

SPIRITUALITY
AND SOCIETY
IN THE NEW
MILLENNIUM

Edited by

Ursula King

Spirituality
and
Society in
the New
Millennium

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
1 Introduction: Spirituality, Society, and the Millennium – Wasteland, Wilderness, or New Vision? <i>Ursula King</i>	1
Part I Spirituality, Tradition and Change	
2 Interpreting Texts and Traditions <i>Philip Sheldrake</i>	19
3 Female Godlanguage in Christian Spirituality <i>Kari Elisabeth Børresen</i>	35
4 The Body as Meditative Locus in the <i>Revelations</i> of Julian of Norwich <i>Kevin J. Magill</i>	51
5 Spirituality, Sexuality and Embodiment <i>Janet K. Ruffing</i>	63
6 From Transgression to Transformation: The Creative Potential of Gay Spiritualities for the New Millennium <i>Sean Gill</i>	80
7 Masculine Spirituality and Addiction: A Personal Journey <i>James B. Nelson</i>	93

Spirituality, Sexuality and Embodiment

Janet K. Ruffing

Contemporary theological anthropologies emphasize integral theories of embodiment rooted in the Christian doctrines of incarnation, sacramental life, and the resurrection of the body as constitutive of human persons.¹ Postmodern theories treat the body and its socially constructed gender as infinitely more variable than in previous cultures.² In relation to ecotheology and the new cosmology, philosophers situate bodily knowing and human embodiment as the primary way in which humans experience themselves in relationship to the cosmos as well as to one another.³ A positive valuation of female embodiment is a central theme of feminist critique and reconstructive theory, both through a positive identification with female bodily experience and through resistance to the patriarchal identification of woman with body and matter in contrast to soul and spirit that diminishes women's supposed capacity for spirituality and rationality.⁴ Theories of embodiment (and sexuality which is a consequence of this embodiment) can illuminate the experience of ordinary Christians who practise their religion and experience God with their senses.⁵ A further development of these themes and theories about embodiment is their extension to and recognition of the practical activities of intimate love and compassion expressed through bodily care of family members and spouses, and through the extensions of this concern to the body-politic in actions on behalf of care beyond the family circle and to social and ecological justice. As we cross over into this new millennium, these themes and concerns continue to manifest themselves in the concrete religious experience of practising Christians.

The experiential data upon which I build my analysis is extrapolated from interviews conducted using qualitative research methodology. The investigation consisted of a very small sample of five men and nineteen

women, of whom all but three were Roman Catholic. All had engaged in a consistent practice of personal prayer for a minimum of five years and were between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-five.⁶ This particular research sample focused exclusively on men and women whose mystical or religious experience was primarily kataphatic, that is, it was characterized by a wide variety of mediated experiences of the divine. As a result, these informants represent those most aware of and responsive to the sensuous features in their religious experience.

It is perhaps not surprising that the original sample of 108 was also predominantly female. Consequently, I did not attempt to balance for gender. Although all interviewees' experience was richly sensuous, they were not necessarily entirely comfortable with it because of the internalized distrust and denigration of this type of spirituality by Christian tradition.

Bodily Experience Reported

A wide range of bodily experiences emerged in the interviews. Although a few informants were unreflective about this aspect of their experience, most described an amazing range of bodily experiences that were routinely part of their process of prayer or religious experience. Everyone in the sample reported religious experiences mediated through nature, through symbols, including liturgical ones, and through internal imagery or visions. All but three mentioned the importance of music.

Experiences with Nature

Elsewhere I have given a full account of the specific ways nature mediated religious experience for these respondents. There was a pervasive sense of the divine indwelling in the natural world, usually called *panentheism*, as well as an experience of oneness with the mysterious processes of the universe itself, and a sense of grace – a gratuitous quality – as something received rather than something that could be seized or willfully initiated. Other features of these mediating experiences in nature were: feeling more whole or connected to self and the environment, usually a multisensual engagement with nature, a felt connection between nature and human community, the sufficiency of even minimal events in nature, sacred landscapes unfolding in further imagery, the disclosure of the divine presence in and through creation, the development of divine-human mutuality, and varying degrees of explicit ecological awareness and commitment.⁷

Experiences with Music

The experiences with music or sound were almost as evocative and as varied as those with nature. The widespread availability of tape-recorders and CD players provided the technological basis for fourteen participants to play recordings of instrumental music or of fully accompanied songs as an occasional or common way to enhance their personal prayer. Probably even more significant was the acknowledgment of eleven respondents who sang in church choirs, sang chants at the Taizé "Prayer Around the Cross" service, or who were deeply affected by songs they heard or sang in church. All participants in this study had spent many years singing or listening to hymns, songs, chants and organ music as a regular element in their liturgical worship. This repertoire of liturgical music of varying styles and degrees of musical quality and affective content is deeply embedded in their memories and often triggered complex and profound religious responses. Recent studies related to sacred sound and traditions of chanting offer neurological descriptions of the beneficial effects on consciousness and on physical health from listening to certain sounds and even greater effects when producing sound through one's own body.⁸ Music with lyrics performed or heard in a sacred context is deeply associated with God and the religious experiences occurring in liturgical worship. For seven of the respondents, music which they had previously heard or sung, with or without words, spontaneously arose into consciousness while they were in a meditative states or when triggered by something in the way God seemed present to them outside of a ritual context, as an interpersonal relational content.

For example, one of the men described being moved to tears when he heard two particular songs in church – the Gregorian chant, "Pange Lingua" and "The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor" by the St. Louis Jesuits. He had heard the chant during Holy Week services for many, many years. Both songs were initially experienced in eucharistic liturgies. He talked about "feeling it inside" when the congregation or choir sang. "It's difficult to say, but I can feel his goodness, that's a word, you know, and it's intangible. I mean I just know it. That's all, I mean it's the best way for me to describe it. It's more intense than" [E3].* This sense of feeling inside what the words and music are about occurred when he had a heightened sense of God's presence. The melody or words from these songs arose in consciousness while he was walking down the street, but only if he was sensing God's presence. Hence, the songs would evoke these feelings on certain occasions or an experience of God would evoke the melodies. This

* The coding of interviews in this essay simply indicates "E" for East Coast, "W" for West Coast; the number which follows represents the order of the interviews. E3 = the third person interviewed in the East Coast sample.

man, however, never played the songs in an effort to trigger a similar experience. For him this experience was spontaneous and uncontrolled.

Feelings and Music. The connection between music and feeling is well known through contemporary studies of the brain. Music other than that heard in church also mediated experiences of God. Popular songs, country music and classical music were important to some. One woman regularly sang romantic or operatic vocal pieces as part of her prayer process. This music usually tapped into deep feelings states not yet recognized or expressed by the informant and often was interpreted as God expressing feelings of intimate care through the words of the songs. In addition, five of the interviewees associated rich internal imagery responses with music.⁹

It is not surprising that music frequently evoked complex emotional responses and associations in some of the interviewees. A particular song, sometimes heard on the radio, evoked a deeply personal set of feelings and associations in addition to the emotional content inherent in the music and words of the songs themselves. In many of these instances, the interviewee felt God speaking to him or deeply present to her in and through the music. Thus music evoked religious feelings, and songs also became laden with interpersonal content in the divine-human relationship.

A few used music consciously either to surface complex feelings that seemed to be blocking their experience of God or literally sang themselves into trance states, unconsciously rediscovering ancient uses of sacred sound. Only five played musical instruments or played recordings of instrumental music without any words as a way of entering into prayer.

Seven respondents danced to recorded music chosen for the purpose or danced to their own internal melodies and rhythms. For two of the women this dancing took place kinesthetically in imagination. One reported:

I remember I was sitting there speechless and needing something to express what was going on inside. I had gone to the chapel. And I said I'll just put some music on and sit here. I guess it was because I was tired of groping for words or trying to find some way of expressing what was going on inside – the anxiety, the darkness or whatever. The music just took me. I went beyond the words [of the song]. At that time there were whole periods of darkness and confusion and anger. And my body carried all of that. Through my movement I began to cry out to Jesus. "Get me out of this darkness – break through this!" And that's how all this happened. . . . I have so much inside to pray with and pray about – this is my own way. This is my own journey and with my God, I can cry out in my words rather than in someone else's words. [W12]

She then described how God seemed to her when she freely expressed herself in movement as well as in words, "It was more of a real God – the Lord of the Dance – it was both of us co-creating, doing and becoming rather than me giving this to God, talking to God out of the stillness. There is a mutuality – a whole source of energy back and forth." [W12]¹⁰

This female example represents one of the most fully embodied expressions in the sample of both longing and responsiveness to God in personal prayer. The dance is primarily expressive rather than performance-oriented. The dancer also spontaneously danced to her inner music until she discovered what she needed to express when she came before God. She discovered in the process a God who was more mutual, who danced with her, even enjoyed her spontaneity and eros. She exemplifies feminist poet Audre Lorde's statement: "When I speak of the erotic, then; I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."¹¹

Sensory Facilitation of Religious Experience

In addition, to the experiences described above with nature and with music, and aesthetic experiences with symbols or art, these informants also described ways they employed movement or somatic functions as a means to focus in a centering process or to evoke ecstatic states. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 represent the great variety of bodily experiences related to prayer and religious experience.

Figure 5.1 *Rhythmic movement facilitated prayer*

Dance and/or rhythmic gesture	W4, W12, W6, W8, E5, E8, E11, E1
Walking, swimming, cycling	W6, W9, W8, W12, E6, E10, E1, E5
Giving massage	W9, W11, W12
Gardening, vacuuming	E10, W7
Singing into contemplative state	W4, W9
Using pulse or breath to center	W5, W3, E1

Figure 5.2 *Conscious choice of position of body in prayer process*

Yoga	E1, W12, E5
Chosen body position	E12, E9, E1, E4, W6
Sitting on the floor	E6, E5, W11

Maternal Experience

Among the mothers in the group, four of them named experiences related to conception, childbirth, and nursing among their religious or spiritual experiences. For one, the experience of nursing her baby became an image of God for her. Another woman talked about sensing the *ensoulment* of her fetus before her pregnancy had been confirmed. She also found nursing and holding her baby, born after her husband's death, a tremendous consolation – one way God consoled her. Another talked about both sensing the conception of her child and of its birth as a spiritual experience. And the fourth described two contrasting experiences of childbirth: one birth was a profound spiritual experience; the other was not because the birth happened faster than expected and the pain medication had not taken effect. The baby was born distressed because of other complications and the new mother discovered she was at odds with the urgent medical concerns of the professionals.

Maternal experience is, of course, not unrelated to sexual experience. Because female sexuality “by its very nature, is a total sensory experience, involving the whole body (not just the genitals) . . . A woman does not even need a partner or a significant one-to-one relationship to be in touch with her sexuality.”¹² Maternal experience before and after the birth process partakes of this whole-bodied sensuality and relational responsiveness which is at root sexual. Women are often acutely conscious that maternal experiences of nursing, cuddling, and responding to infants is a particularly gendered pleasure, which they may not necessarily associate with sexuality. Yet women clearly recognize themselves as participating in the joyfulness of creation and identify their maternal love and self-giving with God's, thus recognizing the feminine divine in their own experience.

Sexual Experience

Although two or three interviewees referred to spontaneous sexual or genital experiences as an overflow of their religious experience, this dimension of physical experience was not explicitly dominant in the group as a whole. In fact, several of the married women explicitly mentioned that their sexual experiences and sometimes their marriages themselves were not ways they experienced God. One of the women wondered about this. She described sexual feelings/sensations just before she began to pray, but was puzzled because they were physically located in the centre of her body, thus demonstrating the more diffuse nature of female sexual responsiveness and its association with divine-human intimacy. Neither of the married men mentioned this area, perhaps reticent to talk about this with a woman interviewer. However, both had been married for more than

forty-five years and expressed contentment with their sense of vocation to married life and work in the world. One talked about family challenges while the other talked about his increasingly more sensitive relational responses to his wife's behaviour, no longer trying to change her or control his domestic environment. Only one of the women recalled times in her sexual experience with a partner in which mystical experience of God coincided with intercourse and she, too, talked as much about her relationship to her daughters becoming transfused with her experience of God as she did about coinciding sexual/ecstatic mystical experiences. Among the married couples only one seemed to enjoy a relationship in which there was a mutual sharing of spiritual life and ministry.

Figure 5.3 *Physical responses to presence of God*

Fizzy gravitational pull, gathering of energy, pulled to knees, quivering	
Nestled, held, caressed, enveloped	W1, E6, W6, E8
Sense of rising energy	
Sexual but not genital feelings	
Takes breath away	
Moved to tears	E1, W1, W3, E3, E7
Genital response in prayer	W6
During sex	W11
Peace felt bodily, deep relaxation	E8, E7
God's healing power felt in hands of health workers	
God's voice felt or heard in the heart area	E8, W3, W8, E10, W4, W11, E6, E2, E3, E4
Sense in <i>gut</i> of union; but not in sexual area	
Sense of upper body “in tune”	

Like other forms of mediated religious experience, sexual expression or sexual response were unpredictable. Intimate relationships both between adult lovers as well as parent child ones could unfold into or trigger profound mystical experiences, but frequently they did not in any predictable way. In many instances, study participants tended to focus more on the entire quality of these interpersonal relationships. Is this not also a characteristic of healthy sexual partners? All love is not expressed through sexual expression alone. For some couples, there was a mutual

support for a spouse's attraction to the spiritual life in their intimate relationships. For others this was not an area which could easily be shared. Celibates in the sample, whose most intimate sexual experiences may have occurred only in the context of ecstatic prayer experiences, had learned to sublimate their sexual yearnings towards God. There is much in the tradition to support this. More commonly, spousal and familial relationships were multivalent. They both mediated religious experience and challenged growth in healthy self-giving and concrete loving through the particulars of daily living.

Figure 5.4 *Physical changes when receptive to God*

Feelings of peace and joy	
Heart warms and opens; stomach relaxes	
Torso chakras open	
Relaxation, especially legs	E12, E7
Need to be physically comfortable	
Breathing deepens	
Sense of a need to "open"	
Looking and longing for God	

As figures 5.3 and 5.4 show, however, there was a wide variety of bodily responses which registered presence, mutual loving, or openness to God in a more diffusely gendered way than in genital response alone. James B. Nelson's definition of sexuality may illuminate these reports:

By sexuality I mean not only physiological arousal and genital activity, but also much more. While human sexuality is not the whole of our personhood, it is a basic dimension of that personhood. While it does not determine all thought, feeling, and action, it does permeate and affect all of these. Sexuality is our way of being in the world as female or male persons. It involves our appropriation of characteristics socially defined as feminine or masculine. It includes our affectional-sexual orientation towards those of the opposite and/or same sex. It is our attitudes towards ourselves and others as body-selves. It is our capacity for sensuousness.¹³

If sexuality consciously includes our desires to "reach out toward the embrace of others"¹⁴ as well as our capacity for sensuous interrelatedness

with both the created world and other persons, it is far more implicated in our religious experience than participants in this study articulated. The richness of their sensuous experience, especially in nature, in vivid imagery, and in their ministries and familial lives all partakes of the sexual. In all three areas, the engagement of the participants was multi-sensory. They involved all of their senses: visual, auditory, olfactory, taste, tactile, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic. Further, for many, their Roman Catholic religious backgrounds may have served to obscure the interrelationships among these dimensions of their religious and human experiences. Because of anxiety about sexuality and multiple conflicts about moral teaching related to sexual expression, the connection between sexuality and religious experience may have become obscured for many. Nevertheless, I interpret the more generalized somatic responses and the richly sensuous quality of experience the participants described as part of the continuum of pleasure and responsiveness characteristic of sexuality.¹⁵

The interviews revealed less insight on this theme than I would have hoped. Because sexuality was not a major focus of the research, testimony was not directly elicited. The interviews did, however, disclose intense passion and desire directed towards God. These people deeply desired increasing intimacy with God and responded in every way conceivable. They were also passionate about God, about love, about service, and about life. Sometimes they talked about frustrated desire, at other times they fearfully recoiled from a divine-human intimacy that was more than they could bear. Their human intimate relationships took place within this larger frame of meaning and experience. If spiritual awakening had occurred early in life, there was always some correspondence between their human and divine loving. If spiritual awakening or its deepening occurred later in life, human-divine intimacy was a sequential development. It altered, challenged, or at the very least affected the prior intimate human relationships. Theories of passionate desire surely help illuminate this experience in an explanatory way.¹⁶ These theories suggest rather persuasively that passionate desire is at its core frequently an opaque desire for God. Our desirous selves according to Walter Conn and others encode our need to become self-transcendent. Within Christian tradition, love is at the core. We are made to become lovers of ourselves, of God and of others in ways that are life-giving and creative.

Recent work by feminist theologians who explore sexual issues, sacramentality, bodily knowing, and imaging the divine from women's perspective offer rich suggestions about ways in which women's eroticism which has been so controlled by the tradition and split off from the mystical might be released and reintegrated in the spiritual quest. In many ways women are only now developing a language through which to construct a new paradigm for spirituality which is incarnational, sacra-

mental, and mystical. Within this research sample, the most eloquent testimony was given by the women who were either massage therapists or who received massage as part of their recovery from illness. They were the ones who could connect their bodily knowing¹⁷ of the unity of mind, body, and spirit at least through the theories related to mind-body healing. They also experienced a fully embodied spirituality – varied and diverse mystical experiences which marked their spiritual journeys. They knew the difference in their body-selves between the psychic and the spiritual. They also knew the difference in their embodied experiences between “only body”, a primarily material experience and embodied experiences which were more than “merely body”. Their entire spectrum of religious experience was suffused with this kind of sacramentality – a transparency of the physical revealing God within their experience. This is so, I believe, because of a recovered incarnational emphasis in Christianity and the shifts in theological anthropology which are recovering the unity of the human as embodied spirit. Catherine Keller poses the question this way: “Can we affirm at once that we are body yet that we are not identical with body? That our body is itself soulful, and so never merely material? Then how shall we reconceive the body itself?”¹⁸ She paraphrases Whitehead’s lovely theory of bodies as the starting point for experiencing the world because our bodies are part of the world:

The body then is my special corner of the cosmos; my relation to my body then will reflect and rehearse my relationship to everybody and everything else. For I encounter the world only as embodied. Through my bodiliness I come to the animating knowledge that the energy of matter and the energy of soul are at base indistinguishable. *Soul matters.*¹⁹

From a Christian perspective, we could say with equal force that God *matters*. We believe in a God become flesh. Our new understanding of our bodies as our allies and partners in the spiritual quest (rather than as obstacle or foil) to use Margaret Miles’ categories,²⁰ shifts our attention to entirely new ways of experiencing ever more intensely “the ambiguous presence of God within the immediate, concrete, and particular”.²¹ This research sample offers a small window on this emerging experience in our times.

Sense of Presence

Description of a felt sense of the presence of God was a universal theme in the interviews. Many reported this sense of presence was pervasive, all the time, or as a sense of being always in the presence; others experienced the presence of God more intermittently. Within the textual Christian

mystical tradition²² as well as in the interreligious empirical work of the Religious Experience Unit at Oxford,²³ this single feature is the most significant characteristic of mystical experience. The people in my sample reported repeated experiences of God rather than one or two. The process of transformation as a result of such experiences requires conscious response to this presence – a life committed to ongoing relationship with God and to altruistic activity. These subjects became increasingly aware of precisely how they recognized their receptivity to God’s self-disclosure or their responses to them in their somatically registered responses. Although all interviewees mentioned experiences of God’s presence, figure 5.3 represents the responses of one or more interviewees who described specific physical responses to this presence. While some interviewees were not particularly self-reflective about these physical aspects in their religious experience, others were acutely conscious of them and consciously paid attention to them in order to intentionally be receptive to these experiences of Divine Presence.

As figures 5.3 and 5.4 show, study participants recognized physical changes which were the result of their religious experience as well as felt bodily shifts which signaled to them their readiness or receptivity to God (figure 5.4).

Conscious practices which create this relaxation and openness often lead to contemplative experience. Conversely, mystical experience often overflows to the body. Diane Ackerman confirms such somatic response to mystical experience in the “postscript” to her book, *A Natural History of the Senses*:

There is a point beyond which our senses cannot lead us. Ecstasy means being flung out of your usual self, but there is still a commotion inside. Mysticism transcends the here and now for loftier truths unexplainable in the strait-jacket of language; but such transcendence registers on the senses, too, as a rush of fire in the veins, a quivering in the chest, a quiet, fossil-like surrender in the bones. Out-of-body experiences aim to shed the senses, but they cannot. One may see from a new perspective, but it’s still an experience of vision.²⁴

Love and Service

The Christian sensibility that love of God and mystical experience had to be correlated with concrete love for other people was all pervasive within the interviews. One married man said:

I most experience God . . . on a daily basis by meditating two times a day, morning and evening, for half hour periods in total silence . . . that’s one form of experiencing God. But I’ve known for years and years that would be absolutely a kind of spiritual egoism if I didn’t then go from that experience

to seeing God in those around me and identifying Christ in my students and in my family . . . So my experience of God is very real with my students and with my family. [E1]

As he traced the development of his spiritual life he reflected, “ I feel that I’ve always been called. (Crying) You see this is the inevitable. (Tears) You can’t talk about it. However, . . . it’s a love affair. If it isn’t that, it is nothing, you know. Jesus is love. God is love.” [E1] In the interview, this man broke off his narrative in tears repeatedly as he recalled and was freshly touched in the interview with an overwhelming love of God which was a consuming passion for him. For years, he had made great efforts to do the loving thing in every circumstance and to connect his times of solitary prayer with his activity in the world. He was a speech and drama teacher working with many students from the inner city. By the time I interviewed him, he was very aware of how God often acted through him and was present to him while he was teaching or counseling students:

Now here’s the other phenomenon. When you’re with people, uh . . . Christ disappears in a strange way . . . I used to be disturbed by it. I’d say gee, I wasn’t thinking of Jesus. . . . In the class, doing my work, right. So I learned not to be upset by that. It’s as if after say five, six hours so then you’re suddenly alone and you say, oh, Jesus, what have I done? I’ve ignored you all this time. But what I’ve learned since when you’re totally engrossed with the people around you, Christ is in each and everyone of them so I stopped worrying about that . . . nonsense. So I know that when I’m engrossed with my student and when I tell a poor student of mine “Don’t worry this will be alright or that will be alright,” then I’m talking to Christ. See? [E1]

Figure 5.5 *Changes in relationship with people*

Greater connection with both congenial and uncongenial people	W1, W2, W3, W4, W5, W6, W7, W8, W9, W11, W12, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E7, E9, E11, E12
God’s love experienced through others	W1, W8, W10, W12, E11, E4
Others as catalyst for conversion	W9, W11, E1, E3, E10, E11, E12
Freer with boss/parent	W7, E8, E1
Love of others empowered by God’s love	W4, W6, W9

This same man also described subtle changes in his relationship with his wife as a result of his spiritual practice and experience:

Now here domestically, I live with another human being. There are foibles. . . . My wife has a forgetful memory. She’ll leave the electric stove on or she’ll leave on light bulbs. [Previously I] . . . would be saying, “Why did you leave the light on? You know, there are 600 watts there or you left the stove on.” Now when the stove is on, believe me, what a temptation to want to scold. I just turn it off and shut up. I’ll turn off the lights and not say anything. Now these are two different people. . . . I was a very controlling person. I wanted to control my academic environment; I wanted to control my domestic environment. If my wife does or does not do something, I . . . I’m right there saying, Jesus, give me the grace not to complain about this. Give me the grace not to tell her to do something else. And I shut up. And when I shut up and turn away from it, then some time later, I am gifted with the peace that comes out of it. [E1]

Figure 5.6 *Changes in relationship to world*

World of nature as consoling	W1, W8, E11, E9, E8
Intercession for world needs	W4, E1, E10
Change in sense of mission	W9, W4, W6, W7, E1, E6, W8, E8
Change of participation in church mission	W1, W2, W5, W4, E5, E3, E9
Works of mercy or public service	W12, E3, W5, E7, E4, E10
World as revelation of God	W1, W10, W11, E3, E5, W8
Notices beauty more than evil	W4, W2, E5, W8
Non-violent stance/disturbed by war	W6, E10, W9, E11
Social critique/justice issues	W6, W7, W4, W5, W12, E2, E4, E6, E12, E8, W11
Less materialistic/stewardship or economic choices	W2, W7, W9, W4, E2, E1
Consciousness of pain and evil yet love and accept world as it is	W3, W9, W10, W11, E12

Most of the people in the sample described similar changes in themselves (see figure 5.5). This change was an experienced shift away from self-centeredness, although this shift often remained a struggle, and a capacity to make choices in favour of behaviour which supported a more consciously loving connection with intimates, co-workers, or those served in work or ministry. This same man had gone through a similar change at work, refusing to respond not to inattentiveness but to actual harassment

by his chair. Eventually, the chair simply stopped his offensive behaviour. For the total group this change in loving capacity attributed to God manifested itself in their ability to be more loving both to intimates whom they loved and people whom they experienced as difficult. For many as well, this loving concern took many forms as shown in figure 5.6.

For at least half of the group explicit action on behalf of social justice was very prominent. Many in this group not only engaged with some particular form of social justice, but embraced a life-style or ministry in solidarity with the oppressed group. For instance, one woman worked for an inter-community social justice network, another worked with runaways and subsequently as a social worker in the South Bronx, a third discerned a call to mission in Africa. For others this concern was encompassed in their intercessory prayer or in their sense of mission in and to the world through their work. Four more expressed this concern through the works of mercy without any particular social critique.

In this sample of committed Christians whose faith was energized by their religious experiences, their highly embodied prayer modes and responses to mystical experience led them to greater engagement with the world and with relationships. They found it not only entirely logical but a necessary aspect of their religious lives that they extend their active care and compassion for the social body, especially the family, other communities or oppressed social groups, and the earth itself as an extension of their mystical experiences mediated through their bodily knowing of God.

Notes

- 1 See Charles Davis, *Body as Spirit: The Nature of Religious Feeling* (New York: Crossroad, 1976). For an early articulation of the sensuous recovery of the body in Christian tradition, see Walter Kaspar, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). Susan Ross writes, "From an object of discipline and control, the body has come to be seen as the basis for human thought and action, as symbolic of the human connection with the natural world, as intimately involved in the development of an adequate liturgical and prayer life. The sharp distinction formerly drawn between soul and body has given way to a conception of the person as embodied spirit." "Body" in Michael Downey (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 98–9. More recently, Ross treats sacraments from a feminist perspective asserting that [sacraments] *intensify* the ambiguous presence of God within the immediate, concrete, and particular. We encounter God, not by "leaving the world but by immersing ourselves more deeply in the world." *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 167. Elisabeth Moltman-Wendel, in *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (New York: Continuum, 1995), presses the point: "A theology of embodiment mistrusts all abstract spirituality which is disso-

- ciated from the body, life, earth and social relationships. It trusts all embodiment which speaks from a concrete, involved spirit, moved by eros and related to the cosmos. Disembodiment is lovelessness" (p. 104).
- 2 For example, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Joseph Holland identifies an embodied spirituality as one of the key hallmarks of a postmodern spirituality extending that embodiment both to nature and to society in "A Postmodern Vision of Spirituality and Society" in David Ray Griffin (ed.), *Spirituality and Society* (State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 41–61. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), is more critical of some postmodern approaches to the body. "What sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel anywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all" (p. 229).
 - 3 There are many versions of this position. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1993) draws out many of these implications, as does Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991). See McFague for extensive bibliographical notes. For treatments of bodily knowing, see Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: the Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Davis, *Body as Spirit*, J. Giles Milhaven, *Hadwijch and her Sisters: Other Ways of Knowing and Loving* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
 - 4 For a precise summary of the key issues in feminist theology see Anne Bathurst Gilson, "Embodiment", in Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (eds.), *The Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 82–3, and Susan A. Ross, "Feminist Theology", in Charles Curran, Margaret Farley, and Richard McCormick (eds.), *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 14–17.
 - 5 See the work of James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1978) and *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1993), as well as Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), and my "You Fill up my Senses: God and Our Senses", *The Way* 35 (April 1995): pp. 101–10, for some of the appropriate literature and an alternative description of the sensory aspects of mystical experience based on the interview sample.
 - 6 See the research summary, "The World Transfigured: Kataphatic Religious Experience Explored through Qualitative Research Methodology", *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995): pp. 232–59. The charts in this essay originally appeared in this summary.
 - 7 See Janet K. Ruffing, "'To have been one with the Earth': Nature in Contemporary Christian Mystical Experience", *Presence* 3 (January 1997): pp. 40–54.

- 8 See Robert Gass with Kathleen Brehony, *Chanting: Discovering Spirit in Sound* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999); Don Campbell, (ed.), *Music: Physician for Times to Come* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1991); *Music and Miracles* (Wheaton, Illinois: 1992); and *The Roar of Silence: Healing Powers of Breath, Tone and Music* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Society, 1989).
- 9 Two of these had pursued some training in the process known as "Guided Imagery with Music" that has become popular in some forms of music therapy and in some retreats. This process employs music to evoke complex imagery and feeling states.
- 10 Janet K. Rutting "You are the Music While the Music Lasts': Music as an Opening to Religious Experience", paper presented to the Iona Spirituality Institute, March 4, 1995 and to Spiritual Directors' International, April 12, 1996, Hendersonville, N.C.
- 11 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power", in Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (eds.), *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 210.
- 12 Christiane Northrup, *Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1994), p. 227.
- 13 Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, p. 5.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 15 Andrew Greeley found positive correlations between sexual abandon in marriage and warm or positive images of God, while the cool and distant images of God as judge, father, master, and king correlated negatively with sexual satisfaction. See *Faithful Attraction: Discovering Intimacy, Love and Fidelity in American Marriage* (New York: Tor, 1991), p. 227. Greeley's study suggests that a religiosity that is warm and relational has a positive effect on marital satisfaction for couples who maintain a strong romantic quality in their relationship.
- 16 See Walter E. Conn, *The Desiring Self: Rooting Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Direction in Self-Transcendence* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998); Sebastian Moore, *Let this Mind Be in You* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985) and *Jesus the Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), and my "Encountering Love Mysticism: Issues in Supervision", *Presence* 1 (January 1995): pp. 20-33.
- 17 I find J. Giles Milhaven's analysis of bodily knowing which he derived from women's mystical experience in *Hadwijch and Her Sisters* profoundly illuminating. He develops a seven-fold set of features through which bodily knowing occurs: (1) a woman knew only an individual in a single moment and place; (2) she knew a person in actively affecting another, often as the other person affected her; (3) physical touching pervaded the knowing; (4) the knowing arose in bodily need or desire; (5) the knowing was had often in pleasures peculiar to family life; (6) the knowing was had often in bodily pain; (7) the knowing often included bodily identification with another. It is truly not by reason alone that we can know. But we know through participation, relationship, and connection.

Milhaven further explains why the philosophical tradition rejected bodily

- knowing because of its preference of sight and hearing over the senses of touch as "higher" and therefore more likely to disclose a more abstract form of knowledge.
- 18 Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 236.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Margaret Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).
- 21 Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, p. 104.
- 22 Bernard McGinn identifies this as the common element in the Christian Mystical tradition in his multi-volume series entitled *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. In Volume I, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991). he laid out this framework in "The General Introduction", pp. xv-xvi.
- 23 See Timothy Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence: The Phenomenology of Certain Kinds of Visionary and Ecstatic Experience Based on 1000 First-hand Accounts* (Manchester, England: Religious Experience Unit, 1977).
- 24 Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 301.