

Jennifer Moe  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary  
[Jennifer.moe@garrett.edu](mailto:Jennifer.moe@garrett.edu)  
2015 REA Annual Meeting, Nov. 6-8

## What's So Offensive About a #womanwholikesherself?

### ABSTRACT

Women in the United States today are exposed to constant reminders via social media, television, films, and books that they must always be working on bettering their bodies, monitoring their feelings, and being nicer and more pleasant. Many of these women are also part of a religious subculture that reinforces the same, often oppressive values. In this paper I explore what it means to be a woman who likes herself in today's culture and whether there is a place for liking one's self within Christian religious communities. I ask the question, can we imagine a Christian religious identity that can coincide with a radical self-love and self-like that resists the pressures of society to constantly conform to a standard that is often oppressive?

When I first heard about comedian Amy Schumer's tweet, "Woman who likes herself,"<sup>1</sup> I was immediately transported back to middle school, where the worst character trait a girl could possess was being someone who "liked herself." To like yourself meant that you were stuck-up, that you thought you were better than everyone else. To like yourself was considered rude and offensive. Because you liked yourself, you couldn't possibly like other people.

Schumer's tweet included the hashtag, #offendeveryonein4words. I began to wonder, what does it mean that liking one's self, as a woman, is still considered offensive? What does it mean today to say that you like yourself? As someone with deep roots in the evangelical Christian subculture, I also began to wonder what liking yourself means in a community that tends to encourage a diminishment of the self in order to bring attention to God?

As I researched this idea of liking yourself as a woman, the most prominent places I found where women embrace self-love and self-like are in relation to body acceptance, specifically as it refers to thinness and beauty, and in online communities where stories of women's experiences, no matter how strange or provocative, are accepted. As I spent hours poring over interviews with Schumer and watching her video parodies, so much of her feminist vision and critique revolved around her own physical appearance and willingness to comment on the absurdity of the expectations placed on women today. It seems that the heart of self-like, for women like Schumer and others, is no longer related to esteeming one's self more highly than others, but is rather in learning to accept and embrace the body and personality that you have.

Author and advice columnist Sara Eckel writes that contemporary women in the United States are constantly hearing "alternating voices of cheerleading and shame continually urg[ing] us to better ourselves."<sup>2</sup> We are bombarded with contradictory messages about what it means to be a "good" woman and how we are to carry ourselves through the world—be sexy, but innocent; be exceptionally pretty, but like you "woke up this way;" be healthy, which is equated with looks more than actual physicality, not to mention any reference to mental health; be nice, be thin, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Amy Schumer, "Woman who likes herself," [www.twitter.com @amyschumer](https://twitter.com/amyschumer), March 1, 2015 (accessed 9/16/15).

<sup>2</sup> Sara Eckel, *It's Not You: 27 (Wrong) Reasons You're Single* (New York: Penguin, 2014), xv.

be beautiful. When the messages are this confusing, and often contradictory, is it any wonder that women today feel constant pressure to better themselves, if only just to keep up?

Postfeminist critical scholarship has found that as women are gaining more opportunities in society, they are also encountering a strong emphasis on self-improvement and taking control of one's life as the means to self-fulfillment and "living your best life." The kinds of self-improvement that women are encouraged toward are similar to the maintenance tactics that women have always been expected to follow. This new understanding is that self-improvement is not for the benefit of others (such as a male spouse), but for your own benefit as a woman. The postfeminist ideal is a woman who embraces a model of womanhood where performance of the same kinds of maintenance rituals that women used to do to please the patriarchy or solidify their position in society are seen as means of self-expression and wholeness.

Media scholar Rosalind Gill writes, "Notions of choice, of 'being oneself' and 'pleasing oneself,' are central to the postfeminist sensibility that suffuses contemporary western media culture. They resonate powerfully with [an] emphasis on empowerment and taking control..."<sup>3</sup> These notions include "femininity as a bodily property" (defined as "an obsessional preoccupation with the body"), "self-surveillance and discipline," and "individualism, choice, and empowerment."<sup>4</sup> In other words, women are now empowered to choose for themselves, and they are "choosing" often physically punishing and emotionally draining regimes of constant self-improvement under the guise of wellness, healthfulness, and living one's best life.

These same messages have made their way into Christian faith communities via explicit and implicit curriculum (materials, sermons, programs, and a general "spiritual wellness" ethos) that tells girls and women what it means to be a "good Christian woman." On a popular Christian book website, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors), there are 147 titles that come up on a search for "Weight Loss." Titles include: *The Lord's Table: A Biblical Approach to Weight Loss; Bod 4 God*; and *The Maker's Diet for Weight Loss*.<sup>5</sup> One of the most popular, and controversial, of the Christian dieting programs is *The Weigh Down Diet* by Gwen Shamblin. "With Shamblin as its most popular guru, the industry has exploded," says author and Episcopal priest Lauren Winner.<sup>6</sup> In programs such as Shamblin's, overeating, and therefore "fatness," is equated with sin and thinness with godliness.<sup>7</sup> Shamblin has taken women's sincere desires to be disciples of Jesus and the biblical notion of the body as a temple and has turned them against women by using a contemporary notion of thinness to convince women that they are not truly following Jesus. Author Naomi Wolf equated thinness with *obedience* in *The Beauty Myth*:

...female fat is the subject of public passion, and women feel guilty about female fat, because we implicitly recognize that under the myth, women's bodies are not our own but society's, and that thinness is not a private aesthetic, but hunger a social concession exacted by the community. *A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience* (emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2012), 139.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 139-141.

<sup>5</sup> See website cbd.com

<sup>6</sup> Lauren F. Winner, "The Weigh and the Truth," ChristianityToday.com, August 25, 2000, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/september4/1.50.html?start=2> (accessed 9/16/15).

<sup>7</sup> Marie Griffith, "The Christian Diet Craze," beliefnet.com, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/2000/02/The-Christian-Diet-Craze.aspx> (accessed 9/16/15).

<sup>8</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 187.

Shamblin has taken Wolf's observation and made a Christian teaching out of it: women's bodies are not their own (they belong to God) and Christian women are called to obedience to Christ, so therefore Christian women are called to thinness.

Feminist body theologian Lisa Isherwood, in discussing a 1957 book, *Pray Your Weight Away* by Charlie Shedd, says the author "says that God did not ever imagine fat and his justification for this statement is that the slender are those who succeed in the world."<sup>9</sup> Being slim as a means of discipline is "part of what good Christian womanhood implies":

This movement ["Christian" or spirituality-based dieting] is particularly popular with women and becoming slim for Jesus appears to be almost *part of what good Christian womanhood implies* in some circles (emphasis mine).<sup>10</sup>

Constant monitoring of the body is not the only area that materials for Christian women and girls emphasize. Self-surveillance of feelings and emotions also plays a crucial part in obedience to God. Authors of Christian young adult books and curriculum Justin Lookadoo and Hayley DiMarco make clear that emotions have tremendous power in the life of a young person: "The desires you have deep inside you can propel you to greatness or destroy your life in a single spark. If you can't control your passion, you can't control your future."<sup>11</sup> Throughout their book, titled *Dateable*, Lookadoo and DiMarco continually challenge young women to control their emotions as a means of controlling their lives. They tell girls to "Fight the urge to go with your emotions. Then you will be the prize every guy wants."<sup>12</sup>

Megan Clinton, author of *Smart Girls, Smart Choices*, also charges girls to rein in their emotions. She writes, "When we don't keep our emotions in a healthy balance with our brains, we often... listen to ourselves more than we do to God... focus on what we want and not on what we know."<sup>13</sup> For Clinton, making smart choices involves *not* listening to ourselves, and *not* giving much credence to what we want. Clinton sets girls up in opposition to God—that girls' own voices are in competition with God's voice. A girl cannot both want what she wants and want what God wants, which is implicitly saying that what girls want must be bad. What is particularly insidious about these messages is that they not only reinforce a self-monitoring of the body, feelings, and emotions in order for girls and women to be considered "good", but also that self-surveillance is required in order to be acceptable to God. It is not just that slenderness and keeping one's emotions in check is a societal expectation, it is also the manifestation of obedience to God.

Can we imagine a religious education that encourages girls and women to like themselves—their bodies, their feelings, and their voices? Is it possible that Christian education can encourage girls and women to listen to their own wants and desires as part of what it means to follow Christ—not as components of their lives that are in opposition to obedience, but that are *part of* obedience? What would it look like if liking yourself – your body, your feelings, your voice, your personality, all of the things that are uniquely you, is *what good Christian womanhood implies*? Liking one's self, as exemplified by Schumer and others, is a conscious resistance to the ways that a culture of peers requires you to conform when those ways encourage

---

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Isherwood, "The Fat Jesus: Feminist Explorations in Fleishy Christologies," *Feminist Theology* 19, no. 1 (August 2010):27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Hayley DiMarco and Justin Lookadoo, *Dateable: Are You? Are They?* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2003), 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> Megan Clinton, *Smart Girls, Smart Choices: Avoiding the 10 Biggest Mistakes Young Women Make* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2010), 29.

a kind of self-surveillance, body hatred, and/or oppressive means of limiting one's personhood. Can we envision a religious education that embraces uniqueness in girls and women and does not have a pre-existing standard of "good" womanhood that requires conformity and constant maintenance? In other words, can we imagine that a religious identity could coincide with a radical self-love and self-like that resists the pressures of society to constantly conform to a standard that is often oppressive?

It seems to me that in setting up specific expectations for behavior, as evangelical or conservative Christian communities tend to do, the possibility of uniqueness is diminished. This is not only my observation—I've had several conversations where we've thought aloud about this phenomena. Such communities exist within a subculture where the primary vision is claimed to be about spreading the good news of Jesus and living counter-culturally in a media-saturated world, but where the warp and woof of daily life is actually more akin to whatever the current obsession is right now. If dieting is big, the subculture will create some "Christian" diets. If yoga or aerobics are popular, a "Christian" version will appear. A cursory glance at Christian self-help books reinforces my suspicion—these materials are the same as any other self-help books, they just incorporate a few religious themes and more clothes. The general message is the same: you can fix yourself in order to be better if you just try harder, and with God's help.

When there is a rigid, yet culturally-bound picture of what it means to be a "good" woman, there is no room for uniqueness of personhood. A personal disposition is viewed as a character flaw. "Iron sharpening iron" often translates into shaving off the edges of one's actual self to create a diminished person who is obedient but no longer shines. I suggest here that radical self-love and self-like is a deeply Christian value. We know we are to love others as we love ourselves—how is that possible if we subtly (or not) participate in practices that encourage self-hatred? It is hard for me to believe, when I hear a Christian friend complain about how much she hates her double-digit size body, that she could then truly accept, much less love, my double-digit body, and as an extension, me. We are our bodies, our personalities, our quirks, our rough edges and our round ones.

As someone formed within evangelical Christianity, I've memorized certain Bible verses to use in evangelistic outreach—verses like, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). At the height of my confusion about following Jesus and feeling that the yoke was a burden, not something that was light (Matthew 11:28-30), I began to think about having an abundant life. Abundance, for me, was not material, but was found in fellowship with people who loved me as I am, and who I loved for who they were. Struggling to be better and try harder was not filling my life with abundance. Feeling like I needed to tamp down my voice and my emotions felt like an unbearable yoke. And hating my body became something I just didn't want to spend my life doing.

Following Jesus as a person who embraces and practices (to the best of my ability!) radical self-acceptance, self-love, and self-like has opened those verses up in ways I couldn't have known before. It has also opened up a whole new space and ability for loving and accepting others that seems to me to be at the heart of the Christian gospel. As I have grown to like myself, I have grown to more deeply like, and love, others.

In a world where women are encouraged to be competitive with each other, the hallmark of goodness is self-deprecation, and women are trained to bond with each other over their own self-hatreds, it is indeed radical and offensive to be a woman who likes herself. But it is the kind of radical and offensive that the world needs. Jesus was pretty radical and offensive; perhaps Christian women ought to be free to be the same.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Clinton, Megan. *Smart Girls, Smart Choices: Avoiding the 10 Biggest Mistakes Young Women Make*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2010.
- Eckel, Sara. *It's Not You: 27 (Wrong) Reasons You're Single*. New York: Penguin, 2014.
- Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." In *The Gender and Media Reader*, edited by Mary Celeste Kearney, 136-148. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Griffith, Marie. "The Christian Diet Craze." Beliefnet.com, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/2000/02/The-Christian-Diet-Craze.aspx> (accessed September 16, 2015).
- Isherwood, Lisa. "The Fat Jesus: Feminist Explorations in Fleshy Christologies." *Feminist Theology* 19, no. 1 (August 2010): 20-35.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste, ed. *The Gender and Media Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- DiMarco, Hayley and Justin Lookado. *Dateable: Are You? Are They?* Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2003.
- Schumer, Amy. "Woman who likes herself," [@amyschumer](http://www.twitter.com), March 1, 2015 (accessed September 16, 2015).
- Winner, Lauren F. "The Weigh and the Truth." ChristianityToday.com, August 25, 2000, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/september4/1.50.html?start=2> (accessed September 16, 2015).
- Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2002.