

## The Procrustean Bed of Women's Spirituality: Reclaiming Women's Sexuality as an Integral Aspect of Christian Spirituality

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**Abstract:** To understand women's spirituality within the Christian framework it is essential to look at traditional cultural attitudes which have contributed to the (de-)formation of women's sexuality. This article presents an overview of some significant historical influences that have shaped the contemporary western understanding of women's sexuality; it offers a critique of these influences through an analysis of three movements in the liberating understanding of women's spirituality; it also proposes elements of an integral Christian spirituality for women that takes account of the reclaiming of women's sexuality

ONE OF THE MAJOR PROBLEMS women face in regard to their understanding of spirituality within the Christian tradition is that the tradition has been androcentric and patriarchal in its religious and cultural foundations. For far too long women have tried to fit themselves into the Procrustean bed of prevailing Christian cultural approaches to the relation between God and God's people in both public and private worship. The violence women have done to themselves in trying to conform to the modal practices of spirituality is only now being recognised, as is the impact of this violence over centuries on their understanding of themselves as women in relation to self, others and their God. What is now experienced by women as one of the problematic areas in the Christian community has its roots in the origins of western civilisation as we know it today.

In order to understand the present situation it is important to look at the past to see those significant factors that have been influential on the development of spirituality in general<sup>1</sup> and on Christian spirituality in

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1. The understanding of spirituality in this paper follows that described by Sandra Schneiders: "Spirituality in (its) inclusive sense might be defined as the experience of striving to integrate one's life in terms of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives." Schneiders' understanding of spirituality includes sexuality. She argues that "feminist spirituality is rooted in women's experience, especially their experience of disempowerment and reempowerment". Much of women's experience of empowerment and disempowerment is in relation to their sexual identity. S. Schneiders, "Feminist

particular. To understand spirituality from a woman's perspective it is important to examine cultural attitudes to female sexuality through history. Historical records from the Ancient Near East which describe the relation of humankind to their gods and to the created world portray a spirituality which is both androcentric and patriarchal. Even when the pantheon of deities admitted goddesses, the approach to these has been primarily male normative. The underlying androcentrism and misogynism that women and men in the Christian tradition today are working to overcome has taken millennia to establish itself. The general ambivalence towards sexuality that is recorded in the period from the Fourth Millennium BCE<sup>2</sup> until the present era has had negative consequences for the world as a whole, and for women in particular.

#### TERMINOLOGY

*Sex* refers to the biological differentiation for males and females, while *gender* is related to cultural conditioning. Gender is used to refer to those differences between male and female human beings that are created through psychological and social development within a familial, social, and cultural setting. Because gender is derived from the prevailing perception of male and female cultural roles, it is a cultural identity which changes over time. *Sexuality* is related to both biological and gender related roles and relationships, to women's conditioned social behaviour, and it includes women's dreams and desires.

In general, the term *spirituality*<sup>3</sup> has been used to describe the engagement between the natural and supernatural worlds. The way in which this interaction has taken place culturally has been oppressive for women and for lower social classes in many early political and religious contexts. Spirituality is derived from the Latin term *spiritualitas* which was originally associated with the dualism between spirit and body in early Christian, and particularly Pauline theological writings.<sup>4</sup> Early

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spirituality", in Michael Downey (ed.), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1993) 395, 400.

2. The selection of this period of time is due to the recognition that history-making is "a historical creation which dates from the invention of writing in ancient Mesopotamia... (Men of the ruling or professional class) have been the historians until the recent past" and they "have selected the events to be recorded and have interpreted them so as to give them meaning and significance... They have called this History and claimed universality for it... Historical scholarship, up to the most recent past, has seen women as marginal to the making of civilization and as unessential to those pursuits defined as having historic significance." Gerda Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986) 4.

3. Schneiders clarifies the origins and early understandings of spirituality in the religious context, but she also illustrates the contemporary widespread use of the term "beyond the Catholic, Christian or even religious spheres". See Schneiders, "Feminist spirituality", 394.

4. Although Paul has been described as completely misogynistic in his attitudes to women, it is helpful to see some of the clarifications of Pauline contributions to the present

Christian writings describe the dichotomy as the tension between one's fleshly and spiritual desires, the male is identified with the spirit and the female with the flesh.<sup>5</sup> Within major religious traditions spirituality has been perceived to be the personal and/or communal way of living and loving that people adopt according to their perception of themselves in relation to the Divine, and their place in the world. The term is also used to describe the interplay between the natural and supernatural worlds. A wider and more open-ended use of the term is now required as the term is being used in "inter- or transdenominational (for example, 12 Step), non-religious (for example, holistic) or even antireligious (for example, Marxist or secular) experience".<sup>6</sup> It is in relation to the broader and more inclusive understanding of spirituality that the nexus between women's sexuality and women's spirituality can be appreciated.

#### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW – PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN'S SEXUALITY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PROCRUSTEAN BED.

##### 1. Mesopotamian and Hebrew Influences

In discussing the rise of patriarchy, researchers point out that, from the earliest male-recorded history, women experienced marginalisation: Women's sexual subordination was institutionalized in the earliest law codes and enforced by the full power of the state. Women's cooperation in the system was secured by various means: force, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and the artificially created division of women into respectable and non-respectable women.<sup>7</sup>

Because education was denied to the majority of women in the era, they were excluded from the activity of writing their community stories, of recounting their religious experiences, such as the "Great Mother Goddess" cults and their priestly roles in them, in such a way that they

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understanding of the Christian tradition that are being made by biblical scholars. See Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the christian woman* (Homebush NSW: St Paul Publications, 1988) especially chapters 1 and 6.

5. This association of women with the flesh and man with the spirit in the Christian tradition is clearly presented in Margaret Miles, *Carnal knowing* (London: Burns and Oates, 1992) 152: "women's ability to overcome the limitations of their sex and achieve intellectual and spiritual accomplishments – to 'become male' – was emphasized in the literature of martyrdom and asceticism in early Christian churches. Women's difference from the normative male was, however, far more frequently noted in medieval Christianity. Male authors wondered whether women have souls; women often seemed, to the men who represented them, to lack the subjectivity they associated with having a soul."

6. Schneiders, "Feminist spirituality", 394.

7. Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy*, 9. See also chapter 5 for the elaboration of these ideas.

might remain in the collective memory of their people. Instead only the community stories written by men survived.<sup>8</sup>

Early Mesopotamian writings, over 2,500 years old, illustrate the augmentation of male control over women's sexuality. This patriarchal domination was legitimated by laws in regard to privileged classes and their property:

Men were powerful enough to incorporate members of their family – i.e. women, and children of both sexes – in such a way as to offer them as substitutes for themselves in case of punishment. The practice of burying servants, slaves and retainers with a king or queen in the same tomb was an older manifestation of the power to incorporate others.... What is important for understanding the development of class hierarchy is to see this principle extended to civilian and non-royal heads-of-families and to note that such heads-of-families were, in the period of (the Codex Hammurabi), always males.<sup>9</sup>

Although there were some exceptions in relation to privileged classes, a woman's spirituality was usually related to her subordinate position both in her family and in the State. In that same period, as cultic goddesses were gradually being replaced by male gods, those civic and familial mediating roles and ritual practices that had customarily been given to women were gradually taken from them and reallocated to males.

With the expansion of Hebrew monotheism in the Ancient Near East, fertility goddesses came under attack from another perspective. Women's exclusion from religious rites was sanctioned, as female sexuality was judged increasingly as making women unclean and thus unfit for leadership or even for ritual worship. The story of the Fall in the Hebrew Scriptures elucidated that while men's condemnation was externalised in their roles as producers and tillers of the earth, women's condemnation was internalised in their bodies and in their life-giving powers. Woman's experience of her own bodiliness was thus its own routine reminder of her identity as impure and guilty: "Penitence for the sin of Eve, a sin which, according to Jewish interpretations of the Genesis account, caused menstruation and ritual impurity."<sup>10</sup> In the Mesopotamian and Hebrew cultures the attitudes towards women were

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8. For further information on the written history of literate societies and women's exclusion from this history, see Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy*, chapter 11, "The search for women's history", 247-73.

9. Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy*, 104.

10. Miles, *Carnal knowing*, 51. Much more could be written on the taboo of women's menstrual blood in all the major religious traditions. However, in this paper, it is enough to note that women's menstruation was not understood, and that it was a major factor in women's oppression within the religious context.

consistently generating a spirituality of guilt, bodily (and thus personal) rejection and submissiveness.

## 2. Græco-Roman Influences

Sexuality and spirituality in the Græco-Roman culture are described by historians as male, superior and elitist. The young man born into privilege saw himself and his world from a position of "unchallenged dominance". To be human was to be male, to have amassed a "decisive surplus of 'heat' and fervent 'vital spirit'."

Women by contrast were failed males. The precious vital heat had not come to them in sufficient quantities in the womb. Their lack of heat made them more soft, more liquid, more clammy-cold, altogether more formless than were men. Periodic menstruation showed that their bodies could not burn up the heavy surpluses that coagulated within them. Yet precisely such surpluses were needed to nurture and contain the male seed, thus producing children. Were this not so, the doctor Galen added, men might think that "the Creator had purposely made one half of the whole race imperfect, and, as it were, mutilated"... [Such assertions] had already been made for over half a millennium by this time. They effectively confined women to a lower place than men in an irrefutable "natural" hierarchy.<sup>11</sup>

For a male to be submissive or subordinate was to be less than a man, "No normal man might actually become a woman, but each man trembled forever on the brink of becoming 'womanish'."<sup>12</sup> The prevailing scientific opinion in the first and second centuries of the Christian era was that males were the fetuses which had come to their full potential, while females were the result of a failure in the fertilisation process.<sup>13</sup> This medical theory had been elaborated in the fourth century BCE by Aristotle in his description of women as deficient males. Thus women's spirituality took on a further dimension of rejection as they not only suffered the pain and discomfort of their bodies, but they also experienced rejection of themselves as both incomplete and guilty beings in the realm of the ordinary world and that of the Transcendent.

The exercise of power and control was seen as the essence of maleness in the Græco-Roman world. Just as good order and control were seen as the ideal of the good state, so too, order and control were the essence of authentic spirituality for males, and thus for females as the

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11. Peter Brown, *The body and society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 10. Brown points out that this understanding of "nature", while shocking to the present reader, had already been held for over half a millennium and that it has continued until the present century.

12. Brown, *The body and society*, 10.

13. Brown, *The body and society*, 9.

objects of this exercise of power relations, in the Greek and Roman cultures. Normative male sexuality was seen less in terms of eroticism or procreative powers and more in terms of maintaining appropriate power relationships and decorum in the state.<sup>14</sup>

Spirituality, expressed in familial and public worship and associated with the elitist superiority of the aristocracy, was inevitably patriarchal. Women, deemed to be inferior, were excluded from the right to lead worship, in either familial or public rituals, by law.<sup>15</sup> Objectified in patriarchal cultures, which saw women as possessions owned by and subservient to the males in their family, women were further reduced to the status of objects when, although they were required to be present at religious rituals in Græco-Roman societies, they were denied the right to be anything other than passive spectators at such male worship ceremonies. An examination of ritual practices for young men and women in Greece and Sparta (around 750 BCE), shows that:

In the end (Athens') treatment of its "young people" was just another manifestation of the inequality between men and women in the religious sphere. Despite a certain pretense of allowing all citizens equal participation in politics and religion, men and women were treated differently. Women and girls were integrated in ritual, but under the control and supervision of men.<sup>16</sup>

Women's place in the public and private worship practices of the state was always carefully controlled by those in power. To be a woman was at best to embody gendered ambivalence, at worst to experience total rejection. Theoretical affirmation of the "respectable" woman, and actual condemnation of the "non-respectable" (that is, non-privileged) were both fed into women's experience and cultural perceptions, and thus they contributed to the complex formation of women's identity and spirituality.

### 3. Judæo-Christian Influences

As Christianity, with its roots in Hebrew monotheistic culture, and influenced by Greek and Roman cultural contexts, became the dominant religion of the western world, ambivalence to the body and to sexuality became more prevalent. Early Christian writers such as Tertullian and Jerome emphasised human sinfulness and the weakness of human nature, especially that of woman, in such a way that the renunciation of "the flesh" and especially of sexual desires became a

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14. Philip Aries and Georges Duby (eds.) *A history of private life: from pagan Rome to Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 1987) 242-3.

15. For clarification of women's place in Roman family and society, see John Scheid, "The religious roles of Roman women" in Georges Duby and Michelle Perot (general eds.), *A history of women*, vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 377-408.

16. Louise Bruit Zaidman, "Pandora's daughters and rituals in Grecian cities", in Duby and Perot, *A history of women*, vol. I, 348.

spiritual ideal to strive for. While male sexuality was taken for granted as normative, women's sexuality was seen as deviant:

You give birth, woman, in suffering and anguish. You are under your husband's spell, and he is your master. And do you not know that you are Eve? She still lives in this world, as God's judgment on your sex. Live then, for you must, as an accused. The devil is in you. You were the first to abandon God's law. You were the one who deceived man, whom the devil knew not how to vanquish. It was you who so easily overcame him who was made in the image of God. For your wages you have death, which brought death even to the Son of God. And yet you think of covering your tunics with ornaments.<sup>17</sup>

Sexual abstinence was promoted as a Christian ideal, and as women continued to be described within the tradition as sources of temptation in the community, regulations in relation to women's presence and participation were constructed according to the misogynistic spirit of the period.

The sustained ambivalence towards human sexuality resulted in a Christian church which used celibacy as a means of control, as well as of elitist and exclusivist practices which were subsequently rationalised within the tradition. Brown cites several misogynistic anecdotes from the ascetical literature of the fourth and fifth centuries:

The studied misogyny of much ascetic literature did not reflect merely a shrinking away from women as a source of spiritual temptation. It was mobilized as part of a larger strategy. It served to contain and to define the place of the ascetic movement in late Roman society. Faced by the perpetual threat of an asceticism so radical that it blurred the distinction between city and desert, even between men and women, the leaders of the churches, in Egypt as elsewhere, fell back on ancient traditions of misogyny in order to heighten a sense of sexual peril. In so doing, they ensured that their heroes, the monks, remained in the prestige-filled and relatively safe, zone of the desert. In fourth-century Egypt, fear of women acted as a centrifugal separator.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Tertullian (Carthage, c.202), quoted in Monique Alexandre, "Early Christian women", in Duby and Perot, *A history of women, vol. I*, 409, n. 1. Although Carolyn Walker Bynum questions Tertullian's alleged misogyny in this quotation by arguing that his ideas are much more complex than this often cited quotation allows, I find myself unable to accept her position. Even if Tertullian's concern is with "cosmetics and jewels" or the goodness of our bodily organs as Bynum suggests, the concepts of rejection are so strongly emphasised that their primary meaning is what remains with the reader. See Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The resurrection of the body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 37 n.64, 43.

18. Brown, *The body and society*, 243-44.

#### 4. Medieval Influences

The predominant misogynistic attitudes engendered by early cultural, political and economic structures continued into the Middle Ages with little apparent sustained resistance from men or women. The medieval period reinforced the denigration of women that had prevailed, as early ascetical traditions waxed and waned within the various Christian countries. Women's spirituality in the medieval period may be best described as one of both guilt and confusion: women were idealised and demonised by both religious and medical professionals; they were blamed for many of the ills that occurred in families and in society; and yet they were also celebrated as the source of family identity and continuity.

Some outstanding women transcended the misogyny of their religious tradition; the works of some of these have been kept within the collective memory of their churches. But many more have been forgotten because they had no chance to make their contribution in writing, or because what they wrote was not seen as valuable for the handing on of the tradition.<sup>19</sup>

The ambivalence towards women's sexuality and spirituality is seen even in outstanding women of the period. Women such as Hildegard of Bingen (twelfth century), gifted and creative writer in the fields of science, medicine and theology, appeared to accept the patriarchal view that women were inferior to men. Yet Hildegard's vast expanse of works shows that, alongside her acceptance of prevailing patriarchal attitudes, she presents a counter view of women as strong and gifted contributors to their church and society. This alternative perspective was generated not from formal education, because she did not receive any, but from her strong inner conviction about the working of the world, about women's relationship with their God, and her belief in the importance of communicating these ideas which were prophetic in character. Generally, when it occurred at all, women's experience of their own educational competence was in terms of their incapacities rather than in relation to their capabilities. Diffidence is a constant characteristic of their literary endeavours. This was a consequence of a culture that was most reluctant to offer education to women.

"Teach women neither letters nor writing." It was no small feat for a woman to acquire the means of self-expression.... Literacy in

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19. Gerda Lerner comments that "Current scholarship holds that women made no significant impact on the writing of History until the late 18th century. The single exception is Christine de Pisan, whose solitary attempt at creating a Women's History sank into oblivion. I will show that while this generalization is true, there is a significant and almost constant effort on the part of women to create Women's History from the 7th century A.D. forward." Lerner proceeds to show the aborted efforts at history, particularly through the historical biographies of outstanding women. See Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy*, 249.

women would for a long time to come arouse men's fears both of female impudence and their own impotence.<sup>20</sup>

A classic example of the consequence of such attitudes to women's education can be seen in Hildegard's own diffidence about her writing skills, alongside her confidence in her spirituality, and in her relationship with her God:

Hildegard wrote Bernard of Clairvaux that without the instruction of the Holy Spirit she would be unable to write.... this "poor, uneducated woman" disowned any literary skill and professed to know little Latin. Accomplished as she was, she seemed to have been less confident of her linguistic skills than many men. But "within my soul I am learned," she claimed, and her abundant correspondence reflects her efforts to keep abreast of the intellectual ferment of her time.<sup>21</sup>

While there are records of women who transcended the oppressive forces of their culture in the Middle Ages, they were the exception, and they usually suffered for it in some way or other.

Fear of women's sexuality was such that those women who exercised spiritual leadership in their communities were frequently denounced as witches. There are varied assessments of the number of women who were executed during the Inquisition in fifteenth-century Europe, but it is generally accepted to be more than a million.<sup>22</sup> Medieval fears of women's sexuality led to fantasies about women's part in the procreative act.

Continued ignorance and anxiety about menstrual blood and its role in the generation of life caused major religious traditions to proscribe menstruating women as unclean. Thus women have traditionally been excluded from the religious rituals of their communities. Menstrual blood was also believed to be capable of killing plants, giving dogs rabies, and even causing smallpox, measles or leprosy.<sup>23</sup> The sexual arousal of celibate clergy and the emasculation of males in general was also attributed to women's "deviancy".<sup>24</sup> This fear of women's potency

20. Danielle Régner-Bohler, "Literary and mystical voices", in Duby and Perot, *A history of women*, vol. II, 442.

21. Régner-Bohler, "Literary and mystical voices", 443. Hildegard's *Scivias* is her most important theological work, inspired by her wisdom, her visions and with the addition of manuscript illuminations that enabled the communication of her theological foundations for the Christian spirituality that she engendered through writing, artistry and music.

22. Estimates range from the conservative number of around six million to the more expansive assessment of fifteen million during the varied persecutions for "sorcery" in Europe of the Middle Ages. For a closer historical examination of the situation of witches in Europe, see Jean-Michel Sallmann, "Witches", in Duby and Perot, *A history of women*, vol. I, 444-57.

23. See Claude Thomasset, "The nature of woman", in Duby and Perot, *A history of women*, vol. II, 64-6.

24. In an analysis of the relationship between the heart and the body in early Christian life, Michel Rouche comments on the "irresistible sensual impulse, of desire inspired

is not confined to western religions, but extends across cultures: it is seen in medical and scientific literature as well as in religious writings:

Medieval authorities followed Aristotle in his belief that the gaze of a menstruating woman could darken a mirror. Albertus Magnus gave a scientific explanation of the phenomenon: the eye, a passive organ, received part of the menstrual flow and, in keeping with Aristotelian and Galenic theories of vision, caused an alteration in the air, through which a harmful vapor flowed to the mirror. After menopause women became extremely dangerous because various excess humors no longer eliminated by menstruation now exited through the eyes. The *Admirable Magical Secrets of Albert the Great and the Small* asserted that old women could poison infants by staring at them in their cradles.... This pseudoscientific argument justified the exclusion of a whole segment of society: women who had lost not only their allure but also their social function (the ability to reproduce).<sup>25</sup>

This exercise of the power to exclude women from formal public and familial religious worship kept women locked into positions of subordination in the spiritual realm that few were able to release themselves from, either publicly or privately. While such theories about women's destructive bodiliness were raging, women were trying to make sense of their own sexuality, their relation to their desired but despised bodies, and to reconcile them with their own understanding of their bodily desires and their fears. In the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century the negative stereotyping of women moved from one of evil witch to hysterically ill inferior being who needed constant attention.

The cultural and religious ambivalence towards women was such that many women co-operated in their own repression because they carried the burden of centuries of negative attitudes and dealings in their psyche as well as in their person. The exceptions were rare enough to be noted in the literature of their period.<sup>26</sup> One woman who made her mark on the Christian ecclesio-political context of her time was Teresa of Avila. This sixteenth-century woman has left a heritage of spirituality that subsequently influenced the Church in such a way that she was made a Doctor of the Church. Yet Teresa had her own

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according to the pagans by the gods and according to Christians by Satan, but in any case, a subversive, destructive passion.... The Germans had another word for this unreasonable and possessive spirit: libido. This always stemmed from the woman." Michel Rouche, "Body and heart", in Aries and Georges Duby, *A history of private life*, 480.

25. Thomasset, "The nature of woman", 65-66.

26. Secular feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote in 1792, *A vindication of the rights of women*, worked to achieve the rights of citizenship for women, but it took much longer for women to become aware of, and subsequently to claim their rights within their Christian churches.

struggles with the hierarchy of the time. Her autobiographical writings and biographies list the political maelstrom that accompanied her foundations as well as her spiritual writings. Her successful establishing of religious houses was as much due to public leaders and male clerics whose support she enlisted, as to her own powerful influence. She offended, however, as many of the civic and ecclesiastical hierarchy as she charmed.

While her writings were rich with spiritual insight, they were also permeated with a humility that smacked of a self-abasement and submissiveness which enabled her to survive visits from officers of the Inquisition, and opposition from within the Carmelite Orders, Calced and Discalced. A letter from Father Gracian, appointed Apostolic Visitor to her foundations, and both spiritual director and friend to Teresa, describes her mixed reception and gives a concrete example of the ambivalence towards women in the church of the period:

We are being submerged by a wave of opposition. It does not come from our enemies but from Fathers who are our friends; not from sinners, but from good people; their intentions are not evil but very good; it is the most fearsome of contests for our position is very weak, whereas our enemies' strength comes from the fact that they are our so-called friends and that they are good and well-intentioned.... They seek our ruin under the guise of friendship and unity.... They have only too much human power, whereas we lack it, although that of the great Philip who is on our side is mighty. The divine power, too, is on our side. It is this divine Power which has brought our primitive Rule once more into the light of day and given to Mother Teresa strength to do things for this Rule which nations have never before seen.<sup>27</sup>

The strong woman mentioned here is not always evidenced in her own writings. The reader receives a very different understanding of Teresa from her own account of her spiritual life for the Inquisitor of Seville in 1576. Using the third person, she recounts a variety of mystical experiences and visions, of affirmation of her spiritual development and understanding from a wide range of ecclesiastics, including another Bishop of the Inquisition:

In spite of all this, she (Teresa) was not without fears at times, and it seemed to her that spiritual people could be deceived as well as she. She wanted to speak with very learned men, even though they may not be given to prayer, for she only wanted to know whether all her experiences were in conformity with Sacred Scripture. And she was sometimes consoled, thinking that even though she may have

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27. Jeronimo Gracian, *Way of perfection, vol. I*, 557, quoted in Marcelle Auclair, *Saint Teresa of Avila* (London: Burns Oates, 1953) 295.

deserved to be deceived because of her sins, God would not permit so many persons to be deceived since they desired to give her light.<sup>28</sup>

This autobiographical account paints a clear picture of some of the struggles that gifted women faced in the ongoing development of their spiritual lives. One wonders if Teresa's apparent disclaiming of women's experience, her affirmation of men's powers of interpretation and regulation of spiritual conformity (whether they were men of prayer or not!) might possibly be read in multi-levelled ways. The ambivalence is obviously present in any case. Over the centuries this ambivalence has continued to contain women within the Procrustean bed of religious conformity to the male-normative expressions of public and private worship. Such is the heritage that the contemporary Christian women and men are working to redress.

This necessarily sketchy overview illustrates some of the significant cultural influences that have contributed to the present situation in which Christians find themselves as they collaborate in the exposé of patriarchy and misogyny in the human story. While it gives some very general understandings of a complex history, it cannot do justice to the varied influences that have shaped women's experience as we are beginning to hear it in our present era. It may, however, give some insight into the difficult task of liberation that is being undertaken, and it offers a panorama against which the three movements towards women's sexual and spiritual integrity can be seen more clearly.

### THREE MOVEMENTS OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

The complex history of women's sexuality in a context of male-normative spirituality can be seen as moving through three stages. The first was a period of awakening when women began to realise that their experiences of their own sexual identity did not fit the patriarchal paradigms endorsed by their culture. Rejecting the operative stereotyping of woman as *wife, mother, whore*<sup>29</sup> in the patriarchal world, groups of women began to reflect on their own experience and understanding of sexuality. They also reassessed the conventional cultural assumptions about spirituality and about women's place in relation to prevailing religious traditions, teachings and worldviews. The second

28. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodrigo (trans.), *The collected works of St Teresa of Avila, Vol.I* (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, ICS Publications, 1976) 350.

29. Miles, in *Carnal knowing*, 164, points out that in one of the most popular Christian devotional manuals of the sixteenth century these are reduced to two stereotypes, "The *Enchyridion* knows only two types of women: 'tarts' and wives. Erasmus's instructions on how to love a wife, like admonitions against consorting with other women, do not suggest that women have either subjectivity or unique personality characteristics." Whether the stereotype is negative, or overtly positive, the reduction of women to a stereotype destroys their uniqueness and reduces them to objectivity.

stage was one of separation, when women stood apart from cultural conventions to analyse and critique their context and to expose the ways in which their sexuality had been affirmed or repressed. The third is a reclaiming movement. After a period of critical analysis women have moved to acclaim their experience as women, and to name and reclaim a Christian spirituality that enables them to be fully alive and free human beings. In her exploration of the historical nature of women's subordination, Gerda Lerner describes the stance of this third movement:

What will the writing of history be like, when (the) umbrella of dominance is removed and definition is shared equally by men and women? Will we devalue the past, overthrow the categories, supplant order with chaos?

No – we will simply step out under the free sky. We will observe how it changes, how the stars rise and the moon circles, and we will describe the earth and its workings in male and female voices. We may, after all, see with greater enrichment. We know that man is not the measure of that which is human, but men and women are. Men are not the centre of the world, but men and women are. This insight will transform consciousness as decisively as did Copernicus's discovery that the earth is not the center of the universe.... We may find that those who had previously taken upon themselves the burden of both action and definition may now have more freedom for playing and experiencing.<sup>30</sup>

There is no longer the Procrustean bed of conformity to convention, but an opening up to the 'new' in life. Women are stepping out of their assigned places and roles, and they are discerning their rightful identities in their societies and churches. This discernment process is a freeing one for all: women, men and the world of creation.<sup>31</sup>

### 1. An Awakening: The Birth of Feminism

With the Industrial Revolution came the birth of feminism as we know it today. While this period created new problems for women, it also enabled them to break through many cultural barriers that had confined them. As the individual began to be given priority in the developing democratic political context, so too, women as individuals in their own right (not as another person's disposable property) began

30. Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy*, 13-14.

31. It is not by chance that an accompaniment of the third movement is a greater emphasis on ecofeminist theology. See: Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: an ecofeminist theology of earth healing* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, earth and creator spirit* (New Jersey: Paulist, 1993); and, from a Christian praxis approach, Maria Harris, *Jubilee time: celebrating women, spirit, and the advent of age* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), especially chapter 2.

their claim to be heard.<sup>32</sup> The nineteenth and twentieth centuries signalled the time of women's sexual and spiritual awakening. Women began to question some of the contradictions and the paradoxes that were influencing their self-understanding, their relationship with their God, and with their church communities. With the cultural changes brought about by the movement from the private life of rural communities to the public world of urban development, women were able to break out of the economic and gender dependency that had constricted their identity and their place in their expanding world. This first wave of feminism moved women from a sense of shame about their bodies to a celebration of their new womanly identity and their potential contributions to their families and communities.<sup>33</sup>

Women claimed their places in their churches as well as in their communities. As working men and intellectuals of the period increasingly questioned and abandoned their religious belief systems, women became the backbone of the Christian churches. By their majority presence in the pews they influenced the writing of contemporary prayer manuals and devotional services. The feminisation of religion began to take shape in this period, and the prevailing popular spirituality was derived from women's spirituality.<sup>34</sup>

Again, although women were maintaining the life of their Christian communities, the heritage of ambivalence was sustained through the trivialisation of popular spirituality which was expressed devotionally and in concrete relational terms.<sup>35</sup> In sharp contrast, orthodox theology was removed from women's reach and used to maintain the barriers of élitism and exclusivity. Yet, while formal scholarship was not allowed to them, women endeavoured to transcend the limits of their formal educational possibilities within the churches.

As women began to be aware of ways in which their churches were using the Bible as a means of control, they saw a growing need for women to read the Scriptures in a more critically conscious manner. It

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32. This developing recognition of one's own identity and responsibility is an integral element of women's claiming of a spirituality according to the terms cited above, n.1.

33. Although the new movements towards democracy did not immediately give women rights, they raised women's consciousness of their position in their political and ecclesial environments and of their experiences of exclusion and discrimination. Protracted local and global warfare in the period meant that women were increasingly called on to take men's place in the workplace, developing new skills as well as increased self-confidence. But when the men returned, women were reluctant to give up the new skills and opportunities for development that had come their way. In face of much hostility many women held on to their new roles in the workplace and in their local communities.

34. For the development of this understanding of women's changing place in Catholic culture see, Michela De Giorgio, "The Catholic model", in Duby and Perot, *A history of women*, vol. IV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 166-97.

35. It is interesting to note, in contrast to past trivialisation of popular piety, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994) §1674-76, affirms its importance.

was in the 1890's that a group of American women led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton produced *The woman's Bible*:

They excerpted and commented on those portions of the Bible in which women appear – or are conspicuously absent. In their comments the authors attacked both the male bias that distorted the interpretation of the Bible and the misogyny of the text itself.<sup>36</sup>

As some women worked in the area of secular feminism on behalf of women,<sup>37</sup> other groups of Christian women formed communities to educate the poor and to help the ill and the needy. The changing shape of women's spirituality became one of service, and the developing insights into their gendered identity reinforced women's awareness of their diverse gifts of practical care and compassion.<sup>38</sup> Religious women began to educate the poor, and nurse the sick while married women also exercised their influence actively through their insistence on familial presence at church devotions, and in subtle ways they influenced the types of worship that were sustained and those which died out.

Within the Roman Catholic context the right to serve with the official sanctions of the Church meant that celibacy was imposed as a requirement for spiritual leadership and ministration. This led to women's often unwitting reinforcement of the ambivalence in their Church. They transcended the "weak female" stereotypes, but often at the cost of realising their authentically womanly identity. In urging the members of her Order to the exercise of ever greater ministerial energies, Madeleine Sophie Barat stated, "More than ever, the hope of salvation will be in the weaker sex. The men of our time are becoming women; transformed by faith, the women can become men."<sup>39</sup> Yet, she

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36. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (eds.) *The women's Bible commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992) xiv. See also Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The woman's Bible* (Seattle, Washington: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion 1974).

37. While women at the grassroots were breaking through the stereotypes, so too were women in the academies. Academic feminism in Europe, through the voices of women such as Virginia Woolf (*A room of one's own*, 1929) and Simone de Beauvoir, (*The second sex*, 1949), was challenging both religious and cultural conventionalized ideas about women. The prevailing focus of women's sexuality on either the expression of their procreative powers in marriage or their suppression through a life of virginity, chosen or imposed, was being questioned. Women began to be aware of the power of their own initiatives, and of their own varied powers and accomplishments, whatever their life choice and direction, and they collaborated to make their activities recognised in their communities.

38. These women were not engaged in any explicitly "feminist" pursuit on the whole. But they were responding with an enlightened awareness to the needs of the suffering and deprived. In doing so they were creating opportunities for new understandings of individuals and their spiritual capacities to be recognised. The nursing profession owes much to those dedicated lay women who followed the path of Florence Nightingale, often at the price of marriage.

39. Madeleine Sophie Barat, cited in Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996) 600. This comprehensive historical review of Roman Catholic sisters reminds the reader that to do

saw beyond the limits of her culture, and in missioning her women to service in the New World, she encouraged her women to teach their students to become "real women...through the full and harmonious development of their faculties, Christian women who shall be well informed and influential for good".<sup>40</sup>

In describing women's service within the sisterhood, and their place in the male clerical system, Jo Ann McNamara comments,

Virginity wiped out gender differences and turned women into men by giving them independence and the authority to pursue a lofty spiritual calling.... Based on the ideal of the spirit's triumph over the body, it encouraged a cooperative lifestyle of pooled resources and mutual encouragement exemplified by the desert retreat of Jerome and Paula.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time as Catholic lay women find avenues of service, no longer requiring a celibate commitment, available to them in both church and society, religious life itself is also undergoing a transition. While there are fewer candidates for religious life as we have known it over the centuries, there are still significant numbers of women who spend some years, or even their lifetime in service commitments, or in commitment to a life of prayer in the world. Perhaps the problem of the contemporary continuity of religious life is not simply an issue of affirmation of the laity as is sometimes suggested, but rather it might be more a problem of the present incumbents of religious communities. Might the diminishment of numbers in religious life be seen less as a failure of generosity in today's young people, and more as a failure of imagination in religious themselves?<sup>42</sup>

Alongside service and formal religious expression of their spirituality, women acclaimed their identity in relation to the Divine through other means. Although they were denied the fullness of their human individuality, they found alternative outlets for their spiritual yearnings. Mystical spirituality had for centuries provided an avenue for gifted women within religious traditions to express their sexuality in accord with their heart's desires. Much spiritual writing of the mystics is intensely sexual in its expression, and the relationship of the individual to God is one of deep union. Yet, as an examination of the historical records show, Christian women mystics and spiritually gifted

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justice to the contribution of publicly professed women within the Christian churches is beyond the confines of this paper. A final comment by McNamara is relevant: "The history of nuns is haunted by the presence of men who often admired them yet feared their own admiration; who invested emotional currency in the mythology of mystery and difference rather than the ideal of understanding and equality." (p. 6).

40. Madeleine Sophie Barat, cited in McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, 600.

41. McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, 3.

42. For the insight on the failure of imagination in religious life and in seminaries today, I am indebted to a conversation with Michael Himes, Theology Department, Boston College.

women suffered a great deal of persecution for their writings and for their charismatic community leadership.

Where women had little opportunity for writing because of their cultural circumstances, or because they were excluded by mainstream religious traditions or the political context in which they lived they found an alternative outlet for the expression of their sexual and spiritual yearnings – the world of science fiction and magic realism. This different standpoint of the imagination enabled women to generate visions of freedom that would be unthinkable or seen as treasonable or blasphemous if they were written in more obvious forms. Mary Shelley's<sup>43</sup> science fiction work, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), and Toni Morrison's *The bluest eye*<sup>44</sup> (1970), with its coded language of magic realism,<sup>45</sup> are quite divergent examples of this avenue of spiritual release. Critiques that would be unacceptable or denied publication within society or church community were presented in an alternative and coded context understood by those people whose experiences were being described.

In violent and abusive societies where women have been denied the right to speak or even respond, where their feelings and worldview have been trivialised or condemned as irrelevant according to patriarchal or racist beliefs and values, women have found their experience and their voice in alternative media. They have been able to acclaim their identities in ways that did not threaten the patriarchal structures within which they were powerless. They have learned to live in a dualistic world, but not that of the patriarchal division of body and soul. Theirs is the spirituality of women who are freeing their imagination to dream that their world might be transformed, to describe a Transcendent Being and a world of acceptance and forgiveness that is not open to them as they write.

In non-literate cultures, or in cultures where women are without voice, women's sexuality and spirituality have been expressed in arts and crafts. An example of this is seen in African-American women's quilting. Quilting has been recognised as a meditative practice from the nineteenth century until the present time:

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43. It is an interesting irony to note that Mary Shelley is the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft who died ten days after Shelley's birth. Mary Shelley educated herself and became a voracious reader.

44. Morrison writes that her isolated writing of this novel was an experience where "I reclaimed myself and the world – a real revelation. I named it. I described it. I listed it. I identified it. I recreated it.... I was Pecola, Claudia, everybody." See Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy (eds.), *The feminist companion to literature in English* (London: B. T. Batsfor, 1990) 764.

45. For further elucidation of this approach see A. S. Byatt and Igenes Sodre, *Imagining characters: six conversations about women writers* (London: Vintage Books, Random House, 1995).

Quilting could also be a social ritual and an event, providing an opportunity for women to meet and talk as they created a valuable gift to celebrate a friendship or a special occasion. Frances Trollope, a British traveller in the United States, wrote in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* published in London in 1832, "The ladies of the Union are great workers, and among other enterprises of ingenious industry, they frequently fabricate patchwork quilts. When the external composition of one of these is completed, it is usual to call together their neighbours and friends to witness, to assist at the *quilting* which is the completion of this elaborate work. The assemblings are called 'quilting frolics' and they are always solemnised with much good cheer and festivity."<sup>46</sup>

The purposeful business of the quiltmakers illustrates an aspect of women's spirituality in practice. But while it was usually white women who wrote about the aesthetics of quilting, African-American women also passed on their own often quite contrasting spirituality of quilt-making:

A woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn't freeze, and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn't break. Women's thoughts, feelings, their very lives were inextricably bound into the designs just as surely as the cloth layers were bound with thread.<sup>47</sup>

Women's crafts were as much an expression of their sexuality as they were of their spirituality. They represented women's efforts to integrate all aspects of their womanly experience into a single way of being in relationship, with others, their God and their developing sense of themselves in the world. Patriarchal dualism is totally alien to women's integrated approach to life.

A womanist examination of African-American women's experience of suffering shows the type of transformation that is taking place in women's spirituality through their writing and reflection on African-American experience.

Black women's suffering redefined caricatured Christian virtues. Because of the lives and suffering of Black women held in chattel slavery – the meanings of forbearance, long-suffering, patience, love, hope and faith can never again be ideologized. Because of the rape, seduction and concubinage of Black women under chattel slavery, chastity or virginity begs new meaning.<sup>48</sup>

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46. Doris M. Bowman, *The Smithsonian Treasury American quilts* (New Jersey: Gramercy/Random House, 1991) 7.

47. bell hooks, *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990) 117.

48. M. Shawn Copeland, "Wading through many sorrows", In Emilie Townes (ed.), *A troubling in my soul* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993) 124.

Women's dreams, fantasies, fairy tales, myths and handcrafts are a means of expunging their pain and frustration, celebrating their womanliness, attending to the sexual and spiritual desires that energise their lives and their hopes for a future in which they participate with a fullness of living and loving.<sup>49</sup>

## 2. Separation: Leaving the Procrustean Bed

After the first wave of feminism where women began to make claims for full inclusion into the significant institutions, civic and religious, to which they belonged, women began generally to take an intentional stance in regard to their place in those systems. In order to understand their situation more clearly, many women began to stand apart from organisations and communities of Faith to which they had previously faithfully and unquestioningly belonged. What was true of feminists in general was true of Christian feminists<sup>50</sup> in particular. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s saw a damburst of titles from Christian women such as: *Woman: survivor in the church*, *Woman's place in man's church*, *The church and the second sex*, *Sexism and God talk*, and *In memory of her*.<sup>51</sup> Women had claimed their voice, and their right to examine what was happening to them in the present in light of the past. Women also began to question what future the next generation might have in a patriarchal environment, and they began to collaborate with each other in the movement towards the transformation of their homes, their churches and their social contexts. Women's spirituality has never been confined simply to the realms of public and private formal worship. Their intuitive awareness of their connectedness to the Transcendent has consistently enabled women to go beyond the normative constraints and possibilities.

Women who reacted against mainstream patriarchal systems saw normative understandings of sexuality and spirituality as dangerous because it was controlled by males. Women's control over their own bodies was the essence of their spirituality and sexuality. New groups of women arose both formally and informally, and expressed their own forms of autonomous identity as women in their churches. From this

49. For an understanding of such a future context see, Maxine Greene, "The lived world" in Lynda Stone (ed.), *The education feminist reader* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 17-25.

50. Many women who would hesitate to call themselves feminists have moved through the consciousness-raising stages of their secular feminist sisters, and their questioning of "women's place in man's church" has begun to take place in more organised ways. Rather than try to clarify the various stances of representative women's groups in the various churches, I will stay with the term feminist and use it in relation to those women who are concerned with their own identity, spirituality and ecclesial experience, and actively working for full integration into their churches.

51. It is virtually impossible to list all the theological, biblical and pastoral publications, both academic and popular that came out in those spirited years of the 1970s and 80's. These few simply represent the flavour of women's writing in that period.

separatist perspective women's bodies were recognised as a special means by which women had access to their own truth. The taboos against women's bodies were being demythologised as women examined the oppressive and repressive worldviews that had kept them from understanding their own bodily ways of being. From within the Western Christian tradition women scholars such as Mary Daly, Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Daphne Hampson, Phyllis Trible and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have systematically exposed a tradition of Christian misogyny from scriptural, theological and pastoral perspectives. Their writings were the foundations of the critique of operative models of male-normative spirituality and they are continuing to call into question the roles and relationships of women and men in civic and ecclesial communities.

While Western women had the power and the opportunity to make their voices heard, this was not always the case with women from other cultures. One of the consequent complications for women's collaborative activities on behalf of gender inclusiveness, in society in general and church in particular, has been in relation to the right to speak. Some western women spoke out on behalf of their sisters in poorer circumstances. But resentment rather than gratitude was often the result. Women from the "two-thirds" world wanted to claim their own identity and speak on their own behalf. Misunderstanding, unintentional "colonialism" and resentment has been an aspect of much of the international interaction of women's reclaiming activities. The establishment of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and its Women's Commission in 1979 has done much to enrich collaborative feminist ventures and to offer mutual support and recognition for women in theology in all parts of the world.

In this period of separation women's religious writings might be divided into two main groups. On the one hand there were those whose writing was in reaction against a male-dominated church, and on the other there were women whose concern was to claim their own voices as women whose spiritual identity needed an acclamation of their womanhood. A hermeneutics of suspicion was alive in secular and religious women's writings, and alongside these were the emancipatory woman-centred writings. Both approaches influenced the writings of Christian women at this period. One of the important characteristics of this separatist stance has been the realisation that the term "feminist" is itself problematic because its inclusivity militated against the diversity of women's voices claiming the right to speak on their own behalf.<sup>52</sup> Women's writings and collaborative activities are

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52. For an understanding of some of the variations within this second wave of feminism and its separatist mode see Monica Threlfall (ed.), *Mapping the women's movement: feminist politics and social transformation in the North* (London: Verso Books, 1996).

taking place in all parts of the globe, and the emphasis on separateness arises as much from a strong concern that no single chorus of women's voices would drown out those with less powerful voices, as it does from a reaction to patriarchy and androcentrist attitudes and practices.

### 3. Acclaiming and Reclaiming:

#### From Procrustean Bed to Sleeping Bag!

In the first stage, that of awakening, women's efforts were directed to the new understanding that their experience of themselves as women needed to be attended to. They worked to hear and then to claim their own voice. Both individually and in groups, women worked to free women's world of sexuality and spirituality from misogyny and androcentrism. As time moved on and women began to hear the integrity of their experience they recognised their need to stand apart from normative understandings of women's sexuality and spirituality. They began to collaborate more intentionally in multi-levelled ways, in the academy, in the home and in the marketplace so that the forging of new hermeneutical approaches<sup>53</sup> has enabled women to find a language and a forum for their experience.

In the final decade of this century it might well be argued that within Christian communities many feminists have been less interested in denouncing the prevailing patriarchal worldviews and more interested in creating alternative contexts where the voiceless can first of all hear their own voice, and where they can then be heard by others. The energies for this movement come from a solidarity between women which respects difference. This is the decade in which cultural differences are being acclaimed in their uniqueness rather than absorbed in a dominant culture that is gender or power-based.

As groups of women work to interpret what is their own truth in terms of their womanly identity they are clarifying their relation to, and contribution to the multi-faceted world of Christian spirituality. In writing about the spirituality of Hispanic women, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz addresses some of the problems they have in a dominant Northern Atlantic Church whose theological and liturgical identity is western and rational in its expression:

Popular religiosity...is an intrinsic part of the daily lives of Hispanic women. Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology understands popular religiosity as a rich tradition of religious beliefs and

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Western and Eastern European, American and Japanese variations of feminism are explicated in this book.

53. Perhaps the most significant contributor to women's understanding of the need for a hermeneutic of suspicion in their approach to Christian tradition has come from the biblical research of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and in particular her ground-breaking book, *In memory of her: a feminist reconstruction of Christian origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

practices that fuse Christian, Amerindian, and African religious traditions and is the most operative "system of symbols" used by Hispanic women in establishing "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" in their lives.<sup>54</sup>

These women understand their own spirituality in ways that are not accessible to the western mind – male or female. As women from diverse cultures elucidate and celebrate their own integrated Christian spirituality, other women and men can begin to hear those elements of their spirituality which are cultural accretions, either positive or negative, and those which are of the essence of their tradition.

To the secular and religious writings of western women, new perspectives on feminine sexuality and spirituality<sup>55</sup> are being offered from African, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern and Pacific Island nations. Mujerista, Hispanic, and Womanist writers in their explorations of their own cultures, and in dialogue with women from other cultures and religious traditions, are reminding their readers that there is no simple definition of women's sexuality or of women's spirituality.

Women no longer have to fit into a single imposed model of Christian spirituality with its exclusive understanding of sexuality built into it. As women and men discover new understandings of what it means to be human, to be sexual beings drawn to the fullness of life by the call of the Transcendent God, their spirituality will be one that is consistently calling them to discover the "new" in their relationships with God, with self, and with others.

#### CONCLUSION: WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY – ALIVE AND TRANSFORMING!

What then is the present and future direction for women's sexuality and spirituality? What shape is the "new" taking in present research and collaborative processes? To begin, after around four millennia of ignorance and misinformation about women's anatomy and the formation of female and male fetuses, it cannot be said that women have come to a definitive understanding or reclaiming of their own sexuality in the past 150 years. However, through contemporary medical and scientific research, women have come to the realisation that they can debunk the destructive myths about women's sexuality, and they can befriend their bodies and celebrate their sexual identity. Social science research has enabled women to understand the gender conditioning that has controlled them in their cultural identities and social relationships. Biblical and theological scholarship in the

54. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Yolanda Tarago, *Hispanic women: prophetic voice in the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1992) 67.

55. For a clarification of aspects of the global diversity of feminist spiritualities, see Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (eds.), *Dictionary of feminist theologies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 100-116.

Christian tradition is opening women to the realisation that there is much more to their relationship with their God than the negative aspects depicted in their Judæo-Christian heritage. Women in the major religious traditions are supporting each other in their acclaiming and reclaiming of their rightful place in their faith communities. Solidarity in the search for their own truth across religious and secular feminist scholarship is enabling women to communicate new insights and understandings about their place in the world of creation.

To describe the present directions of women's sexuality and spirituality is to recognise that the reclaiming process is coming from a dialogue that is inter-disciplinary, international, ecumenical, as well as inter-religious and cross-cultural. The raising of women's consciousness is moving along the continuum of critique of the patriarchal worldview, the dislocation of androcentrism, the overturn of misogynistic structures and beliefs, and it is moving towards an interdependent and creation-inclusive consciousness and way of relating in the world. Women's more intensive and expansive understanding of their sexuality and of the embodiment of their spirituality are dynamic elements in their consciousness-raising activities.

Women are collaborating with each other in their affirmation that there is and can be no single spirituality of women, as there is no single understanding of sexuality as long as women live in different cultural and historical contexts. Women's sexuality, shaping their spirituality, is dynamic and diverse, open to desire and affirming of bodiliness. Christian women's spirituality is a spirituality that is liberating, not simply for women and for men, but for the whole created world.