no wider social or justice-oriented aspect, and a troubling capacity to be commodified as a kind of lifestyle brand or product.

Another worrying trend that Isherwood identifies in these movements is that they portray physical beauty as a Christian virtue. Isherwood notes that the flip side of this divinisation of physical beauty standards is an attitude in those same churches that views disability as a mark of sin. She cites Eiesland’s call for a theology that embraces “survivable” bodies and refuses to create distinctions of good and bad disability. Within this, she includes bodies that have been disabled by injustice – for example malnutrition or torture. Conversely these slim for Jesus programmes, in their individualistic faith and association of food with sin, do not consider the wider social significance of food and the injustices involved in its distribution. Indeed, they generally seek to equip people to participate better in the very societies and organisations that perpetuate these injustices. In contrast, a good theology of disability calls us to oppose these things, and teaches us to recognise the value in forms of embodiment that break with our assumptions about health, perfection, vulnerability and naturalness.

Finally, Isherwood has concerns about their exaltation of control. This, she claims, is of the same mindset that looks “for a certain world and, as we know, such a world requires that the rigid boundaries we create around our bodies also extend to our lives, our countries and our religions” (82). In this way, she also notes that these movements, being fundamentalist ones, are associated with apocalyptic Christian movements that have become more widespread in politics, seeking to purify society before the eagerly-awaited end-times by undermining the civil rights gains of the past century. Similarly, the beauty standards these movements champion are White-coded ones.

In this regard, she argues. they also reflect wider racial history of Christian fundamentalism in the US, which is marked by slavery and White supremacy. Isherwood also notes that the evangelical bent of these movements reflects the wider universalism of diet culture, which claims to address everyone. She notes that this universalism is a colonialist one, undermining different cultural bodily standards and supplanting women’s diverse relationships to their bodies around the world. She notes that this makes its standards analogous to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s concepts of colonial ‘decency’, which used moral values to establish and police colonial gender norms (91). Similarly, insofar as thinness requires money and time to achieve, and that obesity is greater among poor, Black and Latina women than White women, these standards exult the rich and educated over the poor.

For Isherwood, these are all problems that Liberation Theology needs to address.

# Part 3 – the redemption of food

The first step towards, for Isherwood, this is a reconception of what food means theologically. She looks to the Bible for understandings of food that challenge the ascetic, individualised, boundary-policing views of food that characterise religious movements like Jesus dieting.

Against historical Christian overemphases on asceticism around food, Isherwood notes that the Old Testament talks about food in positive ways. For example, in Genesis, we are made from the same dust we toil over for food. Similarly, it associates the Word of God with the taste of honey, and God leads Israel to salvation in the land of milk and honey. For Isherwood, this suggests a different focus: through these images, we can see that the issue with food in the Old Testament is not an individualised one around too much personal enjoyment, but that people lack access to food – and therein, grace.

Isherwood notes that food, like sex, also crosses the boundaries of the body, and so also both marks out and can subvert analogous social boundaries. The Old Testament also sees food as a sign of hospitality and belonging. In this way, Jewish feasts were an occasion to renew the covenant. Hence Isaiah 25:6-9 sees deliverance in terms of a shared banquet. Likewise, in the New Testament, outcasts are frequently invited to the banquet as a sign of God’s kingdom.

Likewise, she argues that the Song of Songs unites sensual food and sexual imagery to show the richness of each. For example, the singer describes her lover’s love as better than wine, and his fruit as sweet (2:3). Correspondingly, her lover describes the singer’s genitals as “an orchard of pomegranates with excellent fruit” (4:13). This challenges patriarchal restrictions of love to insensate reproduction, or sex focused only on male pleasure. She writes:

Food is life-sustaining and fruit a wonderful riot of juicy taste and texture, a delightful addition to any diet but nonetheless a life-sustaining and preserving addition. By coupling sex and fruit in this text the author is celebrating the life-sustaining aspect of sexuality beyond that of the merely procreative and introducing us to the idea that the more tastes, textures and smells we encounter the richer life is. So the more immersed in sensuality we become the more our lives are enriched and indeed the more we challenge the patriarchal order.

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In this, she argues, it also reconfigures the relationship between the lovers:

The interesting use of fruit in this text places the lovers within a larger circle of creation but also makes it difficult to identify the giver and receiver of pleasure, the mouth being an active receptor in eating… The eating images disrupt phallic notion with ‘their frequent demarcation of subjects and objects, known to us from many ancient representations of sexuality’. The clear desire of the woman for oral stimulation is not the epitome of patriarchal phallic sexuality. The woman here is no simple object she is also a subject of her own desire, she eats and is eaten, she indulges in a riot of taste and smell.

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These food metaphors also occasion a celebration of the woman’s body: she celebrates the colour of her skin and asserts the magnificence of her breasts against her detractors; and she portrays her body as a feast that she bestows, without ever questioning whether it will be received (43-44).

Isherwood argues that this woman should be the model for Biblical womanhood, valuing and rejoicing in her body, and relating herself to the earth from which she emerged, and which provides her with the food that nourishes her body and its desires, and represents its grace (44-45).

# Part 4 – the fat jesus

So if Biblical womanhood is modelled by the desirous singer in the Song of Songs, how ought we to think through women’s desire in a way that is liberating?

She looks to the work of the feminist theologian and Episcopal priest, Carter Heyward for the resources to do so. According to Heyward, Christ brings a message of divinization: that humans can be drawn through our desire – which ancient theologians would have called our *eros* – to be and act in ways that are ever closer to God. In this context, holiness arises out of choice and desire. Isherwood sees this as the basis for a theology that speaks against the trends I’ve mentioned in this lecture. She writes:

…if the God women follows frees and empowers them in this way then the restricting discourses of patriarchy will be seen for what they are, blasphemous, because they do not acknowledge let alone encourage the full becoming of the divine incarnate in the bodies of women.

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For Heyward, this means that the erotic – in both its original sense, referring to *eros*, but also the more narrow senses given to it today- is important. Erotic desire is embodied, and thus unites agency and desire, embodiment, and subjectivity. Through reconnecting with their *eros,* women can thus become embodied subjects, reconnecting with their desires and bodies against the ways that society alienates women from both. It is in living out this embodied subjectivity that women can move closer to God. Doing so will enable them to recognise and express their *dunamis;* the in-born power with which humans are created, and which moves them back towards God.

Isherwood takes this view of desire and uses it to think through the act of eating. She draws from the theologian, Monical Hellwig to argue that the shared eating of the Eucharist involves entering into a relationship with food that is bound up in this desire. Hellwig claims that the Last Supper was a meal in which food was shared, becoming a sign of fellowship amidst oppression; something that can guide us in our understanding of the Eucharist that it instituted. This feeding sates physical hunger, embracing the body. But it does so not simply by giving us food, but by feeding us with a new way of living that speaks against the injustices that attend eating and food distribution in our society today. Isherwood writes,

I would like to suggest that what one ingested was the passion of Christ understood not as a final sacrifice but as a radical way of living countercultural praxis through the skin. We are fed with incarnation possibilities and sustained to ever widen the boundaries of this contained patriarchal order that does nothing to embrace and allow for the flourishing of our divine/human reality.

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In this context, Isherwood argues, hunger – which is to say, the desire for food - is thus something that can be embraced and satiated in an authentically liberating way.

It is this liberating hunger, which seeks both physical and spiritual fulfilment, goes beyond privatised asceticism to engage others, and problematise food injustice and the boundaries along which that injustice falls, that is embodied in the eponymous figure of the book: the fat Jesus. She writes:

The Fat Jesus wants us to hunger and indeed shares that hunger with us, but this is not a desperate search for satisfaction – it is rather a continued commitment to expanding the edges through sharing and creative engagement with each other and the resources of the planet… The Fat Jesus compels us to demand fairer production policies, better quality food, more equitable distribution and enough food on all tables, food that we eat with passion, with joy, with embodied pleasure, not praising God for his blessing and then binning it. The Fat Jesus does not wish us to control our desire for food but rather to passionately engage with a desire for the world to eat and to celebrate the life that is enhanced through this abundance.

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In this context, she advocates that Christians engage in ways of eating that reflect this Eucharistic hunger. She calls this “dunamis eating”, and describes it as “their connection with the raw and passionate heart of their divine/human natures which will propel them into greater connection and relationality in the world” (136).

In doing so, Christians can repeat the gesture at the heart of the incarnation. Rejecting the image of the self-sufficient, phallic God, she argues that we should see in the Fat Jesus how God needed to “abandon himself to flesh”, understood in all of its mutable, fluid reality. In this context, we should not reject the flesh as an improper area of concern or love or desire, either by disavowing bodily desires, or attempting to idealise the flesh by creating boundaries of control. Rather, in *dunamis* eating, we embrace the flesh, and its capacity to satisfy real and valuable needs and desires, and to connect us to one another. And in doing so, just as Christ commanded us at the last supper, we can Eucharistically remember the Fat Jesus; the one, she writes,

…with the flexible edges, edges that are not constantly policed by the guardians of improved selves and manicured lives”, who can embrace softness and vulnerability rather than the hard and upright, masculinised God of rigid bodily boundaries.

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# Conclusion

OK – that’s enough for this week. I’d like you to take a look at the reading, and think about the following questions:

1. Isherwood finds fatness to be significant far beyond simple individualised health concerns. What does this mean for how you view your body and those of others?
2. Isherwood shows how, particularly in a US evangelical context, dieting takes on a kind of perverted religious significance. Does this reflect your own experiences of the messages you find about fatness in your society?
3. How do our attitudes towards eating reflect and shape our images of God?

See you soon!