

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

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THE WORLD TRANSFIGURED

Kataphatic Religious Experience Explored through Qualitative Research Methodology

I HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Despite Roman Catholicism's almost exclusive focus on kataphatic forms of prayer in public worship with its emphasis on scripture, ritual practice, and Christological preaching, a strong bias in favor of apophatic styles in mystical experience has been dominant since the Counter-Reformation. Typically, kataphatic refers to experiences of God which are mediated through one of God's creatures, either something external to the person such as nature, art, language, sound, ritual, another person, etc. or through a content of the person's consciousness such as visions, prophetic words or locutions. In either case, the experienced phenomena are genuinely transparent to the Divine Presence. Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila are two Counter-Reformation examples of kataphatic mystics. Earlier traditions also included kataphatic mystics, especially Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, and other medieval women mystics too numerous to name. Contemporary students of comparative mysticism have focused, however, almost exclusively on the apophatic tradition emphasizing the teaching of John of the Cross, Eckhart, and the anonymous treatises, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Mystical Theology*.

I have been interested in better understanding the kataphatic mystical experience for a number of years. Too often, I have listened to the concerns of directees with many years of rich and varied religious experience wondering if or when they would ever reach the more highly valued apophatic experience of God. Too often, in supervising spiritual directors, I have felt their uncomfortableness with the voices, visions, feelings, and intensity of kataphatic directees and their desire to discourage these experiences rather than explore them. The impression is often given in the literature that the kataphatic way is merely a prelude to the real, true, or most authentic mystical experience which is then defined along apophatic lines. Kataphatic experience is relegated to the beginnings of the spiritual journey and excluded by definition from mature mystical development. A recent example of this position is aptly presented in David Granfield's *Heightened Consciousness*¹.

There are most likely a number of reasons for this notable lack of appreciation for kataphatic mysticism as truly mystical and equally valuable as a form of mystical experience. Some possible reasons include: a misogynist bias which treats the experience of many women mystics as inferior or less valuable than the experience of male, theologically

trained mystics; an institutional need to control the content of visions as a source for theological insight in competition with elite theology; a philosophical tradition which emphasizes the distance between the creator God and creatures; cultural changes as a result of the enlightenment which has tended to pathologize and denigrate the phenomena associated with kataphatic experiences as either trivial, neurotically hysterical, or even psychotic²; and perhaps a lack of development in spiritual directors or students of mysticism to develop sufficient experiential and theoretical knowledge of the kataphatic experience in order to discern between the self-centered and its God-centered manifestations.

In the medieval period, the *via affirmativa* was for the most part the dominant popular mysticism among both male and female mystics. The external phenomena apparent to those who observed these mystics often served to validate the mystics' experience and to establish them in a public social role within the community. Hence, kataphatic mystical experiences were recognized, desirable, and cultivated. It was precisely because of the secondary gains in psychological and sociological terms that both apophatic mystics and kataphatic mystical teachers developed criteria for discriminating the self-induced from the God-induced, the bogus from the authentic, desirable behavioral qualities outside of the mystical interlude from non-desirable ones, and preoccupation with phenomena from God-focused living.

An inordinate amount of attention to the negative aspects of kataphatic mysticism has resulted in discouraging the kataphatic path itself. It would appear that making these kinds of discernments is so troublesome that people truly seeking union with God, deification, or the experience of the immediate presence of God would do best to ignore and abandon kataphatic processes. They should try, instead, to enter the paradoxical absence/presence of the divine through self-naughting or through emptying practices. Such assumptions, while understandable, fail to recognize that it is God who initiates either a breakdown in imaging or the darkness of unknowing. And these assumptions deny the possibility that a kataphatic path is equally valuable and truly mystical when judged by its fruits in those who follow it.

Far less attention has been given to the seductive traps of the apophatic path. Too many are taught to do centering prayer, regardless of temperament, attraction, or religious history. Vague, imageless, sometimes vacuous states of consciousness are preferable to a rich texture of imagery, sacramental experiences of the natural world and relationships, and interpersonal presence and communication. In addition, people whose natural bent is toward the apophatic experience in discrete periods of prayer often fail to notice or acknowledge the kataphatic experiences that occur throughout their day which either

2 See Tomas Agosin, 'Psychosis, Dreams, and Mysticism in the Clinical Domain' in: *The Fires of Desire: Erotic Energies and the Spiritual Quest*, Fredrica Halligan and John Shea, eds. New York: Crossroad, 1992 for a helpful description of the similarities and differences between psychotic experiences and mystical experiences. Drawing on the research of Lukoff and Perry, he describes how to treat and differentiate between these experiences as well as how to treat mystical experiences which may also have some psychotic features. He claims that phenomenologically these experiences may be so similar they cannot be differentiated. However, the result of the experience almost always clarifies this discrimination.

1 David Granfield, *Heightened Consciousness: The Mystical Difference*, Mahwah: Paulist, 1991

contribute to or flow from their contemplative experience. This present bias toward the cultivation of apophatic experience is also supported by a contemporary experience of the hidden God or of the absence of God in the post-modern context³.

The truth is that many contemporary men and women continue to experience God through kataphatic forms of mediation. Ignatian spirituality specifically cultivates this kind of sensitivity. Creation-centered forms of spirituality are profoundly kataphatic in emphasis. Finally, a recovered appreciation for symbol, imagination, and embodiment has emerged especially in Jungian and transpersonal psychologies, and in post-modern sensibilities as well. For students of mysticism and for spiritual directors, it is important to respect God's freedom to choose how and under what circumstances God discloses God's self to contemporary people. It doesn't matter whether or not this immediacy of presence, typically described as the core of Christian mystical experience, occurs in apophatic or kataphatic ways⁴. Understanding how this occurs in both its apophatic and kataphatic forms without prejudice toward either path is an important goal.

The pastoral implications of validating kataphatic mysticism on its own grounds are significant. People whose path is primarily kataphatic continue to cut off their toes to try make their feet fit the apophatic shoe. Some ignore the ways God is manifesting presence to them. Others try to repress their rich imagery, flee their visions, or fear for their sanity. Some are reluctant to share their religious experience with spiritual directors for fear of being judged immature, self-centered, or unbalanced. They wonder if there is something wrong with them if after thirty or forty years of committed prayer and Christian life they do not seem to be resting in the imageless, conceptless *nada* advocated by apophatic teachers. Having witnessed these behaviors in numerous directees and having seen anxious reactions of spiritual directors to these experiences along the kataphatic path, I decided to discover what the kataphatic path of religious development looks like for contemporary men and women.

II THE STUDY

In this study, using qualitative research methods, I explored the actual experience of life and prayer of contemporary men and women who have a kataphatic bent. Very little research has been done on what people's actual religious experience is. Even less has

3 See Elizabeth Johnson, 'Between the Times: Religious Life and the Postmodern Experience of God' *Review for Religious*, 53 (Jan-Feb 1994), 6-28., for a succinct description of the change in the idea of God and the sense of darkness and absence characteristic of the present era.

4 Bernard McGinn identifies 'a special consciousness of the divine presence as the goal of all their [the mystics'] hopes and efforts' as the category most inclusive of the diversity of mystical experience according to the historical witness of Christian mystics. However, he asserts that the positive language of presence of itself is not adequate to account for the divine-human encounter. It requires the paradox of absence as well as presence and that among the most kataphatic witnesses, 'it is primarily a successive experience, as in the coming and going of the Divine Lover presented in the Song of Songs...' (*Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, Vol 1, New York: Crossroad, 1991, xviii).

been done on Christian religious experience. By using an interview methodology, I wanted to see how experiences of those I interviewed either diverged from the accumulated wisdom of the Christian mystical tradition, or how they confirmed classical descriptions and criteria for discernment. I wanted to discover how a process of purification and detachment from specific forms took place, if in fact they did not disappear, as the experience of God deepened or changed. It seems to me that just as it is God who initiates the confusion and obscurity of contemplation in the apophatic mode, so too, God disrupts and confounds the expectations of the ego in the kataphatic experience by shifting the loci of divinely given revelation of presence and infusion of love.

An underlying theological assumption of this study is that God is concretely experienced by the mature mystic in process, whether that experience occurs in a kataphatic or an apophatic mode. In Ignatian terms, both consolation with a cause and consolation without a cause involve God's self-communication to the subject of the experience. God can be sought and experienced contemplatively whether or not that experience is mediated by something other than consciousness itself. It is God who is disclosing God's self to the person. In neither case can the person control the experience. The usually higher valuation of the experience without mediation has often tended to equate this kind of religious experience with mystical contemplation itself. I argue against this position in that the same divine reality is experienced through kataphatic mediations as is experienced through apophatic modes of attention.

The kataphatic experience is something like looking through an open window at something: in this case, the divine reality. The window is there, but what one sees through the window is more important than the window itself. Analogies can take one only so far. For people on the kataphatic path, almost anything can unexpectedly turn into such a window. In the apophatic experience, there is no window, but the same objectless object of attention is disclosed in a subtle presence/absence. Kataphatic experience of God is thus not necessarily either an inferior experience nor merely a prelude to apophatic experience of God.

If individuals proceed along either path toward mature self-transcendence, their entire intersubjective reality is gradually oriented around the Divine presence as the center of their lives. This reorientation leads to similar effects in their lives as a whole. Everything is increasingly experienced in a transfigured way. God is in everything. The mystic experiences self and others through participation in God's compassion and love. The people I interviewed who enjoyed a lifetime of rich and varied kataphatic experiences of God in prayer and beyond prayer described themselves universally as more consciously given over to God and as having grown more loving and compassionate toward others.

III THE STUDY PROTOCOL

In order to explore these issues, I designed a qualitative study of the contemporary experience of middle-aged and older men and women whose spiritual directors judged

they adequately fit the criteria listed in the profile⁵. This included: women or men, Christians of any denomination, living in California or from Washington, D.C. to New York City on the East Coast, members of any ethnic or socio-economic group provided they were English-speaking. They had to be thirty-five to sixty-five years of age with five years minimum practice of consistent, personal prayer defined as two-times per week to daily. By the age and prayer practice criteria, I hoped to locate people who were no longer beginners in prayer and who were mature adults, mid-life or older. I was also looking for people who had committed themselves to an ongoing relationship with God, rather than those who had only occasional experiences of transcendence and had not made a committed response. I wanted psychologically healthy subjects who were able to integrate interior experience with their normal lives. According to the profile they were to give *evidence of organic integration in process of inner and outer life. Behavior is congruent with prayer experience. Or the person recognizes incongruence, is distressed at it, and seeks to live in harmony with the sense of God and self indicated in reported prayer experience.* Their prayer was to be primarily in the kataphatic mode. This term was defined operationally: *they are frequently aware of some mediation in the experience of God, i.e. a text, music, internal imagery, art, nature, relationships, ministry, dreams, sensations, etc.* I amplified this definition of kataphatic prayer by including Harvey Egan's description of the apophatic and kataphatic approaches.

The apophatic tradition, the *via negativa*, emphasizes the radical difference between God and creatures. God is best reached, therefore, by negation, forgetting, and unknowing, in a darkness of mind without the support of concepts, images, and symbols. God is not this, not that. Kataphatic mysticism, the *via affirmativa*, emphasizes the similarity that exists between God and creatures. Because God can be found in all things, the affirmative way recommends the use of concepts, images, and symbols as a way of contemplating God⁶.

By selecting interviewees who had been in spiritual direction, I hoped they would have developed some facility in speaking about their interior experience, and yet I did not presume that their experience of God was dependent on the process of spiritual direction. Finally, the profile specified that a potential interviewee *has experienced at least one or two shifts in the mode of mediation of their religious experience.* By this final criterion, I wanted to discover what happened in transitions from one mediation to another, how a

5 These spiritual directors were located by sending a letter to 198 members of Spiritual Directors International in California and along the Eastern Seaboard from Washington, D. C. to New York City. The spiritual directors asked appropriate directees if they were interested in being interviewed for this study, and provided the primary researcher only with factual information that would facilitate arranging an interview. Forty-seven spiritual directors submitted the names of 108 people willing to be interviewed. The final sample was drawn using random tables, twelve from each coast with no effort made to balance gender, age, Christian denomination, or life-styles.

6 Harvey D. Egan, *Christian Mysticism: the Future of a Tradition*, New York: Pueblo, 1984, 31.

process of shifting from self-initiated activities in prayer to more passive-receptive modes occurred, and to insure that I was not interviewing typical beginners in prayer. The questions used in the interviews were a standard, open-ended set of fourteen separate items to be combined with the use of probes to clarify the experience being described or to elicit concrete descriptions. Later questions on the list could be eliminated if they had already been answered spontaneously in the earlier open-ended ones. The interview questions were critiqued and revised on the basis of a review by a panel of six peers in the fields of psychology, religious education, and theology. The interviews were conducted by one person, tape-recorded, and completely transcribed. Typically the interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. The majority of the questions were focused on the subjects' experiences of God, of prayer, of how they sought to be present to God, and of concrete mediations of experiences of God in prayer and in life. Two final questions probed for changes in relationship to people or to the world as a result of these experiences of God. These last questions looked for both attitudes and behaviors that would potentially reveal a corresponding love of neighbor and of the world consonant with the deepening of their reported experiences of God. These are traditional criteria for discernment of the authenticity of religious experience which identify positive effects beyond the prayer experience in terms of love and service.

IV RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In this summary of key findings, I report first of all on the frequency, variety, and pluriform character of the modes of mediation experienced by the interviewees. These modes of mediation occurred in both less complex and more complex forms both within and outside of prayer contexts. Second, I show both the frequency and variety of ways the interviewees consciously made themselves available to God. Third, I describe the role of bodily experience in these mediations of God. Fourth, I present some of the types of disturbances or changes in their modes of mediation. Fifth, I describe the significance and role of Jesus in their religious experience. Finally, I report the changes the interviewees described in their interpersonal relationships and their relationship to the world, especially their active service and concern.

1 Modes of mediation and their importance

The accompanying figure which displays the modes of mediation of the interviewees' experience of God during or outside of prayer illustrates well a number of key findings in the interviews⁷. The responses to several questions provided the information for this

7 According to Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, data elicited from qualitative research methods *are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes occurring in local contexts.* p 15. These rich, thick, descriptions have a quality of undeniable when the actual words of the participants are presented. The essay on nature referred to below in note 9 incorporated

diagram: How do you most frequently experience God at the present time? What is prayer for you now? and What role, if any, do nature, music, symbols, images, or dreams play? Frequently, one or another of these mediations was mentioned several times or emerged in response to the first two questions. The interviewer probed for specific information about mediations omitted in the initial responses or asked the respondent for any further comment. This scatter diagram offers a visual pattern which accounts for the testimony of every interviewee, and shows that most frequently experienced a great variety of modes of mediation which they considered to be of major importance. Each respondent is identified by a letter indicating location on the East or West Coast and a number indicating the order in which they were interviewed.

Less Complex Modes of Mediation

	No Importance	Some Importance	Moderate Importance	Most Frequent & Major Importance
Nature		W3	W2, W4	W1, W5, W6, W7, W8, W9, W10, W11, W12, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E10, E11, E12
Music	W2, W10, E1		W5, W7, E10	W1, W3, W4, W6, W8, W9, W11, W12, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E11, E12
Symbols: sacred and others		W2	E7, E10	W1, W3, W4, W5, W6, W7, W8, W9, W10, W11, W12, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E8, E9, E11, E12
Imagery and Visions		W1, W2, E9	W10	W3, W4, W5, W6, W7, W8, W9, W11, W12, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E10, E11, E12
Dreams	E3, E7, E8, E9, E11	W2	W1, W3, W4, W8, W9, E4, E6, E12	W5, W6, W7, W10, W11, W12, E1, E2, E5, E10

Perhaps the most significant finding in these interviews was that as the experience of God deepened and broadened over time, mediations of religious experience expanded rather than diminished for all interviewees. They repeatedly cited the line from *God's Grandeur* by Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The world is charged with the glory of God*, to explain or describe how they experienced God in and through creation. This kataphatic mystical experience lead to a sacramentalization of reality. God was not identified with any particular thing, but all persons and things might become transparent of the divine presence. An amazing variety of mediations was characteristic of this group of people.

such rich illustrative quotations from the interviews to support the analysis based on multiple sources. In this report, I have employed a second strategy, also recommended by Miles and Huberman, which uses matrices, charts, and other displays to account objectively for large amounts of information in ways that allow the reader to see relationships among the data and to connect this information to its sources. This representation of content from the interviews accounts for anomalous information, as well as for the strength of patterns emerging from the data. It serves as an objective verification of the analysis that the use of apt first-hand accounts cannot. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984.

Equally significant, all interviewees except one experienced *two or more* important mediations of their religious experience which occurred with considerable frequency⁸. For instance, experiences primarily alone in nature were named by twenty-one respondents⁹. A similarly large number were also affected by music, again twenty-one. Of these, many named sacred music from liturgical contexts which they either sang, played, or listened to in their personal prayer. This music carried with it associations from ritual, as well as the feeling and vibrational qualities in the music itself. Others had equally strong responses to popular songs which became a vehicle of God's addressing them through the words and feelings.

Recognition of the importance of symbols was universally present among the interviewees. All of the interviewees named specific symbol(s) that triggered religious experiences. These symbols encompassed a considerable range. Some were specifically sacred objects, the sanctuary, the tabernacle, the altar, either during liturgy (usually Eucharist) or in a chapel used for private prayer. Others were representations of Jesus, of Mary, of the saints, or of the cross. Others were collected from natural settings or related to the four elements: flowers, rocks, shells, wood, candles, water. Others were made by the respondent, such as clay figures, paintings, etc. Most interviewees had a specific place of prayer which included symbolic objects.

Likewise, imagery was present in every one of the interviewees. How this imagery functioned varied considerably. Most had been taught to visualize and reported experiences of Ignatian contemplation. Several reported intense visionary experiences which included more than one sensory element. Visualization was particularly strong, but so too were locutions, tactile sensations, and kinesthetic sensations or activity. Dreams received the least affirmation as significant, although they were very important to almost half of the total group. All of those who either did not remember dreams or

8 The one interviewee who claimed multiple mediations as neither frequent nor major was fairly inarticulate about his experience. W2 mentioned every mediation explored in the study except music. For instance, he gave evidence of psychic experience which functioned through images as a teen-ager. He reported being absorbed in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, yet he claimed symbols were not very important. He didn't seem to recognize the effect on him of sacred space, ritual objects, or the importance of Catholic belief in the *real presence* in this prayer experience. Because this respondent disagreed with summaries or re-stated descriptions of his experience, I placed his responses in the diagram according to the strength of his self-report rather than according to my content analysis.

9 A separate essay accounts in much greater detail for the specific ways nature mediated religious experience for these respondents. There was a pervasive sense of the divine indwelling in the natural world, a *panentheism*, an experience of oneness with the mysterious processes of the universe itself, and a sense of grace - a gratuitous quality. Other features of these mediating experiences in nature were: a wholeness-making effect regardless of a specific sense of divine presence, sensual engagement, lack of dichotomy between the natural world and human community, the sufficiency of minimal events in nature to evoke profound experience, subsequent internal imagery related to sacred landscapes, the disclosure of the divine presence in and through creation, divine-human mutuality, and varying degrees of ecological awareness. 'To have been one with the Earth: Nature in Contemporary Christian Mystical Experience' was the Fall 1994 Cora Brady Memorial Lecture at Manhattanville College.

who did not see them as significant were from the East Coast portion of the sample. Those who named dreams as a mediation of religious experience universally discriminated between dreams which were particularly numinous and which they directly associated with God, and other dreams which they appropriated as a form of self-knowledge or guidance. Several incorporated their dream images into their prayer. Every mediation, however, was not equally important at any one time to a respondent. Interviewees tended to identify the most important loci of religious experience at the time of the interview. Once some particular mediation became revelatory of God, it remained available as a point of entry to religious experience but not in a predictable way. A mediation which was consoling and typical at an earlier period of time but no longer dominant could be reactivated at any time by divine initiation, but not at will by the interviewee. Three or four interviewees expressed frustration or dismay at the loss of particular kinds of consoling, mediated experience. What was remarkable, though, was that despite the complaint about the absence of God or loss of the familiar mode of encounter there was usually another mode of mediated experience already being given. It was as if a person had become habituated to encountering God in a particular place or mode and was failing to notice God's self-disclosure in another way. This new or less familiar way of experiencing God through some other mediation was not entirely welcome. These changes entailed subtle purification of desire, expectation, or gratification, and confounded any sense of control by the interviewee.

Experience of God in private prayer, or in life-events, or in and through other people was clearly in continuity with corporate worship in sacramental traditions. Frequently, the language used to talk about these experiences was derived from sacramental ritual. Ordinary meals or sectioning an orange would acquire eucharistic meaning. There was a movement, in both directions, from ritual sacrament to other concrete realities which disclose God's presence and activity, as well as from ordinary life to liturgy. As a group, the sample was strongly churched. All participated in some form of corporate worship at least every three weeks, although for most their participation was far more frequent.

The figure below accounts for the more complex mediation of experiences of God which were not restricted to special times and places, but clearly surfaced in interpersonal relationships and other life-events. There were three distinct ways in which interviewees talked about the way they experienced God in relationships and in entire situations: 1) subsequent reflection revealed God's presence or activity in a relationship or event; 2) a sense of a deeper mystery was present during an event and deepened with subsequent reflection; 3) other respondents were frequently conscious of God immediately within some experiences and relationships.

The theme of experiences accumulating religious significance upon subsequent reflection was an important one. Interviewees reported recognizing that God had been present in a friendship, their personal history, some event only some time after the event. A Rahnerian perspective is particularly helpful here. Karl Rahner talks about both non-thematized experience and thematized experience. People who reflected on the depth dimension or their unthematized experience discovered God active in their lives more clearly than without such reflection. For them some introspective process

such as examination of consciousness, journal-writing, and spiritual direction conversations fostered this kind of awareness.

All interviewees experienced God in interpersonal situations and life-events outside of prayer. Differences emerged in the degree of the person's awareness of the divine presence or activity immediately within the experience. Some became aware of God only on subsequent reflection. Others described explicit awareness of the Mystery in the events themselves, as well as needing to reflect on other experiences before the divine involvement in the situations became apparent, and still others described frequent and present-moment transparency of the divine in a broad range of experiences outside of prayer. This kind of discrimination appeared to constitute a continuum from experiences requiring reflection to immediately recognized experiences of transcendence. Subsequent reflection or contemplation of these graced events enhanced all three kinds of experience.

More Complex Modes of Mediation

	<i>Important Through Reflection</i>	<i>Mystery with Reflection</i>	<i>Frequent and Transparent</i>
Persons	W9, W10, E3, E12	W1, W2, W3, W7, W8, W9, E2, E4, E5	W11, W12, E1, E6, E7, E8, E9, E10, E11
Life-Event	W5, W6, E2, E3	W1, W2, W4, W7, W8, W9, W10, E4, E5, E8, E9, E12	W3, W11, W12, E1, E7, E10, E11

As people began to experience the presence of God or evidence of God's activity in their world, they experienced God more frequently and in more diverse kinds of situations. Depending on temperament and personality styles, they differed in whether these experiences occurred in solitude or in the midst of other activity. Eventually, their experience unfolded so that it became a both/and situation. They actively sought an intimate, interpersonal relationship with God/Christ, not specifically ecstatic or unusual experiences. They took time to reflect on their experience. They tried to live their lives of love and service informed by, and often enabled by, their experience of God. Finally, they embraced a variety of practices involving intention and attention that disposed them to recognize this divine activity wherever it occurred.

2 Cultivation of availability to God

Most people in the study exhibited a high level of personal commitment to ascetical practices which facilitated openness. They usually had several ways in which they tried to stay *tuned in* to God. Only three people in the sample described the frequency of their regular personal prayer routine as less frequent than daily. Two of these were dealing with a serious long-term illness which made more frequent periods of prayer impractical. Most people prayed forty to forty-five minutes, five to seven times per week. One person spent four hours daily each morning in prayer or related activities. Frequently, people spent an extended time each week or took periodic retreat days

throughout the year. Everyone, however, developed informal, spontaneous ways of staying connected to the divine reality, regardless of the time spent on solitary prayer or reflection. They would periodically chat with God, pray for others, use a breathing technique to center, think about God, or intentionally open themselves to God's touching them throughout the day.

Most of the people interviewed described specific activities such as solitary daily prayer; practices of attention and intention, for example, use of a mantra, text, image, or object; or some method of introspection or dialogue. Many described an expressive stage of such prayer-talking to God about how they were, journaling, getting in touch with their own movements of affectivity and noticing when they were changed or affected by the divine presence. Such change was frequently both cognitive and affective. They began to understand the situation differently and began to feel differently about it. Some described conscious intentional activities; one named *clearing the deck*, making space for something to happen both in terms of physical conditions as well as psychological openness. Some mentioned the necessity of being open to feeling and experiencing - a relaxation of control and task orientation.

Finally, most people in the study also participated in a regular pattern of corporate worship such as daily Eucharist, morning and evening prayer (the office) either alone or in the local parish community, Taize prayer, or spiritual activity in some other faith community. The majority were frequent in their attendance at Eucharist, and often reported significant religious experience in sacramental settings. Some reported greater tranquillity and lack of irritation about how ritual was being celebrated or about the celebrant's personality (when the person appeared to be at a quite developed stage). Others, especially women, experienced ambivalence related to the celebration of Eucharist. Changes in religious imagery, and the possibility Eucharist would present them with either too much intensity or none at all, were cited as reasons.

Most of the interviewees felt part of a believing faith community which contributed to their religious experience and which provided meaningful language and symbols with which to interpret and understand their experience. They sought out groups or individuals in their communities, in spirituality centers, or in their families with whom to share prayer or faith experiences. Most had participated in more than one kind of spiritual development program such as cursillo, diaconate formation, retreats, and their present involvement in spiritual direction.

The following diagram visually shows the many ways people made themselves available to God. It is remarkable to note the number of daily practices.

Ways People Cultivated Availability to God

	Daily (5-7x wk)	3-5x wk	1-3x wk	Weekly	Bi-weekly
Worship Eucharist or Taize	W1, W2, W3, W8, W11, E1, E3, E4, E6, E9, E12			W6, W7, W8, W9, W10, E2, E7, E8, W11, W12, E10, E11	W4, W5, E5
Regular Prayer or Meditation	W1, W2, W3, W4, W6, W8, W9, W10, W11, W12, E1, E4, E6, E7, E8, E9, E11, E12	W5, E3, E5	E2, W7, E10		

	Daily (5-7x wk)	3-5x wk	1-3x wk	Weekly	Bi-weekly
Talk \ listen to God thru day	W1, W2, W5, W7, W8, W9, W10, E6, W11, E1, E5, E7, E10, E11, E12				
Read Scripture or Office	W1, W2, W3, W4, W8, W9, W10, W12, E1, E2, E3, E4, E6, E8, E9, E11, E12	W5, W7,			

Other Activities (Non-Specified Frequency)

Be Quiet	W1, W3, W6, W7, W8, W5, W10, E1, E4, E5, E6, E9
Make Space Tune in	W3, W4, W5, W7, W11, E10
Solitude	W3, W4, W5, W6, W7, W8, W10, W11, W12, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E10, E11, E12
Journal	W4, W7, W11, W12, E2, E5, E7, E8
Spiritual Direction	W1, W2, W3, W4, W5, W6, W7, W8, W9, W10, W11, W12, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E10, E11, E12
Retreat Days	W1, W2, W3, W6, W7, W8, W9, W10, W11, W12, E1, E2, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E12

3 Bodily experience reported

A wide range of bodily experiences emerged in the interviews, either through direct questioning about this dimension or in the course of responding to other questions. Several informants were unreflective about this aspect of their experience, even in response to probes. However, most of those interviewed described an amazing range of bodily experiences that were routinely part of their process of prayer or religious experience. In analyzing the interviews for this particular dimension, the category of participation in public ritual was not included since everyone participated in Eucharist on a regular basis. The high frequency of singing or listening to music was reported in relationship to other forms of mediation. Obviously, the use of music and experiences in nature were also always bodily experiences.

4 Bodily experiences related to prayer or religious experience

The following diagrams represent the great variety of bodily experiences related to prayer and religious experience, in addition to those which occurred as a result of engagement with nature, experiences with music, and experiences with art or other concrete objects.

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

Dance and/or Rhythmic Gesture	W4, W12, W6, W8, E5, E8, E11, E1
Singing into Contemplative State	W4, W9
Using Pulse or Breath to Center	W5, W3, E1

Conscious Choice of Position of Body in Prayer Process

Yoga	E1, W12, E5
Chose Body Position	E12, E9, E1, E4, W6
Sitting on the Floor	E6, E5, W11,

Role of physical illness

Physical conditions, illnesses, or pain were significant for several of those interviewed. How these illnesses or conditions affected their spiritual lives varied. For some occasional pain got their attention enough to turn them toward God. For others life-long afflictions shaped experiences both socially and religiously. Eventual acceptance of the disability frequently lead to profound experiences of emotional and psychological healing. Physical illnesses or events were often the occasion for spiritual processes. One interviewee who had been extremely healthy prayed for a physical experience of suffering and got it.

Physical Conditions

Long-term Illness/Disability	How Affected Rel. Exp.
W1 Childhood paralysis; followed by effects of serious car accident	Childhood rejection lead to exp. of being loved by Jesus and healed through later exp. of love from people; exp. of God through asking for help
W3 Neurological damage from cerebral hemorrhage and brain surgery	Experience of God through those who helped in the healing process; vulnerability in ministry; a breath prayer; affirmation of life despite handicap
E2 Rheumatoid arthritis (30 yrs)	Different reactions; rel. exp. of psychological instead of physical healing; saved from activism; shared passion of Jesus; limited prayer time
W4 Chronic fatigue syndrome; life-time pattern of low energy	Ended work outside the home; gave leisure to devote four hours a day to contemplative process
E9 Dyslexia	Empathy for students; sensitivity to nature
Short-term Illnesses/ Injury	
W11 Illness related to divorce	Simultaneous spiritual process
E10 Cancer surgery	Experiences of Jesus related to peace and healing; trust of God; exp. of healing thru health professionals; regular prayer disrupted
E1 Knee surgery and asthma	Prayed to suffer bodily; rapid onset of physical suffering
W7 Difficult pregnancy	Disrupted regular prayer
E11 Weight and cigarette addiction	Initiated recovery process

Sense of presence

A universal theme in the interviews was the mention of a felt sense of the presence of God. Many described their sense of presence as pervasive, as being all the time, as being always in the presence; others experienced presence more intermittently. The figure below represents the response of one or more respondents who noticed bodily changes in themselves when they were receptive and open to God. Although all interviewees mentioned experiences of God's presence, the second figure represents the responses of one or more interviewees who described a physical response to this presence. Several interviewees were not particularly self-reflective about physical aspects in their religious experience. Others were acutely conscious of physical manifestations of their religious experience, and still others chose physical activities to support or facilitate their experience of God.

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
Excited feeling before prayer

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 gut of union; but not in sexual area
Sense of upper body 'in tune'

Maternal experience

Among the mothers in the group, four of them named experiences related to conception, child-birth, and nursing among their religious or spiritual experiences. For one, the experience of nursing her baby became a visual 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. 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.

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 dominant in the group as a whole. In fact, several of the women who had been or were married explicitly mentioned that their sexual experiences and sometimes the marriages themselves were not ways they experienced God. Neither of the married men mentioned this area, and only one of the divorced women recalled times in her sexual experience with a partner in which mystical experience of God coincided with intercourse. Among the married couples only one seemed to enjoy a relationship in which there was a mutual sharing of spiritual life and ministry. As the diagram above shows, 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.

5 Significance and role of Jesus

The interviews were not specifically conducted to discover the implicit, explicit, or operative Christologies of the participants. Since the participants in the study were recruited from Christian contexts, it was assumed that these informants would interpret and appropriate their experience through the lens of Christian faith. Questions were simply posed in terms of experience of God and experience of prayer. The interviewer mirrored the language the respondents used in talking about God and Jesus. The theological meaning of their statements was not probed. The descriptions and narratives of religious experience, however, gave some insight into how the interviewees viewed and experienced God or Jesus.

These spontaneous descriptions demonstrated strong Christological content, focus, and experience in the group as a whole. At the same time, experience of God was not restricted to a personally appropriated relationship with Jesus. For a few, years of meditation and prayer which focused on Jesus in Gospel narratives expanded into experience of the Trinitarian Mystery. Many used Jesus language and God language synonymously. Still others made comments such as: *My experience is now more 'God' than Jesus*. One participant described a life-long struggle with Christological faith as she presumed others experienced it. She described Jesus as a representative of a human way to God. She occasionally, however, imaged Jesus in her prayer and at those times had strong affective responses, although this was not typical. She was, nevertheless, clearly committed to live the way Jesus did and she was shaped by Gospel values. Four women in the sample talked about God as mother, as well as Jesus being God. Another woman, who had gone through a feminist struggle with her sense of God, employed little explicit Jesus language. One of the women mentioned needing to pray with feminine images of God in order to avoid evoking in prayer the fear and anxiety she

experienced relating to her alcoholic father. Of the twenty-four interviewees only three, as described above, used little language about Jesus.

The remaining twenty-one interviewees exhibited a pervasive consciousness of Jesus along with an experience of Jesus as a focus of contemplative prayer, a model for life, and an intimate friend. As the diagram on practices showed, a large number prayed with or read Scripture daily. This use of Scripture was complemented by regular liturgical worship which was also Christocentric. Fourteen of them described frequent experiences of Ignatian contemplation in which they experienced prolonged imagery of Jesus in their prayer. In addition, four others heard the voice of Jesus or felt the healing touch of Jesus at times. For several, the visionary experience of Jesus was intense, prolonged, and passive in character. The themes of these experiences were typically: healing of psychological wounds, unconditional love and acceptance, increasing intimacy with the divine, and calls to some kind of active love and service in the world. Finally, the three celibate clergymen reported their experiences of Jesus in Eucharistic or ritual contexts. Jesus was experienced while they were presiding, sitting before the Blessed Sacrament, or in life-situations which were interpreted Eucharistically. Twenty participants had made either an enclosed or nineteenth annotation Ignatian retreat. Of the four who had not reported this kind of background, their referring spiritual directors were all trained in Ignatian spirituality.

6 Changes and disruptions in mode of prayer experience

One of the focuses of this study was an attempt to understand how kataphatic experience of God deepened and changed through various mediations, eventually emerging in passive, infused contemplation. The richness of the discoveries in this area can only be briefly indicated in this report. The changes described in the participants' narratives related to several overlapping areas of experience. Themes which emerged included: simplification of the prayer experience, changes in the image of God, loss of control and disorientation initiated by infused contemplation, alternations of consolation and desolation or presence and absence of God. Additional themes were: the healing of psychological blocks or wounds in the participant through prayer, increases in freedom in relationship with God, and life-circumstances which affected the experience of prayer. The affective and behavioral responses to these changes in the mode of prayer or the quality of experience of God ranged from relief to anger, resistance, grief, or rebellion when a particular form of consolation or meditation ceased.

Simplification and God-initiated passivity

A large number of those interviewed could describe transitions in their prayer experience which the classical literature on prayer would describe as transitions from meditation to affective prayer or prayer of the heart, and then to a doing nothing, more passive experience in prayer. Most participants described an active phase of reading Scripture, entering into a scene through imaginative contemplation, expressing feelings, maintaining a dialogue with God or Jesus. They described various ways this dried up or just didn't

work anymore. Most thought they weren't praying at these times and frequently tried to go back to the old way. They described using less Scripture, from lots in the beginning to very small bits later on. They moved from involved conversations to resting in the divine presence. Some continued to say devotional prayers even though something else was happening. Most described how their spiritual directors had encouraged them to let go of the old way, whatever it was, and surrender to something new. All of them, however, described continuing images, voices, visions, and nature experiences in this passive prayer. They felt they couldn't make something happen.

But after many years, as many as ten to twelve of one form, followed by a new form for several months or for two or three years, dialogues might begin again from a far deeper visionary state. Frequently, the interviewees abandoned the use of Scripture for some completely non-linear form of mediation such as dance, drawing, music (arising internally or physically played), elaborating an experience of nature in internal image, or something else. Something would be given or emerge from the seeming non-doing, resting, being, or sitting that disclosed God's unconditional love, the healing of psychic wounds, a release from a compulsion, or a call into service and love of others. This something was usually symbolized in some concrete image, symbol, feeling, or word. These accompaniments never disappeared, but emerged unpredictably from a deeper place in the psyche.

Changes in images of God

In the process of learning to surrender and trust these uncontrollable experiences, frequently the judging, external, super-ego God lessened, died, or disappeared. Universally, these respondents felt themselves affected by and changed by someone, something, outside themselves. Others found their God images changed to include feminine dimensions of the divinity. All of them experienced some kind of encounter with God that caused them to withdraw less mature or faulty projections onto God originating in childhood experience.

Changes in perspective and feelings

Even in expressive and affective forms of prayer, most found they began to see things differently, their feelings changed, and their perspective changed. This was not the result of thinking about their situation but of being touched from beyond themselves. Sometimes this touch was wordless; at other times it came in a visual or tactile image; at yet other times it came as analogy from life-experience which matched the felt quality of how God was for them in the prayer. As the first figure on modes of mediation indicated, there were almost always three or more important and significant ways this experience might occur at any given time.

Experiences of disorientation

Although there were frequent descriptions of disorientation during transition points, only three or four of the respondents described intense feelings of grief, loss, or frustration at the withdrawal of consolation in prayer. A far greater number, at least six, experienced the loss of a way of prayer as a consequence of life circumstances such as

illness, small children, lack of time alone, or psychological states of anxiety which deprived them of their usual experience.

Integration of negative or painful feelings and events

A significant number of those interviewed also described deepening levels of affective intimacy and a sufficient freedom with God so that negative feelings and events were brought with them into the prayer experience as much as neutral or positive ones. They simply felt accepted and loved as they were, sinful, limited, struggling with life. One woman described moving to more authentic prayer in this way: *I am no longer avoiding problem areas and looking for comfort in prayer.*

Experiences of healing

The majority of respondents also described being changed and healed in places of deep psychological wounding. Many had also participated in some kind of counseling or therapy. They frequently described a spiritual form of healing that enabled them to live with irremediable problems in ways which did not create blocks in their relationship with God. They seemed to function better in their relationships with others because of their certainty of being loved and accepted by God. Often this healing was concretely represented in visions, locutions, or in some other symbolic way.

7 Changes in relationships with people and to the world

Toward the end of the interview, two questions were asked which dealt with changes in interviewees' relationships with people or to the world as a result of their experiences of God. The Christian mystical tradition has consistently emphasized that growth in Christian life increases the mystics' ability to love unselfishly and to express that love in some effective way. Active love is a more significant criterion of the authenticity of religious experience than any of the particular features or phenomena occurring during times of prayer. The interviewees would, of course, have been shaped by these expectations. Christianity is characterized ideally by a loving savior and by followers who love as Jesus did. These final questions probed for such effects. Frequently, these themes had emerged spontaneously in the course of earlier descriptions. These questions, however, focused much more explicitly on events and feelings located outside times of prayer.

Relationships with people

Interviewees had unique ways of describing changes in their relationships with people. Among those for whom the interpersonal world had originally been problematic, frustrating, or abusive, their world gradually became a mediation of God's consolation. For others whose interpersonal lives were generally less troubled, respondents almost universally described dramatic increases in their ability to be more loving of others, more forgiving of them, and more tolerant of differences. There generally seemed to be growth in their sense of connection with others, inclusive of those who were both

naturally likable and unlikable. Three people described a sense of mystical oneness with all peoples, especially in prayer. Although on the figure below I listed all these respondents under the category of greater connection with people, the other specific changes they named were: more inclusive, more flexible, more tolerant, more tender, more gentle, more present, more accepting, more compassionate, less judgmental, more respectful, and more authentic in relationship.

Many of the descriptions implied qualities of mutuality. For instance, *because others have loved me, I am now free to love others*. Another said, *Others reveal God's love to me. I know I do the same for others*. Several people noted that they would not be able to be as nice or as loving as they are if they didn't spend the time they did in prayer or meditation. Two related that their spouses mentioned they noticed there was more grace in the house when their partners were faithful to their meditation practice. Many continued to struggle with interpersonal relationships, identifying them as teaching them more about themselves, as being a catalyst for conversion, or as a revelation of areas for growth. There was a remarkable absence of blame or projection. It is important to note that twenty-two had already named persons as mediating grace to them. The way they responded to this question about changes in their relationship with others was primarily interpreted in terms of their response to and active love for others.

Changes in Relationship with People

Greater Connection with both Congenial and Uncongenial	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

Relationship with the world

The question about their relationship with the world was interpreted with great variety. As shown above, the world of nature was an important mediation of religious experience to the vast majority of the respondents. Several interpreted this question in terms of the natural world but most took it to refer to the social world, specifically social systems and structures beyond the family, or to their concrete activity in the world.

It was in relationship to this question that the problem of evil emerged in the conversation. Several mentioned that they had come to a love and acceptance of the world despite the presence of pain and evil. Many of these respondents have struggled with personal illness and physical pain. Others have experienced injustice in one way or another or were acutely aware of injustice in the world.

The world constituted for many the place of God's activity and theirs. Two, however, contrasted markedly with one another. One, a sister in her early sixties, described God and the world as almost synonymous: the world in God and God in the world. She also had an intensely personal relationship with the earth and the natural world. The other, a man, also in his sixties, talked about the world as over and against Christ. His vocabulary continually contrasted the spiritual world with the world of sin and evil.

Several mentioned the development of a clearer sense of mission or purpose they were meant to express in the world as a result of their experience of God. All but four of the interviewees worked outside the home in a secular occupation or in full-time church-related ministry. Two of these were full-time seminarians who were students at the time of the interview. Another was a retired policeman in a diaconate formation program, and another a married contemplative, with grown children, economically supported by her husband.

Among the interviewees a large number had changed the basic structure of their lives in response to their deepening experiences of God. Four of the men were embracing particular religious callings. Two were older seminarians. One had been a restaurateur, the other was unclear about prior employment but had recovered from a very serious automobile accident. One of the married men had taken early retirement from the police force in order to have more years to serve as a deacon. The other married man indicated he would most likely move toward a more specifically religious role if anything happened to his wife. He was, however, leading a meditation group, and he was actively engaged with feeding the poor, in addition to his full-time job as a professor which he accomplished with a sense of mission. One of the married women felt called to live a contemplative life within the context of her home and marriage.

Several others changed either ministry or employment in a direction toward greater personal sacrifice or service with the poor. One sister left an affluent high school to work as a social worker with poor teenagers; another went from teaching to a social justice office; and another was on her way to Africa as a missionary after having taught American Southern Blacks. The wife of a deacon shared ministry with her husband and with him accepted their reduced income when he took a full-time ministry in a black, inner city neighborhood. The only priest in the group regularly joined the local Catholic Worker House in overtime ministry.

Finally, eleven of the interviewees made some change of ministry which enabled them to cultivate the spiritual development of others. Seven of the women, three of them lay, had sought training as spiritual directors. Two of these are among those who also made choices of life-style or ministry toward service with the poor. Another of these women has begun working on retreat teams in a local spirituality center. Another sister worked as a chaplain in a hospital rehabilitation unit for substance abusers, and another woman directed a field education program in a seminary. For the others, their commitments to make the world a better place took place through their ordinary work as lawyers, teachers, congregational administrators, pastoral workers, etc.

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/Evil yet love and Accept World as it is	W3, W9, W10, W11, E12

The responses reported to these probes about relationship to other people and the world itself strongly reveal that the vast majority of these people live a spiritual life that is thoroughly engaged with the world. There is clearly an acceptance, even a positive embrace, of the church's mission in the modern world as outlined in *Gaudium et Spes*. All of the interviewees would have been affected by the changes in the church's understanding of its relationship to the world, and this understanding appears to be fully integrated in consciousness among this group. There was also little evidence of attempts to avoid the harsher realities of human existence. Although many of those interviewed have coped with personal suffering in their own lives, their experiences of God have often healed their deepest wounds and increased their capacity to respond with generosity and love to the needs of the world around them. They cannot be characterized as uninvolved or withdrawn in a pursuit of a personal spirituality divorced from love and service. In fact, the evidence is quite the contrary. The depth, breadth, and range of kataphatic experiences given to those interviewed is the ground out of which they are given in service, called to on-going conversion, and empowered in their ability to love.

V CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

I have learned an enormous amount from my reflection on and analysis of various dimensions of the experiences recounted in these interviews. While there are clearly limits to the knowledge and understanding gained from this small selection of people, the discipline of objective analysis continually challenges assumptions and biases of the researcher. The actual experience of a variety of persons who came from different social contexts and personal histories other than persons previously known to the researcher serves as a critical check against generalizing from too narrow a *slice* of experience. Experience which diverged from the researcher's own required a search for explanations and generalized descriptions that accounted for a wider variety of experience than could have occurred without the interviews.

Further, Christian tradition is a living tradition. Qualitative research allows the experience of contemporary people, itself shaped by the tradition, to challenge and add to the tradition. Classical texts on mysticism were originally written from the combined perspectives of the experience of the writer and the theological and philosophical understandings which shaped that experience. The Counter-Reformation tradition tended to make the particular experience and interpretation of that period prescriptive for later generations, including our own. Although qualitative research is limited in

how findings from the data can be generalized to other populations, it is richly suggestive about actual experience and processes which can contribute to better pastoral practice. Such research does provide a basis for questioning theories that have been repeated as the *received* spiritual tradition, but which may be based on an even more idiosyncratic and narrow basis of experience than this qualitative study represents. If forty-seven directors could recommend 108 directees they judged to be appropriate study participants, these experiences are not as rare as has been supposed. The interviewees welcomed the opportunity to talk about their experience, to contribute to better pastoral practice of spiritual directors, and to discover that they were not alone, odd, or unusual in their religious experience. It is important for students of mysticism and spiritual directors to understand and support the appropriate spiritual development of contemporary Christians particular to this kataphatic path.

APPENDIX I: DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLES

California sample

California sample

	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Gender	2=16%	10=84%	12	
Clergy	2			16
Lay Women		5	5	41
Sisters		5	5	41
Married		2	2	16
Divorced		2	2	16
Single		3	3	25
R. C.	2	7	9	75
Episc.		3	3	25
Converts	2	3	5	41
Spiritual Directors		6	6	50
Non-U.S. Born		3	3	25
Born in Midwest	2	1	3	25

California sample: age distribution

		<i>Percentage</i>
35-39	4	33
40-49	5	41
50-59	1	8
60-65	2	16

Comments: In the raw California Pool, gender distribution was 19% Male and 81% Female. N=36. All of the men in the pool were clergy. And 17 of the women were lay, comprising 47% of the pool. The final sample, drawn from random tables was similar in gender proportion but created an even proportion of lay women to sisters.

The difference in the age distribution between the final sample and the raw pool is perhaps more significant than the ones listed above. The youngest age group is over represented in the final sample while the 50-59 age group is under-represented. The East Coast Pool and Sample complemented this age distribution in interesting ways. That sample under-represented the two youngest age groups, giving the combined sample good representation in each age-grouping. However, in the combined sample the 41-49 group was only 25% compared to 43% in the combined raw pool while the 50-59 group was 37% of the final sample compared to 28% of the raw pool. The largest number of potential interviewees fell in the 41-49 year age group which would suggest that at this time in our culture there is likely some correlation between age and mystical development among people who have consistently made themselves available for this type of experience. James W. Fowler found a similar correlation between age and the appearance of more people in the 4th and 5th stages of his pattern of faith development. *Stages of Faith Development* (1981).

California raw pool: age distribution

		Percentage
35-40	8	22
41-49	15	41
50-59	8	22
60-65	4	11

East Coast sample

East coast sample

	M	F	Total	Percentage
Gender	3 = 25%	9 = 75%	12	
Clergy	1		1	8
Sisters		5	5	41
Lay	2	4	6	50
Divorced		1	1	8
Married	2	3	5	41
Single		1	1	8
R.C.	3	9	12	100
Spiritual Directors		4	4	33
Born in New Eng.		1	1	8

East coast sample age distribution

	Percentage
35-39	0
40-49	8
50-59	66
60-68	25

Comments: The East Coast sample is uniformly Roman Catholic in both upbringing and present affiliation. By contrast, even though the California sample is 75% R.C., 41% of that group had been shaped by a variety of Protestant churches. Two had converted to Roman Catholicism; one was a former R.C. and two had converted to a different Protestant church. The experience of married laity is better represented in the Eastern sample than in the West Coast sample, while singles are better represented in the west. The East Coast sample is also considerably older than the West with 92% over 50 years of age compared to

50% on the West Coast under 50 years of age. The East Coast sample also included less ethnic diversity and fewer people who had significant experiences in other parts of the country or outside the country. The California sample included 25% who were first generation immigrants, all from European countries, and another 25 % who had grown up in the Midwest. The California sample also had greater diversity in the economic backgrounds of the interviewees. 50% came from working class families compared to 8% on the East Coast. 25% of the Californians came from upper middle class families compared to none on the East Coast which was 91% middle class.

Combined sample (both coasts)

Age distribution

		Percentage
35-39	4	16.5
40-49	6	25
50-59	9	37
60-67	5	21

	M = 520%	F = 1980%	Percentage
Gender			
Clergy	4		16.5
Married	2	5	29
SisterS		10	41
Single		3	12.5
Lay	2	9	45
R.C.	5	16	87
Episc.		3	12.5
Spiritual Directors		10	42

Age when made commitment to prayer/relationship with God

Total sample

Age	WC	Percentage	EC	Percentage	Total	Percentage
6-9	2	16.5	5	42	7	30
10-14	0		4	33	4	16.5
15-19	5	42	1	8	6	25
20-25					0	
26-31	1	8	2	16.5	3	12.5
32-36	3	25	0		3	12.5

73% or 19 of those interviewed placed the age at which they committed to on-going relationship with God or prayer before the age of 20. 41% of the total sample placed that commitment before age 14. One person in the West Coast sample did not answer this question, but she had entered the convent by age 19. 58% of the entire sample were clergy or religious.

In terms of years spent in commitment to prayer/relationship with God, the East Coast group ranged from 14-60 years yielding an average of 42 years of such commitment. The West Coast group ranged from 2-55 years yielding an average of 25 years of commitment. In interpreting this question, some respondents counted this commitment from the time their prayer became a regular and satisfy-

ing part of their lives while most of the group indicated at what age they consciously began responding in any way to the felt awareness of God.

Years committed to prayer/relationship to God

5-10 yrs	11-20 yrs	21-30 yrs	31-40 yrs	41-50 yrs	51-60 yrs
W7 = 5	W4 = 12	W3 = 25	E11 = 37	W10 = 40	E1 = 60
W5 = 10	W2 = 14	W9 = 25	E2 = 38	E9 = 40	E12 = 55
E3 = 6	E7 = 14		W11 = 32	E8 = 45	W8 = 55
	W12 = 19		W1 = 32	E10 = 48	
	E6 = 20		W6 = 37	E4 = 48	
				E3 = 50	
				E5 = 50	

In relationship to other research, by far the majority of this entire sample had never lost their 'original vision' or childhood awareness of God as reported by Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision: a Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood*. (New York: Seabury, 1983) based on descriptions collected by the Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford. Even more, this research studies a group of people who chose to respond to awareness of God and cultivate it in such a way that it affected the rest of their lives.

The profile required interviewees to have been in spiritual direction without specifying any length of time for this practice. The aim of this item in the study design was to locate persons who had some practice articulating their experience of God in order to facilitate the ease of interviewing. It does not assume that experience of God is in any way dependent on the experience of spiritual direction. The table above clearly supported this hypothesis. But participation in spiritual direction is one indication of seriousness of commitment to growth in prayer and in the spiritual life. The response to the question about years in spiritual direction does suggest some interesting differences between the practice of spiritual direction in the two geographical regions. Much of the information from this study may reveal as much about persons who seek out spiritual direction as it does about development in kataphatic prayer. For instance, the large number of women spiritual directors on the original roster and the large number of women identified for interviews may be an indication that far more women, both lay and religious, engage in spiritual direction than do men. And the majority of the men engaging in spiritual direction were clergy or religious.

Number of years in spiritual direction

Years	WC	Percentage	EC	Percentage	Total	Percentage
3-5	4	33	6	50	10	42
6-10	2	17	2	17	4	16
11-15	3	25	4	33	7	29
16-20	1	8			1	4
25+	2	17			2	8

Although the East Coast sample was older and had a range of years committed to prayer/relationship with God from 14-60 years, only 33% of this group had participated in spiritual direction for 11 years or longer, with 50% for 5 years or less. Among the California sample with a slightly later age of beginning commitment to relationship with God, 50% had participated in spiritual direction for 11 years or longer. Those who had spiritual direction more than 25 years were 60 years of age or older. There may be a weaker social taboo in speaking about religious experience in both the secular and religious cultures of the West Coast than in that of the East.

Socio-economic backgrounds

Class	WC	Percentage	EC	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Upper Class						
Upper Middle	3	25			3	12.5
Middle	2	16	11	91	13	54
Working Class	6	50	1	8	7	29
Poverty Level						
N/A	1	8			1	4

Again the West Coast sample represented a greater diversity in economic backgrounds. 50% came from working class families compared to only 8% on the East Coast. Six of the Seven interviewees from working class backgrounds were seminarians or women religious. In this group two had completed at least two years of college, and the rest had completed college and/or masters degrees. Only one continued to do work in this category. Socio-economic class for this group was described by family of origin. The California sample also included 12% of those who considered themselves to be upper middle class compared to none on the East Coast which described itself as 91% middle class. One could argue that interviewees from working class backgrounds who had either succeeded educationally or embraced religious callings had overcome the disadvantages of economic circumstances which had correlated negatively in other studies with the occurrence of religious or ecstatic experience.[See David Hay and Ann Morisy, 'Reports of Ecstatic, Parnormal, or Religious Experience in Great Britain and the United States--A Comparison of Trends' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, (1978) 255-268.

Educational background total sample

Highest Level of Education	WC	Percentage	EC	Percentage	Total	Percentage
PHD/DMIN/JD	1	8			1	4
Post Masters	1	8	2	16	3	12.5
Two Masters			1	8	1	4
Masters	5	42	5	42	10	42
BA/BS	3	25	3	25	6	25
Two Years College	2	16			2	8
High School			1	8	1	4

By all standards this is a highly educated sample. 62% of the entire sample had completed a masters degree or higher level of education, and another 25% were college graduates. In addition to formal degree programs, within the sample there were also three persons trained in massage therapy and another with chaplaincy certification, while several had participated in non-degree spirituality programs or training in spiritual direction which is not reflected in the above chart. One had an MA in progress.

APPENDIX II

Interview questions

- 1 Where do you most frequently encounter God?
- 2 Is there anything you do to make yourself available or present to God?
- 3 What is prayer for you now?
- 4 In question #2, you described , for how long has this been effective for you? Did something else work before?

- 5 Can you describe what this transition was like?
- 6 How did you react when no longer helped you contact God? (probes for feelings, behaviors, strategies)
- 7 How did you happen upon this new way of contacting God?
- 8 Do dreams play any role in your experience of God? If yes, describe how.
- 9 How has your life experience revealed something of the mystery of God?
- 10 How is your imagination engaged in your experience of God?
- 11 How is your body engaged in your experience of God?
- 12 What role do symbols now play in this experience? e.g. Scriptural themes, images, words; sacred or secular art pieces, or nature objects. . . ?
- 13 Has your relationship to the world changed in anyway as a result of your relationship with God?
- 14 Has your relationship to other people changed in anyway as a result of your experience of God?

Study Protocol

Interviewees were located by sending letters to 198 spiritual directors listed on the roster of an international network of spiritual directors who were located in the San Francisco Bay Area and Orange County in California and on the East Coast from New York City to Washington, D.C. Each director received a profile of persons sought for interviews, elicited from them their willingness to be interviewed, and returned to the investigator only factual information that would facilitate arranging the interviews. forty-seven spiritual directors submitted a total of 108 persons willing to be interviewed. Seven directors volunteered themselves for the study but were eliminated from the sample except for one who agreed to be interviewed for a pilot of the interview schedule which had been critiqued and refined by six peers in the fields of psychology, theology, and religious education. There was a poor response from non-Roman Catholic spiritual directors in recommending directees to the interviewer. The interview sample itself was drawn using random tables to select 12 interviewees from the two coasts. No effort was made to balance for either gender or age.

Interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, recorded on audio tape and transcribed. The interviews were 60-90 minutes in length and yielded 12-35 pages of single spaced transcripts for each interview. At the conclusion of the session, factual information about the interviewee was collected together with permission for use of the material. All interviews were conducted in completely private settings. And only one of the interviewees was previously known by the interviewer.

SUMMARY

This study reports the key findings of a qualitative study in the US of middle-aged Christian men and women whose experiences of God, both in prayer and in life, were strongly kataphatic throughout their lives. - Kataphatic refers to experiences of God which are mediated through one of God's creatures, either something external to the person such as nature, art, language, sound, ritual, another person, etc., or through a content of the person's consciousness such as visions, prophetic words or locutions. In either case, the experienced phenomena are genuinely transparent to the Divine Presence -. These men and women gave evidence of an increasing richness and depth in their religious experience, typically experiencing two or more modes of mediation simultaneously as frequent and important. All had undergone significant changes in modes of mediation in the course of their lifetime. However, every mode remained

available in an unpredictable way, even when it was no longer their primary one. Nature, music and imagery were nearly universal forms of mediation for the subjects. The frequency and variety of ways these people consciously made themselves available to God is described. The report also describes the role of bodily experiences, changes or disruptions in their prayer experience, and the significance and role of Jesus in their religious experience. Finally, the changes the interviewees described in their interpersonal relationships and their relationship to the world toward active service and concern are described.

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