Women's Studies Journal

2006 20 : 2

WOMEN AND SPIRITUALITY

Spring 2006

Women's Studies Journal

Volume 20, Number 2

2006

The Women's Studies Association of New Zealand
with Otago University Press

The *Women's Studies Journal* is published twice yearly by
the New Zealand Women's Studies Association Inc. with
Otago University Press

Coordinating Editor: Jenny Coleman <J.D.Coleman@massey.ac.nz>
Book Review Editors: Michelle Lunn <M.S.Lunn@massey.ac.nz>
and Leigh Coombes <L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz>
For further information and guidelines for submitters,
see www.womenz.org.nz/wsj

All contributions and content enquiries:
Jenny Coleman
Women's Studies Programme
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Massey University
Private Bag 11 222
Palmerston North
Aotearoa/New Zealand

All subscription and advertising enquiries:
Women's Studies Journal
Otago University Press
P.O. Box 56
Dunedin

Subscriptions
Institutions … $45
Individuals … $45
Single copies … $24.95
Overseas airmail … Aus$45, US$45

ISBN-10: 1-877372-33-1
ISBN-13: 978-1-877372-33-9
ISSN 0112 4099
Printed by Otago University Print, Dunedin

Cover image
Hadia's Shrine. Photographer: Deirdre Savage

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Women's Studies Association (NZ) Inc.

WSA (NZ), PO Box 5043, Wellington
www.womenz.org.nz/wsa/

The Women's Studies Association (NZ) is a feminist organisation formed to promote radical social change through the medium of women's studies. We believe that a feminist perspective necessarily acknowledges oppression on the grounds of race, sexuality, class and disability as well as gender. We acknowledge the Maori people as tangata whenua of Aotearoa. This means we have a particular responsibility to address their oppression among our work and activities.

Full membership of the Association is open to all women. Other individuals may become associate members. Annual membership includes three newsletters per year and inclusion on the wsanz e-list.

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Women's Studies Journal

The Women's Studies Journal is a biannual peer-reviewed academic journal established by the Women's Studies Association of New Zealand. It is published by a committee of WSA members in association with the Otago University Press.

The Journal is essential reading for academics with an interest in gender issues, focusing on research and debate concerning women's studies in New Zealand and the Pacific. Issues of the journal are often used as texts in tertiary institutions, as it contains a wealth of resource material.

Submissions

The Editorial Collective welcomes contributions from a wide range of feminist positions and disciplinary backgrounds. The Journal has a primary but not exclusive focus on women's studies in New Zealand and encourages papers which address women's experience, explore gender as a category of analysis, and further feminist theory and debate.

Call for Papers: General Issues

Two issues of the journal are published each year. Contributions for general issues are accepted at any time. Submission guidelines and deadlines for Special Issues on a particular theme are available on the journal's website (www.womenz.org.nz/wsj/). Subscriptions, advertising and distribution are handled by the Otago University Press. All contributions should be sent to the Coordinating Editor (see page 2).

Call for Papers
Special Edition: Mātauranga Māori

Kia hiwa ra! Kia hiwa ra! Kia hiwa ra ki tēnei tuku, kia hiwa ra ki tēnā tuku!

Kei apurua tonu koe ki te toto, whakapuru tonu, whakapuru tonu. Haumi e, Hui e! Taiki e! He mihi tēnei ki ngā ūkaipo o ngā iwi, ki a koutou ngā wahine toa!

Hukarere Valentine: Kua tipu ake au i te rohe o Heretaunga, Ngati Kahungunu. I was raised in Paki Paki, Hastings, and am a descendant of Ngati Kahungunu. I am currently a Doctoral student at Massey University School of Psychology, Palmerston North.

Bronwyn Campbell: He uri au o te Tairāwhiti, ko Ngāti Porou toku iwi. I am a descendant from the East Coast (of the North Island) iwi, Ngati Porou and am currently employed as a lecturer at Massey University by both Te Pūtahi-a-Toi (School of Māori Studies) and the School of Psychology.

While the broader area of mātauranga Māori has enjoyed increased availability through written publication, in particular, there are a number of dynamic and vital wahine in various disciplines who have produced challenging and scholarly kōrero/writings, working the difficult area of weaving western academic practices with mātauranga Māori. We are keen to cast our kupenga widely in order to produce a forum in which we can celebrate ngā matatini Māori. Your contributions are not only welcome but entirely necessary! Nau te raurau, naku te raurau, ka ora ai te manuhiri.

Each submission will be peer reviewed by both Hukarere Valentine (takuta_hook@clear.net.nz) and Dr Bronwyn Campbell (B.M.Campbell@massey.ac.nz).

Contributions should be 5000–8000 words long, including tables, notes and references. APA referencing preferred, but footnotes or endnotes also welcome. The deadline for submissions is 13 April 2007.

All submissions should be sent to the **Coordinating Editor:**
Jenny Coleman, J.D.Coleman@massey.ac.nz
Women's Studies Programme
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Massey University
Private Bag 11 222
Palmerston North
Aotearoa/New Zealand

Editors' Introduction

The idea for this special 'Women and Spirituality' issue of *Women's Studies Journal* was prompted by the series of research symposia and lectures organised around the visit of feminist theologian Carol P. Christ to New Zealand in February 2005. The theme of the symposia was 'Re-imagining the Divine in the World', the sub-title of Carol's most recent book *She Who Changes* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). The meetings brought together around 500 women and men across four venues to listen, question, share and debate. As well as Carol Christ's key-note addresses, the symposia at Massey University's Auckland and Palmerston North campuses included presentations by a number of woman scholars working in the field of women and spirituality. It became clear from their excellent papers that this is a fertile field of scholarship at present, and we are delighted that the editorial committee of *WSJ* decided to devote an issue to this theme. It has also been a pleasure to work together as co-editors.

The spirit of openness, inquiry, goodwill and excitement which characterised the 'Re-imagining the Divine' symposia was very noticeable. Given the heterogeneous backgrounds of participants – academic, non-academic and a plethora of religious and spiritual identities – it seemed possible that traditional tensions, prejudices and blind-spots, not to mention scorn or bitter condemnation, might well erupt at some point. Thankfully, this was far from the case. The symposia made it clear that the landscape of religious discourse in New Zealand has changed in recent years: new level spaces for dialogue have opened up, former chasms between different belief forms have shrunk, and previously unbreachable positions have found crucial connections.

It seems that doctrinal differences are now less important to many – at least those who attended the meetings – than our shared concerns with social justice, the environment, and respect for others' beliefs and worldviews, for example. Thus Neo-pagans, Christians, Buddhists, Quakers, New Agers, agnostics, theologians, sociologists, psychologists, historians, interested bystanders and others – some holding multiple identities or not wanting to be tied to any particular identity – were able to meet together on common ground.

Chief among the connections we discovered are the themes around which this volume coheres: women, spirituality and embodiment; spirituality and the environment; and the importance of relationality, inclusiveness and dialogue. All of the articles in this issue, explicitly or implicitly, take up the project of the seminars – 'Re-imagining the Divine in the World' – irrespective of the authors' various spiritual, disciplinary and theoretical standpoints.

The importance of embodiment, environment and relationality are paramount in Carol Christ's book *She Who Changes*, and some of the developments in her journey as a feminist thinker and writer clearly strike a common chord with many feminists interested in spirituality at present. The inclusiveness evident in her recent naming of the divine as 'Goddess/God' (instead of 'Goddess' as in her earlier books) is intended to build a platform for dialogue amongst spiritual feminists from all backgrounds to think and talk together about the nature of divine power and its relation to the world. The express political goal of doing so, she says, is to create a better world for women, for all people, and for all beings in the web of life.

Just as it was enriching and thought-provoking to read *She Who Changes* and listen to its author, it has been very stimulating to read the papers submitted for this special issue. As co-editors of this volume, we received many more articles than we were able to include because of the space available. While this was a very positive indication of the state of scholarship in the area of 'Women and Spirituality' and justified the need for this issue, we were sorry that we were unable to include some excellent articles (some of which will be published in future issues of *WSJ* and other publications). While the six articles included here reveal a continuity in their themes, they span a range of topics dealing with the close to home in Aotearoa to a Mothers' Union community in Tanzania, from medieval lyrics to contemporary God images amongst New Zealand women.

The first article, by Aroha Yates-Smith, one of the presenters at the Auckland symposium, explores Maori women's spiritual connection with the goddesses Papatuanuku and Hinenuitepo in order to discuss the roles of woman as nurturer/creator/transformer performed at the major life portals of birth and death. While suggesting that Maori women 'possess what could be described as an innate sense of the necessity to nurture' – whether the object of nurture is ourselves, other people, or the environment – Yates-Smith emphasises that the

European concept of 'a woman's place is in the home' is foreign to Maori. Being nurturers did not and does not exclude women from a diversity of other roles such as 'leaders, politicians, strategists in battle, warriors, medical practitioners, composers'. This is a crucial point, because the essentialising of women as nurturers has been a lament of many feminists since the 1970s, writers whose Western cultural experiences meant they saw nurturance as culturally devalued and restrictive and therefore to be shunned by women. Yates-Smith makes it very clear that it is not nurturance itself that is the problem, but the cultural devaluing of nurturance and the dichotomising of nurturance and many other roles and endeavours women might choose.

The themes of women's empowerment and nurturance are explicitly brought together in Eleanor Sanderson's article, based on her research with a group of Mothers' Union members in Tanzania. Indeed the women's hospitality and mutual caring for one another, their care for refugees, orphans and widows (often as a result of HIV/AIDS) in their area, are critical for community development along with their co-ordination of income generating projects and education programmes. Community development in this context begins with women's embodied relationships, and these relationships are constituted through their shared participation in their Christian women's group. Spirituality and 'development' are inseparable, as are spirituality and the body, and the women's deep compassion and joyous vitality.

Deirdre Savage's article on home shrine-making by New Zealand women from many different religious backgrounds also takes up the theme of spirituality and embodiment. Savage found that when women spent time at the shrines they had created, engaging with the sacred, beautiful, treasured objects and symbols they had placed there, including images of other bodies (deities, loved ones, gurus), women experienced powerful bodily sensations and emotions. Women's shrines were places of healing, for 'checking in with' their bodies, for experiencing life's struggle as manifested within one's body, and for experiencing serenity and inner calm. Their construction of personal sacred places in their homes where they experienced transition and transformation were women's creative acts of spiritual autonomy.

Mary Betz's article reviews Christian God imagery and language from classical theism through to feminist revisioning, and goes on to discuss her own New Zealand study of a group of Catholic women's

God images. The kind of autonomy and creativity described in Savage's paper is also apparent in these New Zealand women's re-imagining of the divine. While traditional God images such as father, lord and master are still alive, there are also abundant nature images of God among New Zealanders, and images of God as nurturer, healer, womb, liberator, indwelling, friend. Her participants' images of God, Betz found, 'are rooted in the women's experiences of relationships with God, self and others.'

Patricia Rose and Elizabeth Moore's paper beautifully captures the spirit of dialogue referred to earlier in this introduction. The paper consists of a series of letters between the authors – one a 'post-Church Christian' and the other 'part of the growing Goddess Pagan tradition', both medievalists – concerning some medieval lyrics. In the paper they 'articulate, explore and express [their] very different but strangely interconnected, spiritualities' in a series of communications they found both 'challenging and nourishing'. Their exchange led to a deeper understanding of their own spiritualities as well as of the medieval texts with which they were engaged. The revelation of their shared and individual processes is an inspiring model for dialogue.

The final paper is by Juliet Batten, known to many New Zealand women as one of the pioneers of the women's spirituality movement in this country, and author of a number of books widely used for many years in women's ritual-making in Aotearoa. Juliet charts her personal journey from the heady stirrings of Goddess spirituality back in the 1970s – from feminist separatism and women-only events – through to the realisation of a larger vision of openness, inclusion and partnership with others: men, Maori, family, local community and virtual community. Having reclaimed the Goddess, the divine in our own image, and reclaimed our sacred connection with the earth, her cycles and our female bodies, Batten says, women have been able to move in an ever widening circle. The power of women's spirituality is to continue 'to seek our creative edge' and keep moving with the flow. 'Being generative, the [women's spirituality] movement has continued to give birth to many forms' and has itself 'moved beyond the protective womb in which it began'.

This process of continuous expansion, openness and inclusion, and the forging or discovery of connections, strikes us as a very positive way forward in our re-imagination of the divine, the human and the other-than-human beings with whom we share this earth.

* * *

Two guest editors have contributed to this special issue of *Women's Studies Journal* focusing on women and spirituality: Kathryn Rountree, School of Social and Cultural Studies (Massey University, Auckland) and Mary Nash, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work (Massey University, Palmerston North). Kathryn was responsible for bringing together the programme of meetings around Carol P. Christ's visit to New Zealand, and much of her own research as a social anthropologist has focussed on feminist and Neo-Pagan spiritualities. The papers presented to the 'Re-imagining the Divine' seminars and to this volume provide a strong and heartening indication that scholarship in the area of women and spirituality is diverse, vigorous and adventurous; it has been exciting for Kathryn to be part of this current of activity and to work with Mary in the preparation of this volume.

Mary has developed an interest in spirituality in connection with social work and community development and was delighted with the invitation to be involved with this special issue. Mary would like to comment in particular on the processes of jointly editing this issue with Kathryn. While we come from different academic and spiritual traditions, we found we had complementary approaches to the selection and production of this issue. For Mary, there was something comparable in the way we conducted this project to the experiences of Elizabeth Moores and Patricia Rose. I had not met Kathryn till a few weeks before the journal went to press but I found our communication to be, in the words of the authors mentioned above: 'a supportive, womanly communication and an assertive, honest and indisputably feminist dialogue.'

Kathryn Rountree and Mary Nash

GLOSSARY

ariki	noble; leader
aroha	love; compassion; affection
atua	god; supernatural being
Hine	feminine; female (for the purpose of this article)
Iwi	tribe; people
kaitiaki	guardian; caregiver
karakia	incantation; prayer; charm; spell
karanga	ritual call performed by women
kohanga reo	pre-schools which use the Māori language as a medium of instruction and communication; (lit.) language nest
kopu	womb; stomach
korowai	type of cloak
kuia	old woman; grandmother
Kurawaka	Papatuanuku's fertile region – her *pudenda muliebria*
manaaki	care for; tend
marae	courtyard; central area of village and its buildings; meeting area of whanau or iwi
marae atea	enclosed area in front of a house; courtyard
mokopuna	grandchild(ren)
pare kawakawa	chaplets of greenery
Po	night; place of departed spirits
puna	spring of water
puna roimata	spring of tears
rangatira	chief (female or male); well born; noble
raranga	weave
Reinga	realm of the spirits
reo	language
ruahine	old woman; woman employed in certain ceremonies
taiao	world; nature; environment
takapau	floor mat
tamariki	children
tane	man; male
tangi	weep; mourn; lament; a wake; funeral process
tangihanga	funerary rites; funeral process
taonga	treasure
te	the (sing.)
tupapaku	corpse; deceased
tupuna; tipuna	ancestor; grandparent (pl. tūpuna; tīpuna).
turuturu	upright pole; hand grip
ukaipo	(poetical) mother; (lit.) breast which feeds at night
wahine	woman; wife; female; feminine (pl. wāhine)
waiata	song
wairua	spirit
whakapapa	genealogy
whakatauki	saying; proverb
whanau	give birth; family
wharenui	meeting house
whare aitua	(lit.) house of misfortune or death (referring to women as descendants of Hinenuitepo; the guardian of the spirit world; and therefore their connection with the spiritual realm)
whare tangata	(lit.) human house (referring to women as bearers of humankind)
whariki	woven mat
whenua	land; placenta

Te Ukaipo – Te Taiao: the Mother, the Nurturer – Nature

AROHA YATES-SMITH

An ancient Maori god once advised his brother, Tane, to return to their mother, Papatuanuku.[1] His words, which translate loosely as 'lest we forget the Mother who nurtured us at her breast,' remind us of the importance of considering the feminine, respecting our Earth Mother, and not taking either for granted. It also signals the important role of women as nurturers, at one level as mothers, lovers, daughters, friends, and at another, as kaitiaki, caretakers or guardians of the environment.[2]

The title of this article, 'Te Ukaipo – Te Taiao: the Mother, the Nurturer – Nature', links us to our Earth Mother, Papatuanuku, and all our grandmothers extending back through the mists of time to Te Kore and Te Po, a time of pure potential, the very essence of which was to produce humankind and all forms of life. Te Ukaipo refers to woman in her capacity as mother and nurturer – feeding her baby in the wee small hours of the night (literally, 'the breast which feeds at night'). The term also refers to Mother Earth to whom we humans turn for sanctuary and nurturing, particularly when we need healing or quietude. Te Taiao is the environment, the universe at large.

I will provide a brief overview of how our ancestral mothers such as Papatuanuku, Hineteiwaiwa, Hinerauwharangi, Horoirangi and Hinenuitepo were models for women through time and how we Maori women maintain the role of nurturer in our contemporary lives. This role will be identified specifically through elements of the human life and death cycle as viewed by Maori.

It is in Papatuanuku that the creative, generative principle resides, and it is because of Papa that her female descendants are imbued with these traits. Papatuanuku, the ultimate source of creativity, along with her female descendants, reflected the nurturing quality of the feminine and the complementary aspects of the creator/transformer figure as embodied in the whare tangata/whare aitua concept, connecting women with life and death.

The whare tangata was established when Hineahuone was created

from Papatuanuku's sexual organs, the fertile region called Kurawaka, and the womb, housing humankind in its embryonic form, was implanted in Hine, vesting her with the powers of reproduction.[3] The whare aitua is represented by Papatuanuku, who receives her offspring back into 'te kopu o te whenua' (the womb of the earth) when they move from the realm of living into death. While the physical body is protected in the womb of mother earth, the spirit returns to the spiritual realm, to be cared for by Hinenuitepo, the goddess of death.

> The term *whare o aitua* might also be applied to Papa, the earth mother, for she is the personification of the female principle. Her descendants ... who dwell on her broad bosom, *i.e.,* man, birds, trees, &c., all perish and are received back into the earth mother. For Papa said to Rangi: 'Our offspring shall return to me in death, and I will conceal them.'[4]

Papatuanuku, in co-habiting with Ranginui, the Sky Father, created a family of godly beings, thereby providing a genealogical base for the elements and features of our environment, for instance, the flora and fauna of the forest, rocks and stones, marine wildlife. One of Papa's mokopuna (granddaughters), Hineteiwaiwa, had a profound knowledge of karakia (prayers and chants) and possessed supernatural powers. She was a tutelary deity of women, of childbirth and women's arts and crafts, and was closely connected with the sea and the moon.

Hineteiwaiwa

Pastel on archival paper by Jolene Douglas. Permission to publish courtesy of artist.

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on some specific examples of how women have displayed that nurturing role through generations of time. Let us first consider the creation of new life and its passage into this world.

Our Maori ancestors considered the creative, fertile element to be

the most important gift and, therefore, to be cherished.[5] The children of nobility, as future leaders of the tribal group, were generally treated particularly well, as it was believed that they would ensure the survival of their people. In traditional times, chiefly, rangatira women were accorded due respect and special attention was paid to their nutritional needs and comfort and to their spiritual wellbeing. The kuia, older women, would give wise counsel to the younger generations, particularly when the younger women were unwell, or moving through the various stages of the life cycle, as in this case, giving birth to a child.[6] Such counsel was provided within all sectors of Maori society.

There is evidence that invocations were used throughout a woman's pregnancy and to herald the birth of a member of the noble class. One such karakia, 'te tuku o Hineteiwaiwa,' was used during difficult births.[7] This karakia was recited to aid the process by invoking Hineteiwaiwa and to encourage the mother, reminding her that Hineteiwaiwa herself had had difficulties delivering her own child, Tuhuruhuru. Indeed it was at his birth that this karakia was first used.

The words of the karakia follow through the stages of the birth process, encouraging both mother and child, and invoking the gods to participate in the safe delivery of the baby. The opening line, 'Raranga raranga taku takapau', refers to the weaving of a ceremonial floor mat which may be used as a sleeping mat. The ancient karakia is filled with phrases, now obscure in meaning, but certain lines such as 'Tu te turuturu no Hinerauwharangi, Tu te turuturu no Hineteiwaiwa' clearly refer to the weaving pegs, turuturu (stakes placed at either of a garment being woven to support it), belonging to Hineteiwaiwa and Hinerauwharangi. Turuturu was also the term given for props used for support by the expectant mother during labour. Doubly significant, then, are these lines which relate to the connection of the goddesses and women through weaving and childbirth.

Another karakia acknowledges the noble, ariki qualities passed down through the ages to a baby girl via the words used to address her: 'e hine kahurangi ariki'. It is credited as having been the very karakia used after the birth of Hinerauwharangi (a goddess connected with the spiritual and physical growth of humans, flora and fauna) when her mother, Hinetitama, was seated on the verandah of her home and the following words were recited:

Naumai, E hine wairoto!
Whakaea, whakaea to uru tapu
Whakaea, whakaea to uru tipua
Whakaea, whakaea to uru waiora ki taiao nei
E tipu, e rea, E hine kahurangi ariki!
Whakamau tai, whakamau o Rongo
Whakamau taketake toitu ki taiao nei, E hine ariki rangi..e!
E tipu, e rea koe he whatu ioio nui, he whatu io matua
He io taketake ki taiao nei, E Hine-rauwharangi..e![8]

The term 'hine wairoto' represents 'te wai o roto i te wahine' (literally 'the water/liquid within the woman'), thereby investing the 'Hine' in the young girl whose femaleness is in its infancy; she is at the rudimentary stage of becoming a wahine, a woman. The noble, ariki qualities passed on through the generations to the child are recognised when she is addressed as 'e hine kahurangi ariki' and 'e hine ariki rangi'. Her connection with the natural environment is secured with these words of welcome and finally her name is spoken, Hinerauwharangi.

As the child grows, the singing of tribal songs instils a sense of history and identity in the mind and the very psyche of the young person. Close relatives would massage the child from infancy through to puberty – yet another way in which the physical and spiritual dimensions were nurtured. Today, Maori children brought up with a strong affiliation to things Maori continue to be influenced by aspects of the oral tradition and customs of yesteryear.

Through karakia and the careful tuition of experts, such qualities found in the ancestor Hineteiwaiwa, for instance, were fostered in young girls that they might become strong, capable women, able to extend hospitality to others (by providing food and entertainment for them), to raise children, weave fine garments and mats, participate in fora of a social, political and educational nature, and to draw on the leadership qualities inherited from their ancestors. The gifts of the ruahine (wise woman), knowledge of karakia and healing, were given to those seen to have a propensity for these roles.

Thus far, the focus of this article has been to reflect on that significant time in a human's life when the spirit becomes embodied in the physical body and a child is born. Let us now consider the process aligned with the spirit's departure from the physical form.

Traditional Maori beliefs maintain that the wairua (spirit) of a dead

person travels to the domain of the spirits, where it joins Hinenuitepo and the ancestors, while the body is interred in te kopu o Papatuanuku (Earth's womb), to rest. Hinenuitepo, the guardian of spirits, awaits the arrival of her descendants in Te Reinga, the gathering place of the spirits, where she takes them into her care.

At tangihanga, Hineteiwaiwa was manifested in the numerous whariki (mats) and fine garments used to adorn the tupapaku (the deceased), and the house or the area in front of the meeting house known as the marae atea. It was usual practice, too, for the bodies of nobility to be wrapped in garments and/or whariki before being laid to rest. These finely woven cloaks and mats were the result of many long hours of dedicated weaving on the part of women.

As a goddess of spiritual and physical growth, Hinerauwharangi, too, was symbolically represented or manifested in the greenery used at tangihanga, the branchlets held by the tangata whenua when extending a pohiri (welcome) to the group of visitors approaching the marae atea, and the pare kawakawa, chaplets of greenery worn by the mourners, along with the greenery adorning the deceased's body and the meeting house. One could equally attribute the use of green leaves to Papatuanuku, as mother earth, or to her son Tane, as the male deity of the forest, or as suggested here, to Hinerauwharangi, the deity of growth. The symbolism evokes the sense of connection between the human dimension and the ancestors present in the surrounding environment, the tangible link between the physical and spiritual dimensions, and the fragility of life.

Women surrounded the body of the deceased, and were the chief mourners at a tangi. The group of mourners approaching the body would usually be led by the women of the party, with the men following.[9] The foundation for this positioning in the group was that women were regarded as the puna roimata, the spring of compassion, or quite literally, fount of tears. Their spiritual connection with Papatuanuku and Hinenuitepo also meant that they were able to liaise closely with the spiritual realm through karanga, when the women would raise their voices in a high-pitched tone, calling to the dead. The high frequency of sound was said to be heard by the spirits. On a more practical level, the stirring wail prompted the physical release of the iwi's grief. By virtue of the fact, too, that women housed the whare tangata, and were connected cosmogonically with te whare aitua (through Hinenuitepo and ultimately Papa), they were destined

to play these particular roles in the tangi process.

In considering the modern context, my observation is that Maori women continue to maintain many of their grandmothers' roles in everyday life: in the home, on the marae, as well as in places of employment and recreation. The fundamental role of woman remains as creator and mother, thus fulfilling the generative function previously carried out by Papa, Hineteiwaiwa, Hinerauwharangi and the many other goddesses. Women are still regarded as te whare tangata. Though the role of ruahine may have altered (some of her tasks taken over by Christian ministers, or doctors and midwives), on the marae, kuia and some younger women are still placed in the role of ruahine and perform ritual functions including karanga and waiata.

The concept of manaaki tangata (hospitality, and caring for others) has remained a fundamental principle within modern Maori society. The energy and success of Maori women is evident in every sector of society. They have been a driving force behind Maori educational and health initiatives, the revival of our indigenous language and the education of our children through Kohanga Reo (pre-school language nests) and immersion primary and secondary schools. The Maori Women's Welfare League and the Women's Health League have made significant contributions to our society during the past 50 years. In the area of health, many Maori women have revived Maori medical practices as an alternative to western medicine. In many instances, traditional karakia and the woman's karanga (call) feature in welcoming the child into the world. The ancient custom of returning the placenta to Papatuanuku (the whenua or earth) on the birth of a child is now widely maintained; where possible the placenta (also termed whenua) is taken to the family's tribal area.

Why are our women such strong advocates for the retention of these values? I propose that, as a result of numerous generations being taught the importance of caring for our loved ones, tending to the needs of others and striving, sometimes struggling, to ensure that our young can aspire to successful futures, for the ultimate benefit of our people and our environment, we possess what could be described as an innate sense of the necessity to nurture. This continues to be the general case, despite the disempowerment created by colonisation, the poverty of many, the resulting breakdown of social norms, and the alienation of so many of our people from their Ukaipo, their mother figures and ancestral lands. The situation certainly is not perfect, but

the foundation remains firm, with the interweaving of fundamental values.

An example of alienation from one's tribal land can be found in the following account about one of my female ancestors, Horoirangi. Horoirangi was a cousin of Tamatekapua, the captain of our canoe, Te Arawa. She was of noble lineage. However, it was because of her dedication to caring for her people and the environment that she is remembered today. This image of her (shown below) was carved into the rhyolite rock face of a cliff at Tihiotonga, at the southern end of the Rotorua caldera. My elders told me that her image was crafted in stone as a tribute to her capacity to care for the environment. For hundreds of years she received the first fruits and game of the forest, the first crops from the land; our people of the Uenukukopako tribe would take the offerings to her and would invoke her guidance and protection.

Horoirangi

Courtesy of Te Papa Whakahiku – Auckland War Memorial Museum.

About eighty years ago, she was removed from her cliff location and taken to the Auckland War Memorial Museum. When I first saw her in the early 1990s, she was lying on a storeroom shelf in the museum. I had an overwhelming sense that she wanted to return home to Rotorua; through consultation with our elders and the permission of the Ngati Whatua people and the Auckland War Memorial Museum, this became possible.

Horoirangi now stands in the Rotorua Museum of Art and History

among the taonga, the treasured items, of our people. She represents for us today a woman, who, through her exemplary behaviour, has nurtured both humankind and the ancestral components within our environment. Many believe that Horoirangi continues to guide and protect her people in her spiritual form. Horoirangi also provides us with an example of one who was removed from her people, albeit in the form of her stone image, to be returned generations later. The great sadness I personally felt on her return to her ancestral home was that so few people knew who she was; in fact the orators who welcomed her assumed she was male, until one elder explained that she was a female kaitiaki, long removed from our people.

Horoirangi, Papatuanuku, Hineteiwaiwa, Hinenuitepo and the many other Maori goddesses all continue to guide us through the trials and tribulations of this life. Collectively the atua wahine, these goddesses, our ancestors, form a constellation symbolising 'Hine', connecting humanity with the land and the source of life, connecting the newborn child with Nature, and the dying person, through her or his ancestors, with the Universe.

In this modern world, one might ask if focusing on women's roles as nurturers might restrict the consideration of women's wider roles in society. In traditional Maori society, women were never confined in this way; despite the fact that such whakatauki as, 'He puta taua ki te Tane, he whanau tamariki ki te wahine' refer to the roles of men as warriors and women as bearing children, the European concept of 'a woman's place is in the home' was foreign to our people as able-bodied men and women were needed to undertake the tribe's work, which often entailed moving around the countryside. Women's roles were diverse – some women were noted leaders, politicians, strategists in battle, warriors, medical practitioners, composers.[10] Today, Maori women are actively involved in a diversity of occupations, but the value of manaakitanga, which is exemplified through consideration of others and the extension of hospitality to visitors, is a value of Maori society, maintained by women and men alike. Men's roles complement women's – at a marae gathering, men and women work together in the kitchen, while others perform appropriate rituals on the marae atea and in the wharenui.

The goddesses provide role models for us in the modern world. The impressions I have gained through years of listening to stories and waiata, and through reading manuscripts which describe these

deities, suggest that they were extremely strong women, not to be treated lightly, who would fight to protect their people but who still retained the core qualities of aroha and manaakitanga, compassion and hospitality. My observation is that those same qualities continue to be displayed by women today. At a time when globalisation and global warming are having an impact on societies across the world, I believe it is critical that we 'remember the Mother who nurtured us at her breast,' whether she be a maternal, human figure, our spiritual Mother or the Environment – Te Ukaipo – Te Taiao: the Mother, the Nurturer – Nature. The commitment to nurture ourselves, each other and the environment will surely have positive outcomes.

AROHA YATES-SMITH *(née Yates) was raised in Rotorua and is of Te Arawa, Ngāti Maniapoto, Rongowhakaata, Aitanga-ā-Mahaki and Ngāti Kahungunu descent. Professor Yates-Smith is Dean of Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao, the School of Māori and Pacific Development, at the University of Waikato. She completed her BA, MA and PhD at the University of Waikato, becoming the first PhD graduate from Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao in 1999. Aroha held a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 1992. In 2003, the Royal Society of New Zealand awarded her the Te Rangi Hiroa Award for her study of Māori goddesses. Her main research interests lie in the study of the feminine in Māori society and Māori spirituality. Her love of song and dance has culminated in her involvement with Māori cultural groups and in her participation in the recording of the CD/DVD, Te Hekenga-ā-Rangi, alongside musicians Hirini Melbourne and Richard Nunns.*

Notes

1 Elsdon Best, 'Maori Personifications. Anthropogeny, Solar Myths and Phallic Symbolism as Exemplified in the Demiurgic Concepts of Tane and Tiki', *Journal of the Polynesian Society,* 32 (1923), pp. 53–69, 103–20.

2 The focus of this article is the feminine, therefore the nurturing qualities of men will not be fully addressed here.

3 G.R.A. Yates-Smith, 'Rediscovering the Feminine in Maori Spirituality', Ph.D. thesis, University of Waikato, 1998, p. 141.

4 Elsdon Best, 'The Lore of the Whare Kohanga', *Journal of the Polynesian Society,* 14 (1905), pp. 205–15.

5 Yates-Smith, p. 159.

[6] Makereti [Maggie Papakura], *The Old-Time Maori* (New Women's Press, Auckland, 1986 [orig. 1938]).

[7] Makereti (1986); Edward Shortland, *Maori Religion and Mythology* (AMS Press, New York, 1977 [orig. 1882]).

[8] Te Matorohanga in Elsdon Best, *The Whare Kohanga ('The Nest House') and Its Lore*. (Government Printer, Wellington, 1975 [orig. 1929]), p. 27.

[9] The men provided protection in the rear, should the group be attacked from behind.

[10] A. Mikaere, 'The Balance Destroyed: The Consequences for Maori Women of the Colonisation of Tikanga Maori', (M. Jur. thesis, University of Waikato, 1995).

Women and the changing face of the Christian God

MARY BETZ

The development of the 'traditional' Christian God

Christian understandings of God have traditionally been of a powerful, invulnerable, unchangeable, male deity, and many Christians still relate to God as father, lord, almighty, heavenly, king, master, triumphant and judge. Where did these images come from?

While Christianity inherited from the scriptures a vast storehouse of God images, including feminine and gender-neutral images, early and medieval theologians including Augustine and Thomas Aquinas focused more narrowly on defining the Christian God against heresy with the assistance of Greek philosophy. The effect of this speculative theology was to understand God as a self-sufficient divinity removed from humanity.[1] The tradition called classical theism came to posit a transcendent God who was akin to an earthly – but absentee – absolute monarch, benevolent but with judgment and dominion over all creatures.[2] Triumphalist imperialist metaphors entered the theological and liturgical language of the church after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire,[3] and any remaining traces of the use of feminine symbolism for God like *Sophia* and mother also disappeared[4] in the condemnation of Gnostics, Montanists and other heterodox groups.[5] God came to be known as a 'remote, other-worldly, "supreme Being"'[6] who is, according to the Fourth Lateran Council: 'one, true, eternal, incommensurable and unchangeable, incomprehensible, omnipotent and ineffable.'[7]

It is no wonder, then, that contemporary writers reflect on God as 'a whiskery old man in a night-gown, a "He-who-must-be-obeyed."'[8] Hearing about God as an 'old man', Gustav Aulen comments wryly that 'with such imagery, there is good reason to regret that the Old Testament prohibition of images [graven] has not been respected by the Christian Church.'[9]

If classical theism presents a God who is self-sufficient, all-powerful, immovable, unchangeable and imperturbable, and so on,

it has also carried the understanding of that God as a male God. Although the theological tradition has maintained that God has no sex, church prayer, catechism and the popular imagination (above quote) all assign God to the male sex. [10] There is also evidence that in some denominations, recent English-language liturgical language has become even more masculine than in past years. In the post-Vatican Council II Catholic Church, classic Roman invocations such as 'almighty and eternal God' have been replaced in hundreds of places by 'father', seemingly out of a desire for a more relational God on the part of the English translators.[11]

Sociologist David Nicholls has found that, over centuries, 'concepts and images used of God have been closely associated with images and concepts of political authority, which in turn have been related to institutional [both church and state] developments.'[12] He demonstrates how images of God are related to the ideas of state, whether king, warrior (ancient Palestine), perfection, self-sufficiency (ancient Greece), hierarchy, order (Middle Ages), sovereignty, authority (Renaissance), or unlimited power, paternalism, and benevolence (late 19th through 20th centuries). Noting these later trends, the recent use of father might well be understood as a sociological phenomenon.

Edward Edinger, following theories of Jung, also understands God image development as a cultural process, but adds that it is an evolutionary process with biological underpinnings: 'The history of Western man [sic] can be viewed as a history of its God-images, the primary formulations of how mankind [sic] orients itself to the basic questions of life, its mysteries.'[13]

The official God language of liturgy and doctrine of many Christian churches is thus a language of classical theism, a mixture of images culled from religious and probably wider social and psychological history, in which God is removed from creation, but also Lord of all. God, although theologically without sex, is nonetheless referred to with many masculine terms and solely with male pronouns. This combination of male monarch and distant but fatherly parent who sees and knows all, who may be merciful but is ultimately judge, is part of what this paper will refer to henceforth as traditional God language.

How God language functions

In the opening pages of *Models of God,* Sallie McFague reminds readers how much words can hurt; conversely, they also have the potential for healing, encouragement and giving life.[14] In reflecting on McFague's understanding of language, Rosemary Ruether points out the 'capacity for language to generate reality.'[15] Language thus not only reflects the world in which we live, it also has the capacity to create and re-create it. Sarah Mitchell expands on this idea: 'Language shapes our understanding of reality and, at the same time, reflects and reinforces the underlying belief structures and accepted implicit assumptions of our society.'[16]

God language is no different. The way we speak to or about God reveals who and what God is for us; it carries implicit or explicit assumptions about what we value, our place and time in history, and it also has the potential to change us and those around us. Carol Christ explains that religious symbols, including God language, shape our culture and define our values.'[17] Three New Zealand theologians, reflecting on recent work in sociolinguistics, write:

> The very language we use can shape the culture and relationships within our society. The language we use for God forms our ideas of not only what we think of God, but how we see ourselves in relation to others in the world ... Recent linguistic studies have forced us to recognise that language is the chief way that social structure is stated and maintained ...[18]

It is not only specific images – nouns or phrases – which influence our understandings of God, but also pronouns. Mary Collins singles out the metaphorical status of pronouns because 'their power of interpretation is all out of proportion to their virtual concealment in our ordinary nonconscious use of language ... they function to interpret our naming and so to control our imaginative freedom.'[19] In English liturgical and catechetical language, third person pronouns and possessive adjectives for God have nearly always been male. Hearing repeated, exclusively male referents, even to gender-neutral nouns like 'God,' cannot but shape our understanding of God.[20]

A growing number of theologians are drawing attention to the effect that God language has on the health and well-being of individuals.[21] Because how we understand God is foundational to values, the way we speak of God is significant not only for our own lives, but our relationships and even the life of our planet.[22]

Challenging traditional God language and images

Since Mary Daly first questioned prevailing God images in 1968, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish theologians, particularly feminist theologians, as well as spiritual and pastoral writers have produced an immense literature critiquing inherited images.[23] God images have been criticised principally because they were solely male; implied dominance, control or power-over; were imperialist, triumphalist or militaristic; had parental connotations; and/or were distant and other-worldly.

Solely male images of God like father, lord, king and the ubiquitous 'he' have made it difficult for women to believe in their own sacredness, conferred an undue degree of sanctity and power to human males, and thus devalued women.[24] Use of lord, master, king, judge, and even father – especially when combined with 'almighty' – is understood to promote dependence and prevent acceptance of responsibility in both women and men.[25] Triumphal military images appear to condone authoritarianism, violence and war.[26] Parental metaphors are seen to discourage adult faith and mature psychological development.[27] Distant God images do not encourage healthy intimate person–person relationships or person–God relationships.[28]

Feminist theologians and others have engaged for nearly forty years in the destruction of the idol of God which has been a powerful male symbol, perceived to be either a root cause or a sanction of many of the social, psychological, theological and ecological ills of our time and place. Karl Rahner comments: 'The true radicalism in the doctrine of God can only be the continual destruction of an idol, an idol in the place of God, the idol of a theory about God.'[29] Along with the destruction of an idol have come alternative ways of speaking about God, and these will be returned to in a later section.

Recent research on God images

Most of the theological critique of God images is either theoretical, or based on personal and pastoral experience. Very few of the authors have formally studied factors involved in the formation of God images or the effects God images have on aspects of human development, attitudes and behaviours. Psychologist of religion Joseph Ciarrocchi has, in fact, criticised theologians for not citing relevant empirical literature and for making 'incautious statements about matters that are empirical questions.'[30] In this section, some major findings of both qualitative and quantitative research on God images are briefly

summarised[31] and, in many cases, these confirm the intuitions of the theoretical writers. Just as feminist theologians understand God images to affect nearly everything in life, psychological and social researchers attempt empirical studies in order to demonstrate whether human experience affects and/or is affected by God images.

Psychological studies have demonstrated that adults who have positive images of God (e.g. loving, close, accepting) are more likely to be psychologically healthy, have greater self esteem and have less depression than those who have negative images of God (e.g. wrathful, irrelevant, controlling).[32] Women whose understandings of God which included female or gender-neutral images as well as or instead of solely male images had higher self esteem, and scored more highly on scales of creative personality, self-confidence, autonomy, dominance and achievement.[33]

A branch of psychoanalytic psychology known as object relations (the way in which people, things and conditions relate to and affect a person) has contributed to knowledge of how God images form and change throughout life. Adult God images change with age, and are reflective not only of parental traits, but unfilled needs, significant people and life-events, self-image, and experiences of suffering. New images of God presented to adults may have the capacity to change persons if there is an experiential as well as intellectual identification with the God suggested by the new image. The relationships among images of God, self and others may each have the capacity for changing the others.[34]

Social research has shown a number of social factors to be related to God images. Women's images of God are reflective of early contacts with the divine through people, nature or their interior life; life changes, crises, and suffering; self-acceptance; and age.[35] Those who see God as judge or as having ordained the social order are more likely to have socially conservative attitudes. Those who do not see God as having ordained the social order are more politically liberal, favour racial equality, and would more likely help someone in need.[36]

Thus, psychological and social research supports the theological theorists who suggest that God images are linked with people's well-being and behaviour, e.g. that self-image and God image are positively correlated, that changing one image – of God or self – will change the other, that God images do change over time with experience and are related to people's wider social activities and attitudes.

Alternative God images in recent literature

Practical and theoretical theologians, as well as social scientists and practitioners, have contributed to both the critique of traditional God images and to the gathering and making known of alternative God images. The results of a survey[37] of 'alternative' images in the works of fifty such authors are summarised in Table 1, along with images found by my recent study of a group of New Zealand women (discussed in a following section).

What is immediately evident is that these images do not reflect the list of traditional God images which might begin 'lord, king, almighty, heavenly, father' and yet most of the alternative images and categories are equally as scriptural in origin, goddess being the only image category that is not. Those who use alternative images have, for the most part, retrieved some of the wealth of imagery that is already in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

A second observation on the list of alternative images is that many of the images connote ethics of care, wisdom, freedom, presence, mutuality and female relationship rather than power, might, distance, royalty and male relationship.

A third set of observations regards the gender of God images. Some of the images are feminine, e.g. mother, sister, goddess, and several specific images in other categories, but most of the images are, on the surface, gender-neutral. Some, like wisdom, spirit, *Shaddai* and compassion have feminine linguistic roots in Hebrew or Greek, are feminine in personification, or have alternative feminine meanings to the one traditionally used.

Alternative God images among those who write theological literature are varied, imaginative, and faithful to the biblical tradition – but not usually to the position of classical theism. Many images challenge the traditional ideas of God, especially as omnipotent – in the sense of having 'power over' – and impassable. For recent feminist theological writers and others in related fields, God is understood best in many images: nature images such as wellspring,[38] rock[39] and soaring protective mother eagle;[40] strong, labouring, nurturing mother;[41] wisdom Sophia who counsels and invites;[42] healer and binder of wounds;[43] intimate friend;[44] womb of compassion;[45] and more.

TABLE 1: Alternative God Images

God image clusters from theologians and related authors' works	Relative usage[46] in the literature	Relative usage by New Zealand group	God image clusters of New Zealand women
Total nature images (includes * below)	14	21	Total nature images (includes * below)
Mother	13	1	Labouring, birthgiver
Wisdom/ *Sophia*	8	1	Wisdom
Healer/ helper	5	7	Nurturer, protector, carer, watching over, involved
Friend	5	9	Friend, beside me, one to weep to at the clothesline
Womb/ compassion	4	5	Comfort, mercy, compassionate friend, compassion
Spirit	4	2	Spirit
Presence/ *Shekhinah*	4	8	All-encompassing presence, is everywhere, stillness, all-encompassing energy
Creator	4	7	In the process of creating, co-creator-partner, meaning, force for order in nature, growth-renewal, creator of opportunity, painter of sunsets
Liberator/ power	3	10	Empowering toward freedom, strong, allows change in letting go, power, brings peace and freedom, giving people control, we allow God to be God, enabler
Human-made objects (cup, door, etc.)	3	0	
Suffering	3	7	In suffering, in pain, enabling endurance of pain, in difficult times, in vulnerability of those who suffer, vulnerable God who suffers-with, God willing to suffer on cross, suffering = universal = God
* Water – within Nature cluster	3	6	Well of love, sea, lake, snow, storm
* Rock – within Nature cluster	3	3	Rock
other Feminine	3	0	
Goddess	2	0	
Lover	2	0	

TABLE 1: Alternative God Images *(continued)*

God image clusters from theologians and related authors' works	Relative usage in the literature	Relative usage by New Zealand group	God image clusters of New Zealand women
Indwelling	2	5	Indwelling
Abstract Relational (except Love)	2	17	Trusted, forgiveness, confidence, truth, hope, acceptance, calling women, eternal giver calling forth – challenging, calls us to growth, integrity, gracious God who has dignity and sincerity, wholeness, knowing
Shaddai	2	0	
* Mother bird – within Nature cluster	2	0	
No image, mystery	2	5	Mystery, hazy, unclear, no more clear images, bigger than we can understand, paradox
Love/people	1	15	Love, in people – service, in the beauty of people strength, support, in the love of people, body of Christ, in relationship, one who loves, in those who work for justice, in community
Rejoicing	1	4	In joy, has a sense of humour, delight, celebration
Sister	1	0	
YHWH/ I am	1	2	I am, She who Is
Justice	1	1	Justice
Trinity	1	2	Trinity
* Light	1	4	Light, light on the water, light on the hills
Food	1	0	
* Darkness	0.2	1	Darkness
	0	3	Sacrament, in liturgy, in Mass, in sacraments, in symbols
Misc. other images	5	18	Christ, identity, never changes, changing, in process of unfolding, expected to work in unexpected ways, living being, personal God

Comparison of alternative God images: the literature and among women in New Zealand study

My own recent study[47] of images of God among a group of eleven Catholic women in New Zealand aimed to document the evolution of women's God images in their lives and the life events which caused their images to change. It demonstrated that this group of women is challenging the traditional images of God which are still predominant in church life. Like the God images of Christian feminist theologians and other writers, the God images held by these New Zealand women illustrate the way in which many women are re-working their understandings of God.

As children, this group of women had traditional images, which most of them held well into adolescence and some into adulthood. By the time the women (who were in their forties and fifties at the time of the study interviews) reached mid-life, most had gone through many life changes – both joyful and tragic – which resulted in changing understandings of God. At mid-life, the women's God images included some like father, lord and master, but predominantly the ones listed in Table 1. The images have much in common with those mentioned in the literature, but there are also striking differences.

Nature images are the most common ones articulated for God in both groups, but they are used with an even greater frequency by the women in my New Zealand study.[48] Among the nature images (and also listed separately in the table), New Zealanders used water – especially the sea – and light images significantly more frequently than those who contributed to the literature. Most New Zealanders, including the women in the study, have close access to the sea, so it is not unexpected that the sea would be a source of God images.[49] Similarly, a narrow island country sees incessant changes in weather and light conditions, so God images based on light could also be expected. The preference for nature images overall in both groups indicates the importance to them of nature for mediating God.

There may be deeper cultural reasons for the abundance of nature images for God among New Zealanders. New Zealand's 'clean, green and 100% pure' images are certainly touted by government, tourism and immigration agencies, but environmental groups regard much of this as myth and stereotype.[50] New Zealand culture is, however, influenced to a greater degree than many other post-colonial countries by its indigenous people, and Maori identification with the land is

very strong. The question bears further research.

Other images more common among the New Zealand women were those of God as healer/helper/nurturer, friend, womb/compassion, presence, creator, liberator/power, suffering, love/people, the cluster of other abstract relational images, indwelling and rejoicing. The most notably lavish uses are of images of God as love/people and other abstract relational images which, like most of these images more common to New Zealanders, are apt to be grounded in community and in relationships. As an immigrant from North America, my own experience would suggest that human relationship ties are indeed stronger in New Zealand, perhaps because until recently, the population has not been as mobile. Again, this is a question which would bear further study.

God as creator, for the New Zealand women, was not simply a creator, but often a co-creator or partner not only in the on-going creation and care of the earth, but in the care and on-going growth of people; a creator of opportunity (bringing life from suffering); and a magnificent 'painter of sunsets'. The sense of God as liberator and power came from the freedom some women felt when they recognised God as having qualities like themselves, when they felt empowered by this compassionate friend and all-encompassing presence to live lives of friendship, justice and compassion themselves.

The recognition of God in suffering was explicit for many of the women – the 'God who suffers with us', the God who is in the pain which 'sticks like treacle to those who touch it', and the God working in those who try to relieve suffering. The women for whom God was vulnerable to suffering (challenging the traditional immutable and impassible God) were women who were involved either in paid or voluntary work with people who were suffering, or in social justice issues.

A number of the New Zealand women also had a profound sense of the indwelling God, an understanding which is present in the Gospel of John, but has been internalised in them by a strong belief in self and by opportunities for reflection and solitude.

More common in the literature were the images of spirit, mother and wisdom, as well as some images not mentioned by the New Zealand women (human-made objects, Goddess, lover, *Shaddai*, and mother bird). Except for the cluster of objects and God as lover, these images are either obviously female (mother, Goddess, mother bird),

have a partly feminine etymology in the scriptures (spirit, *Shaddai*), or are personified as female in the scriptures (wisdom). Much of the literature which offered these images was authored by feminist theologians and others who in their works suggest such images to balance or reverse the effects of traditional male images.

Thus, often where one group uses particular images more than the other, the theologians and other authors use images which are specifically female and/or more obvious to those who have studied scripture, while the images of the New Zealand women (while also present in the Scriptures) are rooted in the women's experiences of relationships with God, self and others.

Influences and catalysts that shape and enable changes in God images

In the New Zealand study, the God images that were dominant at each stage of the women's lives from childhood, adolescence, young adulthood through mid-life were recorded along with the important people, events and experiences at each stage. It was clear that life experiences did shape women's God images – in positive ways (resulting in change away from the controlling, punishing and solely male images which psychological research has shown harmful) and not-so-positive ways (encouraging such images). Some painful experiences resulted in healthy growth of God images and some benign experiences did not seem to influence such growth.

The two most common influences on women's God images for the better were their experiences of *motherhood* and their *friends*. Motherhood – including births of children, caring for them, loving them, deciding how to teach them – influenced the God images of ten of the eleven women, and for eight of them it was a major influence. Motherhood helped form such images of God as friend, loving, caring, nurturing, trusted and enabling. Friends were also an influence for ten women, and a major influence for seven of those. Friends influenced the growth of God images like friend, caring, community, love, in people, compassionate, hope, nurturer, darkness, mystery and God who suffers.

For eight to nine of the eleven women, influences for the better included *nature*, *groups* they were part of (church groups, women's groups, community groups), their *work* (paid or voluntary), *solitude*, *illnesses and deaths*, *courses*, *mentors* and *feminism*. Nature, as would

be expected, inspired images of God such as the sea, painter of sunsets, presence, awe, light, challenge and suffering. Groups influenced such images as caring, community, love, feminine, acceptance, enabling and so on. Career and volunteer work contributed to images of God like love, creator of opportunity, nurturer, friend, compassionate.

Serious illness, accident and death – while painful experiences – influenced many women's God images for the better, bringing images like God in stillness and God as friend, love, being beside, paradox, compassionate friend, presence, darkness, mystery, suffering and growth. Solitude gave rise to images like God as friend, presence, mystery, light and 'no more clear images'. Courses (theology, personal growth, faith development, spirituality) encouraged the finding of God in liturgy and love, God as feminine or of no gender, and God who calls women. Mentors were influences for eight women's God images, and for seven women they were considered major influences. Mentors were important as influences toward images of God as love, presence, compassion, integrity, responsibility, justice, challenge, mystery, wholeness, energy, in suffering and in searching.

The influence of feminism and feminist theology led to understanding God as androgynous or of no gender, feminine, love, calling women, enabling and birthgiver. Influences on God images for four to seven of the women included *nuns*, *mothers*, *teaching* (especially as children), *priests*, *scripture*, *husbands*, *reading*, *retreats*, *Vatican II,* and *fathers*. Influences which encouraged the development of negative and solely male God images occurred mostly in the women's childhoods. The most common one was *teaching*[51] received as children, which resulted in God being imaged as controlling (six women), i.e. as judge, unloving, string-pulling, triumphal, always watching, demanding, and also in a multitude of solely male images like king, lord and father (ten women).

Other common influences for ill were the women's *mothers* (for seven women) and *fathers* (for six women), whose personalities, attitudes, actions or situations contributed to their daughters' understandings of God as guilt-inducing, judge, parent, authoritarian, unapproachable, distant, fearful, heavenly father, powerful, and inducing fear and duty. For one of the women, trauma induced by her parents (and reinforced by a punishing and deprived boarding school situation) caused an almost total lack of development in her

God image over the course of her life.

The next most common influence for ill (for five women) was church art, which influenced images of God as male, aged, huge and distant – images which did little to create a positive relationship between young girls and the divine.

For four women, school and nuns influenced their God images for ill as children, mostly reinforcing images of God derived from parental traits – a God who induced guilt, fear and duty, was distant, threatening, demanding and rigid. Overall, the more influences (groups, mentors, friends, courses, etc.) in a woman's life experience, the greater the breadth and depth of her God images. This would suggest that the wider the experience and horizons of a person, the more stimulation and opportunity for meeting people and events which potentially influence God images.

Some influences on God images were considered catalysts if they provoked a sudden or rapid change in God images. The most common catalyst (in eight of the eleven women) was some form of *suffering – death, serious mental or physical illness or accident, marriage breakdown with spouse or of parents, and living with the suffering of others.* Suffering is usually beyond one's control, and causes the sufferer to push the boundaries of understanding in order to come to terms with the suffering. In this process, the women also pushed the boundaries of their understandings of God.[52]

Other influences which catalysed more than one woman's God image changes were experiences of *motherhood, work, groups, mentors, courses and individual encounters with the presence of God* (which in most cases were preceded by severe psychological trauma or physical illness).

While parents, husbands, and friends were common influences on God images, none were seen to catalyse image change. The people or experiences which seemed to catalyse change are those which introduced new or different ideas and experience into women's lives, caused challenge or change, provoked reflection and discussion, and at the same time were accompanied by some means of support and love.

A number of the women in the study, when speaking of the relationship between changes in their understandings of God and self, understood their images to have changed because of their life experiences. The study analysis did indeed trace the changes in their

God images to life experiences, and this insight is shared with feminist theologians who agree that experience is and should be at the root of God imagery,[53] for how can one know or speak of God except in the language and history of self and community?

Conclusion

Many women (and conceivably some men too) who remain within the Christian tradition have been enabled to new understandings of God by allowing themselves to know God through the lenses of their own life experience. This experience has shown them that God is not the immovable, distant and controlling male God to whom they may have been introduced as children – whether by teaching or their parents' own personality traits. Their understanding is, rather, that God is a God of love and compassion; in the midst of the beauty of the creation which surrounds them; present in their friends, mentors and family; and with them in suffering, in joy, in solitude and in all of life.

While feminist theologians intuited that the world would be a better place with a change from traditional God images, psychologists and this study have documented the actual increased well-being of women with positive and gender-balanced or feminine God images. Sallie McFague and others – myself included – believe that "language and the 'world' are coterminous ... changes in the one will involve changes in the other, and such changes are often revolutionary."[54]

Mary Betz *received her doctorate in theology (on which this paper is based) at the University of Otago in 2004. After three years at the Catholic Institute of Theology, she is currently Auckland Regional Coordinator for Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, where she is involved in education on environmental, gender and other justice issues. She has two daughters in university; loves reading, photography and cooking; and, with husband Peter, enjoys living in the Titirangi bush.*

Notes

[1] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 'God in Communion with Us: The Trinity' in Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ed.), *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, 1993) pp. 88–91.

[2] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1992) p. 20.

[3] David Nicholls, 'Federal Politics & Finite God: Images of God in United States Theology', *Modern Theology*, 4 (1988), p. 380. Judith McKinlay notes that 'The triumphalist god is not a Roman Empire invention, but has roots in biblical tradition – the divine warrior motif – and behind that in the Ancient Near Eastern world.' Judith McKinlay, Personal communication, October 2003.

[4] Images of God as female appear abundantly in the medieval mystics, but did not affect mainstream theology at the time. For examples, see Bridget Mary Meehan, *Exploring the Feminine Face of God: A Prayerful Journey* (Sheed & Ward, Kansas City, MO, 1991).

[5] Ruth Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 1991) p. 74.

[6] Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, Study Edition (Winston Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1981) p. 50.

[7] Edward Sillen, 'God, Attributes of' in Karl Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (The Seabury Press, New York, 1975) p. 573.

[8] Jill McLaren, 'If You Want to See the Goddess: An Introduction to Feminist Women's Spirituality', *Women's Studies Journal* 4 (1988), p. 43.

[9] Gustav Aulen, *The Drama and the Symbols: A Book on Images of God and the Problems They Raise* (SPCK, London, 1970) p. 97.

[10] Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female' in Joanne Wolski Conn (ed.), *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1986) pp. 243–247. In the prayers for a typical Catholic Eucharist, God is referred to approximately half the time as male and half the time with no gender – no female words are used. *The Sunday Missal* (E.J. Dwyer, Sydney,1987). For Catechism, see Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1994) p. 56 and following.

[11] Mary Collins, 'Naming God in Public Prayer', *Worship*, 59 (1985), p. 301; J. Frank Henderson is quoted in Duck, p. 79.

[12] David Nicholls, 'Images of God and the State: Political Analogy and Religious Discourse', *Theological Studies*, 42 (1981), p. 196; 'Tricia Blombery, 'Social Factors and Individual Preferences of Images of God' in Alan W. Black (ed.), *Religion in Australia: Sociological Perspectives* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991) p. 79.

[13] Edward F. Edinger, *The New God-Image: A Study of Jung's Key Letters Concerning the Evolution of the Western God-Image* (Chiron Publications, Wilmette, IL, 1996) p. xiii.

[14] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1987) p. 3.

[15] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Models of God: Exploring the Foundations', *Religion and Intellectual Life*, 5 (1988) p. 21.

[16] Sarah Mitchell, 'Standing at the Burning Bush: A Feminist Consideration of Liturgical Language in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand', PhD dissertation, University of Otago, 1992, p. 45.

[17] Carol P. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections' in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds.), *Womenspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1979) p. 274.

[18] Helen Bergin, Judith McKinlay, and Sarah Mitchell, 'Sexism Ancient and Modern: Turning the Male World Upside Down', *Pacifica*, 3 (1990) pp. 162–3.

[19] Collins, p. 299.

[20] David Cunningham, 'On Translating the Divine Name', *Theological Studies*, 56 (1995), p. 434.

[21] Jann Aldredge-Clanton, 'Great Physician, Wisdom, Friend: Images of God Influence the Healing of People with Cancer', *The Christian Ministry*, 29 (1998), pp. 10–12.

[22] Kathleen Fischer, 'An Image of God Beyond Violence', *National Catholic Reporter*, 36 (3 December 1999), p. 37; Helen Goggin, 'Postmodernism and Images of God', *Grail* 14:1 (1998), p. 27.

[23] Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1968). See also David Nicholls, 'Federal Politics and Finite God: Images of God in United States Theology', *Modern Theology*, 4 (1988), pp. 373–400.

[24] See Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (Paulist Press, New York, 1988) pp. 53–55; Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective' in Christ and Plaskow, p. 49; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision' in Christ and Plaskow, p. 139.

[25] Carol P. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess' in Christ and Plaskow, p. 275; McFague, p. ix; JoAnn Wolski Conn, *Spirituality and Personal Maturity* (Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1989) pp. 6–7.

[26] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Divine Wisdom and Christian Fear: Conflict over God-Language in the Churches', Transcript of television broadcast, January 1995.

[27] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1983) p. 69.

[28] W. Norris Clarke, 'A New Look at the Immutability of God' in Robert Roth

(ed.), *God Knowable and Unknowable* (Fordham University Press, New York, 1973) p. 45; Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 225.

[29] Geffrey B. Kelly, *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1993) p. 158.

[30] Joseph W. Ciarrocchi, 'Psychology and Theology Need Each Other', *National Catholic Reporter*, 36 (March 2000), p. 19.

[31] A good summary of the history of psychological research on God images can be found in Beth Fletcher Brokaw and Keith J. Edwards, 'The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations Development', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 22 (1994), pp. 352–56.

[32] Brokaw and Edwards, pp. 352–71.

[33] Carroll Saussy, *God Images and Self Esteem: Empowering Women in a Patriarchal Society* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1991); Jann Aldredge Clanton, *In Whose Image: God and Gender* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1991) p.76.

[34] Ana-Marie Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979) p.200; John McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religions: on Faith and the Imaging of God* (University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1983) p. 115; Martha Robbins, *Midlife Women and Death of Mother: A Study of Psychohistorical and Spiritual Transformation* (Peter Lang, New York, 1990) pp. 73–5.

[35] Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women* (Bantam Books, New York, 1991) p. 49.

[36] Thomas Piazza and Charles Y. Glock, 'Images of God and Their Social Meanings' in Robert Wuthnow (ed.), *The Religious Dimension: New Directions* (Academic Press, New York, 1979) pp. 69–91; Andrew M. Greeley, *The Religious Imagination* (William H. Sadler, Inc., New York, 1981).

[37] Over three hundred alternative God images from the works of fifty authors in the theological (mainly feminist) and social science God-image literature were clustered according to meaning to produce the 'God Image Clusters' in the table. See Mary Betz, 'Who is God for Us? Images of God in a Group of Roman Catholic Lay Women in Aotearoa New Zealand', PhD dissertation, University of Otago, 2004, pp. 24, 270–72.

[38] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (HarperCollinsPublishers, New York, 1990) p. 165; Dorothee Söelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1995) p. 28.

[39] Gail Ramshaw, *A Metaphorical God: An Abecedary of Images for God* (Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago, 1995) pp. 89–91.

[40] ibid, p.80.

[41] Margaret L. Hammer, *Giving Birth: Reclaiming Biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994).

[42] Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1979) pp. 74–117.

[43] Miriam Therese Winter, *Woman Prayer Woman Song* (Meyer Stone Books, Oak Park, IL, 1987) pp. 91–8; Aldredge-Clanton, 'Great Physician, Wisdom, Friend', pp.10-12; Ramshaw, pp. 43–6.

[44] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Why Not a Category Friend/Friendship?', *Horizons,* 2 (1975), pp. 117–18.

[45] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) p. 201, pp. 31–59.

[46] The usage by 50 authors in 300 articles, books and musical compositions is not directly comparable with the usage by 11 women over approximately nine hours each of interview time. But to get some idea of a relative usage, the actual number of images gleaned from each group was divided by the number of persons (50 or 11), then multiplied by ten to get figures that enable some comparison.

[47] Betz, see note 37.

[48] Among the fifty authors whose images are in the literature, only four are New Zealanders. Most are North American, one is Australian and a few are from Europe.

[49] The connection between New Zealander's love of the sea and spiritual experience is also made by composer Colin Gibson in the anonymously authored 'Rejoice in the Lord Always', *Tui Motu: Interlslands*, (April 2003), p. 18.

[50] See, for example, government and other websites: www.nzgs.co.nz, www.nzedge.com.

[51] Some of the influences for ill may be partially traceable to the particular Irish cultural milieu in which New Zealand Catholics growing up in the 1940s and 1950s found themselves, a vignette of which can be found in Mark Williams, *The Source of the Song: New Zealand Writers on Catholicism* (Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1995) p. 15.

[52] This is at the heart of the research by Martha Robbins who found that the deaths of women's mothers were a catalyst to change in many areas of their lives, including God images. See Robbins, pp. 173–4.

[53] Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995) pp. 35–6; Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women*, 1986 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ, 1986) p. 17; Dorothee Sölle, 'Mysticism, Liberation and the Names of God: A Feminist Reflection', *Christianity and Crisis*, 41 (1981), pp. 179; and Ann Belford Ulanov, *Picturing God*, (Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1986) p. 166.

[54] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious* Language (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1982) p. 9.

Home shrine making: Women fashioning sacred space in everyday life

DEIRDRE SAVAGE

Introduction

What constitutes sacred space, where can it be found and how do women use it in their lives? Do they define and create it in particular ways? These were some of the questions I was interested in asking as I went out in search of women's shrines[1] around Aotearoa/New Zealand. I had spotted artful little arrangements of special and beautiful things in the corners of many women's homes over the years and had become increasingly curious about what they meant to the individual women and how they used them in their daily lives. Early in 2003 I set out to visit women in their homes and find out more about these spaces.[2]

The academic literature specifically addressing the concept of sacred space, at the time of my research, was not great and remains scattered throughout various areas of scholarship. Accordingly, during this study I drew together two lines of analysis from different contexts that converged upon the spaces that are women's domestic shrines. One line examined the material culture of the spaces and objects on the shrines and sought to reveal the *agency* of the objects in themselves. The other line was a phenomenological one and responded to the shrines as sites in which issues of practice, embodiment and intentionality in the daily lives of the subjects were explored. The material culture of the shrine was investigated as part of the intersubjective experience of its creator and scrutinised as a fruitful place in which to develop an ethnographic understanding of life-as-lived. The study also strove to give voice to ordinary New Zealand women and their precious things within their own homes.[3]

Background to the research

The findings discussed in this article are the results of meetings that involved interviewing ten women while visiting their personal home shrines, altars or special places. I photographed these spaces and also asked each woman to write (using descriptions and poems) and talk about her feelings and relationship with her shrine. The women I interviewed were Jean, Ruth, Sherap, Maria, Lovely, Fiona, Karis,

April, Hadia and Laura, with no two women following the same religious path or practices. All from the North Island, the women were city, small town and rural dwellers from Whangarei to the Wairarapa. Their ages ranged from mid-thirties to early eighties with most in the decade of their forties. Two were immigrants (from India and United States), two were first generation New Zealanders (Samoan/English and Polish origins) and the remainder were Pakeha New Zealanders of European extraction. Their various approaches centred around Hindu guru devotion, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Gaia or Goddess worship and New Age symbolism. Most had created shrines that were personalised and eclectic collections reflecting a variety of influences. Contact was made with each research participant through personal networks of friends and acquaintances as I utilised my own empathetic involvement in the lives of these women to witness what could otherwise have remained unseen.

Sacred space as liminal space

I began my visits to women's homes with the idea of looking for *sacred* places and at once began grappling with the meaning of this word. Most women seemed happy to use it themselves and I found myself experiencing a sense of 'sacredness' in many of these special corners, but I could not define the concept in a meaningful way that still met the academic requirements of a scholarly study. Fortunately, however, as I visited with the women and let the shrines themselves work upon me, the preconceptions I had about what I would find fell away and the women began to use their own words to speak about what was occurring in these spaces:

> *The unseen realm. Divine beloved. Holy place. Anchor for the Eternal. Connection with the universe. Speaking with the spiritual world. Higher consciousness. Numinous. The footsteps of God. More powerful than me.*

These were the words themselves that the ten women used to describe *another* place or state of being that they were attempting to commune with while at their shrines. At first I could not see these *other* places when I began looking at the shrines. All I saw was groupings of objects – objects that were rich in significance and feeling, but still objects that hid this quality of *otherness* from me. It was only as the women began to tell the stories and write the poems of their shrines that these other states were revealed before my eyes.

Sherap first alerted me to them when she spoke of 'being in another dimension' and 'losing all track of time' when at her altar. It was then that I began to perceive the *whole* of the shrine, and saw that it was so much more than the separate objects themselves, no matter how beautiful, evocative or symbolically potent they were.

The objects of each shrine had also created a space – a space that was an entrance way, a point of communication with those other states that the women had begun to tell me of. Each woman had used the familiar and personal objects of her home and natural surroundings to fashion transition places, border zones or portals between the mundane material world of the everyday and what she envisioned lay beyond it. Their words all speak of things *other* than the ordinary round of daily activities and objects that we are party to in the material world. They speak of realms, states of consciousness or transcendent beings that all these women viewed as something they wished to connect with or invoke in some way. But they needed a way into these other worlds – so they made altars and shrines and special places.

However, once I had understood this way of approaching the shrine space as a portal, I then discovered that the various women were utilising this connecting space in quite different ways. How individual women engaged with their evoked connections to this otherness sometimes seemed to be quite contradictory, and I saw that the spaces were not simply direct *conduits* to the transcendent. It became apparent that the shrines were marginal spaces *in themselves* and had strong properties of their own which were having an impact on the objects and the women who used them. They were more than just entrance ways into another world.

Listening to what the women said about how they used and related to the objects that constituted their shrines, it became clear that the properties these spaces exhibited could best be described as *liminal*. As I visited more home altars this function of liminality emerged as the primary action of each shrine space. Liminal spaces can be identified as those that mark and hold the place *between* realms. They occupy the place of transition and transformation as they sit on the edges and serve as the place of passage from one reality to another.

Victor Turner was an anthropologist who observed liminality intently in his seminal work on ritual processes.[4] In observing people as they moved in and out of liminal space, he saw them as 'necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip

through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space'.[5] He described the way in which rituals produce a state of liminality where participants are literally 'stripped' – of clothing, rank, sex, age, status and identity. Cut off from their 'normative system of bounded structures, and particularist groups', all participants, no matter their social role, are made humble, anonymous and equal in what he called a ritual state of '*communitas*'.[6] Dialectically opposed to the normative state of structure, *communitas* is seen as the temporary state of a rite of passage which people undergo before emerging with a re-envisioned and re-vitalised sense of their place in the life of the culture. Turner writes:

> Liminality and marginality are conditions in which are frequently generated myth, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art ... each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychological levels simultaneously.[7]

Again Turner has recorded the power of the liminal space to deconstruct and re-construct into something new, a place where things are changed because it is a place that is rich with new possibilities, exactly because the old is unseated and pulled apart. For both people and things can be stripped of their 'identity' and have their 'multivocal' quality released, enabling them to speak to each other with previously hidden voices, so that both are re-vivified and transformed.

Even these simple domestic shrines had this ability to connect and re-connect, to transform and re-orientate in that liminal space between two worlds, for as Kay Turner, in her major study of women's domestic altar-making in North America, has observed each shrine is a

> threshold or gateway ... [that] evokes cathexis: the discharge of desire. A woman's altar, her self created threshold, exists between the physical and the spiritual and exists, moreover, between her sense of belief and her sense of need. Every approach to her altar activates a woman's desire for fulfillment, her desire to cross the gap between Self and Other for her own purpose.[8]

> *Uplifted. Peaceful. Focused. Grounded. Struggle. Happy. Sad. Safe. Pray. Sing. Breathe. Contemplate. Cry. Listen. Empty. Conscious. Painful. Spaciousness. Silent. Grateful. Loved. Supported. Focused. Frightened. Centred. Challenge. Comforted. Remember what is important.*

These were some of the words used by each woman to describe the ways she engaged with her altar space and how she felt when doing so. Clearly they record each shrine space as a place where these women could find themselves confronted by some profound feelings.

The women came to their shrines in many different ways. They stopped to clean and decorate them, rearrange and add or remove objects as their significance altered, to meditate, to light candles, pray and remember people, to 'catch' their breath in privacy or be with an emotion in a moment of heightened feeling. They may just glance at it across the room, seek it out only to 'centre' themselves in a busy day, pause before it to put an object on display, admire it, 'talk' to it or sit before it in extended meditation. Some would not interact with it for weeks or visit it only to dust, while others would go to it as part of a daily routine or seek it out in times of stress or celebration – but over and over again each woman spoke of going to her shrine experiencing *one* bodily state and leaving it aware of a *different* sensation within herself. Frequently she would leave her shrine feeling uplifted or grounded. Often she would come to it in one mood or with one feeling and leave it with another. Sometimes contact with her shrine would open her to painful or discomforting emotions.

Hadia speaks of her space as 'challenging' her and how she 'struggles' to release things at her altar. Sherap can feel fear and doubt welling up at her shrine and explains how she has at times stopped doing her Buddhist religious practice of prostrations before her altar because 'bad stuff kept happening to my kids'. Others speak of sadness and tears called up by reflection upon their current lives, families or the memories held in the shrine objects. However, descriptions were even fuller of proclamations of 'joy', 'happiness' and 'love' experienced at the shrine.

Whatever their nature they were clearly strong feelings that were not generally encountered or openly expressed in the ordinary course of the day. Again the carefully fashioned shrine place invited the opening-up and recombining of feelings, experiences and attitudes, which characterise the activity of the liminal. In many different ways each woman spoke about being undone and reconstituted, taken apart and attached to or separated from things. *Change,* therefore, was an integral aspect of each shrine encounter. Change can be negative and fearful, but each encounter was made with the underlying confidence

that ultimately each woman would be moved in some fundamental way nearer to her highest aspirations.

Streep in the summary to her Do-it-Yourself book on making altars sums up the ultimate role of the domestic shrine as a means of personal transformation, an instrument for creating and managing change in our outer and inner lives.[9] She says, 'creating a sacred space is a process. The act of building an altar changes us and our sense of ourselves in time and space…'. It is about responding to the changes in our moral lives.

> The things that matter most – existence itself, love and intimacy, health and well-being and happiness – all are subject to the larger cycles of life and death, attainment and loss. Change, of necessity, always involves a step forward and a step back, a letting go and a reaching out. Creating sacred space helps us to come to terms with change in all of its aspects and allows us to focus on the energy of change in positive ways.[10]

These special spaces lovingly fashioned in the corners of women's busy homes carried the power of liminality and were capable of connecting each woman with profound states of awareness and facilitating deep personal transformation.

Public Spaces and Private Spaces

Having identified these sacred spaces women fashioned within their homes as *liminal*, I found that a clear comparison was emerging for me between these homemade shrines and the other sacred spaces that were the public altars and shrines of churches and places of formal organised worship.

While sitting in front of women's dressing tables, it was impossible for me to be unaware of the link between the creation of liminality and the feminising of the places chosen for shrines. Even Lovely's special space on top of the family piano in the family lounge, the least liminal of those studied, was undoubtedly a place that had been created and tended by a woman – with its arrangements of pot plants, china ornaments, candles and children's precious things. Most of the shrines were housed in the women's bedrooms and their presence had to be negotiated in relation to the man that most of them shared that room with. Both Maria and Laura were assertive about how they rapidly expelled any object of their male partner's from the space by their bed where they had their shrine. His car keys left on the dressing table, his suitcases straying onto her side of the bed were not acceptable in that

space. Sherap, along with Maria and Laura, were quite conscious of the power of their own bodies in relation to their shrine spaces. Maria described the liminal power of her woman's body itself as she places herself in the shrine space and 'activates' it with her presence. Sherap spoke of how she moved her shrine from the narrow space directly beside her bed as she felt she may be in some way offending it when her body, partially clad, climbed across it as she got in and out of bed. Laura laughed when she recognised that she used an embroidered table runner on the surface of her dresser because it created a barrier that protected her space from the very non-liminal things of her husband's underwear drawer that sat below it!

Ruth said she let her husband use her altar with her at times, but with her consent and she was certain that it was *her* space and not for her children. Others managed the issue of their personal female space in differing ways. Karis's consultation room was separate from the main house and not used by her husband and Hadia maintained a separate bedroom from her male partner. Lovely's was used by the whole family at the times they sat before it and prayed or sang together. April's husband supported her in her use of her space in ways like extinguishing the candle if she fell asleep while communing with her altar from her bed. The other women in the study did not share their homes with other adults at the time.

Kay Turner has traced the role of the domestic shrine in the evolution of Christianity from its origins and she describes the oppositions between the gender polarities of *oikos* (household/private/female) and *polis* (state/public/male).[11] Within the corresponding patriarchal *dominator model* (as opposed to the *partnership model*) women are assigned the devalued role of 'other' in relation to the male as ideal 'self'.[12] She reveals the history of women's domestic shrines as sites of resistance to the restrictions of women's involvement in public worship and records how the women responded by creating their own style of shrine that served to nourish their own needs. Prime among these needs was the drive for 'interconnectedness'[13] between specific people and emotions, which was not satisfied by the institutionalised emotionality of the formal altar. With the co-mingling of different religious and magical traditions, personal needs and devotions, healing and specific family and individual people, the woman's shrine was capable of subverting the male practices of public worship. This meant that women's domestic shrines were marginalised by the patriarchic

religions of the day, but that in response the 'home altar has for centuries encoded a visual language through which objects "speak" to the distinctive concerns of women's "hidden culture"'.[14]

Most of the women I studied had fashioned eclectic shrines dedicated more to fulfilling their own personal needs than any traditional or formalised religious purpose. Each exhibited a mixture of religious and secular or personal objects and comfortably, sometimes defiantly, mixed the symbolism and iconography of different religions in the single space. As such, the shrines documented in this study are part of what I believe we can now see as an unbroken tradition of women crafting and maintaining their own forms of spiritual expression outside of the male institutions of their wider societies – mimicking, contesting and dissimulating in the privacy of their own homes.

Ruth and Karis explained that they chose female deities for their spaces to counteract the maleness of their religious traditions or of the shrines themselves. Ruth had identified her inspiration as the Christian wisdom deity Sophia and central to her shrine was a beautiful illustration of the divine feminine as Gaia or Mother Earth. Sherap was adamant that she had a picture of the Chinese goddess Kwan Yin on her otherwise exclusively *Tibetan* Buddhist shrine (with its many pictures and statues of male teachers and deities) because there were 'too many men' and it was the 'goddess form of a woman's body' that she personally related to.

Throughout history, these unseen attitudes and motivations of women as they selected and utilised the sacred and ordinary spaces of their daily lives can be traced in the objects they used in their homes. In the study of simple household objects left in the archaeological and written records from Renaissance times, Ajmar has demonstrated the enduring core of 'female interaction with the domestic objects in the context of the construction of the domestic female persona and a family memory'[15] and records that the woman has always been 'in charge of the moral and material identity and memory of the household'.[16]

All the women in this study had constructed their own private liminal spaces even though all of them had access to, and were regularly involved with, sacred places, altars and shrines in the formal public practice of their spiritual lives within their faith communities. They had created their own personal shrine spaces that were

empowered by their own femaleness and often distinctly delineated from male spaces within their homes.

The characteristics of women's shrines

During the privileged time I spent in the private spaces of these women, I recorded styles of shrine making that were rich and varied but also characteristically different from traditional altars of religious institutions. There were three elements that I observed over and over again in the shrines of these women as I found that their shrines were primarily: spaces to engage with *things*, spaces to capture the senses and spaces to experience embodiment.

1. SPACES TO ENGAGE WITH *THINGS*

These spaces needed to be *interactive*. Women filled them with the things they were currently working with in their lives and they needed to be able to put these things in and take them out. The objects that went in and out could be anything and they were moved in and out at many different times and in many different ways. Sherap placed a photograph of her son beside that of her guru after he had had an accident and needed to be 'held' in the space while he healed. Hadia tied some feathers from her child's chicken, after it had been killed by dogs, on to the arms of her goddess statue as a way of remembering and honouring a beloved pet. April displayed the perfection of red autumn leaves on her shrine and Ruth laid out necklaces of *pounamu* she was 'holding' for friends while they travelled overseas.

The spaces were never static and they seemed to live and grow to the point, some women explained, that they needed to be cleared out and emptied so they could be begun anew when the space became too full. I have re-visited many of the shrines I last saw in 2003 and all now have different arrangements of objects with some having been totally dismantled and re-constructed in other parts of the home.

> *Purification of body and soul. I hand it over. Let go of hassles. I just offer up my fears. It's for releasing.*

> *Needs to be held in that sacred place. Need to be with him, put them in his care. I connect with myself – Buddha, universe. My family surrounds me here. Shrines are points of stability.*

As described above, the shrine space exhibits the properties of liminality and the most important of these properties is its paradoxical ability to both *hold fast* and also *let go* at the same time. The words

above show some of the ways in which these spaces could serve both these functions. A close study of the objects put into the shrine space revealed each woman to be using her shrine specifically to *bond* and *unite* herself with things, people and ideas and also to *separate* and *free* herself from the same. The shrine seemed capable of doing both – some shrines acted primarily in one way or the other, while others did both at the same time or both at different times. I have called this paradoxical quality of liminal space *cleaving* because this word implies its own antonym – where *to cleave* two things is to bind them in union and also to split them apart. It is a word that carries its opposite within itself, for cleavage between two things denotes their separation, but the separation has no meaning unless it embodies the idea of the original state of the two things as bound together at some point.

In this way the shrine space could also act as a place where each woman encountered herself and had her own self-identity reflected and affirmed. By attaching to or separating from different aspects of themselves, they were able to create and maintain before their gaze a dynamic picture of who they perceived themselves to be or who they aspired to be. April's dressing table strongly captures this sense, with its display of treasures being a conscious representation of herself and the dancing figurine identified as 'Myself, standing erect in Dancer's Pose' (see figure 1). The whole collection was a lovingly tended reflection of self amidst family.

Maria's, in a less overt way, was also clearly about establishing her own identity and actively working with it as she strove to cleave with archetypes of deep significance in her evolving sense of selfhood. Though holding little more than a white bone, a black obsidian stone and a Hindu yantra (picture of symbolic geometric mandala) she named all of these as representations of her own body (see figure 2).

Laura was strong in her statement that her dressing table collection was, indeed, where she 'dressed' herself and created the self she met the world with – an arrangement of things that she vigilantly protected from what seemed, at times, like a world indifferent to her personal existence. A group of angels, a mother-and-child figurine and family keep-sakes anchored the values of home and family protection that she clung to at these times. With its power of cleaving, the shrine could be a potent place for encountering, affirming and working with the

Figure 1: April's dressing table space

Figure 2: Maria's shrine

self and most shrine spaces had one or more objects that appeared to be primarily about cleaving to the self.

Sometimes it was *one* object in itself that seemed capable of acting to both unite and separate at once when used in liminal space. Maria stroked the bleached bone and articulated that it was connecting her to the dark goddess of death; while at the same time separating her from her own changing body as she moved into middle age – the bone placed on the altar was a giving up of her temporal self while at the same time being a mediation object that united her with the Great Mother. In the space of her altar she was able to connect herself with this idea, this feeling – hidden and denied in other parts of her home and her day as a suburban homemaker and mother. In the dissolving medium of this threshold space between two worlds each of these women was able to loosen the things they did not want in their lives and strengthen their bond with their chosen ideals and people.

Ruth's dressing table, on the other hand, was a powerful place of letting go. At its centre sat a lovely open bowl in which she put little written notes that recorded the 'shite' she no longer wished to hold on to in her life (see figure 3). Placed in this special receptacle

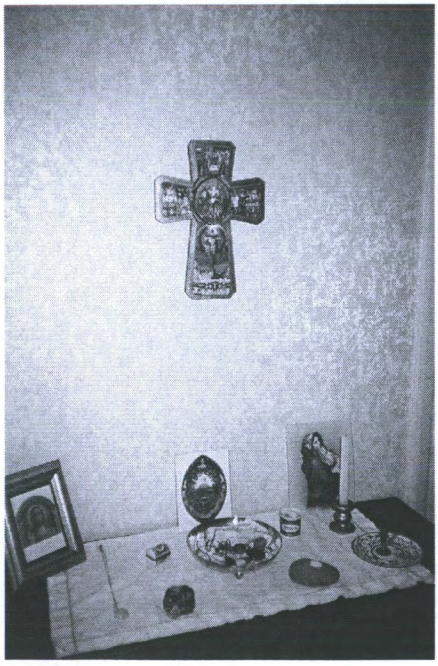

Figure 3: Ruth's altar table

these unwanted emotions could be effectively removed by the liminal power of this space. When successfully forgotten they were removed from the bowl and thrown out. A simple and open space, its *letting go* qualities predominated to the point where she did not feel it was suitable to put family photos within its boundaries. Its periphery was marked only by pictures of *deceased* friends, who she felt she was in the process of letting go, just as they too were relinquishing their hold on this life.

Many objects were used by the women to represent the feelings, people and ideas that they were letting go or holding fast to. Therefore the spaces needed to allow things to be taken in and out. These spaces were used actively, sometimes repeatedly in a day, to put things in and out of so that the women could be cleaved to or from them. They wanted and needed their spaces to be dynamic and open and capable of holding and receiving any objects they required.

2. SPACES TO CAPTURE THE SENSES

The second factor I observed was these women took delight in decorating their spaces to make them aesthetically pleasing and arresting to their senses. These are some of the words they used to describe their spaces and how they felt when engaged with them:

> *I need to see them! Beauty. Smiling. Gaze. Silent. Spaciousness. Relaxing. Beautiful. Grace. Precious. Rich. Elegant. Calm. Treasures. Attuned. Interesting. Soulful. Special. Serenity. Peaceful. Simple. Pause. Whole. Centered. Calm. Aware. Empty. Safe. Focused. More present. Pleasing to the eye.*

As I visited these domestic shrines, each woman revealed to me a specific space in her domestic landscape that she really liked. A space she felt to be very appealing to her, a place that was a repository for things of beauty and specialness. It was immediately apparent that each woman in this study had fashioned spaces that would capture and arrest her senses and produce bodily felt aesthetic experiences. This was achieved in numerous and individual ways but each altar space was consciously positioned to catch and rest the woman's eye, to satisfy her sense of beauty and structure and arrest all her senses with objects of appeal.

Each woman described how her shrine was a collection of things that she found to be beautiful, lovely and attractive. Natural objects, faces of beloved people or beings and works of art and craft. Each

woman smiled, her face softening as she described the precious things of her altar. She touched them lovingly or generously allowed me to hold and admire her chosen things. The shrine space was a place for beautiful objects and was also decorated to enhance their beauty – embroidery, flowers, glossy leaves, crystal, glass, pottery, china, porcelain, gilt, bronze, silver, silk, jewellery, precious stones, carved, turned, and polished wood, inlaid stone and metal, decorated ornate frames, paua shell, weaving, tapestry, beads, tassels, brocade, lace, satin, velvet, glitter, gold. Embellishment, texture, detail, design, colour, gloss, richness, delicacy, sheen and depth – each shrine displayed at the very least three of these elements, usually most of them all brought together within the confines of the special space.

Cloth was also present on every shrine in a multitude of lovely forms and I believe the very important use of textiles in women's creation of sacred space deserves far greater attention than I am able to give it here. Elsewhere[17] I have discussed its liminal properties in greater detail and Weiner and Schneider (1989) have written a major work on cloth and human experience that gives a fascinating overview of the cultural role of cloth and strives to counteract the neglect of fabric as subject of study while asserting women's mastery and abiding relationship with the medium.[18]

So, once the eyes were arrested by the visual appeal of the beautifully adorned space, the women then employed other means to more fully engage their senses if they desired a more prolonged interaction with their shrine. Most lit a candle to produce some kind of effulgence that radiated an embracing atmosphere that included them in the space. Maria used incense to 'create the atmosphere' and Ruth wrapped herself in a very special shawl while April's 'favourite' was to cuddle into bed with the candle on. Warm, embraced, safe and drawn in by the candle glow or incense the more of their senses they could *arrest* the stronger their immediate experience of their shrine. Sherap used the chime of her cymbals to take her more deeply into that 'other dimension' that she felt could not be described in words (see figure 4).

With the carefully arranged aesthetic appeal of their shrines capable of captivating and stilling the senses these women were able to enter into its liminal boundaries and experience something of its effects. Even if it was Laura's quick, reassuring glance in her harried morning routine or Ruth's deep breath after a disturbing phone

Figure 4: Sherap's shrine space

call, it was a place that had the power to arrest the ordinary flow of consciousness through its appeal to the senses – be it for a brief moment or for a protracted period of meditation.

> The altar is a made thing and a process of making. It is an intentional gathering of symbolic objects, each having their own purpose but each combining with others to elicit a visually compelling whole. Like any work of art an altar is a product of choice and strategy, an attempt to transpose contradictory materials through arrangement, embellishment and so on, in the endeavor to create meaning.[19]

These women wanted their spaces to be attractively decorated, some were lavish with adornment while others had a minimalist beauty, but always the makers expended time and energy to fashion their spaces with artistic care and attention to aesthetic detail.

3. SPACES TO EXPERIENCE EMBODIMENT

As I engaged with each woman and her shrine it became impossible to document their places without reference to their experience of being in a body. The presence of *bodies* represented on the shrine, in various forms, via various media and through many different symbols was

inescapable and the women's repeated reference to their own bodily felt sensations and emotions was equally powerful.

If the shrine creation and engagement was primarily about the putting of *things* in and out of a liminal space, then the woman's body was first among those things. Most of the special places reverted to nothing more than an idiosyncratic juxtaposition of interesting or aesthetically pleasing objects when the woman herself was not engaging with them. Unless the woman put her own *body* consciously in to the configuration of objects its powers remained latent and it remained closed as a portal to the liminal. It was at her shrine that she would stop to experience herself within her body. Here she would check in with herself and monitor her own emotional and health status and perhaps strive for the kinds of transformations that she may call 'healing'.

One of the major ways to heighten and fulfil the bodily investment in the shrine activity was to fill it with other bodies. For it is with other bodies that our own body engages most powerfully and our response to another body always involves a corresponding reaction from our own. Therefore, it was no surprise that the only other major category of things that I recorded on these altar spaces was, of course, the images of *other* bodies. Representations of other people – artwork, photographs, statues, figurines, iconography and holographic images. Faces, eyes, hands, feet. Lovely's winking holographic Christ/Mary. Karis's photograph of Jung. Jean's two images of her guru in two different bodies. Masters, deities, mentors, husbands, lovers, children, deceased friends. These various bodies represented those whom the women wished to be linked with – those people and ideals they strove for, those people they wished to be bound in relationship with. Sherap and Jean spoke of 'cuddling' and 'cradling' the photos of their lama or guru at times of need, while Fiona just loved to look at the beautiful bodies of her children displayed in various stages of their development from infancy. Her shrine was also decorated with hearts of all types, each one touching the same place in her own body. Gazing and touching they connected their own bodies to those of others.

The shrine space needed to speak to and appeal to the body of its maker. It needed to produce a physical reaction within her. She needed to see others in their physical form – to talk to their faces, hold them in her hands and touch them with her tears or her fingertips. There

was no shrine space that did not contain images of the human body. Maria's space, which had the fewest actual bodily forms depicted on it, was in fact the altar most powerfully described as being about the human body more than anything else. The Hindu yantra triangle picture was, she said, a representation of the breasts and genitals of a woman. The white bone represented the inner structure of her own form while the tiny central statue was the goddess Kali – the Crone herself, with bloodied human body parts attached to her own dancing body.

Central to this experience of embodiment felt at the shrine was each woman's repeated description of things on the altar space that 'just felt right'. When probed on why certain objects were on the shrine (or sometimes, more significantly, why certain things were *not* permitted there or had been removed) over and over again they would shrug their shoulders and say it just 'felt' as if it didn't belong or wasn't right. On consideration the deepest they could take this response was to identify it as a bodily feeling – one felt in their 'guts', their 'heart' or their 'soul'. These words reflect this bodily felt experience:

> *I had a yearning to make a shrine. It feeds my heart. It attracts healing energy. It feels special.*
>
> *It wasn't the right place for it. If it feels right I put it there. It felt wrong, like sacrilege – I was irritated!*

So, a woman's domestic shrine is a place for her body. A place of healing, checking in to how the body is coping under the demands of everyday life. A place to experience the struggle with life that is manifested within her own body and between the bodies represented there and, hopefully, experience the feeling of serenity and inner calm that can be described no other way than as a physical sensation. Placed in the shrine space, her body, and those of others, may be freed from their daily imperatives and the pragmatics of time and space and re-united with its highest aspirations. Hadia (see figure 5), Maria, Ruth and April all used the imagery of the dancing body in relation to their shrine – sensuous, invigorating, empowering, flowing and encompassing – this one image of movement says so much about the experience of embodiment as understood by each person. Made open and softened by the security and tranquillity of the shrine space or ripped apart by the raw power of the truth she confronts there, the woman permits and risks deeply felt bodily experiences.

Figure 5: Hadia's shrine

Conclusion: Women defining and fashioning their own sacred spaces

The way that ordinary women in Aotearoa/New Zealand are creating private sacred space in their own homes seems to have distinctive elements that characterise it as different from other forms of public or institutionalised sacred space in our communities. The women in this study wanted and needed liminal space that carried some investment of the practices and things that they valued most highly in their lives. They fashioned it with the things that they treasured, enjoyed and found pleasing and they needed their spaces to be interactive, alive and dynamic as they put things in and out of them. They filled them with representations of the bodies of those they most cared about and the bodily felt sensations and emotions that were most profound for them. They also needed their spaces to carry beauty, be lovely to

look at, attractive to the eye and arresting to the senses.

I suggest that such expressions are common amongst ordinary women and they are creating sacred space in places of their own choosing within their own homes and integrating them into the practices of their ordinary daily lives. These women are defining for themselves where and when they will utilise sacred space, rather than allowing it to be limited to times and places ordained and presided over by others. Their domestic shrine making demonstrates the need and desire of women to actively fashion sacred space on their own terms and make it rich with their own meanings.

DEIRDRE SAVAGE *completed her MA in social anthropology (Massey University) in 2003 and has a special interest in the material culture and phenomenology of women's spiritual practice and experience. A rural dweller, she has lived in Taupo for the last 20 years where she works as an adult educator and is a participant in a women's ritual group that celebrates the beauty and power of the lake and mountain environment. She knows many special spaces in Taupo and takes pleasure in introducing this sacred landscape to visitors from all over the world.*

Notes

[1] *Shrine* is not the word that most of the women in my study used to describe their special space. Accordingly I always attempted to employ, with each woman, the use of whatever term she herself had chosen. However, the names they used were diverse, so *shrine* is the one I have utilised throughout this paper for consistency, as it is a general term that can act to cover all the other descriptions. I selected it in preference to the word *altar* as that word is derived directly from the Latin *altare*, which means *high*. Its opposite is the *low* sacred spaces of the earth, such as the hearth – spaces more intimately associated with the lives and symbolism of women. The shrine, on the other hand, was traditionally a more portable reliquary that was often like a small cupboard and was ultimately more likely to be found housing precious religious objects in the home. As such it has, to me, a more direct link with the spaces I was seeing in my research.

[2] This research was done for an MA thesis in Social Anthropology, supervised by Sita Venkateswar, Massey University, Palmerston North campus, New Zealand.

[3] D. Savage, *'Fashioning Liminal Space: The Meaning of Things and Women's Experience in the Practice of Domestic Shrine Making in Aotearoa/New Zealand'*, MA thesis, Massey University, 2003.

[4] V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Aldine De Gruyter, New York, 1969).
[5] ibid., p. 94.
[6] ibid., p. 110.
[7] ibid., p. 129.
[8] K. Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*: *The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1999), p. 30.
[9] P. Streep, *Altars Made Easy: A Complete Guide to Creating Your Own Sacred Space* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1997).
[10] ibid., p. 199.
[11] K. Turner, p. 16.
[12] ibid., p. 16.
[13] ibid., p. 19.
[14] ibid., p. 21.
[15] M. Ajmar, 'Objects, Women and Memory in the Renaissance Household' in M. Kwint, C. Breward, and J. Aynsley (eds), *Material Memories.* (Berg, Oxford, 1999), p. 81.
[16] ibid., p. 83.
[17] D. Savage, p. 46.
[18] A. Weiner and J. Schneider (eds) *Cloth and Human Experience.* (Smithsonian Institute Press, Washington, 1989).
[19] K. Turner, p. 39.

Women readers on spiritual quest

PATRICIA ROSE AND ELIZABETH MOORES

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Carol Christ wrote of the intimate link between women's writing and their spirituality.[1] We suggest that, for many women, the relationship between *reading* and spiritual experience and expression can be equally profound.[2] In this paper we will explore the role of selected medieval lyrics in our spiritual lives, as sources of inspiration, gateways to the sacred, and bridges to religious expressions that honour the past and respect our own life experiences.

As medievalists, our reading practice builds on the insights of John Speirs, who suggested that, in the process of reading, 'the critical reader ... is applying his [sic] sensibility to it – and, together with his sensibility, his intelligence, everything he *is* ... the whole of himself and his whole experience both of literature and of life.'[3] John Stevens further noted that 'in the study of medieval literature, as of all other there comes a moment at which neither philology, nor metrics, nor any other 'science' can take the place of a considered personal response.'[4]

For both of us, as women, as readers and as medievalists, our personal response is primarily a spiritual one. It has been argued that 'the Middle Ages provide a source of magic, mystery and enchantment that satisfies the contemporary desire for new – or renewed – models of spirituality.'[5] Luce Irigaray once observed pertinently that 'in this age of sophisticated technical apparatus we still frequently turn to the Middle Ages in search of our images and secrets',[6] and this has been our experience, in different, but complementary, ways.

There is a body of medieval lyrics which invokes in us something of that combination of emotions – *tremens* and *fascinans*, an awe-filled sense of reverence and mystery, and an intense feeling of fascination and allurement – which Rudolph Otto described as the natural human response to something holy.[7] While we each have different religious beliefs and practices – Elizabeth is a post-Church Christian, and Patricia is part of the growing Goddess Pagan tradition – in reading

these lyrics we each experience a sense of the sacred, we encounter the 'awen' - that which is both poetic inspiration and sacred prophetic power - and respond accordingly.[8]

Through the medieval lyrics we write about, we articulate, explore and express our very different, but strangely interconnected, spiritualities. Some of these lyrics, including 'Maiden in the mor lay', 'At a sprynge wel under a thorn' and 'The Corpus Christi carol' are both remnants, and reminders, of Pagan religion as well as expressions of medieval Christian piety.[9] The religious fluidity of lyrics such as these enables readers from diverse religious backgrounds to explore them from very different perspectives, and to find in them resources for their individual spiritual lives.[10] Indeed, the ambiguity of these lyrics has a subversive character to it, for the reader can never be quite sure precisely what she is reading: the Christian reader may read these lyrics as Christian writings,[11] while the Goddess Pagan reader may view them as Goddess Pagan spiritual texts.[12] Yet neither reader can be unaware of the alternative readings contained in the texts, and the challenges these alternatives pose. These lyrics occupy a position similar to that described in *The Mists of Avalon*, where two worlds – that of the priestesses of the Goddess, and that of the Christian monks – occupied the same geographic space simultaneously.[13]

In our exploration of medieval lyrics in our spiritual lives, rarely have we been geographically close. Our work has been conducted long distance, by email, telephone and very rare meetings. Like the letters of Julia Kristeva and Catherine Clement, our (electronic) missives have flown to and fro, circling, spiralling and challenging each other.[14] It has been both a supportive, womanly communication and an assertive, honest and indisputably feminist dialogue.

What follows is a record of this literary and spiritual journey through lyrics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, starting from a shared love of 'I sing of a maiden', moving to 'At a springe wel under a thorn', and then exploring 'The Corpus Christi carol' and 'Maiden in the mor lay'. The texts of these lyrics are available at www.wildwoodconsultants.com[15]

Dear Patricia,

You asked me a while ago what sources I have been finding helpful in nurturing my spiritual life since I made the move from the public, external rituals of the church to my own private and interior forms of accessing the sacred.

Knowing me and my religious formation, you'll probably not be surprised when I say that, for me now, as always, words are the gateway to the other world. No longer, though are they simply the words of the institution, the scriptures and the liturgy. Though these taught me the beauty and power of words, their authority and patriarchal cast troubles me. So I have looked to the poetry of the literary canon, texts I have taught and read over my forty years in the academy, as a way of sustaining and developing my understanding of the sacred, and satisfying my need to touch 'the beauty of holiness', words from one of my favourite hymns.

Why poetry and which poems in particular? I think that poetry is the highest form of verbal expression possible, the closest to perfection. As some people believe that opera is the finest musical genre because it combines words, music and form, poetry combines words, sounds, rhythm and form. In its lyric modes, it is capable of sharpening and distilling emotion and meaning. It can be (as Gerard Manly Hopkins recognised) 'charged with the grandeur of God'.

Recently, with the Advent season and Christmas upon us, I took the fifteenth-century lyric 'I sing of a maiden', which deals with the Incarnation and birth of Christ, as a starting point for my daily meditation. It is a gem of a poem, and, to my delight, it offered me a fruitful subject for spiritual contemplation.

How different its account is from the synoptic gospel narratives that dominate the Advent liturgies! This is an imaginative rendering of the event, stripped of its historical, factual circumstances. It does not narrate. It simply sings. Gone are the angels, innkeepers, stable, animals and shepherds. Two unnamed players, the 'maiden that is makeles' and the 'king of alle kinges' (she and he) enter an agreement that sees the Divine made incarnate and brought forth into the human world.

Their transaction is described with a delicate beauty that opens my mind and senses to the holy from the very first lines. Its source is the aural and verbal play that runs through the poem. Rhyme, assonance, alliteration and verbal repetition combine to produce beguiling

harmonies. In the three central stanzas, these patterns blend with a form of ballad-like incremental repetition to generate a contrapuntal effect. This, in turn, allows tension to develop between the polarities of movement/stasis and of temporality/eternity. The repeated formulae 'He cam also stille' and 'As dew in Aprille that falleth on' contain the stasis and timelessness, but they lead into phrases marking the passage of time and evoking the gradual process of natural generation. He came 'wher his moder was', 'to his moderes bowr' and 'wher his moder lay' as the dew falls 'on the grass', 'on the flowr' and 'on the spray'. Through these counterpoints, my world of change touches the timeless world of the sacred.

Freedom from narrative specificity opens the text, allowing me to enter it as a participant, to engage personally with it. I am no longer simply a detached observer. 'Maiden', 'moder' and 'she' include me. So the Incarnation is no longer a theological issue to be accepted (with some difficulty!). It is theology as felt experience. It is personally relevant. Figuratively, through the use of the generative imagery of spring, I see that the infusion of the divine into me, a human, is a process constantly recurring.

Like the 'she' of the poem, I too must choose to allow this infusion. The text puts great emphasis on the choice by making the verb 'ches' the last word of the first stanza and the only monosyllable of a group of three rhyming lines. Assigning choice to the 'maiden' in this poem is surprising in itself, in the light of the scriptural narratives. It opens another window for contemplation for me. Choice is a complex concept. A sense of duty or a subordinate position may dictate choice; a position of power or of independence may allow it. There are hard choices, easy choices and impossible choices. Very few choices admit no element of risk. Admitting another person or relationship into one's life is risky, and that is the choice facing the 'she' of the text, facing me. Do I allow the divine to infuse me, with the chance of pain as well as joy?

The text figures this forth in its generative images of conception, gestation and birth through the beautifully worked spring/dew patterns of its central stanzas. After the season of fruitfulness comes the bleakness of winter; after the spiritual awakening comes the dark night of the soul; the Christmas season soon passes into Lent; after youth and maturity comes ripening and decay. For the 'she' and 'he' of the poem, there was the pain of the birthing and of separation too.

Much to think about, much to wonder about as I read the poem. An active and provoking meditation, one in which I am free of constraint, giving me the opportunity to deepen my spiritual perceptions and to revel in the verbal beauty that allows me to access the place where my world touches the 'other'.

But I return, of course, and the last stanza, which has always troubled the critics (they see it as an unfortunate addition, mere doggerel in comparison with the rest of the poem, and it is hard to disagree) brings me sharply back to reality. Its invocation of the maiden and mother's uniqueness raises the spectre of the patriarchy and its negative effects on women in both secular and religious spheres. It serves to remind me that moments of transcendence are just that: moments, precious ones, to nurture us when spring seems far away.

I wonder what you'll think of this attempt to answer your question. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts.

Elizabeth

Dear Elizabeth,

Your letter arrived as I was attempting to sort and discard some old books, with little success, for I can't bear to part with any. One anthology attracted my attention. I opened it and was immediately struck by the inclusion of 'I sing of a maiden'. I have no conscious memory of reading this at school, but clearly I must have done so. Your letter discussing 'I sing of a maiden' was one of those coincidences that fascinate me; at a time when many of my old frameworks of belief have been deconstructed almost to the point of nihilism, I continue to experience and trust what Jung called moments of synchronicity, as a call to pause and reflect.

So, in reflecting on what you wrote, I affirm your conviction that words can open the way to the world of the spirit. As my belief in traditional religious texts has waned, I am finding other writings that function as sacred texts for me, texts that give me access to the world of the sacred, the world of the Goddess. Some medieval lyrics have become sacred texts for me. These mysterious, anonymous, ambiguous works offer me the possibility of multiple meanings; mediate an experience that is mystical and otherworldly, but grounded in the physical, natural, earthly environment; provide access to ancient,

yet strangely familiar rituals that speak to me of the Goddess; present female protagonists who are both gentle and reflective, and who are the subjects of their own destiny.

'I sing of a maiden' is a sacred text for me. As you noted, neither the mother nor her son is named. Thus, the poem might be read as a Christian text, a very beautiful expression of the relationship between Mary and her child. It might also be read, with developing Goddess-consciousness, as a mythical text. Who was, who is, this mother and her child? The poem claims that 'Moder and maiden/Was never non but she', but virginal mothers are far from unique in Goddess storying; witness Athena, Devi and Astarte, to name but a few.

Contradiction seems to characterise the maiden in 'I sing of a maiden'. She is both maiden and mother; active and passive. She initiated the action, choosing her son, and then took no further active part in the tale; from then on she simply 'was', she 'lay' passively. Or did she? Perhaps this is an example of that passivity/fidelity which Luce Irigaray sees as manifesting a different economy, demonstrating woman's different relation to herself, to others and to nature? It is a passivity/fidelity far removed from the object position, or from essentialism. It is an active passivity.

The active way the maiden's choice is expressed here: 'King of alle kinges/To here sone she ches' directly contradicts the way this choice is expressed in 'Now this foules singeth', where 'The king of alle kinges/to moder He hire ches.' Perhaps we can read 'I sing of a maiden' as a subversive text, a challenge to androcentric culture and patriarchal religious ideology.

Paradoxically, however, while I want to read this gentle, elegant text as illustrative of a new way of gender relating, inscribing female agency, I can't help thinking that it is still a classic example of the 'woman on the pedestal' syndrome. This is an idealised, sanitised version of conception, gestation and birth, far removed from the realities of the actual female body, of bodily fluids, nausea and pain. It is difficult to imagine any woman writing of birth in these terms. It is a disembodied experience, and one of the core principles of both feminism and Goddess religion is the necessity to remain grounded, embodied; human experience – like spirituality – is not, and cannot be, purely transcendent, but must always be liberally dosed with immanence.

Nevertheless, like you, and despite its limitations, I am captivated

by this poem, fascinated by the beauty of its language, the intricate patterning of its imagery. In many ways it reminds me of 'At a springe wel under a thorn', which I have been rereading recently. As always, the simplicity of this short lyric enthrals me and, as always, I read in it (or into it) a contradictory complexity, similar to that found in 'I sing of a maiden'.

From the very first line I am irresistibly drawn in, left in no doubt that this is a sacred setting. 'At a springe wel under a thorn' becomes, for me, 'by a holy well beneath a sacred thorn tree'. Thus situated, physically and psychologically, I am prepared to enter the spiritual realm. This, coupled with the mood evoked by the third line, which gives the poem something of the character of an otherworldly tale, a fairy tale – 'a lytel here a-forn' being not far removed from the traditional 'once upon a time' – tells me clearly how this tale is to be read. It suggests that it is not limited to time and space, and gives me, the reader, freedom to interpret, to ascribe meaning, to read between (or beneath) the lines.

Line four introduces an unnamed maiden to this sacred, otherworldly scene. Namelessness is more common to female protagonists than to male in medieval (and modern) writings, and often obscures or erases the female presence in a text. In this instance, however, far from rendering the maiden invisible and powerless, her nameless state confers on her a power and enigmatic presence that enhances the mystique both of the maiden and of the tale itself.

Conventional scholarly wisdom tells me that 'At a springe wel under a thorn' is an unsophisticated affirmation of Mary's role as comforter of the sorrowful, but there is sufficient latitude in 'bote of bale' to allow for alternative readings. Mary is only one of a number of figures who offer help in times of trouble. Who is this compassionate maiden? Is she Mary, is she fairy, is she Goddess?

The ambiguity surrounding the protagonist, and the lyric itself, is enhanced by the reference to the thorn. In the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey is a thorn bush, which is reputed to bloom twice yearly: in May, at the time of the ancient Pagan fertility festival, and at Christmas, a key feast in the Christian calendar. Glastonbury itself is a pilgrimage site for Goddess Pagan and Christians alike; both of us have visited the Abbey and the thorn bush, the Tor and the red spring at Chalice Well many times.

The proximity of the well to the thorn tree in 'At a springe

wel under a thorn' – and of Chalice Well to the Glastonbury thorn – reinforces the sacredness of the well and must remind the reader, be she Goddess Pagan or Christian, of a long tradition of sacred wells and female sacred figures. While 'At a springe wel under a thorn' may be read as a Marian text (is this how you read it?), it blatantly subverts orthodox Christianity by its echoes of Goddess traditions and symbols.

The last two lines of the poem, 'Ho-so wol seche trwe love/ yn hyr hyt schal be founde', remind me of the words of the primary text of Goddess religion, 'The Charge of the Goddess'. In part this reads: 'And you who seek to know me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the mystery, for if that which you seek you find not within yourself, you will never find it without'. This highlights a core difference between Christianity and Goddess religion: where the former locates truth and love in external agents (God, Mary, Church, Bible), in the Goddess tradition it is the individual who is the locus of truth, love and authority. Despite this obvious doctrinal difference, the words of this lyric ring true for me, perhaps enhanced by the ambiguity of 'her', who may be Mary, may be the Goddess, may be me.

I started with words opening the way to the spirit and, like the Ouroboros, I have come full circle. Clearly, magical, mystical texts like 'I sing of a maiden' and 'At a springe wel under a thorn' are integral to my exploration of a spiritual tradition that is firmly rooted in the world from which these lyrics sprang, and are central to my very personal expression of this spirituality.

Patricia

Dear Patricia,

Your account of 'I sing of a maiden' is both stimulating and moving. Like the poem itself, it made me feel and it made me think. What power this short poem contains! Power to question, to wonder, to ponder.

Clearly, 'At a spring well' offers you a similar experience, but one I cannot share. While I do not dislike the poem, its language doesn't enthral me. No goose bumps! My interest in it is intellectual and academic only. For me, it is a classic example of the ambiguity common to medieval representations of the Virgin Mary. As you say, symbols from pagan traditions were systematically appropriated

to characterise her. In addition, the language of secular love was harnessed to express the devotion due to her. So I am aware of the text's potential for ambiguity. But, as a medievalist, I'm also aware that, in its manuscript, this poem is inscribed among a group of Latin texts on the subject of confession. This weight of knowledge makes it difficult for me to read it other than as didactic and Christian.

Even its form seems to me both self-conscious and ponderous. Images are weighed down with symbolism; rhymes are heavy with long vowels and diphthongs (thorn/aforn, ibounde/founde); rhythm is so irregular as to appear like prose arranged as verse; and hard consonants (bote of bale, beside, ibounde) complement the long vowels, to reflect the seriousness of the poem's serious message: that the Virgin Mary and her son are the source of salvation. It simply doesn't generate the sense of wonder and engagement that 'I sing of a maiden' does. So while I can acknowledge (intellectually) its potential for ambiguity, and while your reading sits well with me, I still see it as a poem derived from a conscious formula, rather than one whose origins lie in an unconscious tradition, as you do.

But your reference to Glastonbury does connect me with traditions of great significance to me. It reminded me of my visit to the Abbey site last year, on a glorious day in early summer. Families relaxing in the shade of leafy trees, children playing in the sun and exploring the ruins, laughter ringing out. A place filled with life, yet restful, serene, confident in its dignity; a place connecting past with present ... and with future. A place that inspires me with feelings of awe and exhilaration. Through your words I recapture the delight of standing beside the thorn and the well, and the exhilaration of being in such a holy space; and I experience again that sense of connection with the host of witnesses of whatever faith for whom it has been and is a sacred place, a source of wonder.

Glastonbury's rich traditions are not only religious. The site has strong links with history and literature, particularly with stories of the legendary kingdom of Camelot. Thinking about all this, I turned to a poem that's always been a favourite of mine but, I think it's safe to say, probably not among yours: 'The Corpus Christi carol'.

Re-reading this enigmatic lyric, I am struck anew by its beauty, its power to enthral and challenge me, engaging both my mind and my senses through its verbal and rhythmic patterns. It creates its own world, just as the Arthurian legends do, and invites, or rather

seduces me to enter. It is a poem whose language, rhythm and ballad-like incremental repetitions draw me into and hold me on a ritual journey which extends a promise of some form of encounter with the numinous.

The words 'Lully, lulley ... 'commonly introduce medieval Marian lullaby poems, soothing gentle murmurs of a mother to her babe. But in a stunning reversal, the second line turns gentleness and comforting words to violence and anguished lamentation with its stark statement: 'The fawcon hath born my mak away'. The line is heavy with monosyllables. Hard consonantal, labial and plosive sounds (fawcon, born, my, mak) combine with repetitive 'a' vowels to prolong and weight the line. It is also a syllable longer than the first line, and its rhythm is slightly different as a result. The suggestion of a mother crooning to her new-born child metamorphoses into a scene where an undefined figure keens over the loss of a 'mak' (companion/mate) born off by a bird of prey. Birth to death.

How do I understand this strange action? How do I respond to these actors? All I can do is to read on, follow the text and heed it; submit to its hypnotic rhythm, respond to its rich verbal patterns and open my mind to its suggestive language; engage in its ritual movement, pass through each stage to reach the heart of its mystery; join the speaker (whom I believe to be a woman) on her journey.

I accept the invitation and allow the poem to draw me, step by step, further into itself. This is a path from which I can't deviate. Ballad-like incremental repetition (similar to that of 'I sing of a maiden') connects each stanza. The chain of words (born, bare, orchard, hall, bed, knight and bedside) moves the seeker almost imperceptibly from one focal point to the next through an ever narrowing perspective. First, it lifts me into the sky with the falcon and its prey, then deposits me, with the 'mak', in 'an orchard brown'. Next, it takes me indoors to a hall, and then directs me to a bed and to the figure lying in it, a knight whose wounds bleed day and night. Finally, my gaze rests on a maiden who kneels, weeping, beside the bed and to a stone, also beside the bed, bearing the inscription 'Corpus Christi'. Each vignette presents, individually, an enigma; and perhaps, offers a clue to its unravelling.

As I pass through each stage, I try to solve the clues. Gradually, my perceptions sharpen, until the final tableau reveals all. For I realise that the key to the mystery lies in the poem's language, which

is associative, suggestive, symbolic, ambiguous, open. Almost every word, no matter how simple it seems, may conceal secrets. And it is powerful, even magical; or, I would say, sacramental, pointing the way from the outward and visible to the inward and invisible worlds. Its richness may only be laid bare if clues are followed and questions asked.

The clues lead me to see that the key to understanding this lyric may lie in the cycle of Arthurian legends known as the Grail Quest. The link between this poem and the prose texts is forged through the poem's images of the orchard, the bleeding, bedridden knight and the inscribed stone beside his couch.

The poem's barren orchard gestures to the 'Wasteland' of the legends, and its wounded knight points to their Maimed (or Fisher) King. Both these images signify a spiritual malaise that has settled on the world of Arthur, draining and paralysing both community and individuals. The quest for the Grail is a search for communal and personal renewal.

In the prose narratives of the Grail legends, achievement of the quest is described in a series of detailed scenes centring on the Eucharistic rite. In a moment of awesome mystery, a wounded, bleeding figure emerges from the Eucharistic vessel and distributes the sacrament to a group of knights. Later, the perfect knight Galahad heals the Maimed King, anointing his wounds with blood from a spear, in an image linked to the biblical Passion narratives. Finally, as the Grail Knight receives the sacrament, he experiences an unveiled vision of the divine.

In the lyric, these details are poetically compressed in the image of the stone (both sacrificial altar and gravestone) with its inscription 'Corpus Christi', the words of the consecration. The Eucharist is shown to be the source of spiritual refreshment and health in a style both allusive and haunting, in perfect harmony with the mystery it figures forth.

In a poem of such richness, complexity and mystery, I embrace multivalence: the unidentified knight may be 'maimed king', and 'Grail hero', and sacrificial victim, the 'prey' of the refrain. (It is, perhaps, no accident that the colours adorning the hall and the bed are red and purple, colours associated with high rank, with blood and sacrifice, with penance and mourning and with Christ's Passion.)

But this text began with a woman keening and ends with another,

a maiden, weeping. It seems to me that these women may be one and the same; that it is the maiden's experience that is relived in the poem. So, who is she?

The maiden may bring to mind the group of women weeping at the foot of the Cross or at the tomb of Christ; or the single figure of Mary, as mother, mourning over her son's body as represented so often in Pietas. But I see her in the context of medieval mystical writings. From Bernard of Clairvaux onwards, and drawing, of course, on a tradition going back to texts like 'The Song of Songs', it was common to represent the relationship between the individual soul and Christ as that between wife and husband or between lovers. This conceit was not confined to theological texts, but enters into popular texts including some of the Middle English lyrics, where terms like 'spouse' and 'lemman' (lover) are used to describe the relationship. So, for me, this maiden may represent the human soul, my soul, in search of the spiritual refreshment and joy that come from moments of union with the divine. In its final image, the poem, like the legends, affirms the Eucharistic rite as the source of such moments, and connects spiritual health closely with the ever-renewing grace accessible through the Eucharistic rite.

As a regular worshipper, the sacramental life was the cornerstone of my faith and of my experience of the divine. I must admit that participation in the Eucharist is the main thing I've missed since my break with the church as institution. When I read this poem, its sacramental language connects me with the sacramental life and traditions of the church. Through it, I gain access to the Eucharistic promises of nurture and sustenance, in my private spiritual life.

Elizabeth

Dear Elizabeth,

How do I respond to your letter on 'The Corpus Christi carol'? I have a … perhaps love/hate relationship is too strong, but I am certainly ambivalent about this lyric. It draws me in, leads me through mysterious scenes, suggests Arthurian themes, hints at the dying and rising God of Paganism, offers me a woman's voice and then, in the last lines – so positive for you – I experience only anticlimax. A text that had promised so much delivers only doctrine and orthodoxy. Its ending is not dissimilar to that of 'I sing of a maiden', where dogma

and doggerel intrude sharply into the mystery and magic.

This disappointing ending notwithstanding, 'The Corpus Christi carol' (why is this lyric rarely called by its first line, 'Lully, lulley', in the tradition of other medieval lyrics? This naming only reinforces the popular understanding of it as an exclusively Christian text) satisfies my criteria for, if not a sacred text, then certainly a spiritual one. While it may not lead me to the Goddess, it offers me insights and experiences that are mysterious and otherworldly. It is a ritual experience, an ever-deepening progression, via a series of pericopes, into a magical space rich with multiple meanings.

You noted that your reading of 'At a spring well under a thorn' is influenced by your prior knowledge of its location in a manuscript amidst other Christian texts; in reading 'The Corpus Christi carol' I am unable to ignore the fact that two nineteenth-century versions of this lyric contain references to the Glastonbury thorn. While these later texts are overtly Christian, the enduring significance of Glastonbury as a centre both of Christianity and Goddess Paganism, and the role of the thorn tree in these different religious traditions, invites and encourages a reading that is open to multiple spiritual possibilities.

I accept this invitation willingly and read between and beneath the lines, seeking out what is ambivalent or marginal, searching for the covert values in the text, clues that appear to challenge its dominant ideology. I find the falcon, companion to the Morrigan, Celtic Goddess of death and destruction, which carries the souls of the dead to rebirth. I find a brown orchard, an appropriate site for a ritual of death and possible rebirth. I meet a royal king, possibly a Pagan precursor to the Arthurian Fisher King, shedding his blood, as is his wont, for the life of the land. I read of a standing stone, majestic and mysterious, a monument to some long-forgotten religious rite.

Far from clarifying the meaning of the lyric, I succeed only in opening up further spiritual possibilities. I am fascinated by the subtle and sophisticated way in which it subverts all forms of religious orthodoxy. On the one hand, it undercuts a straightforward Christian reading by its Pagan allusions; on the other hand, the final lines subvert an overt Pagan reading. What more could a scholar of religion, with a literary bent, ask of a text?

How swiftly I have moved from spiritual text to academic excitement but, in the complex package that is my spiritual life, these two are inextricably interwoven; perhaps this explains, in part,

why medieval lyrics have become such significant texts for me. They facilitate an expression of spirituality, access to the sacred, that is holistic, embodied, non-dualistic; they engage my body with their linguistic, poetic, rhythmic beauty; they challenge and stimulate my mind; they nourish my spirit.

A classic example of a lyric that expresses this holism is 'Maiden in the mor lay'. Its simple, repetitive, melodic question and answer structure calls for a bodily response; it invites me to participate joyously, to meet the sacred in the physicality of singing and dancing, of food and drink, of bright flowers and bubbling water. Its seemingly obvious, but strangely elusive meaning challenges me with questions I find irresistible: who is this maiden? why has she spent seven nights in the moor? what is the significance of her solitude, her spartan diet, her unusual bower? The setting, sacred but not sombre, natural but otherworldly, nurtures my spirit, inviting me into an enchanted place where hidden secrets will be told, veiled truths revealed.

I am attracted to this lyric partly because, as in 'At a sprynge wel under a thorn', the protagonist is female and, like the maiden by the well, the maiden in the moor is nameless, elusive and enigmatic, all of which contribute to the sense of mystery which enthrals me. Also, like the maiden by the well, this maiden is alone with nature, by herself on the moor, with no companion, human or animal. Nevertheless, the image conveyed by the lyric, and especially by the bower with its roses and lilies, is not of loneliness, anxiety or fear, but rather of security, containment, quietude. In this hidden moorland world the maiden is alone, independent and self-sufficient. Like the maiden in 'I sing of a maiden', this maiden also demonstrates an active passivity; she minimally, but purposefully, engages with her surrounds, taking only water and a few selected flowers for her personal needs; she demonstrates little overt concern for her security, yet creates an environment which holds her gently, safely. The place where she 'lay' on the moor is not a place of frenetic activity, but of focused restfulness and intentional inner reflection. It is a space that is marked out, seemingly, for the purpose of ritual.

I am reminded of Goddess rituals, which take place in a liminal space, 'between the worlds, beyond the bounds of time'. In this lyric the moor lies in the interstice between an actual, physical location and an otherworldly spirit land; the maiden exists outside of time, within the mysterious, mystical parameters of seven nights and a day. In this

numinous world of ritual the maiden also occupies an ambiguous, liminal position: is she priestess or is she participant? She is apart from her community, yet perhaps her temporary isolation is integral to the spiritual life of society. I find this ambiguity exciting, yet I am aware that, even in our own time, there are many who wish to see women's roles in society and in religion clearly delineated, and deem women who do not conform deviant and a threat to the social and/or spiritual order. So, perhaps this maiden appeals to me precisely because she gently and unobtrusively subverts these restrictive goals. I wonder what a fourteenth-century female reader would have made of her?

It is impossible to know why the maiden was in the moor, but I hazard a guess that it was a time of ritual, or of preparation for ritual. The seven nights and a day (seven full nights, no slipping home under cover of darkness) seem significant, and contain echoes of other ritual times: of the making of a knight, of the duration of a quest, of the preparation for initiation into the Goddess tradition.

'Maiden in the mor lay' does not explicitly mention the Goddess (or indeed, the sacred in any guise) but it does not take much imagination for me to see subtle hints of the Goddess in the text. Intentional, or a product of my own spiritual consciousness? Does it matter? At one level it doesn't, for a sacred text needs no empirical facts to fulfil its purpose, and this lyric, like the others I have written about in previous letters, clearly leads me to the Goddess.

Furthermore, a series of coincidental facts impinge on the way I relate to this lyric, and encourage me to read it with an overt Goddess consciousness. The primrose and violet (the maiden's food) are the traditional flowers of February; February derives its name from Februa, a Roman purification festival held on the fifteenth day of February (is the maiden engaged in a ritual of purification?); February is sacred to the Goddess in Her aspect as the Maiden (the maiden of the lyric). I am not suggesting that February is implied in the text, for it's not. What I want to share with you is the way in which a simple text can become so much more for me (and, perhaps, for any reader) because of the coincidences, personal interpretations and individual biases brought to bear on it.

As a scholar perhaps I should ask if this is legitimate; as a feminist I would assert that it is the only way to read; as a Goddess Pagan lacking a canon of authorised texts, I claim the right to create my own collection of sacred texts; as a medievalist these texts will, of

necessity and by preference, be anonymous, ambiguous, mysterious and lyrical. As a friend, colleague and spiritual companion, what will your response be?

Patricia

Dear Patricia,

Your enthusiasm for 'Maiden in the mor lay' did not surprise me, and I found your account of it both moving and pleasurable. Like you, I have always enjoyed the linguistic, poetic and rhythmic beauty of this allusive and elusive poem. As with 'I sing of a maiden' and 'The Corpus Christi carol', I delight in its puns, its 'suggestivity', its sounds, its verbal and incremental repetitions, its incantatory metrical patterns, and its riddles within riddles. Like a Chinese puzzle, it poses questions, then gives answers that serve only to raise more questions. It generates a powerful sense of mystery and evokes the patterns of ritual.

At this point, I have always come to a halt in my dealings with the poem. Yet I have still felt that there was something else there, something that was eluding me. None of the numerous interpretations of the text I've read over the years has given me any deeper understanding of its appeal for me. From Robertsonian patristic allegory to Speirsian folkloric contexts, nothing has helped me to find the key to understanding the deeper source of its power to intrigue and engage me. Your letter tempted me to look at it again.

It still beguiles me. Its insistent rhythmic patterns and its repetitions (of words and consequently of sounds) play with my senses, creating an hypnotic effect that almost completely suppresses any attempt at intellectual analysis. I feel as if the poem is controlling me, rather than allowing me to master it. To compound this sense of disorientation, each stanza begins with what appears to be a clear statement of fact, but almost immediately the clarity dissolves through ambiguity, questioning and withholding of information. I wonder how is 'welle' to be read? Clearly it has different meanings in stanzas two and three. How am I to answer the questions about her diet? Frustration is exponentially increased by the suspension of information until the last lines of each stanza. The poem is playing games with me. Is it a game in itself, perhaps, not meant to be taken seriously, except as a party piece? Certainly, it is fun to read, and its formal textures of

rhythm, rhyme and verbal play are sensuous and alluring. But I still have a nagging feeling that it is something more than this for me.

Thinking over your comments about this strange poem I have begun to realise that its formal beauty and vigour – and its playfulness – gives me a sense of release, of freedom, if you like. It's a kind of escapism, I suppose. I simply revel in the sensuous beauty of the setting – I might be alone in a herbal bath, with wine and grapes; or picnicking solo in the bush with billy tea and damper!

More seriously, what you say about 'active passivity' is significant. It seems to me that your insight helps to explain why, in my frivolous images above, I seem to be claiming solitariness as such a desirable state. Your description of the maiden's reaction to her isolation and scanty provisions reminds me of the importance of independence and self-sufficiency in my life. In this maiden, I see my selfhood; always one who is comfortable with my own company, delighting in quiet time and solitude. As an only child, one learns these habits early and comes to value them greatly as one goes through life. Times of spiritual and mental refreshment, times, too, perhaps, of indulgence!

Since I withdrew from the institution, I have struggled with the loss of community this has entailed. Anglican theology is strong on community: the concept of the community of the faithful, the sense of mutual support that this engenders; the idea of the church as 'the body of Christ'; the credal affirmation of the 'communion of saints'; the simple importance of communal worship and sharing of the church's sacramental life. Despite my firm belief that remaining in the institution was no longer an option for me, it has been hard to strike out on my own and feel that my position is valid and acceptable to the 'other' whose world I still wish to access. So a belief in my self-sustainability outside the church community is a very important commodity for me.

Reading 'Maiden in the mor lay' after receiving your letter focused my mind on this issue and I began to wonder whether, as a post-Church Christian, I might find a 'type' of this self-sufficient isolated moor-maiden within the scriptural tradition of my faith. My quest was successful and I name Hagar, whose story is told in Genesis. A slave woman whose presence in the house of the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah was both difficult and unsustainable; who was oppressed, rebellious, awkward, an uncomfortable reminder of something best forgotten; who could not remain within the community. Forced into

isolation, she managed not only to survive on meagre resources in the wilderness, but, as well, she flourished spiritually, apart from her community. In her solitude, she was visited by heavenly messengers, was promised a future for herself and her son, and, having 'seen God and lived', she gave the deity a name, El-roi.

I take these women as a sign that my developing private spiritual life will be sustainable, that I will find the resources to nurture it and that, like Hagar, I will meet the divine in my solitude. So I take comfort and learn courage from these 'outcasts' as I explore and develop my private spirituality. Through them, I recognise the difficulties in the path I've taken, but have faith that my journey will be blessed.

Elizabeth

Our letters formed a communication that was both challenging and nourishing. We learned so much, not only about the lyrics and their role in our spirituality, but about ourselves. As the correspondence progressed it also became apparent that we each read very differently.

As a student of English Literature, Elizabeth was brought up with the 'New Critical' paradigm and her reading and writing practices remain grounded in its now disparaged principles. She learned to read closely, to use the classical rhetorical terms, to consider features such as rhyme, rhythm and form, to notice and describe a text's diction and imagery. She was encouraged to read for the richness of the text. She still finds it helpful, indeed natural, to use its vocabulary when she wants to describe her response to particular texts, to explain their effects on her, and to articulate her relationship with them.

But while she uses its terminology, the New Critical paradigm is not an end in itself for her. Rather, in her critical world, it sits quite comfortably with the theoretical paradigms of the last thirty to forty years. Influenced by cultural materialist and feminist critical practices, she acknowledges and honours the historical and cultural circumstances of a text's production, distribution and preservation. In other words, she reads contextually and, in the case of the Middle English lyrics covered in this correspondence, the context is her spirituality, here and now as a middle-aged woman, an academician and medievalist, and a post-Church Christian. Her discourse is catholic, in the true sense of the word. While it embraces

feminist, historicist and psychoanalytic paradigms, it is expressed in a vocabulary and form shaped by a long habit of New Critical 'close reading', and written 'lushly' to capture the way the poems touch her senses.

Patricia's reading experience is somewhat different; she draws on a number of theorists to create a reading praxis that is broad, incisive and interdisciplinary. John Speirs's approach to reading and understanding medieval texts, which combined a commitment to exploring the internal, often unconscious, mythic and ritual elements manifested in the medieval texts with a reading style which deliberately sought to engage both the objective mind of the reader and the life experience, emotions and judgement of the reader, resonates with Patricia's commitment to the holistic tenets of feminist praxis. Expanding on Speirs's approach, using the feminist psychoanalytic approach of Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva's theory of countertransference, Patricia explores the conscious and unconscious impact of the lyrics on her as a reader.[16] This, coupled with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's 'feminist hermeneutics of suspicion', provides a framework for questioning 'the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models, and unarticulated interests of contemporary ... interpretation'.[17] In recent times, cultural materialism has offered Patricia a structure within which to expand this questioning to look at the way texts, consciously or unconsciously, can subvert and disrupt the dominant ideology, and reveal alternative values and meaning systems.

As the correspondence proceeded, a number of other things also became apparent. In writing the letters we were not only documenting the role of the lyrics in our own spiritual lives, but were also developing a deeper understanding of our own spiritualities. Our letters and our thoughts spiralled, returning again and again to key themes and issues, each time with enhanced depth and understanding.

Central to Elizabeth's writing and reflections are the themes of separation, independence and community. How, as a post-Church Christian, can she find that sense of community, which is so vital for her spiritual life? What are the rituals that sustain her today? How does she continue to honour her religious heritage and traditions? Who are the role models on this journey? For Patricia the questions were different, but the process no less significant. As she wrote, it became clear that she was seeking to strengthen the links between her own developing Goddess Paganism and the much older traditions of

Paganism. How does a twenty-first century woman acknowledge and build upon a religious heritage that exists only as hints and whispers? What texts are available to help her tap its richness? How can these texts speak to her today?

For each of us, the lyrics were a resource and a catalyst as we sought answers to our questions. We explored creative and challenging collaborative reading and writing processes. We discovered untold literary beauty and depth. And, most significantly, we found ways to satisfy the desire for spiritual nourishment, for encounter with the sacred, which we share, despite our very different religious frameworks.

Notes

[1] Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Beacon, Boston, 1980).

[2] See also the preface to the second edition of Christ's book (Beacon, Boston, 1986).

[3] John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (Faber and Faber, London, 1971) pp. 24–25.

[4] John Stevens, 'Medieval Lyrics and Music' in Boris Ford (ed.), *Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition, The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* (Pelican, Middlesex, 1982) p. 251.

[5] Patricia Rose, 'The Quest for Identity: Spiritual Feminist Ritual as an Enactment of Medieval Romance' in Kathleen McPhillips and Lynne Hume (eds), *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006) pp. 17–18.

[6] Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, Gillian C. Gill (trans.), (Columbia University Press, New York, 1993) p. 58.

[7] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1958).

[8] Judy Harrow, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Pagan Guide* (ECW, Ontario, 2002) p. 247.

[9] Speirs wrote extensively on the Paganism of the Middle Ages, and of medieval writings. He posited that the traditions and practices of nature Paganism are preserved in the lyrics, many of which are remnants of Pagan rituals, or seasonal songs of nature. He singled out a number of lyrics, which may be remnants of older religious rites: *Ich am of Irlande* and *Of everykune tre* (dance ritual songs), *Maiden in the mor lay* and *All night by the rose, rose* (initiation rituals), and *The Corpus Christi carol.* (Speirs, pp. 45–96). While Stevens did not develop Speirs' theory of extant Paganism in the lyrics, he did note that that 'Poems (songs? dances?) like *Maiden in the mor lay* and *The Corpus Christi carol* are liable to go on teasing us for ever

with their enigmatic power'. (Stevens, p. 275).

[10] To our knowledge the lyrics have never been read in this way. Indeed, recent scholarship has generally neglected medieval lyrics, perhaps because they are not compatible with the goals of the new historicist theories which have come to dominate medieval studies in the last two decades. See Seth Lerer, 'The Endurance of Formalism in Middle English Studies', *Literature Compass*, (2003), www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature, accessed 15 November 2005.

[11] See for example D.W. Robertson, 'Historical Criticism' in A.S. Downer (ed.), *English Institute Essays 1950*, (Columbia University Press, New York,1951).

[12] Dana Kramer-Rolls suggests that Mary is both the repository of folk religious beliefs and a subversive locus by which doctrinal Christianity is moderated in the popular mind. Dana Kramer-Rolls, 'The Emergence of the Goddess Mary from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages', *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*, 6:1 (2004), pp. 34–50.

[13] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (Sphere, London, 1984).

[14] Catherine Clement and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, Jane Marie Todd (trans.), (Palgrave, New York, 2001).

[15] Texts of all four lyrics are from R.T. Davies (ed.), *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology* (Faber, London, 1966).

[16] This approach was developed and explained in detail in Patricia Rose, 'The Role of Medieval and Matristic Romance Literature in Spiritual Feminism', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2002.

[17] Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Clark, Edinburgh, 1990) p.16. The phrase 'hermeneutics of suspicion' owes its origins to Paul Ricoeur, who described Freud, Marx and Nietzsche as the three great 'masters of suspicion'. See Paul Ricoeur, cited in Erin White, 'Figuring and Refiguring the Female Self: Towards a Feminist Hermeneutic' in Morny Joy and Penelope Magee (eds.), *Claiming our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars*, (Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Adelaide, 1994) p. 153, ftn.11.

Women changing: Relating spirituality and development through the wisdom of Mothers' Union members In Tanzania[1]

ELEANOR SANDERSON

Introduction: Women changing

Wisdom is embodied in the living of life and life is lived with others. Relationships and change, as asserted by Carol P. Christ,[2] are symbiotic; conversations with others engender movements within our self. Relationships and change are also embodied, hence the movements engendered in our self through conversations reflect those with whom we are participating. This is why Luce Irigaray perceives that the closest women get to 'speaking (as) women' is when they 'are speaking amongst themselves'.[3]

This paper is formed from women speaking amongst themselves. I am speaking primarily from conversations amongst women to primarily conversations with women. I am speaking from conversations with Mothers' Union members in Tanzania, who I will refer to as Umaki,[4] who have been research partners in my doctoral work exploring embodied geographies of development and spirituality.

I came to know these women because the Anglican Diocese they belong to is the Companion Diocese to the one that I am part of in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Our partnering in research was part of fostering understanding and support in this relational context. Through knowing these women I came to know of the global Mothers' Union network, begun in England in 1876 by Mary Sumner, the wife of an Anglican priest. The Mothers' Union has subsequently grown with the spread of the Anglican Communion and now has over 3.6 million members in 77 countries. It works to 'support family life and empower women in their communities' through supporting the needs of families, tackling the causes of injustice and also providing a network to strengthen members in their Christian faith.[5] Each Mothers' Union group is connected administratively through regional representation and through upholding each other in cycles of prayer. Whilst each group runs separately, common liturgies, development

support grants, and training and advocacy initiatives are available to all. Worldwide membership is not premised on gender, marital status or parental status, but with Umaki my conversations were only with women. Umaki primarily form their self-expression by their immediate relationships and community rather than a consciousness explicitly shaped by the organisational framing of the Mothers' Union. This emphasis is consequentially reflected in my research.

For Umaki, the Mothers' Union groups are an autonomous space for Christian women to discern, express, teach and minister in their faith. This is particularly significant given that in their immediate church context there have not been, nor are there currently, female ordained ministers.

Through partnering with Umaki in participatory research, my concern has been to hear and learn from the contextual theology implicit in Umaki's self-expression and share that wisdom with those seeking to support them. As a consequence of this research I am now visiting and speaking within church-based women's groups here in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Through this paper I therefore speak to the lived experience of this church context as well as the conversational context that this special issue embodies.

Specifically, I wish to contribute by sharing the wisdom of Umaki to contemporary expressions of women and spirituality because doing so poignantly illustrates some of the concerns articulated in feminist spiritual 're-imaginings',[6] namely the rejection of hierarchical dualisms resulting in disembodiment and the erasure of the spirit in expressions of humanity. Knowing ourselves in relation to Umaki, in turn, informs perspectives for self-understanding. This is particularly so for those women's groups explicitly connected to them and who, through Christian theology, are called to know themselves as many parts of the one body.[7] This calling is a relational calling that consequentially fosters change.

In my conversations within Umaki I focused on exploring change. Umaki explicitly embody development and spirituality and, consequentially, change. Definitions of development, particularly according to Post-Development theorists[8] are political and contestable, as illustrated by Escobar's accusation that development discourse has 'created a space in which only certain things could be said or imagined'.[9] Mindful of this political challenge, the conversational context of this research within Umaki shaped development to be

understood as concerned with the realisation of future possibilities from perspectives of present realities. In regard to spirituality, Umaki have an explicit Christian spiritual self-expression. Also mindful of the need for clarity in spiritual terminology, here I focus on spirituality, as opposed to religion for example, in order to emphasise the personal embodiment and lived expression of faith communities.[10] The spirituality expressed by Umaki is the embodiment of their contextual theology.

Whilst this paper is concerned to express Umaki's embodiment of development and spirituality through their own words, a further contextual introduction is necessary to introduce them here. Umaki live in a rural part of Tanzania[11] in communities of predominantly subsistence farmers with relatively few material resources and are particularly vulnerable to periods of famine. They live in close proximity to the borders of Rwanda and Burundi and have been greatly affected by the influx of refugees, particularly during the Rwandan Genocide, and Mothers' Union groups have been established inside existing refugee camps. The spread of HIV/AIDS is particularly prevalent in this area, a concern expressed by Umaki in their awareness of the growing number of orphans and widows. Umaki meet weekly as a group, taking it in turns to teach, plan activities and lead meetings. They also visit each other frequently between meetings to support one another and their families. They co-ordinate income generating projects and education programmes, but above all seek to support each other in facing the challenges of their environment.

I learnt and intuited Umaki's reflected wisdom through the way they chose to teach me and direct this research. They enfolded me into a relationship with them by incorporating me into Umaki and in that context shared with me their thoughts and prayers. Their way of teaching me demonstrates the heart of their wisdom, which is to privilege relationships and embodiment. I have therefore chosen to introduce each Umaki member who speaks into this conversation by making reference to a way in which she taught me of Umaki. For example, rather than giving the women pseudonyms I refer to them as 'the woman who taught me to cook peanuts'.

In the following section of this paper I will expand upon and express the relational context of change as privileged by Umaki and its significance for the academic debates in which I am situated. Moving away from privileging this academic context, I will then expand upon

the embodied expressions of relational change as expressed through the reflections of Umaki in what I have titled 'The Heart and Home of Change'. In light of the wisdom expressed by Umaki, I then speak back to considerations for women and spirituality, particularly drawing upon the concerns from the womanist theology of African-American women for 'new realities of hope and salvation'.[12] I then conclude by envisaging the embodied changes of subjectivity in the conversational contexts this introduction has highlighted. These are changes consequential to knowing ourselves in relation with the women of Umaki and the spirituality they express; fostering our embodied wisdom in the living of life with others.

A relational context of change

> 'There has never been any construction of subjectivity, or any human society, which has been worked through without the help of the divine'.[13]

As this quotation from Luce Irigaray's *Divine Women* asserts, human progression and change in the realisation and cultivation of society are intimately connected to divinity. Yet within geographies of development, questions of divinity and spirituality are sparse, if not absent.[14] I see this absence, particularly in relation to geography, as reflective of enduring dualistic thinking separating mind/body, nature/culture, and spirit/matter, and consequentially shaping locations of analysis and the (C)artographic frame of analysis away from spiritual bodies. This is symptomatic of a broader philosophy and history of approaching the 'real from the outside' that Luce Irigaray asserts has made 'the soul dissolve' before reaching substantive questions about our humanity.[15] This assertion correlates with the disciplinary history of geography and is indicated by a number of critiques of spiritual absences.[16] In the majority of those critiques, the challenge of spiritual absence is accompanied by a strong assertion of the broader disciplinary significance of paying attention to this area of human experience. Feminist geography must also inform this disciplinary significance, particularly when feminist geography has done so much to challenge the entrenched thinking of hierarchical dualisms.[17]

In Susan Cahill's introduction to the anthology *Wise Women*, an anthology of over 2000 years of spiritual writing by women, she expresses the profound significance of women's cultivation of spiritual

meaning. This is a cultivation that often occurs amidst the practicalities of life and from the 'grounds of a gendered experience',[18] one that is deeply compelling for women, despite often troubled relations with religious institutions. The work of Carol P. Christ illustrates this compulsion as well as these troubled relations, particularly by seeking to write explicitly as a spiritual woman within theological institutions. *She Who Changes* seeks to express something of the foundations of these troubled relations by perceiving a failure to develop relational understandings of the divine in classical theology as connected to the failure to accept a relationality with the female body. Carol P. Christ's synopsis of feminist re-imaginings of the divine and the world, at their heart, speak of 'embodiment' and 'relationship',[19] countering the hierarchical dualisms that ensue from a distant, disconnected and disembodied characterisation of the divine. Spirituality, in feminist re-imaginings, seeks cohesion and integration with the whole of life, as Christ expresses: 'we are seeking spiritual understandings that can inspire us to create a better world for women, for all people, and for all beings in the web of life'.[20]

As illustrated by Carol Christ's critique of classical theism and also demonstrated in the critiques of Luce Irigaray, Christian spiritualities have not always had a comfortable relationship with the body. The need to move away from this discomfort, recognise ourselves as our bodies and do so explicitly and comfortably within Christianity is the urging in Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's work *I am my Body*.[21] More recently, Anne Daniell[22] calls us to a (re)conceiving of the spiritual body in Pauline Christian theology in light of recent feminist scholarship that challenges an entrenched Cartesian discourse that has been influential in explications of this theology. Such re-conceptions have great potential significance for the particular spiritual context within which I am located because reference to bodies is a prominent part of Anglican liturgy. Language relating to the body fills the self-expressions of Umaki and the expression of being the Body of Christ was the expression I came to understand as their overarching context.

Whilst I was very conscious of my difference in embodied subjectivity, Umaki's relationship to me was marked by a celebration of our *co-joined* embodied subjectivity; being one in the Body of Christ. The following prayer was said by a Umaki leader at the close of my first meeting with their group:

> We thank you Lord that in you there are no muhangaza or kihaya, no mzungu or African. [23]

This prayer echoes Paul's words in Colossians (chapter 3, verse 11) that there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, but all are one in Christ, inserting the names of the two local tribes and the distinction between African and non-African (mzungu). This co-joined subjectivity is therefore not only indicative of the relationship between members of Umaki and me, but indicative of the relationship between Umaki, other Tanzanian people, me and Christ. This body to which 'we are all one' is implicitly a relational body; a body constituted by manifold relationships because in Christian faith Christ is understood in relation to Creator God and the life-giving Holy Spirit. The Body of Christ in Christian theology, the place of being one, is therefore at its heart this relational body; the relational Trinitarian divine and the relational community of humanity and the living world. This relational body is the context for change within Umaki and an encapsulating world-view.

In Doreen Massey's latest book *For Space,*[24] she challenges that geography needs to move towards a relational politics of space. As part of this relational politics she incorporates human relationships and human/non-human relations. There is, however, no mention of the divine or of spiritualities being part of those non-human relations. Feminist geography has a particular role in not perpetuating dichotomous framings of analysis that truncate rather than expand expressions of humanity. The feminist assertion of embodied geography cannot afford to ignore spiritual bodies. To do so, in the context of the emerging debate between development and spirituality, leaves certain things unsaid and unimagined (to re-use the words of Escobar). In particular it perpetuates a silence from communities such as Umaki in favour of further privileging those already conceived as more powerful. Ver Beek raises this concern about the need to take away the taboo status of spirituality within development studies.[25]

Understanding the relational context of change for Umaki is therefore important both for understanding their embodied experience of development and for further appreciating spiritual experience and expressions from women.

Umaki: The Heart and Home of Change

This image of the heart and home of change came from the woman who took me to her home to eat with her family and who is known locally as Mother Nourishment, because she provides food when there are church functions. She used this expression to describe the work of Umaki when speaking to a church service on behalf of the group:

> Our hearts are our homes and our homes are our hearts; if our hearts are not open to the Spirit of God then neither are our homes, and if our homes are not open to the Spirit of God then neither are our hearts.

On the wall of another member's house are written the words, 'My heart' decoratively surrounded by images of creation. Above the doorway of this house, similarly decorated, are the words 'Jesus is coming'.

Through Umaki sharing the stories of their responses to the refugees, orphans and widows in their area, we appreciate the weight of this gesture. Many of these women have taken children into their homes and care for them as their own. They spoke of giving whatever they had to the 'visitors' who come in need and they gave food and gifts abundantly to me – a visitor not in the same need.

These expressions of hospitality embody development and spirituality and Umaki articulated this consciously when they chose to express their self identity in a church service speaking about their work, with a drama of the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verses 31–46: where Christ teaches that we do to Jesus as we do to 'the least of these'; the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned. Umaki represented this teaching by performing a family household where many visitors came in need but were turned away because the family was instead expecting a visit from Jesus, who then arrived and told the family that he had already visited them in the form of these people in need.

To return to the doorway of the house I described above, crossing the threshold of this Umaki member's house then speaks of recognising the visitor as the Body of Christ. Understanding the embodied expression of the house as the home, which is also the heart, the doorway of this house is then also the doorway of the heart. These words, 'Jesus is coming', speak of the future-now of Christian eschatology and incarnational theology and therefore declare the relational becoming of the Body of Christ that this heart and home

are a part of; both the visitor and the householder are the Body of Christ.

This doorway, this heart, is expressly understood within Umaki to be open to others. This is articulated in the following quote from the woman who brought me milk from her cow, which is a precious gift to give in the dry season:

> We meet as a group to help other people, such as people in the hospital. Also the children who are left without parents, who are orphans. We seek to help those who don't have parents. We help them with different things, clothes, things to wear, food and things that they need.

Community development, community, is the support of others and each other's corporality and spirituality. This flow within spirituality and corporality is synergetic with the relational flow within the Body of Christ: the Triune God becoming flesh and then the flesh of this world becoming incarnationally one with and within that divinity. In such a relational understanding, distinctions between corporality and spirituality disappear, as expressed in what follows, firstly by the woman who fed me cooking bananas and then expressed in the prayers of one Umaki member in my final group meeting with them:

> The most important thing about the Umaki is if we're together, if there's someone who's sick or in trouble we can help them, we can go and visit them. If there's someone who doesn't have money to buy clothes, we can help, we can go and farm and get some money and help them out. And if there are elderly widowers we can go and visit them and help them out. And if someone is mourning, who has lost someone, we will go and comfort them. I see that the important thing in the Umaki is to help each other.
>
> (Prayer) We thank you for the fellowship in visiting each other and encouraging each other in different ways. We pray that you would bless us and bless those who have come to visit us and those of us who are staying here. We pray that you would continue to strengthen us in our fellowship. It is your love and desire that we continue to visit each other and to share with our families, relatives and friends. It is your desire that those of us who can, visit our friends and families and to share with them. This is your blessing and your gift for us. You know what our vision is, Lord, as we visit and share with those people, and we pray that you would give us strength and protection as we do this in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Community development in Umaki begins with community; it begins with individuals and their relationships. Each woman, each member of Umaki, is the beginning and the open end of development. Umaki are nourishment for each other and for their wider communities. Material provision is understood within, and as an implicit part of, their relational context of change. Because this is a relational context in the Body of Christ, the Spirit of God is also understood within and as being part of that material and relational provision. That spiritual expression is most clearly seen in the prominence of prayer for Umaki. Prayer is a corporal breathing of the Body of Christ.

In joining the visiting among Umaki members I would ask different members what they thought was the most important activity that Umaki did. The importance of prayer was a common response. Umaki members would invariably pray when we sat down together in their house, pray before sharing any food and pray again when I came to leave. The following quote is the response to my question of why prayer was so important by one woman who led me in a day of visiting her neighbours:

> In our group prayer is the most important because that is what you start with. That's what you start with, if you don't start with prayer and committing it to God, you might as well not do anything.

I asked Umaki members about the possible separation of spirituality from the more identifiably 'developmental' aspects of Umaki, such as the craftwork income generation projects. This was a division not allowed, as illustrated in the following reflection by the woman who later prayed for me to have strength to complete my research:

> All of this work is surrounded by prayer. None of this work we do without prayer. It couldn't happen without it – it's not possible. All of these things couldn't happen without prayer ending it and starting it. When we start with prayer, when we commit things to God at the beginning, the spirit of God strengthens our spirit and gives us understanding and ideas of what is happening in our group. Then at the end when we finish in prayer, we bless what has happened in the time, we ask God to bless that, and we say 'Amen', God has received our prayers and we know that God is also doing work. As well as to pray and place things in the hands of God, we thank God at the end. We thank God for everything and all things. It's important to thank God.

The opposition to making a division between spirituality and development is found in the relational context of change identified as the Body of Christ; to discern non-spiritual activity is to leave this Body, this relational context. This context, already illustrated at the heart of change for Umaki, is again seen here, emphasised by a woman who shared an example of her Bible teaching with me after reflecting the following overview of Umaki:

> If there's someone in the group who's sick we have times when we go visiting. If someone's sick in the group, each of us will take peas or bananas or beans or something like that, and we will all take them on our heads and go to visit. We will try to go together. And we do the same for people who've lost a loved one, a husband or a child, or mother. And even for someone who's had a child, we'll go and when we go, we study the Word of God to fellowship together. Now that we are all together, we are very close. We do the work to share together, to fellowship together.

In using the language of fellowship, this woman uses the language of New Testament Christians; fellowship, or koinonia in the Greek, connotes fellowship of the Spirit amongst each other. Etymologically koinonia shares the same root as village, which, whilst not explicitly expressed as such by this woman, aids my understanding of her Biblical interpretation and why fellowship is then understood as the overarching expression of community development by this member of Umaki. 'The work' is a means of 'fellowship together' and not reversed in priority. The embodied experience of development and spirituality is, to refer back to the opening quotation of this section, the synergetic flow between the heart/home, those who are in need and the Spirit of God. This synergetic flow is expressed as implicit within the context of fellowship within the Body of Christ.

When we understand the Body of Christ as relational, with ourselves as the visitor to Umaki as part of that Body's expression, humility invites us to discern the wisdom there expressed by these women and the Triune God.

Changing Bodies: Being within the mutilated resurrected Body of Christ

An attitude of humility is different from valorisation. Because of the gendered experience of homes, a synonymous association between the heart and home can seem both inspiring and oppressive when expressed by women. My aim here is not to valorise Umaki as models

of spiritual women, but in the humility required in all relationships, to be open to changes that being in relation with them engenders. Specifically, their privileging of embodiment causes me to ask myself to reconsider, 'what is the Body of Christ that I am part of?'

The embodied expressions of Umaki contained a double language of joy and sorrow. This double language also marks the works of womanist theology, theology written from an African-American women's positionality explicitly reclaiming African roots. An important part of being with Umaki was sharing in the recognition of pain, grief and sorrow. We spoke of the horrific violence witnessed during the Rwandan Genocide, we experienced the increasing dry season and shortage of fodder, stories were quietly shared of oppressive and drunk husbands, and we shared the grief of lost generations to HIV/AIDS.

The following reflection is given by a woman who sent the remaining grandchild that she speaks of here to my house, in order to give me a gift of bananas:

> It has helped me a lot, the group has helped me a lot. I have no family now. All my children have died and I have just one grandchild. After my children died, if the Mothers' Union hadn't been there, I would have killed myself. I wouldn't have wanted to keep on going, but they calmed me down and they comforted me.

Limited resources often frustrate the visions that Umaki express, as is illustrated in the following quote from a woman who showed me how they make mud bricks:

> The development in the women's group isn't too much; it's quite small, because we don't have a lot of help. We have been building a house for the group. We saved some money to build it, but we haven't got enough. But we have tried. We got the rocks and we made our own bricks, we did it ourselves.

After taking me to visit with Umaki members in her area, one of the leaders of Umaki expressed to me the difficulty of co-ordinating training and organisation between the different groups:

> In the past we've had seminars and teaching about different things that we can understand. We also learn from other churches. We get together and have dramas, plays and dances to show what each group have been doing. That way we learn from each other. But communication is difficult, more so now. We might find that someone's prepared something to show

> and teach us, but they don't have the money to go and travel, so they can't – or others miss out because they can't afford to go. That makes the heart go cold. But we do what we can in this area.

Despite these frustrations, the fellowship of sharing in each other's sorrows has a profound effect on Umaki members, as this great-grandmother expresses:

> The biggest thing for me was when they came and visited and encouraged me. They met with me when I was about to decide to go and be with the Lord. But now I'm still talking with the Lord in my old age!

In sharing in each other's sorrows, there is still a deep joy because to share together, to fellowship together, is still the beginning and open end of development. This sharing is 'the love' that is the ultimate aim and heart of Umaki, as described in the following quotation from a woman who shared her sweet tea with me:

> In everything of life we know what's happening in the lives of each other, whether you've had a child or whether you're sick. And it's the love. We're all in love.

This love is for the other and for the self, as illustrated in the two ways of understanding the expression of 'Jesus is coming' written above the doorway of the Umaki member's house and reflected in the following quotation from a founding member of a new Umaki who is responding here to my enquiry into the choices she has made in ranking her group's activities in order of importance:

> We support each other and we help others. After helping others, income generation is next in importance. We use the income to support, but the support is more important that the income. We support people in the ways that we are able and by our ability, we help in different ways that we can. Income generation is to increase the ability to help and to find ways of helping. We are selling cakes and bread and things. That money is used to help other people, but also not forgetting ourselves, because we can't forget ourselves as well.

Sharing together in the generosity of love was the self-expression by one Umaki member of the Body of Christ explicitly expressed in terms of ecclesiology, of being the church. During a day of visiting, I sat with five Umaki members gathered on the floor of one of their houses sharing milky tea and cooking bananas. One woman pointed to us all saying, 'this is the real church; sharing together, sharing across cultures and eating together, in prayer, this is the real church.'

The church is explicitly understood as the Body of Christ. The actual body of Jesus Christ is a body that is mutilated and resurrected. As I know myself as part of the Body of Christ, I now consciously know myself as part of the mutilated resurrected body of Christ, because this is the body Umaki express.

The mutilated resurrected Body of Christ indicates the flow of love that is prioritised in the forming of this relational context of change. That flow of love causes the extension of the self to others with a knowledge of the mutilating potential of doing so; having no food left because you gave it to someone who came or taking into your home orphaned children and dividing whatever limited resources you have to pay for education equally between these children and your own, or suffering the consequences of breaking the silence about sexual abuse in order to change systemic oppression in your society. That flow of love is also the resurrection of all marks of mutilation. This is the tangible resurrection of Christian eschatology, but also a resurrection experienced and seen in the future-now of that eschatology; the affirmed fellowship of love, the women who support you to leave an abusive husband and work to provide you with a house of your own, the receipt of needed food, the new family after losing your own. In this section so far I have perhaps shared what could mostly be seen as many expressed marks of mutilation. When I think of Umaki's embodied marks of resurrection, I immediately think of them dancing and teaching me to dance with them.

Each group meeting finishes with singing and dancing. These are times of shared celebration. They are celebrations, as articulated here by two of my dance partners, of their lives as women and their lives in spiritual fellowship:

> We learned to sew and we study the Bible. We learn dances, and drums and singing. We dance – we are very good at dancing! The women are the ones that dance.

> The Mothers' Union is something that's very good. All the women get together and we eat together and we fellowship together. We dance and we sing and we feel better in ourselves.

I often left people's houses with dancing. We would sing and dance our way back through the dirt tracks as they saw me safely away from their homes. One such woman, who danced me from her house, laughingly speaks here of the celebration of dancing:

> When we go visiting we study in the Word and we pray, and we sing songs and encourage each other, and we jump and we sing, and we dance, dance, we really dance a lot, and if all of Umaki had been here now we'd all be dancing, dancing, until we got really hot!

Writing on the significance of dance, shouting and rhythm for African-American women, Delores Williams identifies them as the expression of women's faith statements and celebrations of 'the great work of the spirit that brings and sustains whatever is positive in their lives'.[26] Dancing in Umaki is a celebration. Significantly, marks of resurrection, as I am intuiting them within Umaki, are not resurrections away from the body; they are not transcending the body as is the supposed capacity of masculine discourse as challenged by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick.[27]

This Body, this mutilated resurrected Body, has now become a potential departing point, a context of my knowing. I am humbly grateful to Umaki for enfolding me into their embodied wisdom, accepting me as an Umaki member and subsequently changing my knowledge. I therefore humbly offer my articulation of Umaki's embodied wisdom as part of the challenged necessity to record expressions of hope and salvation in the context of the womanist search, identified by Emile Townes, for new realities of hope and salvation.[28] Humility in this context is necessary because of the embodied power imbalances in this articulation and therefore the inevitable danger of appropriation.

Whilst these expressions from Umaki are significant in themselves, the relational context of the mutilated resurrected Body of Christ engendered from their expressions is also significant in appreciating the constant newness of hope within it. This newness is indicative of its implicit changing Body; a newness and change implicit because this Body is above all else relational. This gesture of knowing can possibly foster some of the 'richer visions for our life together' that Emile Townes also asserts the need for.[29] To summarise this gesture in the context of Umaki's embodying of development and spirituality, I will say that Umaki understand development and spirituality as participating in the relational flow of love resurrecting all that causes mutilation in the Body of Christ and therefore enabling each other to dance together.

Conclusions: Embodying Change

The process between intuiting that something is wrong and finding the language to articulate that intuition can sometimes be long and difficult, as illustrated by the autobiographical writing in Carol P. Christ's work and the explicit discussion of becoming woman and speaking as woman in the work of Luce Irigaray. The prayers, reflections and wisdom of Umaki emanate the necessity of understanding the relational and embodied foundation that underlies the self expression of themselves and their community and development work. Without an analytical vision ensuing from such a foundation, the wisdom of Umaki and their embodied geographies of development and spirituality can easily be overlooked, as has been the case in the disciplinary debates highlighted at the beginning of this paper.

Through my speaking with the women in the conversational contexts of Umaki and expressions of feminist spiritualities, my consciousness has been shaped away from perpetuating the disembodied philosophical history of my cultural heritage that often makes it hard to see spiritual bodies. As a consequence of my relationships within Umaki, I have come to understand these women's expressions of development and spirituality, their expressions of change, as articulations from a subjective consciousness within the mutilated resurrected Body of Christ. This embodied appreciation challenges the segmentation between different facets of our life experiences (such as explicit distinctions between development and spirituality) that is also reflected in feminist expressions of spirituality more generally. This appreciation also challenges our embodied subjectivity to be corporally rather than individually conceived; to know ourselves as constituted within the same body.[30] Such relational knowledge must, as consequential to all relationships, change us.

By appreciating the geographical spread of particular spiritual bodies, it is therefore significant that in our conversations about women and spirituality, as well as focusing on the specificity of our own geographic location, we also know ourselves in relation to Umaki – to know ourselves as part of a global body and as potential visitors to the Umaki house. In the context of the spirituality expressed by Umaki, this relational knowledge with them will solicit from us the flow of love engendered from appreciating the mutuality of our marks of mutilation and resurrection and our desire to dance together. Really

knowing this mutuality in our own embodied subjectivity will solicit a continual creativity of change within us and between us because relationships continually change us.

I will not conclude with a prescription of what that change might be for either of the conversational contexts within which I now speak, because that is not necessarily conducive to the fostering of relational creativity. Instead I will share one final prayerful expression from Umaki, which was spoken by a woman whose young daughter sat with us as we prayed. This prayer encapsulates much of the relational flow of love within the Body of Christ and is of particular pertinence to contexts concerned with women and spirituality.

> Look, God, our houses receive lots of people and lots of people who need help from our families. But, God, I especially lift up those children, girls and boys, who don't have help. Even those, God, who have even failed to go to school. As we think and talk about ways of helping these children, we continue to ask that you would be our help. God, would you go before us and look at these children who are walking the streets and they have no help. Look, that there are lots of people still who don't respect girls and look down on them and don't think that they deserve to go to school. We pray God for your honouring and uplifting of the females and teaching people, particularly Christians, about the need to respect females. Lord, we ask for your help.

ELEANOR SANDERSON *is a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Earth Sciences at Victoria University of Wellington, where she also completed a Masters in Development Studies. She is also a Deacon in the Anglican Church and currently part of the Parish of Northland-Wilton in the Wellington Diocese.*

Notes

[1] This title indicates towards the work of Carol P. Christ, *She who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* (Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2003), whose visit to Aotearoa/New Zealand was a prompt for this special issue, and also towards the implicit focus on change that development (as understood in international and community development) entails.

[2] ibid.

[3] Luce Irigaray, 'Questions', in Margaret Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991) p.137.

[4] Umaki is the colloquial reference to these groups, which translated from Swahili means, 'our women's group'.

[5] http://www.themothersunion.org/vision.aspx (retrieved 06/06/2006).

[6] Christ, p. 1.

[7] Here I am specifically alluding to a part of the Anglican liturgy where the congregation affirms in the breaking of communion bread that 'though we are many, we are one body'.

[8] Examples of Post-Development theory include: Schrijvers, Joke *The Violence of 'Development'* (International Books, Amsterdam, 1993); Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds), *The Post-Development Reader* (Zed Books, London, 1997); Ronaldo Munck and Denis O'Hearn (eds), *Critical Development Theory: Contributions to a new paradigm* (Zed Books, London, 1999).

[9] Arturo Escobar, 'The Making and Unmaking of the Third World Through Development' in Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds), *The Post-Development Reader* (Zed Books, London, 1997) pp. 85–93 (p. 85).

[10] Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead with Benjamin Seel, Bronislaw Szerszynski, Karin Tusting, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005).

[11] I will not provide specific locations or names because these women requested anonymity for their place-based groups.

[12] Emile Townes, 'Embracing the Spirit' in Emile Townes (ed.) *Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation* (Orbis Books, New York, 1997) pp. xi–xix (p. xii).

[13] Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*. (Columbia University Press, New York, 1993) p. 162.

[14] See for example the absence of religion or spirituality in the latest edition of Robert Potter, Tony Binns, Jennifer Elliott and David Smith (eds), *Geographies of Development* (Pearson Education Limited, Harlow, 2004).

[15] Luce Irigaray, *The way of love* (Continuum, London / New York, 2002), p. 122.

[16] For example see Paul Cloke, 'Deliver us from evil? Prospects for living ethically and acting politically in human geography' *Progress in Human Geography* 26:5 (2002), pp. 587–604; Seamus Grimes, 'Reconsidering the exclusion of metaphysics in human geography' *Acta Philosophica* 6:2 (1997), pp. 265–76; Terry Slater, 'Encountering God: personal reflections on 'geographer as pilgrim'' *Area* 36:3 (2004), pp. 245–53.

[17] See for example, Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993).

[18] Susan Cahill (ed.) 'Introduction' in *Wise Women: Over 2000 years of Spiritual Writing by Women* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York/London, 1996) pp. xv–xxiii (p. xvii).

[19] Christ, p. 1.

[20] Ibid., p. 1.

[21] Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I am My Body* (Gutersloher Verlagshaus, Gutersloh, translation John Bowden, 1994).

[22] Anne Daniell, 'The Spiritual Body. Incarnations of Pauline and Butlerian Embodiment Themes for Constructive Theologizing toward the Parousia' *Journal of Feminist Studies* 1:1 (2000), pp .5–22.

[23] This indented text indicates that a member of Umaki is speaking into our conversation.

[24] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Sage Publications, London/Thousand Oaks/ New Delhi, 2005)

[25] Kurt Ver Beek, 'Spirituality: a development taboo' *Development in Practice* 10:1(2000), pp. 31–43.

[26] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Books, New York, 1999) p. xii.

[27] Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 'Mapping the Colonial Body: Sexual Economies and the State in Colonial India' in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (eds.) *Feminist Theory and the Body* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 388–98.

[28] Townes, p. xix.

[29] ibid., p. xix.

[30] This correlates to a Christian understanding of the Body of Christ, but can also correlate to the process paradigm expressed by Carol P. Christ in which the world is understood as the body of Goddess/God.

A widening circle: The generative power of women's spirituality

JULIET BATTEN

Women's Spirituality: what a powerful concept it was back in the 1970s and 80s! Books came into my hands like detonators, blasting away rock walls, opening up caves down which I journeyed to places of revelation. I felt like those who attended the ancient Greek Eleusinian mysteries: after fasting they were led into a dark interior and shown an ear of corn in a blaze of light: the vision of new, golden life, the symbol of the goddess Demeter herself.[1] My generation grew up thinking of God as male, authoritative and all-powerful. After rejecting Christianity in my late teens I was left in a spiritual void. But now the light of the Goddess had been revealed.

Mary Daly's book *Beyond God the Father* seems tame now compared with the burning text I picked up in 1978. Back then, I felt elated as she demolished the old patriarchal structures of religion and spoke of 'an emergence of woman-consciousness such as has never before taken place.'[2] My blood stirred when I read journals such as *Womanspirit* and *Heresies*, with their special issues on the Goddess, or Art and Politics. At the United Women's Convention in Hamilton in 1979 and first Women's Studies conferences in Hamilton in 1978 and 1979 I made my way down winding corridors to workshops on art and spirituality. I was fascinated by the new forms that were beginning to emerge.

Our groups were engaged in passionate enquiry about women's experience, women's imagery and the reclaiming of our bodies as sacred. We walked with the witches and cuddled up to the Goddess (and each other): these were intense, bonding times.

We were united in our reaction against the patriarchal model of religion, which located spiritual power outside the person, in male authority, split from the body and from nature. According to this model, wrote Hallie Iglehart in *Womanspirit*,

> the creator is male; the body is separate from and inferior to the spirit; matters of the spirit need not affect those of politics; women are to follow men; power ultimately lies in someone else's hands.[3]

Not any longer: we were taking back our power. Political feminists often felt mistrustful of the cultural feminists,[4] feeling that they were neglecting the important issues of women's rights. So in the early days I led workshops on the politics of ritual, asserting its essential place in the feminist struggle. Ritual, I claimed, allowed us to bond, renew, attend to our visions and create an inner language. As Starhawk reminded us:

> Nothing *does* change, unless its form, its structure, its language also changes.[5]

In my personal journey, inspired by my reading of the Jungian writer M. Esther Harding's *Woman's Mysteries*,[6] I was painting Goddess images and charting my menstrual cycle along with the cycles of the moon. I was discovering the power of ritual through my sand work at Te Henga: making forms, offering them to the sea, documenting the process of creating and surrender.

Through the early eighties I initiated collaborative art projects to help women give expression to our collective experience. The process of dismantling our installations proved to be difficult, and so I created rituals to help us let go and move on. For the art installation 'The Menstrual Maze' I introduced ritual processes for visitors going through the maze, and a ceremony for young women to mark their first menstruation.[7]

Mary Daly wrote of replacing the patriarchal concept of 'power over' (people, the environment, things) with 'the power of presence'.[8] By building ways to meet in sacred space, we were indeed building a potent sense of presence: to ourselves and to each other.

These were heady times – when the utterance of the word 'Woman' or 'Goddess' sent thrills through the womb. In the 'Menstrual Maze' initiation evening, menstruating women were asked to take a piece of red wool and tie it around their wrist. It was enough to cause shivers down our long hair and trigger premature hot flushes. We were reclaiming suppressed knowledge and power, and like all initial stages of reclaiming lost culture, the energetic impetus was immense.

Women only

At the first Women's Studies Conference in Hamilton in 1978, not only did a man attend, but he was given a plenary session space in which to address us. This was an outrage to some of the women: we left in a dramatic walk-out of protest. It must have been shortly after

this incident that, like so many others, I became separatist, reading only women's books, listening only to women's music, poetry, voices. The classes I taught through the eighties were mostly for women only: Women as Artists, Women and Fabric Art, Women and Nature, Women Make a World, Women's Visual Diaries, Women as Collaborative Artists, Women, Dreams and Myths and Women as Mythmakers (with Aorewa McLeod), Speaking with the Ancient Goddess, Women's Rituals (beginners, then advanced), and many more. In 1984 I joined my first ritual group of four women who met to celebrate the eight Sabbats of the year. In 1985 we expanded into Cone, a ritual group that still meets twenty years later.

Of course friends and family challenged my separatism and found it threatening. Every women's gathering produced a woman who would pop up and declare 'men are human too.' But on the whole, we didn't want to know. Mary Daly had warned us that

> some women will seek premature reconciliation, not allowing themselves to see the depth and implications of feminism's essential opposition to sexist society. It can be easy to leap on the bandwagon of "human liberation" without paying the price in terms of polarization, tensions, risk, and pain that the ultimate objective of real human liberation demands.[9]

We paid the price in reduced income, marginalisation, exhaustion, and for me, raising a son alone, internal tensions. I attempted to resolve them by making an effort to find men with whom he could spend time and experience some positive role-modelling, but it was not easy.

It was a joyful time too; we women felt part of a self-defined élite: the sisterhood. Our creative energy was immense. We worked with fabric, threads and paint, or moved outside to shape sand forms on the beach.

At the 100 Women Project in 1986, where I led women in making 150 sand mounds on Te Henga beach, we finished by linking hands in a huge circle, then spiralling out chanting 'We are emerging women, we are emerging through the air, we are emerging-merging-merging through the earth and through the air.' We felt we were rising from the underground. We were reclaiming our inner world, our symbols, our visual language. We were riding a wave of change.

The hunger for a woman-based spirituality seemed insatiable. No sooner had I taught one six-week feminist ritual course in my home, than the list filled for the next one. I taught continuously for many

years, first in Auckland, then in the late eighties and early nineties, by invitation, all over the North Island to places such as Taihape, Rotorua, Tauranga, Whakatane, Hamilton, Wellsford, Whangarei, Wanganui and so on: all it took was for one interested woman to do the organising, and a group would materialise from the rural kitchens and farms. My book *Power From Within* (1988) sold 2000 copies in a few years, resulting in a further print run of 1500 in 1992. For a self-published New Zealand book, this was a lot of sales.

While writing unapologetically for women (the subtitle was *A Feminist Guide to Ritual-Making*), I did however state in the preface that the book was 'intended for anyone, male or female, who wishes to bring the magic of ritual into their lives.' And then I added, rather tongue-in-cheek: 'If I use the terms "woman" and "she" throughout, I hope men will understand that this is a generic term, not intended to exclude them.' To my surprise, among the numerous letters I received following publication of the book, many were from men, mainly in rural areas.

Men maybe

The book was launched at a women-only event; however, some men requested inclusion: they were doing their own personal/political work in men's groups and also exploring ritual. I decided to hold a second launch at the Unitarian Church, calling it 'Bridging the Gap', opening it to men and women with the intention that I would draw equal numbers of both. This in fact happened, and the images we drew for the meeting of male and female energies were dynamic and hopeful.

Here was an interesting situation: like other women around me, I found the need for separatism beginning to dissolve. Hallie Iglehart said that

> When a dominant culture insists that power lies only outside the individual, in hierarchical organisations, people eventually cease to believe in their own inner voice. They can no longer hear the inner voice.[10]

The inner voice was making itself known. And the inner voice was saying: 'Move on. Create a new vision.'

By 1991 the vision was becoming clear. In an interview with Kathryn Rountree I spoke of a future meeting in sacred space between men and women:

> I see true partnership coming way down the line. It's not going to be just a women's spirituality movement. It will be about men who are learning to honour the Goddess, and learning to find the Wild Man in themselves, and Dionysus and the Green Man who connects with the planet and the earth.[11]

Why was I including men in work that was so clearly woman-centred, and why was my vision one of partnership?

Because I see any political or cultural movement as a dynamic process. It is about evolution and development. For me, the women's spirituality movement was also about creativity. In any movement, we need to remain attentive to change: what needs to evolve now? What is the new cutting edge? These are important questions, and ones to which my inner voice was articulating answers. I became aware that we were moving through different stages, and that the first stage was coming to an end.

First stage: reclaiming

The first stage of the women's spirituality movement, like other movements that break out of the shadows of repression, was to reclaim what had been suppressed. For us, it was feminine spiritual power and the symbols that went with it. Reclaiming the Goddess meant to discover the divine in our own image, to see our bodies as sacred, to honour the blood mysteries and to affirm the cycle of birth, life and death. (Death itself became taboo along with the Goddess.) In reclaiming our connection with the Goddess, we reclaimed our connection with the cycles of the moon, the sun and the seasons, along with our need to protect the earth.

Reclaiming the Goddess was to become a service not just to ourselves as women, but to the entire culture as we brought back the partnership model and threw out the dominator one (to use Riane Eisler's terms).[12] But in the first stage we focused more on retrieving what had been lost.

Second stage: inclusion (Father earth; mother sky)

OPENING TO MEN

In spiritual work, it is important to take on the largest perspective. If spiritual work becomes self-indulgent, practised just to make us feel good, it can stagnate and turn in on itself. And so we need to

move outwards in a widening circle, becoming more inclusive. This is the second stage.

In 1989 I led a ritual workshop for the Wings creativity course, which two men attended, and in 1990 I tested the water further by leading my first ritual workshop for men and women for Continuing Education in Auckland. It was difficult because a mentally unbalanced man attended and acted as a sabotaging presence, but the group held the situation well and I felt supported equally by the men and the women. It was not an experience I repeated, but even so, it was important to keep reaching out.

OPENING TO FAMILY

In December 1990 my ritual group Cone opened to family for our summer solstice ritual. It began with a story I had written: the myth of the Sun King. Looking back on this story, I am intrigued by how many of the elements of inclusion it contained. Here is a short version:

> The Sun King lived in the northern hemisphere, where he represented bountiful giving. His golden rays shone down on all, ripening the corn and bringing a rosy blush to the fruits below, making the days long and the people laugh. However, by the time the northern hemisphere people came to our southern land, they had become greedy conquerors who imposed their laws upon the inhabitants. They brought with them a new God: Zeus the conqueror, whose weapon was the thunderbolt (gun).
>
> Mahuika, the Goddess of Fire in the new land, was angry at the way the people pretended summer solstice was winter and sprayed their windows with snow; for summer was her time. The Sun King, angry about the insult delivered to his Southern sister, ordered his chariot to be prepared. He sped across the skies, bringing gifts, and the intention to awaken people from their blind and selfish ways.

In order to welcome him back, we moved out onto the deck overlooking the garden, where we sounded gongs, bells and tambourines and called 'Sun King! Sun King!' A yellow-robed figure wearing a tall golden crown then emerged (the husband of one of our members), carrying a basket of gifts. The children squealed with delight, and followed him inside where we formed our circle once more.

It was a heart-opening experience to watch the Sun King instruct the children to breathe and pause as they each opened their presents in turn, to feel our circle enlarge and embrace our loved ones. We could hold our power as women now, without the old fear that men

would 'take over' or that we would revert to submissive behaviours in their presence. Later we experimented with a couple of Cone 'Balls' for 'Cone and Consorts', (male and female) and a joint ritual with another Auckland group.

OPENING TO MAORI

For me, creating ceremony with Maori began in the early eighties when Auckland Hospital's new cross-cultural worker, a Pakeha woman, invited a group of ritual-makers to conduct a cleansing in her new offices. She had been given an old operating theatre and wanted to create an atmosphere of healing rather than traumatic illness. She also invited Maori elders to lead a purification.

The purification with water and karakia took place first, then everyone squashed into the group room where we Pakeha women led a ritual of cleansing based on the Wiccan model, invoking the four directions, with everyone laying down lavender branches around the room. Conducting ritual in the presence of prominent leaders was affirming, and laid a foundation for my work on cross-cultural seasonal rituals that was to emerge a decade later.

In late 1989 I was invited by the Haeata Maori women's art collective to be part of a 1990 exhibition to commemorate the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Entitled *Mana Tiriti*, it drew together a small group of Pakeha and Maori artists (male and female), all producing work that commented on the Treaty. I travelled to the 1990 celebrations at Waitangi and next day began a series of rituals.

The first action was to lay a wreath at the foot of the flagstaff, as a sign of mourning for all those betrayed since the signing of the Treaty. Then I journeyed to the coast and wrote the word 'Promises' in the sand, over and over, watching what happened as the sea erased the word. The resulting series of paintings incorporated colour xeroxed images of the photos of these rituals, and was entitled 'Against Broken Promises.'[13]

In the exhibition catalogue I stated that the works were

> a sacred pledge. Part of this pledge is my commitment to further political action, including the search for a spiritual basis upon which to build a society where the mana of the Treaty is honoured and realised.[14]

This was a big vision, and it began to express in some new writing. My book *Celebrating the Southern Seasons: Rituals for Aotearoa*

(1995) was first conceived as a slender volume about winter solstice. Very quickly I realised I must embrace not only my own European, Anglo Saxon and Celtic roots, but also what was happening in the indigenous culture of this land around the seasons. Maori supporters looked over my work and endorsed what I was doing as I extended my frame of reference. And so three strands were woven in: Pagan European, Maori and Christian – another widening of the circle.

Many groups contributed to the ritual launch: women's groups, including the 'salt water crones', a men's group bearing a totara, and Maori participants. Karakia rang out as the sound of Wiccan invocations died on the air. The occasion was rich and celebratory and I felt a vision of integration was being realised. The publishing world hadn't seen anything like it.

Third Stage: integration and service

From reclaiming our own ground, to including others, we move on to embrace concepts of service and integration. Without service and integration, what begins as dynamic ends up split-off and isolated. We are in danger of solidifying our attitudes into essentialism (mother earth; father sky), or thinking we own the moral high ground; claiming that we women hold the prerogative for earth connection and life preservation – a viewpoint that ignores centuries of farming practice in communities where both men and women lived close to the earth and worked with its rhythms.

OPENING TO COMMUNITY

Cone wanted to serve the wider women's community and in 1988 instigated the Winter Solstice cave ritual on Auckland's west coast. Fifty-two women attended, with numbers increasing to over 100 the following year, and peaking at about 173 in 1994.

PUBLIC RITUALS FOR PAKEHA

1993 to 1995 appears to have been a watershed time. The impetus for women's ritual courses was running out. Around 1993 I conducted my last group on the theme. Lea Holford, an American Jungian psychotherapist who had arrived in Auckland and started teaching a Women's Spirituality course for Continuing Education in 1984, had stopped teaching. Nicola Campbell took up the mantle in 1990 with courses based on Goddess posters she was importing from the United States. Then in 1995 she felt the impetus had gone. Although she

handed over her courses to other women, they didn't take off.

What was happening? According to Nicola, 'we had to integrate women's spirituality so that it wasn't something apart from our lives. It was time to look outward.' Lea, remembering how things were when she returned from a trip to the United States in 1990, said 'the political scene was getting worse, and we had to be practical. There was a sense of increasing despair about world problems.'

When Lea arrived here in 1984 she found that 'New Zealand women were much more depressed than women in the United States, and there was a big hunger for finding their inner strength.' It would appear that a decade later, the hunger had been largely sated. Nicola moved on to join a Celtic spirituality mixed group, and set up a business called 'Feeding the Soul', which imported tapes and other resources from a wide range of spiritual traditions. Lea became involved in environmental issues, teaching courses on Gaia consciousness and organising a large conference on this theme which linked ecology with the feminine.

My own new direction embraced ecological and bicultural issues. In 1990 I extended my art involvement with the Mana Tiriti project to include ritual. That October at the Fisher Gallery in Auckland I led 'Sacred Connections' for Pakeha men and women to address our relationship with the land and the tangata whenua. Each participant was asked to bring a tree as a sacred offering. At the end of the ritual we loaded them on to a trailer; their destiny, the Manukau Harbour where the Ngati Te Ata were replanting the southern shores. Ecological and social concerns were finding their roots in sacred space.

In 1995, following the publication of *Celebrating the Southern Seasons*, I was invited to the winter Heart Politics gathering at Tauhara, near Taupo, and again led a ritual for Pakeha men and women. I wanted to help Pakeha experience their sacred connection to the land, and to seek restoration for what has been harmed or severed. The ritual plunged to a deep level, and I was impressed with the way both men and women responded to the work. As with the Fisher Gallery ritual, this one also culminated in political action.

Here, in the Heart Politics community in 1995, I knew I had found a very wide circle. In Heart Politics, a concept created by American activist and comedian Fran Peavey, politics is given its broadest possible context, involving the whole person. In this community I joined with another stream of social development, created by those

who had been holding earth gatherings for many years, and were developing their own rituals out of their experience of Maori protocols. Integration was happening quite naturally, and from that time, the Heart Politics community has supported my political-spiritual work and enabled me to develop it further.

In 1996 and 1997, inspired by my contact with the Heart Politics community, I taught a new workshop called 'The Personal and the Political', designed to explore questions of balance between inner and outer work. The ideas were tested out at Heart Politics gatherings, and continue to be relevant in both my life and work.

Integrated rituals of welcome, closing and celebration

In 1995, the seventh year of Cone's winter solstice rituals, we decided the cycle was complete. It was time to hand the cave ritual over to other groups so that we could move on.

'To what?' we asked ourselves. 'An activist ritual,' said one woman. 'A ritual for Halloween and the dead?' I wondered, 'or an outdoor spring ritual or summer spiral dance on Maungakiekie.' My public ritual work shifted its focus to leading opening ceremonies for conferences, book launches and other occasions – all for men and women, including co-leading a public spring ritual on Maungakiekie, just as I had envisaged. It was collectively created by a group of three men and three women, a process which was both challenging and exciting.

A parallel thread has been my own spiritual development through the meditation path on which I have journeyed since 1983. I teach meditation courses as service, my co-teachers being two men. The God and the Goddess have long been integrated and my spiritual work is focused on the best way of serving my communities, through writing, ritual and teaching.

Meanwhile, paradoxically, my meetings with the other seven women of Cone through seasons of dark and light, moist and dry, ripening and withering, fallow and flowering, continue to nurture my spirit and link me profoundly with the wheel of the year and my experience as a woman.

The Virtual Circle

Expansion and integration seem to go hand in hand. In August 2006 I discovered that the circle could embrace the world. When *Celebrating*

the Southern Seasons was reprinted in a tenth anniversary revised edition, I was faced with a creative challenge; for my new publishers did not want a book launch. I decided to create a virtual circle, aiming for a hundred individuals or groups all over the world to each light a candle at 8pm (or the equivalent) on August 5. With the technology of email, it was possible to send out invitations and provide instant feedback to participants. By the evening of August 5 every participant and group (the numbers swelling to over a hundred at the last minute) had received a list detailing who was involved, where they were located and what they were intending to do.

At 7pm I lit a candle at a specially created altar inside, where I sat with my partner John. I began to read the list, and asked for blessings for everyone taking part. Then we went into the bush with torches, grasping our umbrellas to protect against the light rain. I lit a candle and read out more names. Right on 8pm we became completely still. I had felt a wave of warm energy gathering over the last hour which now embraced me totally. From my Cone 'sister' Ruth at a chateau in Vesancy, to Cone 'sister' Janice in St Mark's Square in Venice, to Chief Druid Philip Carr-Gomm in Sussex, to a New Plymouth Heart Politics study group, to Diamond Tiger and the Hawke's Bay witches to Braided Rivers/Slothwomen in Christchurch, to a man in Johnsonville and another in Auckland, who slipped outside from his job at the Herald, to a lone woman travelling in Lithuania, the candles were burning. A flow of blessings was whooshing in and blessings were being returned.

This circle felt very expansive. This is where I and so many others have come to after more than two decades of women's spirituality. We began by reclaiming the Goddess and withdrawing into sacred space. There we gathered our energy, our identity and our power. Now we have infiltrated everywhere, opening to receive more, and giving out more. Our ritual-making has spread through many communities and embraces our children, grand-children and partners. This is a movement that has the power to awaken men to the Goddess, to work with other cultures, to allow dynamic meetings, partings and re-meetings, to evoke the awareness of the cycles of life and death, the cycles of nature, the awareness that we need if we are to save this earth.

Women's spirituality has been generative. By reaching back to essence, we reclaimed our power as women and also the place of

the feminine in spirituality. Being generative, the movement has continued to give birth to many forms. Had we attempted to hold this flow and enshrine it, the generative essence would have solidified into essentialism. By moving with the flow, continuing to seek our creative edge, we have moved in an ever widening circle. This is the power of women's spirituality, and this is also why we have moved beyond the protective womb in which it began.

JULIET BATTEN *is a writer, artist, and psychotherapist who has worked extensively with ritual throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand. She has an MA and PhD in English from Auckland University, and spent two years in Paris on a post-doctoral fellowship. She taught English and Environmental Studies at Auckland University before moving into Women's Studies in the late 1980s. She was a director of the QE II National Trust for ten years. Her diverse interests reflect her commitment to personal, community and ecological well being. She has one son and grand-daughter, and lives and works in Auckland.*

Her publications include Power from Within *(Ishtar Books, 1988),* Celebrating the Southern Seasons: Rituals for Aotearoa *(Tandem Press, 1995; revised edition, Random House, 2005),* Releasing the Artist Within: The Visual Diary *(Tandem Press, 1997),* Growing into Wisdom: Change and Transformation at Midlife *(Tandem Press, 2000),* A Cup of Sunlight: Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life *(Random House, 2005).*

Notes

[1] Because the Eleusinian Mysteries were kept secret, no one can say exactly what happened. This account is based on reconstructions made by commentators who have pieced together various fragments: see Juliet Batten *Celebrating the Southern Seasons* (Random House, 2005) pp. 196–7

[2] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1973) p. 14.

[3] Hallie Iglehart, *Womanspirit: A Guide to Women's Wisdom* (San Francisco, 1983) p. xii.

[4] 'Cultural feminists' was a term currently used in the 1980s to denote those who focused on reclaiming women's culture – music, literature, arts and spirituality – rather than acting to reform patriarchal structure or work for causes such as equal pay, abortion rights etc. Of course the distinctions were not always clear-cut.

[5] Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1982) p. 26.

[6] M. Esther Harding, *Woman's Mysteries Ancient and Modern* (Harper

Colophon Books, New York, 1976).

[7] The Menstrual Maze was made by eleven women and facilitated by Juliet Batten in 1983 after a series of workshops. Set up in an old clothing factory in Ponsonby, it was constructed so that visitors journeyed through various 'passages' of menstruation and were invited to participate in personal rituals as they went. See Juliet Batten, *Power From Within* (Ishtar Books, 1988) p. 4.

[8] Mary Daly, 'The Qualitative Leap Beyond Patriarchal Religion' *Quest,* vol. 1, no. 1, p. 21, cited in Charlene Spretnak (ed.), *The Politics of Women's Spirituality* (Anchor Books, New York, 1982), p. 225.

[9] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, pp. 25–6.

[10] Hallie Iglehart, 'Expanding Personal Power Through Meditation' in Spretnak (ed.), p. 294.

[11] Unpublished transcript.

[12] Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (Harper & Row, USA, 1987).

[13] *Mana Tiriti: The Art of Protest and Partnership* (Daphne Brasell Associates Press, 1991).

[14] *Mana Tiriti*, p. 40.

Book reviews

IN HEAVENLY LOVE ABIDING: MEMOIRS OF A MISSIONARY WIFE

Catharine Eade

Compiled by her daughter, Patricia Booth

Sarah Bennett Books, Wellington, 2005

Reviewed by MARY NASH

Catharine Eade's memoirs are compiled by her daughter, Patricia Booth, using Catharine's letters to Patricia, her own notes for talks she gave around New Zealand, short accounts of aspects of her life written after her retirement, and tributes to her and her husband. The book is a good length, 214 pages, and has been edited with love and skill, being illustrated with delightful family photos and interesting scenes of missionary life in India from 1935–1967, with a short period of service in newly formed Bangladesh, 1972–3.

Catharine was born in Feilding in March 1909 and died in Palmerston North in 1988. Her life story is interesting as it records 'the missionary journey through the eyes of a woman, wife and partner' (p. 1). Patricia notes wryly how her mother used to describe herself as '... just a little m' (p. 4), referring to the Missionary Society's practice of referring to her husband as 'Rev. M. J. Eade, m' (p. 4). In fact, she comes across as a determined woman, who combined femininity with devotion to her duty, faith in her vision and a sense of her own worth without arrogance.

In reviewing this book, I aim to contextualise it as one of a particular genre of publications now popular, in which adult children are collecting the papers which document their parents' or grandparents' lives out of a desire to preserve and publicise ways of living that still have meaning to them, but which are now long gone. This book allows Catharine to speak for herself, and in doing so, we are presented with an uncritical and almost unself-conscious story of a life lived with a consistent ethic and with a sense of integrity. Spirituality is hard to define and many people define it as having to

do with providing meaning in life, or being about how people relate to a transcendent being or power. Religion is one vehicle by which that relationship may be mediated (Nash and Stewart, 2002). In Catharine Eade's case, her spirituality is lived out through her religion.

Missionaries tend to come in for a degree of critique, some sympathetic and some condemnatory. As a reviewer, I take a sympathetic stance and was interested to read of the occasion when the young Eades (Paddy and Catharine) discussed the role of missionary with the Maharajah while requesting his permission to live and work in his state. Permission was given, and the Maharajah added that he did not mind if people became Christians (p. 77). Clearly he had concerns but acknowledged that many of the Christians in the state were good people.

Occasionally, Catharine Eade makes observations about the Muslim women she meets, appreciating their strength as women, and their qualities of leadership. This was particularly so during her last period of missionary service, in Bangladesh, when she recalls being told by another missionary woman that the Muslim women are strong women and 'don't let their menfolk get away with anything' (p. 168). She comments that her experiences support this and had left her with a new impression of these women.

Finally, as a historian and a woman with my own store of family letters and documents tempting me to embark on a similar venture and start compiling a historical account from letters of family life before and after the war years, I congratulate Patricia Booth for bringing this book to publication, and for sharing with us the life of her mother, in all its simplicity, humour, bravery and commitment. This is a book which will appeal to women with an interest in history, life stories, travel, missionary lives and family relationships, to name just a few of the key themes displayed.

Reference

Nash, M. and Stewart, B. (eds) (2002) *Spirituality and Social Care*. London, Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

FAITH EVOLVING: A PATCHWORK JOURNEY

Trish McBride

Published by Patricia McBride, Wellington Aotearoa New Zealand 2005

Paperback 160 pages. Available from Trish McBride, PO Box 13-410, Johnsonville, Wellington. Email mcbride@paradise.net.nz

Reviewer: HELEN SIMMONS *Freelance Social Worker, Senior Tutor, Massey University Turitea.*

Trish McBride presents 30 years of her spiritual life journey as a series of theologically reflective patches which she eventually backs and binds, as in the process of quilting. Each patch, rich with metaphor, is presented in verse or prose form and represents a segment of experience in her spiritual life journey.

While contributing to a larger square, each patch can be savoured in its own right. This is what makes this book great bedtime reading. The squares of Trish's quilt are named Clothes-Line Theology, After that and Turangawaewae.

We meet the young Trish first in her traditional Catholic marriage to an alcoholic husband when she is producing lots of babies and concerning herself with the tasks of home and hearth. As a young widow we see Trish questioning aspects of dogma, dealing with sexual abuse by clergy, becoming an industrial chaplain and developing a faith beyond the institution. She links her journey and reflections to J.W. Fowler's (1995) *Stages of Faith* and the text is dotted with references to scripture and an eclectic mix of feminist and other theological works.

This book is not just a spiritual biography but a work of scholarship providing a contextual theology for women in Aotearoa New Zealand. It will resonate with women who have journeyed from a traditional church into alternative forms of spiritual support. It is a profound work, with a wonderful everydayness and simplicity that shines through, a feat that makes the patchwork accessible and real.

In backing her quilt, Trish writes that mostly her life has been very ordinary. I invite the reader to decide.

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Cover image
Hadia's Shrine. Photographer: Deirdre Savage

Otago University Press

ISBN 1-877372-33-1