

## **A Theology Of Disgust**

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## ABSTRACT

A Theology Of Disgust.

‘A Theology of Disgust’ is a personal journey through the bodily experience of physical impairment and the social oppressions of sexism and disabilism. This journey has highlighted the extraordinary power of the emotion of disgust to distort relations throughout the natural order. Utilising the phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the theological critique and insights of feminist theologies as well as the resources of contextual theological reflection, a new appreciation of the human body and body of the earth is sought by engaging more viscerally with the fears (and hopes) of flesh which have troubled the Christian tradition. It is claimed that the effects of human disgust have compromised Christianity’s life giving message of divine love and God given power of relationality throughout creation.

It argues for a deeper consciousness of the need for psychic and social change in our human relationships, with each other and with the whole earth, believing this can be achieved through renewed ecomystical liturgy in the church, labelling and uncovering paralyzing fears so that the church could be seen as a beacon of hope and knowledge for all sentient life. A variety of methods to revitalise and empower liturgy are considered as pointers to enable the church to become an ‘ecclesial spa’ which would lead to deeper engagement with the often neglected physical realities within creation. The aim is also to help all those who suffer, to become theological agents of their embodied lives. The overall goal is

to love at a deeper level those constitutive elements of the earth which sustain the world, before the disabled earth founders due to human indifference to both the joys and suffering of creation which, it is believed, are captured and held in tandem at the heart of the gospel of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.

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# Preface

‘There are seemingly, infinite permutations of the experience of being physically different in a highly normalizing society.’<sup>1</sup>

## THE CONTEXT

I have suffered from ME for eighteen years. ME, or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, as it is sometimes known, is a debilitating disease of the central nervous system which affects the muscles and joints, causes extreme fatigue and lassitude, emotional lability, mental confusion and, at times, extreme pain. It affects every part of the person, yet I have found very few spaces in which I can describe the difference that this disability makes to one’s life and attitudes. Friends, church, family and the workplace alike are closed to an indepth sharing of the experience. Indeed illness and disability are often treated with disgust and such a response to one’s suffering is the hardest part to bear. The devastation of rejection seemed utterly incongruous with Christian love and relationality as illuminated in the Trinity. It inspired an indepth study to try to interpret it and transform it for the sake of others who might also be appalled when subjected to the visceral fear of disgust, emanating from those they trusted. It also inspired a concern to theologially reflect on any aspect of my own Anglican faith that would project the emotion of disgust and so cause pain to others.

The messages we receive are very loud and very clear and we have little access to different values which may place

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<sup>1</sup> Gareth Williams, ‘The Sociology Of Disability:Towards A Materialist Phenomenology’ in Tom Shakespeare, (ed) *The Disability Reader* (New York, London:Cassell, 1998), p.240

a more positive value on our bodies, ourselves and our lives.<sup>2</sup>

This work aims to redress this deficit, a lack that soon became apparent on a wider scale for the issues of women's bodies, those of other creatures and the whole natural order. When one becomes physically impaired and disabled in a highly normalizing society the body becomes the central focus of one's life. Not only one's own body, but the body of others and the body of the cosmos: one moves from the boundaries of the norms and biases of the able bodied world to a recognition of the wider physical world, from the abstract and the controlling social certainties about the body, to the constitutive elements of all suffering bodies.

One sees clearly the silencing and distorting effects of those norms and fears of the imagined potential of the body to cause suffering, and one seeks ways to defuse these fears in oneself and in others for the sake of loving relationality with all beings and with the earth. The strength that lies in disability is the life affirming potential of the human spirit even in the midst of the most feared occurrence, the failure of the body to be perfect. As the earth and its wonderful diverse species suffer in front of our eyes, these defusing and affirming skills become increasingly vital. My impairment, the disgust with which it has been treated, and my Christian faith, I believe, have magnified my empathy and imagination at a planetary level, and a plethora of empowering routes are sought to gain access to a renewing adoration of all creation, to revitalise energy to protect it.

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<sup>2</sup> Jenny Morris, *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes To Disability* (London, Women's Press, 1991), p.28



One particularly empowering route was discovered in the work of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the co-founder of existential philosophy with Sartre. He became established as the pre-eminent philosopher of the body and stressed that any attempt to interpret the world as an object of knowledge can only be derived from the primary source of access to that world which is through the body. It was a fortuitous discovery to find a philosophical method that matched my own concern to explore the body's primordial contact with the world and uncover some of the ambiguities of that contact in their multiplicity and their opacity. Impatient with philosophical ideas such as Idealism that reconstituted the world in terms of their imagined possibilities with no solid foundation for so doing and giving these priority over knowledge gained from actual bodily encounters, he offers a sound method for this engaged study of perception of visceral reality. 'It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'vigorous science' but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we live them.'<sup>3</sup>

Christian feminist theologies have provided the pluriform means to reclaim the body from some of the cultural conditioning of traditional religious belief, but do not discard the empowering elements of that belief; the emphasis on relationality has encouraged a vibrant theological reflection which despite its diversity of thought, carries the sifted tradition forward, probed, amidst all the vagaries of physical existence, for its fluid embodied relevance, rather than its fixed somatic discriminations.

Trinitarian theology inspires creativity to explore the width of creation for means to acquire a new energy of appreciation and understanding, it has

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception* (London:Routledge and Kegan Paul,1962), p.vii

communicated that the kernel of God is revitalising relationality, powerful love and freedom in relation to others and to the whole of creation.<sup>4</sup> The relational unity of the Trinity overflows into all life forms and perhaps it may be possible to grow to understand that ‘we all live our lives in bodies of a certain sort, whose possibilities and vulnerabilities do not as such belong to one human society rather than another.’<sup>5</sup> The possibilities and vulnerabilities of bodies remind us of our commonalities, for all lives emerge, live their lives in, and return to the Godhead. The task facing theology in the twenty first century is how to inspire love for all that has been so neglected and treated with disgust before many lives are lost to extinction with the body of the earth disabled beyond repair. Perhaps the suffering body begins to pave the way.

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of God as relationality within the Trinity has become a shibboleth in theological circles in the past few decades. A study of this size cannot do justice to the popular acceptance of this concept, especially within Christian feminist theologies. See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ‘God In Communion With Us’ for elaboration on the ‘freeing’ potential of the concept of the Trinity. In Catherine Mowry Lacugna, (ed) *Freeing Theology: The Essentials Of Theology In Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), p.83

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, cited in Shakespeare, *op.cit.* p.234

## WHY DISGUST?

Why tackle the subject of disgust, where does such an endeavour take us in theology and what kind of radical methodology is required to bring to light the effects of this basic emotion which as far as most people are concerned is best left unaddressed in the polite circles of academia? How could reflection on such a basic negative emotion further knowledge about divine and human relations? Shouldn't theology concern itself with the best of human abilities and attitudes, indeed much reflection on cultural interaction and divine influence on human action has focused on the most positive of human intentions, revelations and intellectual skills while rejecting negative disturbing influences as distractions.

Very few seem to be aware that theology has been shaped by this bias toward the best, the lofty, accompanied with an often unstated rejection of what is thought to be repellent.<sup>1</sup> Yet artificialism arises from such an approach which often values the abstract above the messy realities of the concrete, leading to the loss of understanding and appreciation of much physical reality. In the course of this study on disgust, as the layers of its influence were uncovered as dynamic forces on human thought and action, the more necessary the research was seen to become for the future of theological reflection on contemporary issues for the twenty first century.

Maurice Merleau- Ponty (1908 - 1961) wished to bring philosophy back to the phenomena of the world, to ground knowledge in the earth under our feet and achieve as authentic a perception as possible through the human body. He warned of the dangers of artificialism and the abstractions often created when we flee

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<sup>1</sup> See *Chapter three* footnote 425

from the world. Rather he advocated that humans ‘return to that world which precedes knowledge.’<sup>2</sup> Humanity needed to return to ‘brute being’ and could escape many of its present problems just by looking again at the physical world and into the eyes of other creatures to acknowledge different realities from our own; to revitalise nature and our views of it.<sup>3</sup> As will become apparent in the ensuing chapters, countless ways have been created to escape the uncomfortable relationship we have with other creatures and the mortality we share with them lest we become connected too deeply with their bodies, unable to maintain a qualitative distance from their lives. The depth of this little admitted aversion and the habit of politely stepping aside need unmasking and interrogating, for the emotional compulsions which arise from disgust have direct bearing on human and divine relationality.

This work addresses the deficit in research on disgust particularly in theology, asking how this basic emotion has been relatively unaddressed until the past three decades?<sup>4</sup> Such reasons will become apparent throughout the chapters as the work delves into the many cunning human devices of disgust avoidance. Perhaps to begin with, one very good reason must be that there can be little kudos for a graduate to further his or her career pursuing such a subject, such is its taboo. It has been quite a challenge in the course of this research to ask people why this emotion must remain hidden and unspoken. The responses have varied from comic reactions to silent disapproval about mentioning disgust at all,

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<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.ix

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.* p.76

<sup>4</sup> P. Rozin, J. Haidt, and C.R. McCauley, report that disgust was almost completely ignored until about 1990 ‘Disgust: The Body And Soul Emotion In The C21’ Chapter One in D.McKay and O.Olatunji (eds) *Disgust and its disorders* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), pp. 9-29

to 'isn't it obvious?' Such automatic responses are the norm, for disgust carries an absolute conviction about its abhorrence and hence it has stayed in the shadows as a target for research.

Another reason is that many, perhaps see that disgust, as the word indicates, is about food and eating and consequently receives little attention as relevant to other spheres of social life. This is perhaps because recent interest in disgust began with Darwin who focused on the sense of taste and the rejection of food. He wrote, 'the term disgust in its simplest sense means something offensive to the taste.'<sup>5</sup> Miller writes that 'the English word disgust is in some unquantifiable way responsible for the narrow focus on taste, oral incorporation, and rejection of food in psychological treatments of disgust.'<sup>6</sup> Paul Rozin argued for a core disgust centred in food rejection but began to connect this to many ideas of contamination realizing his narrow notions of disgust had to be expanded. His later research led him to begin to include other bodily processes, death, hygiene, some sociomoral issues connected to disgust and violations of the boundaries of the body.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed it soon becomes obvious to the intrepid researcher into the subject<sup>8</sup> that disgust is prevalent in a wide variety of domains and has been preadapted to combat many perceived social and moral threats. In finding ever more disgust elicitors in the social order and in the tradition, my research has not only brought forth new insights about the human condition in its environment and in its

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression Of The Emotions In Man And Animals* 1872 (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press. 1965), pp. 256-257

<sup>6</sup> Disgust (from the Latin: 'dis' (a negative prefix) and 'gustus' (taste)) William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (London: Harvard University Press), p. 257 n.2

<sup>7</sup> Jonathon Haidt, Paul Rozin, Mccauley Clark, 'Individual Differences In Sensitivity To Disgust: A Scale Sampling Seven Domains of Disgust Elicitors' *Personality and Individual Differences* 16 (1994), pp. 701-713

<sup>8</sup> See Miller, *op.cit*

relationships but also more than a little incredulity that this topic has not been a major field of study for theology.

For instance, in presenting a paper on disgust many of my feminist theological student peers were told by their husbands that this was a step too far in theology and they were forbidden to attend! More than one said that disgust was not an appropriate topic for a theological paper, it smacked of perversion, was generally an unladylike and unsavoury subject which would cause embarrassment if mentioned socially. Such a reaction often stems from the disapproval of feminism's research into the causes of misogyny; indeed 'the entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over.'<sup>9</sup> This work argues that disgust has played a part in this silence at the borders of sexism and also of disabilism and unpredictable physicality, not only of our bodies but also of the material earth, the origin of our being. The planet is causing alarm and humanity has to take stock of its place within a changing world; it can no longer afford to be locked into its disgust reactions which disengage us from physicality and block out the urgency for action in a fragile, neglected environment.

Thus this study's agenda highlights the extraordinary power of disgust in shaping human concepts. Asking how to become more aware of its negative attitudes to organic life which impinge on all theological reflection, it stresses that disgust elicitors are legion, acting like a firewall or gateway guarding against defilement. It has been more common to address the emotions of anger and fear with their obvious relevance to social problems<sup>10</sup> and their effect on relationality

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<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets Silence Selected Prose 1966-1978*(London:Virago Press,1980), p.11

<sup>10</sup> Rozin et al, 2008 *op.cit.* p.2

yet it has become apparent there is a need to bring to conscious awareness the many strategies of avoidance created in the service of disgust which bring social problems of their own. Of further interest has been the growing awareness that disgust is often thought to violate the ideal and whole ethic of divinity. A major aim of this study has been to challenge this ubiquitous attitude in the Judaeo/Christian tradition.

Disgust's intimate relationship to the moral, social, cultural and spiritual ideas, which will be discussed in the following chapters, might shock for it is the most visceral of emotions, but it offers a new window of understanding about some of those ideas, norms and 'civilising' concepts created over past centuries. 'Civilisation requires the lowering of the thresholds of disgust... that is.. it requires the easier triggering of these emotions.'<sup>11</sup> How little this has been understood. As this process spread it became ever harder to discover the origins of disgust while the defence systems grew more complex.

Thus it is, that only a pioneering journey can begin to illuminate some of the disgust elicitors to bring them to the fore; explicitly stating their effects on human relationality; asking if Christian concepts of love, mutuality and reciprocity are capable of dealing with the gag reflex that is so often the bodily response to disgust. Opening up disgust as a powerful influence opens up a hole not previously researched to its full capacity. As with all holes, sub holes appear and it has become more and more obvious that it is a subject which will require much more exploration in the future. It raises more questions than answers and sets the scene for a deeper Christian understanding of the powerful negative emotional background which can lie behind human actions.

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<sup>11</sup> Miller, *op.cit.* p.172

Why is this the case? The dynamics of disgust are far reaching, they effect many factors of daily life. What possibly began as an adaptive mechanism in the body to protect it from harmful foods and odours has evolved into a complex defence system against all that the body and soul would reject. It is a far reaching and fulsome emotion that has expanded both biologically and culturally to the extent that its evolution from a core rejection response has become disguised. One of the most interesting discussions for the 21st century is how what possibly began as a basic automatic rejection, shared with animals and babies, has evolved in human adulthood into such a richly meaning filled emotion affecting human interactions and proprieties? Cross culturally disgust elicitors arise in many surprising arenas and have expanded both in biological and cultural evolution to the extent that disgust becomes guardian not only of the body and the social order but also of the soul. 'Do not profane my holy name. I must be acknowledged as holy.' (Leviticus 22: 32)

While some elicitors defend the body against pathogens and may have some health benefits, the majority of them are symbolic and, it is contended, work against human relations with its environment. Disgust is often employed in service of the need to forget or deny any reminders of our most vulnerable physical nature. Particularly strong is the reminder we are subject to disease and mortality, disgust plays a strong part in commitment to cultural norms and ideals that shield us from this fact.<sup>12</sup> Interpersonal disgust too plays an enormous part in human life, disgust fuels xenophobia and distrust of diversity. Moral psychology has begun to take disgust as a central feature in its discourse, for it triggers disapproval and appears in seconds in interaction. Disgust also blends with other emotions like

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<sup>12</sup> See Ernst Becker *Denial of Death* (New York:Free Press,1973)



anger, shame and fear and can be initiated by just the suggestion of contact or contamination. Such complexity explains, perhaps, what has made the emotions a difficult part of human life to understand and why disgust has been left unresearched until the last few decades.

During this time disgust has come to the fore in the social sciences which promote it as an object of interdisciplinary study because it has been clinically shown to strongly motivate action; it can be readily measured in laboratory experiments into the emotions. Fear and anger are difficult to measure but disgust can be produced in participants quite easily, and neuroscientific advances mean experiments involving human reactions to disgusting stimuli are becoming a major source of knowledge about moral judgements furthering research in the study of social behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the growing realisation of the effects of contamination, once in contact always in contact, means that disgust has an even greater durability and influence on multiple aspects of events, imagined or real, and on decision making and judgement than has ever really been realised. Contamination is most often linked with ideas of physical infection, but there is a kind of emotional and spiritual infection, that occurs when humans are under threat and patterns of similarity create whole networks of fear and disgust.<sup>14</sup>

There is much to discover about disgust. The connections between the various domains of disgust are complex and they seem to vary according to which part of the body is involved,<sup>15</sup> illuminating the role of the body, as Merleau-Ponty believed, in the acquisition of meaning and presenting challenges to preconceived

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<sup>13</sup> Rozin and L. Singh, 'The moralization of cigarette smoking in America' *Journal of Consumer behaviour* 1999

<sup>14</sup> Rozin et al, Disgust in the C21 *op.cit.* p.5

<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit.* p.11

idealistic notions about purity, norms of perfection and power. Phobias are an insistent feature of daily life but rarely are they probed for their underlying sources of energy and the deep seated mechanisms often initiated in the visceral disgust reaction. Furthermore, research on the brain and psychopathology in the neurosciences, especially in the area of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, has found disgust a frequent component of various patterns of pathological behaviour.<sup>16</sup> One of the most interesting questions is why OCD is not a factor for us all; how do humans integrate the disgusting factors of life into their everyday life in a way that people with OCD cannot?<sup>17</sup> The implications for ritual and liturgy and the arts become increasingly apparent in this field of theological reflection, the roles of habituation and acts to foster inurement to the disgust reaction are explored in the following chapters in relation to their liberating potential.

Brain scans produced during the stimulation of disgust illuminate the linkages of core disgust and moral disgust and their connections with other emotions like shame, anger, contempt and fear.<sup>18</sup> There is an expectation that further studies will show even more connections between disgust, anxiety disorders and the ensuing contamination sensitivity which all have such strong effects on political theory, religion and morality. It is the mixture of somatic anxieties, fear and disgust that is of particular importance to eco/theology in that the force of the disgust scale in those humans who avoid the issue of eco/cide, prevents them developing empathy and appreciation of bodies and the earth. It is not only the more visceral aspects of the physically disgusting that shapes thinking

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<sup>16</sup> D.S.Husted, N.A.Shapira, and W.K.Goodman, 'The neuro circuitry of obsessive-compulsive disorder and disgust.' *Progress in Neuropsychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry*.

<sup>17</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.6-8

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.* p.11

but what people think should be thought disgusting: these are often the more difficult to pinpoint. Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the primacy of perception becomes of utmost importance to defuse the imagined fears and phobias inherent in human interactions with the body and the earth. His work stresses its ability to find new meanings in human encounters. 'By primacy of perception, we mean the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when truth and values are constituted for us.'<sup>19</sup> Terror management and religious rituals, healing liturgy and mysticism in the face of exaggerated phobias caused by disgust become of utmost value for the future of the earth and human relations with all that is.

Paul Rozin writes that there is little doubt that holes in the body have much to do with disgust yet there has been 'minimal' work done on their affect on human behaviour.<sup>20</sup> The disgust category, believes Miller, binds them all together as dangerous, as contaminating, as sources of magic and the uncanny, yet also associated with the 'familiar guest who threatens to return.'<sup>21</sup> They are those parts of who we are that we cannot deal with.

There is much to do to inure humans to their bodily reality. There is little work in psychology now about weaning or toilet training. Freud's work has been neglected or debunked in recent times yet psychoanalysis raises questions about the early acquisition of disgust that go unaddressed elsewhere, and it is a useful model for this work and for future research. The spread of the disgust reaction and the development of contamination sensitivity are areas of research which Rozin believes set an agenda for at least the next decade, believing the baby has been thrown out with the bath water in the general abreaction to Freudian conceptions.

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<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.322

<sup>20</sup> Rozin et al, *op.cit.* p.12

<sup>21</sup> Miller, *op.cit.* p.89 p.108

Shame, guilt and embarrassment, all linked with disgust are formed in the early days of toilet training. What was done with faeces can also be done with other things, he believes.<sup>22</sup>

To make this subject even more complex, disgusts are then acquired in a secondary fashion and evolve by generalization from already disgusting entities. Pairings of indicators of disgust turn into a contamination sensitivity that is difficult to eradicate. Furthermore, the idea that germs are present is enough to set up a disgust contamination sensitivity that is almost indelible. The fears of invisible entities like germs are always present in the disgust reaction and influential in many fundamental issues of theological reflection particularly in relation to chronic illness, disability and ecology. Barnes writes that the convergence of intuitive ideas about illness with the scientific advances in knowledge about germs has accelerated the cultural evolution of disgust to develop a complex system of exclusions and responses to threats. The study of disgust creates a promising arena for greater understanding of the interaction between biological and cultural evolution.<sup>23</sup>

What is apparent is that there are many areas and aspects of disgust that need further systematic investigation; for instance why people with Huntington's disease do not register the gag reflex? What could these people, seemingly without the disgust reaction, teach us about life and love? Disgust signals withdrawal and rejection, it has suggestive powers: making something or someone disgusting entails creating internalised motivation to avoid it or the person, often resulting in

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Rozin, *Perspectives on Psychological Sciences* 1 pp.365-376

<sup>23</sup> See D. Barnes and E. S Phillips, *The great stink of Paris and the marriage of filth and germs* ( Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006)

a political, moral or ecological stance.

Thus a major theological focus of this work is to seek ways to achieve inurement to such motivations, to bring to awareness disgust's overdetermined influences and, through habituation, challenge its exclusions. Miller writes that one can begin to do this through love which he puts in dialectical relationship to disgust. He goes as far as to say that love occurs when disgust rules are suspended. Indeed, 'one way of describing intimacy (and/or love) is that state in which various disgust rules are relaxed or suspended.'<sup>24</sup> Love is a strong motivational force and a regenerative power; much harder than disgust to measure or understand, nevertheless it 'privileges the other'<sup>25</sup> in certain circumstances.

It is maintained throughout this work that Christian love can overcome some of the most damaging effects of disgust. Such confidence works on the premise that love, as understood in the Judaeo /Christian tradition, has shown signs of overcoming and renewing even when disgust threatens to overwhelm and drive to despair. The importance of extending love's power to defuse the fear of physical processes in the face of eco-cide cannot be overemphasized. This energy does not stem from just the instinct to survive on a dying planet but from a very deep love for what we are in relation to all living things, how we have been created and what we would so passionately wish to protect from extinction. This love is seen in others of like mind who feel that God's Creation has not been appreciated or loved enough but harmed to the extent that one feels humanity has been involved in the 'undoing' of a wonderful gift.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Miller, *op.cit.* p.132

<sup>25</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Dorothee Soelle, with Shirley A, Cloyes, *To Work And To Love A Theology Of Creation* ( Philadelphia: Fortress Press,1986), p.3

It is when we are confronted with the utter threat to that which we love that we discover the wellsprings of our love and realise our dependency anew.<sup>27</sup>

Loving God, loving others as well as ourselves and loving the earth become synonymous with active participation in Creation to begin to cherish it. 'As the lover knows and remembers the smallest details of the body of her beloved so too we who love the earth strive to fathom its secrets and to divulge its beauty.'<sup>28</sup> Such love is an energy to learn to know about what God has granted us in the earth. 'We learn to love properly from the Creator who loved us first... love is not primarily an emotion, it is an energy, indeed the power of the Holy Spirit pouring down on us.'<sup>29</sup>

Miller believed that disgust at others helps us create our own identities. 'Those who disgust us define who we are and with whom we connect. We need them too-downwind'<sup>30</sup> Jesus pointed out the depths of the passions and sentiments that are often triggered in defence of religious identity and purity. (Mark 7) He was aware that such emotions and prescriptive identifications had to be addressed before real love could begin. 'You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.' (Mathew 23:27) The command is to deal with this before authentic relating can begin. 'First clean the inside of the cup and then the outside also will be clean.' (Matthew 23: 26)

Disgust and love are held in binary tension, love is the clean, powerful emotion that can be called in to challenge disgust's pessimism and distortions.

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<sup>27</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Martin Israel, *Creation* (London:Fount,1989), p.131

<sup>30</sup> Miller, *Op.cit.* p.251

We are barely conscious of such sentiments and distorted relations in sexism, disability phobia and ecocide as disgust shields the body from pollution but keeps humanity in a sterile ivory tower often unaware of its own careful alienating defences. In this study's intercorporeal and biophilic intent to engage once more with the earth, a life line is thrown for escape from that sterility into the real world of blood and bile, and an invitation is extended to fully engage with life in all its grandeur, terror, horror and wonder before it is too late.

Deepening understanding of such aspects of life through mysticism and introducing them into liturgy, this work invites the reader to a journey through some of the more basic elements of the world. Mysticism has often been considered an ethereal exercise alone and received some hostility in the tradition as seeming to dispense with some of the basic tenets of Christianity, even an eschatological vision; so complete were the beatific visions in themselves and seen as very individualistic. The journeys of some mystics were seen to rely on self-endeavour alone and to dispense with the notions of grace and atonement in the quest for a transcendent perfect reality far removed from the world.

Though there is this tendency to link mysticism to Neoplatonism and thereby to believe it is incompatible with the Bible and Christian religion, the early Christian use of the term was directed to the concrete and the factual events within the growing religion; it was a mystery mindedness surrounding the words of Scripture, the action of the liturgy and the sacraments. This was a mysticism that saw no separation of the material sacramental aspects of the church from spiritual wisdom. The mysticism of the early church fathers discovered the transcendent in the 'sign,' the concrete facts of the incarnation, the eucharist, the sacraments and

the words of Scripture.<sup>31</sup>

It is the latter kind of mysticism which is advocated here, as seen in the visions of St John of the Cross and Dame Julian of Norwich<sup>32</sup> who established their revelations very much within the tradition, knowing their mysticism was a sign of things to come, not an end in itself. They countered the attacks on mysticism by placing themselves squarely in community, in need of grace and atonement, and their experiences of being suffused in love was within this community of hope. They had their feet firmly on the ground of the incarnated love of God in Christ. Their mysticism could not be defined as individualism or mere subjectivity, rather, it was more of a disclosure, a showing of the numinous in the world which was often an overwhelming sense of God's nearness and enhancement within it. The ecomysticism envisaged extends this grounding and opens up the whole of creation to a compelling sense of unity, love and exultation within human encounter with the earth, integrating its suffering and joys together into the Trinitarian Godhead.

Yet ecomysticism also builds on the insights of eco/ theology which has not been without its own struggles to find a voice and to establish a unified critique of ecocide. Volatile debate and confusion have been the hallmarks of eco/theology: there have been many attacks on the science of climate change and differences of opinion of the causes of global warming. The communication between science and theology is often caught up in the polarisation of opinions and fraught with

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<sup>31</sup> Alan Richardson, (ed) *A History of Christian Theology* (London:SCM Press,1969)

<sup>32</sup> See *chapter five* p.35



competing problems, one of which, perhaps, is the fact that no-one quite knows the time scale of escalating problems in the environment. Some eco/ theologians eager to adore the ecosystem and to change it have made earth in God's image, alienating some conservative Christian theologians, while some evangelical Christians have been indifferent to the plight of the earth as they feel eco/cide is a sign of the end times; apocalypse is all part of God's will so there is little to be done in terms of action.

Meanwhile ideas with very little scientific corroboration are increasingly shared on the internet and in the media, which has meant that many enthusiasts and zealots have communicated cherry picked data to suit their own agendas.<sup>33</sup> The scientific mindset which tests theory after theory and is cautious about reporting the results of research, finds itself upstaged by media polemic with political and economic motives. One third of Britons and one half of Americans do not believe there is global warming, many believe the changes are due to natural cycles of change, still more believe the changes have very little to do with human emissions, so the debate becomes even more confusing and volatile.<sup>34</sup>

Scientists are notorious for staying in their own ghettos and not communicating with the public, so for the sake of human action now before it is too late, this reticence needs to change. Nasa has made it plain that there is global warming on a unprecedented scale and they are less tentative than before that such warming has human fingerprints and can not be put down to solar activity or natural cycles of change. But we hear very little in the media about their careful measurements and there remains hostility towards some key issues, particularly

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<sup>33</sup> 'Climate Change' *Horizon* BB2 June 24<sup>th</sup> 2011 8pm

<sup>34</sup> *Op.cit.*

the pace of global warming.<sup>35</sup> When these changes effect so many aspects of life, should not the church be a site of such debate in the face of the unholy mix of political agenda and media hype distorting the findings of science? A centre in this way is sorely needed where people could at least receive the truth and act together in readiness for the climatic and economic changes that are inevitable for every country on earth.

Liturgy is the framework in which the regenerative power of love for the earth can be fostered. It is a practice of acting out the insights of eco/mysticism and sharing the sense of nearness of God in Creation. Sharing new as well as traditional ritualised events facilitates active participation for all worshippers to sense the urgency of the action now needed in today's world. Liturgy is for all to share gifts and visions in a spiritual framework, and it is an important focus for this work. The aim is to encourage liturgies that do justice to the physicality of creation, to all that has been given in its joys and sufferings.

This is an enterprise which involves scouting far and wide for resources to give expression to new ways of appreciating the physical basis of existence. In acknowledging God's presence in the midst of the earth's woundedness there is a compelling need to make liturgy more authentic for the sake of the earth and all who bear what has been termed the negative aspects of corporeal life. In this way insights in new liturgy are offered as a way of honouring and respecting and including aspects of physicality that have been neglected or abhorred. When worshippers gather they recognise special significance in what they are sharing, it is a very valuable space for new visions for healing and appreciating our most precious gift of the earth and our bodies. 'Symbols such as water, bread and

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<sup>35</sup> *Op.cit.*

solidarity may reach an emotional unconscious centre in ways that little else does.’<sup>36</sup>

Liturgy, created by feminist theologies, emerging from centuries of misogyny, silence and disgust at women’s bodies, has opened up closed definitions within the tradition and offered life giving space to reflect in new ways that are biophilic and allow women to challenge androcentric concepts about their bodies and the earth. Many have begun to deconstruct concepts which made female bodies seem disgusting which in turn have stifled wonder, love and spirituality. They reconstruct concepts in the light of what can once more empower and heal the whole person and the whole earth by joyful and sometimes painful but most always passionate participation in a deeper engagement with the sacredness of nature. The association of women with nature in the tradition has become transformed from a negative association to one that denotes creativity and the maintenance of life.<sup>37</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s masculine bias and his focus on the basic structures of life can lead attention away from those differences which mark bodies in meaningful ways for empowering ends: for instance in feminist identity politics there is a tension between this aspect of feminism and his work. Despite this there are resonances in some feminist theologies with his critique of the binary polarizations of mind/ body, consciousness /world and spirit/ body. This lets the lived experience of the body serve as guide to philosophy and theology which has accorded well with many feminist projects. This work expands on the various

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<sup>36</sup> Diann, L. Neu, *Return Blessings: Ecofeminist liturgies renewing the earth* (Glasgow: Wild Goose publications 2004), p.13

<sup>37</sup> Vandana Shiva, *in op.cit.* p.16

ways feminist theologians have tried to link the material and spiritual, the immanent and transcendent to find empowerment and liberation from sexism. The love, mutuality and reciprocity as seen in the teachings of Jesus to combat the worst disgust reactions of misogyny, and the reimagining of God's erotic love and connection with all which was so popular in some second wave feminist theologies, provides valuable links to the dialectical approach to love and disgust advocated in the philosophical methodology endorsed throughout this work.

For instance Carter Heyward believed that humanity touches on the truth of incarnation when it engages in 'erotic connections in relation with one another, other creatures and the earth.'<sup>38</sup> The particular emphasis on a new creative theodicy in chapter four epitomises the ambience of the study, which is to complex the whole issue of suffering and disability, seeking new insights in ambiguous embodiment and to discover how disgust can be challenged through loving Christian relations. The God at the heart of this challenge is the 'current that flows between us, empowering us to insist on justice and love for all.'<sup>39</sup>

The inclusion of queer theology brings a new twist but is defended as an iconoclastic tool on a par with the methods of this work to uncover avoidance strategies and sedimented norms, created in the name of disgust, in the tradition; Marcella Althaus-Reid does this in an original way. It is included as a discourse that bears resemblance to Merleau-Ponty's work in the quest to affirm the body as the site of the meaning of existence unhampered by distortions and idealistic tendencies.<sup>40</sup> From about 1969, after the Stonewall Riots, the term queer became 'transformed from an insult into an empowering symbol of living out one's sexual

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<sup>38</sup> Carter Heyward, *Speaking Of Christ* (Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1989), p.22

<sup>39</sup> Carter Heyward, *Redemption of God* (Lanham: University Press Of America, 1982), p.18

<sup>40</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.160

difference in a homophobic society.’<sup>41</sup> Queer theology has challenged the disgust inherent in homophobia. As well as its intention to highlight the joy inherent in embodied life and friendships in the face of oppressive attitudes it, too, points out that Jesus seemed less concerned with contamination through touch and association.(Mark 7) In the face of disgust this theology determined that ‘there was to be no more extinction through assimilation but a proud outpouring of richness in diversity.’<sup>42</sup> Although not included in depth, queer theology’s contact points with this exploration of disgust opens up new implications for further reflection on its discourse.

Theological reflection on chaos is opened up to deepen the exploration into the visceral components of life on earth. Fixed meanings of the incarnation are challenged and feminist theologies expanded by the inclusion of disgust, disability and suffering, areas that I have found to be less widely researched in feminist theologies than more positive emotions, perhaps for fear of returning women once more to the place of victimhood.

Feminist theologies have sometimes been criticised for their optimistic theological reflection on the body because there are many women who are unable to celebrate their violated or disabled bodies; their experience has been neglected. The experiences of suffering bodies are included in this work as a counter to this challenge. The emphasis on the negative effects of androcentric power over women which takes centre stage in feminism’s challenge to sexism are also countered with an equal emphasis on the alienating effects of the disgust reaction

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<sup>41</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *Liberating Christ* (Cleveland, Ohio:The Pilgrim Press,1999), p.102

<sup>42</sup> *Op.cit.*

which has caused just as much suffering between the sexes and is far less acknowledged. 'Love has pitched its mansion in the place of excrement.'<sup>43</sup>

The feminist evolution to ecofeminism has been recognised as a natural progression as the ecological crisis deepens, acknowledging the inextricable link between the wellbeing of women's bodies and mother earth. 'I dare to think that once the links between all forms of oppression and violence became clear, from oppression in the family to the destruction of the planet, feminism had to become ecofeminism.'<sup>44</sup> Ecofeminism therefore is a vital ingredient in any attempt to challenge eco-cide and sexism, here it is adapted to further the particular aims of this study to promote Christian love for all bodies, men, women and that of the earth. Ecofeminism, alone, in its bid for empowerment and political energy could sometimes be seen as a new ideology which could detract from some of the Christian values espoused in this work.

The ecofeminist theological work of deconstruction often results in a dropping of some of the components of the tradition as too damaging to women and the earth, as the claiming of empowerment for women and the earth becomes the central focus.<sup>45</sup> The feminist call for love, mutuality and reciprocity and care, as Lisa Isherwood admits, does not magic away oppressions and erotic<sup>46</sup> engagement does not ensure good relations with the earth and the bodies of others. Vital as these feminist visions are for action, this work also argues for the power promised in Christ through the Holy Spirit working with humanity,

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<sup>43</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear: The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (London, Sydney: George G Harrap and Co, Ltd, 1933), p.1041

<sup>44</sup> Rosa Dominga Trapasso, 'Ecofeminismo; revisanda nuestra connexion con la naturaleza.' *Conspirando* 4 (June 1993), p.3

<sup>45</sup> See Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp.74-86

<sup>46</sup> *Op.cit.* p.128

empowering, defusing and creating renewal in suffering arenas. It is important to remember that women too are affected by the emotion of disgust, subject to its overreaching influences in the social and natural order and not impervious to the attractions of power.

Ecofeminism is also subject to some of the same difficulties faced by all eco/theologians discussed previously. Furthermore McFague even argues against the value of an eco/mysticism in case ecology becomes about feelings instead of the present reality of the ecological crisis. She views this as exploitation because the earth is utilised to back up human feelings instead of being seen as it is and for itself. She also argues against any notions of fantasy or romantic notions about the earth for the same reasons.<sup>47</sup> I hope this work counters that worry by stressing that the cataphatic mysticism advocated here is about embodied engagement as inseparable from feelings and action for the repair of the earth. .

Again, the use of Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception, attempting to come as close to phenomena as possible, challenging distortions and idealistic tendencies,<sup>48</sup> counters this worry. Some ecofeminists too struggle with fixed concepts of Jesus and the Trinity finding they hamper the journey into freeing theological reflection on the earth. Isherwood writes that the concepts of the Trinity, Jesus and God are predictable and 'we are still screened from the reality of nature by the Trinitarian energy we are told it holds and should embrace. The mindset of Christianity inhibits the creativity of the engagement.'<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Sally McFague, *Supernatural Christians: How we should love Nature* (London: SCM Press, 1997), pp.20-22

<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.160

<sup>49</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Theology 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p.141

In contrast this work hopes to illuminate the freeing potential of Christ and of the Trinity for ecotheology; diverging in places from some ecofeminist interests, it still makes the earth of paramount importance to God's redeeming work in Christ and integrates the earth into its eschatological vision. Many visions are explored in the following pages, they come from both men and women to challenge the disgust reaction so that all bodies can engage more authentically in a world that needs our deep attention and love for the twenty first century. It is a concern that will ask for insights from more than one discourse alone and it will ask for the transformation of our deepest passions, particularly that of disgust.



# Site Map

This work begins with an Introduction which traces love's motivating power in the face of disgust, especially the love that is incarnated in Christ and as recorded in the life of the church, the sacraments and Scripture.<sup>1</sup> It expands on the context of the study, the pains and needs of the disabled, women and the wounded earth, and explains why the reasons lying behind oppressions need probing at a deeper emotional level. The urgency of eco/cide is stressed and the concrete facts of existence brought to the fore. It introduces the spiritual foundation of this work: the yearning to find a new way of privileging physicality and love for the natural world and the intention to challenge all that would obstruct this process, particularly through the emotion of disgust. This section also introduces the philosophical method of the study. Merleau-Ponty's unique method of phenomenology is considered and advocated as a way to avoid abstractions about the physical world. He argues for a new depth and breadth in perceiving the natural world to avoid some of the dualistic aspects of thinking which have proved so destructive in human relations.

Part I begins with Chapter one exploring the emotion of disgust and its appearance in the oppression of sexism, disabilism and ecocide. The way forward amidst such oppression begins to emerge in new dialectical visions. By engaging with the worst of bodily experiences one glimpses hope that not all is lost, and it is in honest reflection and exploration of ambiguities that new theological directions emerge. Such ambiguity is expanded through feminist psychoanalysis.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scriptural references for this work will be taken from *The New International Bible* (Nashville:Holman Bible Publishers,1984)

Psychoanalysis itself is defended, as salient to a study on disgust, as a useful model for the acquisition of affects of many kinds and is offered as one discourse amongst others to bring to conscious awareness the implications of the disgust reaction. Merleau-Ponty drew on psychoanalysis, especially Lacan's mirror stage of development, as it held resonances with his own work on the primordial, that background of the perceptual act which precedes and exceeds us. 'We rediscover anterior to the ideas of subject and object, the fact of my subjectivity and the nascent object, that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being.'<sup>2</sup> This chapter also initiates the question asked throughout this study: how we can deal less violently with the fear and horror of disgust so that the vulnerable in society and on the earth are no longer scapegoated and made to bear the brunt of these emotions which threaten to violate fragile identities.

Chapter two discusses the part interpersonal disgust plays in human life. Disgust at strangers and those who break certain moral rules and norms emerged as the civilising process imposed more and more rules and regulations to keep. It considers the cultural evolution of the effects of disgust, the norms and historical associations built up around it. It emphasises its insistent and dynamic power in the social order throughout the centuries, its self-securing practices and its fixating effect on human identities and status. Biological and cultural evolutionary strategies of the avoidance of disgust have become entwined until the acquisition of disgust sensitivities seems to have become a form of evaluative conditioning. The hiddenness of the foundations of identity is brought to light along with the escalating notion of how much inquiry is needed to probe into these foundations which help shape human ecological, social, moral and spiritual life. The

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<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.219

avoidance of mortality and ideas surrounding it, the effects on gender relations and disabilism, and the fear of ugliness leaves the end of part one almost teetering on the edge of despondency about the ubiquitous influence of disgust.

Part two begins to ask for a theological response in the shape of Christian hope, love and of wonder. Merleau-Ponty's quest for a revitalised view of nature is followed up in the hunger for more knowledge of how the world is and why it continues to disgust but also enchant us. How can Christians become inured to disgust, be transformed and changed in their attitudes and deal creatively with their fears of disgust? This is honestly admitted as a difficult task when the Judaeo/ Christian tradition is paradoxically not only a source of freedom and creativity but also part of the problem, and the whole ethic of divinity is seen to be violated by the disgusting. A dialectical response is attempted in the face of what might seem unconvincing measures, positive avenues through the grotesque, through illness and suffering and also through an acceptance of those aspects of life that cannot be changed, holding these paradoxical positions together in Christian love.

Glimpses of such love shine through in what seem like hopeless, disgusting situations and the truth of this is seen most clearly in the crucifixion of Christ in which the incarnation reaches its most intimate identification with all that would disgust humanity. Redemption begins in the most appalling circumstances and paves the way for hope and a new aesthetic of appreciation and acceptance for all that exists. Visceral fears of physicality are best challenged by habituation, by visceral engagement and by accepting our responsibilities towards the environment. Stepping out in new artistic and creative ways we become inured to our fears, learn to see and accept raw nature and become resolved to work to save

it before it is completely despoiled by human apathy and ignorance. Liberating routes to this vibrant new appreciation are suggested through asceticism, looking into the chaos, the arts, mysticism and creative liturgy, seeking resolutions and transformations to old problems and habits on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh.

Part three continues the work of love as chapter four explores the new life breathed into theology by the varied insights of feminist theologies, particularly their specific work in challenging pervasive disgust reactions to the processes of women's bodies. It endorses the embodied practices advocated by Merleau-Ponty and feminist theologies and attempts to create a feminist theodicy which will be of value for those feminists who, disabled and suffering, have found that the discourse does not go quite far enough in offering empowering visions for their particular experiences. It looks at the potential of feminism and ecofeminism, through the arts and reflections on chaos to deepen understanding of human perception of ambiguous embodiment, to work towards a deepening of Christian love, hope, mystical awareness and action which can begin a new chapter in an expressive, liturgical acceptance of life in all its forms.

Chapter five attempts to explore further the regenerative powers of love and wonder in the face of disgust. It is maintained that the arts, poetry and ecomysticism can do this to best advantage. These themes, like Merleau-Ponty's epistemological reduction, set aside the norm, the habitual language, the assumptions, and creates new visions. Liturgy and worship, for the sake of the planet, should be full of this and the enhancement that mysticism brings. Different types of mysticism are explored, including that of humour for the disgust researchers find this prevalent. It seems to dispel and accept the disgusting in a

way ordinary discourse is unable to do, and perhaps needs a deeper reflection in future on its liberating potential. Chapter five looks for such vital means to continue to find a way through the ambiguity of the love /disgust dichotomy. It seeks gaps in familiar knowledge and tries to link them in integrative ways hoping to begin a creative operation that opens the phenomenal field to a deeper human perception of reality. It discusses how the church might open itself as such a space to make this depth available to all. It endorses the sacraments of the church as vehicles to bring this about and again probes the crucifixion for its depth of ambiguity and hope in the face of all that has been discussed

The conclusion asks further how the embodied love and wonder that ensue from this creativity and knowledge can produce the energy necessary to challenge the deeply embedded norms arising from disgust. Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic, stylistic attempt to express the notion of flesh is expanded in poetical imagery, offered as a means to further theological reflection. The work ends by attempting to pull together the threads of this eclectic approach in affirming Christian love as the strong underlying motivating force which generates repentance and healing action to save the extraordinary world we live in, a world in which quantum mechanics poses further mysteries. It asks what the implications of such research are for the future of theological reflection and for the worshipping community that is the church; posing new topics of interest for the twenty first century. As any good exploration should do, it raises more questions than answers: it creates an opening and paves the way for further interest in the study of disgust so that it will no longer remain the hidden force affecting so many aspects of theology.

# Introduction

Theodicy cannot depend on a one-sided diet of examples.<sup>1</sup>

## PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) developed a particular way of viewing the world which he described as radical reflection which incorporated the power of synthesis in an attempt to rebuild the world of experience. This study uses his distinctive genre of phenomenology which stresses the primacy of perception in becoming reacquainted with the natural order. He felt too that philosophy and abstract thinking had valorized analytical thought and intellectualism in preference to thought that arose from actual encounters in embodied situations. He believed the act of perception was the horizon of all true knowledge and stressed that it was more complex and sophisticated than the subject /object dualism which he decided was still present in classical phenomenology as first expressed by Edmund Husserl. Merleau-Ponty felt that Husserl was too tied to a philosophy of the essence of consciousness alone.<sup>2</sup>

Phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence again. It does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than their facticity.<sup>3</sup>

Not that all concepts and dogmas were bad; he argued for a bracketing of assumptions, to hold them in abeyance while encountering the world to achieve as authentic a perception as possible. He wished to connect various capacities of the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Z. Phillips, 'Theism Without Theodicy' in Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil* (Louisville, London: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2001), p.151

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* pp.vii-viii

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.* p.vii

body including consciousness into an ‘expressive unity’<sup>4</sup> where all traditions and concepts were brought back to ‘the things themselves’<sup>5</sup> and the site and soil of the nature from whence they came. In his thought there was room for the full inclusion of history, spirituality, the body and consciousness without reducing one to the other.

The term ‘expressive unity’ which he used to unite many different human capabilities is one to be emulated in this work where all resources available are sought to help us look at the world anew. Of salient value to this study, too, is his belief in primordial contact, the human encounter with all that precedes and exceeds human consciousness. He was concerned to thicken and broaden philosophy’s understanding of this encounter by drawing attention to it and putting aside abstract assumptions in order to be open to the effects upon us. This primordial, he believed, is an inalienable presence, inaccessible to scientific analysis, rather like Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject.<sup>6</sup>

When the cogito is closed in on itself it is also closed to this mysterious part of the environment which co-joins involuntary movements of the human body with brute being, a cohesion that is not the result of an individual decision, but a mode of being we share with other creatures and part of unreflective being. ‘Because we are in the world we are condemned to meaning.’<sup>7</sup> This is the mode of liason present in nature that is not under our control just as the interiority of nature and animals is of a different quality to consciousness. Indeed he stresses that such interiority is not constituted by an act of human consciousness and should be seen in its extraordinary otherness and not as projections of our own

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<sup>4</sup> *Op.cit.* p.206

<sup>5</sup> *Op.cit.* p.ix.

<sup>6</sup> See *chapter one* p.111

<sup>7</sup> *Op.cit.* p.xix

imaginations.

Phenomenology is a philosophy for which the world is already there before reflection begins and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world and endowing that contact with a (theological) philosophical status.<sup>8</sup>

Merleau-Ponty believed human consciousness to be part of nature and yet also that nature was 'given' to consciousness. 'What is this being of nature and the being of consciousness such that an understanding of one by the other is possible?'<sup>9</sup> The close link between the organisation of human existence and the underlying physiological structure of the world filled him with wonder, and this kinship with the natural order, this fusion of self and world coloured all his work especially his belief that we should rehabilitate our relationship with the natural environment to observe unreflective habits in ourselves, nature and interspecies communication all the better to understand our own primordial contact with the natural order.

As his thought matured he became more absorbed in the ambiguities of life which offered no consolation of definitive answers. He rejected phenomenological positivism, the belief that the world is exactly adjusted to human consciousness<sup>10</sup> and turned to painting as evidence of the incompleteness of consciousness for understanding the world, using the term hyper-reflection to articulate this. He wrote that painting helps to make visible how the world touches us.<sup>11</sup> The painter's sighting draws the seer to the play of light and shadow through which the object becomes visible. In chapter three the

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<sup>8</sup> *Op.cit.* p.vii (Words in parenthesis are my own.)

<sup>9</sup> *Op.cit.* p.xix

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p. 238



arts are explored for just this ability, to illustrate the depths and solidity of perception, the unity whereby humanity is swept up into the primordial depths of nature, the most existential dimension of our being. Pigment of colour used by the artist, is not a secondary quality of the world, the colour brown is a visual sensation experienced through the eyes and brain but it is also very much part of the earth. He wished to restore the primacy of such qualities in artwork to philosophy to illuminate the fusion of self, senses and environment. 'What I am trying to translate to you is more mysterious, it is entwined in the very root of being, in the impalpable source of sensations.'<sup>12</sup>

Though at first drawing on Husserl's phenomenology and his focus on the intentional acts of the ego as it relates to the object as a key factor in discovering knowledge of the world, he drew further away from this as his thought changed. He grew dissatisfied with what he still felt was a dualist framework in classical phenomenology and developed his own style of phenomenology. In his later thought he introduced the notion of 'flesh' in a bid to probe the way the seer is caught up in what he sees.<sup>13</sup> Flesh is not a specific quality confined to the mind nor the body nor the world but part of them all, more like an element as air and water are elements. In this way he hoped people would see that the flesh which permeates the human body also permeates the bodies of those around us in nature, and in acknowledging this as a far greater motivating ethical force for relationality than rules of law or concepts, it would connect the notion of being to a depth that would allow no evasions.

Linking all his thought was the body. Neither object nor subject it was an

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<sup>12</sup> *Op.cit.* p.159

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, trans Alphonso Lingis *The Visible And The Invisible* (Evanston:Northwestern University Press, 1968), p.127

amalgam of both for it was an emblem of our link to nature, to animals and a field of possibilities: a hollow where different influences, habits, expressions, space and temporality all met and could be synthesised. Not only was it not merely an object, it was an 'oeuvre.' It opened humanity to meaning, to endless interpretations. The knowledge that I belong to myself while belonging to the world is a contradiction that he does not try to explain so much as to describe as a fact of the world, an ambiguous part of existence pervading all knowledge.

It was his ambiguity about such matters that drew criticism of his phenomenology, especially in his use of the phenomenological reduction. Because he used a weakened version of this method and believed that there was no complete essence of reality revealed in the perceptual act he was often critiqued and considered not a phenomenologist but an existentialist first with some preconceived notions of how reality should appear. The main critics of Merleau – Ponty have believed that despite his emphasis on the primacy of perception, he could not avoid projecting his own preconceived ideas about human encounter with the world. R.M. Zaner believed there was a fundamental rift running throughout his work in claiming that one could know through the body in the act of perception. 'We cannot say that the body knows anything.'<sup>14</sup> The identification of consciousness with knowing through the body was absurd, he thought as it split the notion of consciousness. However as a church organist I am very sure that my body learned responses over time to this most difficult of instruments so that I am able to play through my body's reflexes without being conscious of some of these actions so I would dispute Zaner's criticism.

Zaner is also known for leading the standard criticism of his work in

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<sup>14</sup> R.M.Zaner, *The Problem Of Embodiment* (The Hague:Martinus Nijhoff,1971), p. 207

believing that Merleau- Ponty utterly rejected the phenomenological reduction, one of the main constituents of the phenomenological method. The phenomenological reduction, whereby all transcendence must be treated with indifference as a way of parenthesising judgements about the world, was however very much part of his method. He only parted company with those phenomenologists who looked for true certainties in the act of perception and who added idealistic ideas of their own. He felt that perception would always be incomplete because of the preobjective reflections and habits of the body and he avoided filling in the gaps with transcendent ideas that were not part of the present and authentic act of perception. He retained a weaker version of the phenomenological reduction; ‘wonder in the face of the world.’ His own interpretation of the reduction was that it ‘disrupts our absorption in the world, thereby destroying its ordinary character.’ He felt that this kind of reduction was like poetry and art, it made us think again about our concepts, the use of language and showed glimpses of a world that was stranger than supposed and paradoxical.<sup>15</sup>

He has also been criticised by Mary Rose Barrol for not giving enough credence to human intellectual powers of thought, to morality or religion. He did not ask the ultimate questions of why being reveals itself at all or how knowledge is attained. Barrol writes that Merleau-Ponty seemed less interested in any questions about the Absolute or reflections beyond phenomena.<sup>16</sup> Yet Merleau-Ponty’s views of religion and the Absolute were grounded, like this work, and plainly put for he placed them, like all thought, in embodiment. His belief was

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<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception op.cit.* p.xii

<sup>16</sup> Mary Rose Barrol, *The Body In Interpersonal Relations* (New York, London:Lanham, 1984), p. 265

that in Christianity the world now had a God very much incarnated and in the world and very much part of bodily experience. 'God thus ceases to be an exterior to become one with human life.'<sup>17</sup>

His ambiguity too is advocated in this study for he complexes easy answers to some of the hardest questions that theology has had to face in the contemporary issues of the day. As for intellectualism, perhaps it is time to put aside some assumptions and hubris about idealistic abstractions in the face of human despoiling of the earth. Merleau- Ponty affirms the dialectical nature of reality and human intersubjective exchange as the site of meaning. His attempt to bring in a level of authentic openness in human lived experience, its relatedness to the world and to God, provides a valuable backcloth to any focus to attempt to avoid the many distortions put in place by what has been termed the disgusting.

Words and actions have fuller meaning when we allow the interiority of the world to come through us, we are conduits and muses of the world's meaning. We then turn this meaning into all kinds of expressions: singing, dancing, painting, sculpture and language, and liturgy (an aim of this work), aesthetically giving dramatic form to what is received through this openness which is the body. We are not imitating the world as something out there, neither are we creating it as a projection of ourselves. This reciprocity is much more nuanced than philosophy has acknowledged, believed Merleau-Ponty. It links with the theological focus explored in this study, the wonder of the encounter and the creative energy such wonder can foster.

This wonder also becomes of more interest to Merleau –Ponty in his later

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<sup>17</sup> *Op.cit.* p. 267

work, especially in the invisible qualities of the world, the inherent directedness of the body, the affective responses and the generosity of intercorporeality. He too wonders about the residues and remainders of the feeling of undifferentiated being that he thinks one experiences in infancy and these implicit energies within the perceptual act all begin to make their mark on his view of the world. It is a philosophical approach that brings a certain amount of passivity and indebtedness in the face of nature back into discourse. It gives weight and credence to the Christian commandment to love one another and encourages engagement with nature for he believed, 'I am given to the field of the other.'<sup>18</sup> It is a determination to 'seize the meaning of the world or of history as the world comes into being.'<sup>19</sup> Rather than a simple act of perception this seizing occurs within a structural relationship which he calls a creative operation within a body schema with the 'already there' of the world.

The secret was to approach this in a new way and he wrote of the potential of the creative spirit, stressing the value of artistic work as a return to an innocence of perception which could transform human identity and purpose, where immanence and transcendence were entwined, self and other were fused. His terms chiasm, element, reversibility and flesh for this entwining drew attention to the endless movement in intersubjectivity in the world. This is the heart of the matter in terms of relationality with the wounded earth for the understanding of human identity, the full extent of its basis in such intersubjectivity has not been acknowledged sufficiently and one has to ask how much this has contributed to the crimes committed against the mystical interdependence of life on earth?

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<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* pp.112-113

<sup>19</sup> *Op.cit.* p.xxi

One of the tasks of Christian theological reflection should be to aid the nurture of the human person, it should look at faith in community and ask how the Christian can carry forth the gospel into the wider world. How does one develop the depth of perception that has been advocated, the vibrant bodily perspectives of engagement with the other and nature and, in the process, look carefully again at ourselves and acknowledge the divisive effect of norms which exacerbate the disgust reaction?

Merleau- Ponty was impatient with the reified abstractions of intellectualism, the stance of pure consciousness alone to describe the world. He was also impatient with empiricism alone, as it betrayed the tendency to reduce engagement with the world by grouping sensations and raw data in objective terms, thereby forgetting the presence of the subject who evaluates them; he broadened the understanding of what he considered to be univocal terms for what is in fact, the multiple nature of perception. A thickening and deepening of the act of consciousness as it meets the organic world, involving involuntary acts of the body, to which consciousness has no access, leaves Merleau- Ponty's work full of ambiguity and incompleteness of which he was only too aware. The structures of the world receive even more attention as Merleau- Ponty becomes more impatient with blanket terms to describe the richness of experience and he searches for the gaps and weaves in the blanket to challenge self satisfied assumptions as to how the world should appear.

Likewise liturgy loses its way when it contains general terms to cover a wide range of experiences. Church goers feel frustrated when such univocal terms get repeated week after week when they know that lived experience cannot be expressed in repetitive restricted form. Merleau -Ponty's notion of receptivity

returns us to the world in all its movement, its colour and richness. Knowledge is constituted in a field of activity, and the fact that the world exists ‘as’ one is perceiving it and must exist for oneself ‘in’ perceiving it, but also exists for itself is an ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty does not try to explain so much as to simply describe as one of the facts of the world.<sup>20</sup> The gesturing creative spirit of humanity should find room to probe more deeply into the unreflective experience, the rootedness <sup>21</sup>all creatures act upon, the involuntary movements of the body which are part of everyday and every action.

Merleau - Ponty’s distinctive contribution to phenomenology is this insistence on the world that precedes and exceeds consciousness. He shows how human lives are grounded in and yet also take up beginnings in the natural order. The ambiguity and inclusiveness that he tries to highlight are what fuel his creativity and perhaps ours as we, too, try to find cohesion between what are often felt to be disparate aspects of life to keep love and wonder alive. Concerned to challenge many reified abstractions in the tradition about God and the world, especially in the name of disgust, this work seeks to tell God’s story in creation through the embodied situations of all life. The concrete lives of people witnessing to a God of created beings, creatures and nature as told in Scripture and the tradition and in the worshipping community. Realising human contingency and dependence on what is given, we might share the ‘same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being.’<sup>22</sup> By remaking contact with the body and describing the perceptual content as Merleau-Ponty

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<sup>20</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.363-5

<sup>21</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Op.cit.* p.xxi

advocates, it is hoped humanity can once more see its kinship with the earth and with each other.

Thus linking the theological task with that of Merleau –Ponty’s phenomenology, one seeks an entwining of self and world, perceiving through encounters and engagement in order to make faith relevant to contemporary life. One tries to relate theories, ideas and concepts of God that emerge from more authentic perception with practice for better relations with all embodiment, attempting to put aside some assumptions about various aspects of life, particularly the fear of life itself, arguing for a closer encounter with them through the eyes of faith.

The normative boundary of faith is enlarged into the wider world, and some of the more intellectualist narrow horizons critiqued for their part in isolating the body of Christ from a wondrous perspective of creation. Idealistic notions and avoidance strategies lead us away from God and to what is often seen as the indifference, sterility and emptiness of the present age. It is a contextual undertaking, working on the premise previously stated that the early Church responded to specific practical circumstances as they arose and early faith became cemented as a result of these practical encounters. As a consequence, it is hoped that perception of the natural order in its entirety, as it is encountered, according to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, will rehabilitate talk about God and the earth in a manner capable of informing the practice of faith where it is most needed.

What does it mean to believe and love as a Christian in a crumbling earth and to unite various capabilities of the body into a positive schema and to work and worship as signs of God’s activity on earth? Different responses to this question are explored in the need to build and sustain an understanding that,



the task of personal and corporate discipleship is to make common cause in solidarity with the suffering of the world in order to work for justice.<sup>23</sup>

In order to begin this task at the depth and thickness of engagement that Merleau – Ponty advocates in the world, one has first to uncover the phobias and fears that surround embodiment so often expressed through the emotion of disgust.

## THEOLOGICAL FOCAL POINTS

### FAITH

How to become more aware of fears and phobias and how we react to them in relation to other life on earth entails sensitivity to a sense of place and embodied relations with others and must always begin in our own contexts. The yearning for deeper engagement with visceral reality and fleshly existence stems from my own powerful experiences of femalehood and disability and the revelation of the Trinitarian God in, and through, a wounded reality. They are only partial perspectives in an extraordinarily diverse world of embodiment. A diversity in which the divine Spirit is believed to be fully present and participative, who also continues to speak through Scripture, burning into hearts to create renewed energy, as experienced on the road to Emmaus.

Did not the Christ have to suffer these things?..he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself....Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? (Luke 24; 27-32)

‘In both science and religion it is the search for motivated belief that is a central technique in the quest for true knowledge.’<sup>24</sup> Fear has motivated many a

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<sup>23</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Francis Ward, *Theological Reflection: Method* (London:SCM Press,2005)

<sup>24</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality* (London:SPCK, 2005), p.94

belief for ‘we have always experienced terror, have attributed it to a thousand causes and have sought refuge from it in a thousand solutions.’<sup>25</sup> These solutions are being called into question in the belief that by bringing disgust and irrational projections to light, they lose some of their overwhelming power as source of inflicted burden onto those who remind others of the unpalatable aspects of creation. Some of these fears have seemed to be set in stone, translated into norms and dogmas which have been in place for so long that they have been defended as divinely ordained and by institutionally maintained official Scriptural texts. John Barton writes that on the contrary, no such argument or maintenance is viable, there are no set methods of interpretation, the Reformation and Enlightenment challenged ‘dogmatic slumbers’ and ‘opposed the establishment of such official methods which interpreters are permitted to use.’<sup>26</sup>

The point is that no-one may legislate as to what questions the reader of Scripture is allowed to ask, or to declare that certain questions shall be deemed uninteresting or unimportant.<sup>27</sup>

Christianity is seen as a source of freedom and the uncovering of the many aversions and fears that have hidden the radiance of creation. ‘Even to this day... whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’ (2 Corinthians 4:15-17)

Within the Christian Church the tradition of freedom, stemming from Jesus himself, to challenge authority has allowed biblical interpreters remarkable scope to search the Scriptures and discover new

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<sup>25</sup> Jose Oscar Beozzo And Virgil Elizondo, (eds) *The Return Of the Plague* (London: Concilium, SCM Press And Maryknoll:Orbis Books, 1997), p.5

<sup>26</sup> John Barton, (ed) ‘Historical Critical Approaches’ *The Cambridge Companion To Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,1998), p.19

<sup>27</sup> *Op.cit.*

meanings.<sup>28</sup>

Scientists are now appealing to all religions to motivate people to find new meanings within their texts and communities to draw more attention to the woundedness of the earth, to protect and become actively involved in the healing energy of the earth's ecological system, cease human despoilation and cultivate a new love of creation. 'We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.'<sup>29</sup> The following reflections explore the unsavoury truth that how humans treat each other in disability or vulnerability is an indication of their fear of this web of life.

Eager to find ideas to promote authentic liturgies to empower new spiritual reflections in creative ways to promote love and dignity within this web, these reflections are offered in the hope that Christians can find new resources from within the tradition and from without to mobilise the church to be a beacon of hope for change and ecological sustainability. The destructive and creative power of the emotions are probed and Christian institutional cohesion and comfort zones questioned for their flights from viscerality. A disintegration of the secure and safe is risked for a true comprehension of the incarnation. Just as Merleau-Ponty held the seer and the visible together as caught up in one flesh so we hold the materiality and spirituality of Jesus together, ('Jesus is fully spirit and fully dust')<sup>30</sup> and attempt to ask,

how is one to connect the realism which must involve a clear eyed contemplation of the misery and evil of the world, with a sense of an uncorrupted good without the

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Morgan, 'The Bible And Christian Theology' in *op.cit.* p.126

<sup>29</sup> Chief Seattle, cited in 'Being Green: Women, Word, Spirit' *Network*: No 89 2006

<sup>30</sup> Karen Baker Fletcher, in *Sisters Of Dust: Sisters Of Spirit: Womanist Workings On God's Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p.19

latter idea becoming the merest consolatory dream? <sup>31</sup>

As a disabled feminist I have been motivated, by the work of feminist theologies and disability studies, to voice my own experiences of the misery and the fear of chronic illness alongside the evils of disabilism and sexism, and of the uphill struggle to assert a protest at being treated as inferior in both ablebodied and male based structures of life. Cheryl Wade describes such struggles of existence as ‘disconfirmation;’ one is not confirmed as a person and, labelling, she writes, is the first step to resist such treatment. ‘All I can tell you is that my survival in the world is a lot easier knowing that it exists and knowing what to call it.’<sup>32</sup> As a great many aspects of existence have been disconfirmed, empowering liturgy to honour all physical existence must begin with much labelling before balance and integrity is restored to the whole web of life. Merleau-Ponty believed a whole new descriptive approach to nature was necessary.<sup>33</sup> Petra Kelly writes of the healing of the human spirit that this entails.

To think green is nothing less than to heal the human spirit and completely reallocate our resources and priorities. We need nothing less if we are to survive and flourish in the twenty-first century.<sup>34</sup>

Human, and what has personally been discerned to be divine, love has motivated a search for the means to assert a right to love oneself and those who walk the same path of fear and hope, for an end to sexism, disabilism and ecocide.

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<sup>31</sup> Iris Murdoch cited in Tim Jackson, *Love Disconsolated* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.v

<sup>32</sup> Cheryl Wade, in Barrett Shaw (ed) *The Ragged Edge* (Louisville:Avocado Press, 1994), p.63

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* trans McCleary (Evanston:North Western University Press:1964), p.15

<sup>34</sup> Petra Kelly, *Thinking Green* ((Berkeley: Parrallax Press, 1994)

As a Christian I have found both fear and hope present in the primary text of the Bible, and in my own received revelations which are experiences difficult to articulate, but akin to the poetic musing of R.S Thomas. 'I feel the power that, invisible, catches me by the sleeve, nudging... I know its ways with me; how it enters my life, is present rather before I perceive it.'<sup>35</sup> I have found fear and hope held together, also, in countless narratives, spoken and written by people in similar circumstances.

These narratives are full of resistance to fear, in and through their hope and trust in the empowering energy of the Trinitarian God, the power that can be equated with justice and reconciliation and the power which finds many different ways to speak of love. 'Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him. In this way love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence.'(1 John 4:17) Very few theologians can speak of utter confidence but many have wished to share their reasons for the hope they have. 'As anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain.'(Hebrews 5:19) In the same mystical fashion my own hope forms the backcloth of this work which could be described as a constructive, revisionist Christian theology to 'provoke a bottomless love ...for all that endlessly rotting and renewing riot of life of which we are a clever but troublesome part.'<sup>36</sup>

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35 R S Thomas, 'The Presence' in *Later Poems* (London:Macmillan, 1984)

36 Catherine Keller, 'No More Sea' in Dietrich Husserl, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology* (Harvard:Harvard University Press, 2000), p.195

## THE POWER OF LOVE

‘God is love,’ (1 John 4:17) and God is Creator. (Genesis 1) Creation, in its woundedness is crying out for love, a change of heart in human dealings and relationship with the natural world in this present uncertainty about the future of the planet as global warming threatens its very existence. As Marcella Althaus - Reid writes, ‘to reflect theologically is always an activity done with a presupposition of love,’<sup>37</sup> and a loving change of heart is something religion advocates consistently; it can move people in a way that many organisations are unable to do.

Real religion is nothing if not the energy to help sentient beings; all religions were originally founded to promote happiness and reduce suffering.<sup>38</sup>

Creation waits with bated breath for a renewed ardour for matter and for the planet, a conversion of repentance, new energy, healing and celebration on the lines of the zeal and passion of the post Pentecost apostles and converts.

See what this Godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. (2 Corinthians 7:11)  
And let us consider how we may spur one another toward love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10-24)

In its application of this energy to social and ethical issues, the church has focused more on people than on nature. Now, however, expansive new perceptions and interpretations at the level of the constitutive elements of all living

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<sup>37</sup> Marcella Althaus -Reid, and Lisa Isherwood, *The Sexual Theologian* (London:T&TClark, 2004), p.1

<sup>38</sup> Robert Thurman, ‘Tibet and The Monastic Army of Peace’ in Kenneth Kraft, *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism And Non Violence* (Albany:State University of New York Press,1992), p.79

matter must inspire human longing and concern in an eagerness to create an ecotheology for a new generation of Christians, to spur all into a more biophilic way of life. ‘Our deepest hope lies in expanding our own roots...our roots, like those of trees, are reservoirs storing materials for future use, enabling us again and again to make a fresh start.’<sup>39</sup> It is a matter of both practical and spiritual expediency.

He prayeth best who loveth best  
All things both great and small  
For the dear Lord who loveth us  
He made and loveth all.<sup>40</sup>

Love at this level becomes radical, (meaning at the root) it includes and integrates the very ground of life and being where we can love because God first loved us. (I John 4:19) ‘The ultimate ground of our being is indeed God, the eternal light, but the reason why we know is within us.’<sup>41</sup> Created and sustained like fruits on the vine (John 15:1) by, in and through the Word made flesh, all life becomes precious. ‘Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.’ (John 1:30)

Beginning with this knowing and making more explicit the belief that this rooted love has been created, spoken and demonstrated through Christ, (John 1:1-18) it is possible to probe the underside of creation, of beauty and disgust, of love and fear and the interdependence with all that exists ‘because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. Because perfect love drives out fear.’ (1 John

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Daly, *Quintessence: Realizing The Archaic Future, A Radical Elemental Feminist Manifesto* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1998), p.46

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner’ in Louis Untermeyer, *The Golden Treasury of Poetry* (London, Glasgow:Collins,1969), p.30

<sup>41</sup> Bernard Lonergan, cited in Celia Deane Drummond, *The Ethics Of Nature* (Oxford, MA:Blackwell Publishers, 2004), p.226

4:17-18) Fear and beauty need rethinking in any zealous eco/theological enterprise. 'Beauty is a delicate synthesis of unity and complexity, stability and motion, form and dynamics.'<sup>42</sup>

Yet, amidst the beauty of the earth when humanity experiences these myriad forms, it tries to protect itself from the most fearful of them. It exhibits the strong emotion of disgust which blocks the path of love and erects defence barriers. It is important to realise that this labour is intensive and is expressed through many concepts, self securing practices and many related emotions at the disposal of humans from the deepest fear to the deepest revulsion, sorrow and solemnity. Christian theology could be described, in one of Emily Dickinson's phrases, as the 'solemn thing within the soul'<sup>43</sup> invariably searching for purpose and telos.

Past, present and future co-inhere in the presence of a divine power who can be approached as friend and advocate, and often as rescuer from the worst aspects of reality. The solemn thing for the soul for the twenty-first century has to be whether the earth will be the basis for such a venture. For many Christians the future has hinged on a life after death, eternal life, a new creation of reconciliation where all wrongs will be righted and all hurts healed. This promise has often affected the way they strive in this life, not for the sake of this world but for the next. Yet John's gospel makes clear that through Christ, the Word is made flesh; 'from the fullness of his grace, we have received one blessing after another.' (John 1:16) It is in this world that we have received him. 'In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.' (John 1: 4-5) All reality holds this life and light and therefore needs

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<sup>42</sup> John Haught, *God After Darwin* (Colorado, Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), p. 131

<sup>43</sup> Emily Dickinson, 'A Solemn Thing Within The Soul' In Ted Hughes, (ed) *A Choice Of Emily Dickinson's Verse* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 32



the utmost attention. 'The Earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.' (Psalm 33:5)

They will not hurt or destroy  
On all my holy mountain;  
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.  
As the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:9)

## CREATION

Working from this Scriptural premise one begins to ask why much visceral reality has often been relegated to necessity, the elemental, disgusting or matter basic to existence and not worth the mention, creating a vast abyssal difference between it and normal human discourse. Yet visceral reality is that lived experience which cannot be denied, the elemental make up of bodies and of the cosmos; of blood and flesh, of soil, of air, fire and water, of form and fluid, of rock, stone and sand, of planet, star and moon, of wind and rain, of virus, of plant and tree, of bacteria and microbe, of wave and particle at quantum level, and of countless other live tiny creatures which share the planet with humanity and often disgusts us. Theological reflection on what is often unspoken and avoided brings the smaller invisible mysteries of the earth alive once more.

Rutherford describes insects as the 'invisible hordes,' whose numbers dominate the earth as 'the waterwheel of life...By digesting raw elements they lift them to a higher level of energy so that they can be used as vitamins and enzymes by higher life forms...we could not exist without them.'<sup>44</sup> As this begins to dawn on our age as an ecological fact of human existence, avoidance and fear shown towards the smallest creatures of life urgently need to be reconsidered and

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<sup>44</sup> The Reader's Digest, *The Amazing World Of Nature* (London, Cape Town: The Reader's Digest Association, 1969), pp.84- 87

revalued. Elements, cycles of matter and energy and minute life should take their rightful place in human hearts and the richness of soil become of paramount importance. Soil contains the highest concentration of life power on earth, it should make us gasp in awe for it takes a thousand years to create an inch of rich top soil, and it is full of amazing diverse life, it is the chief homeland of the invisible hordes who maintain life.

Yet soil is eroding, land laid waste and barren, trees felled on a vast scale and many areas on earth left no longer fit for human or beast. The air is polluted in countless areas and toxins fill the oceans, that wonderful abyss that humanity might never have the chance to explore fully due to fear, indifference and exploitation: the dumping of poisonous waste. All but a tiny percentage of the ocean's three hundred and thirty million cubic miles lie unexplored; the creatures of the great abyss, plunging to depths as much as seven miles, are virtually unknown. The life histories of even those in shallower waters remain mysterious.<sup>45</sup>

Caring and suffering about the areas of the earth that are increasingly being laid waste due to climate change goes hand in hand with a yearning for a more creative wise engagement with the soil under our feet. My experience of being raised on a farm shaped my yearning for the flourishing of the earth and my feeling of responsibility for other creatures, bequeathing an ingrained knowledge of the necessary conservation work to maintain the soil and sustain the produce from the land. Yet my background and desire to produce from the land, too, has to be rethought as one sees now the intense use of the land in modern farming methods, of battery breeding for human use and of exploited land for quick profits.

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Perry, *The Unknown Ocean* (Plymouth: Taplinger Publishing Co, 1972)

The overriding objectives in creating theology at the intersection of an encounter with disability studies, feminist theologies, Christian worship and the urgency of the burgeoning ecological dilemma has been a growing adoration of the whole earth, an experience on a par with my Christian conversion experience. There is a strong feeling that the Spirit of renewal which is experienced as all embracing but mysterious reality, throughout the world, is leading humanity at last into a love and adoration of creation on an unprecedented scale. 'The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.' (John 3:8) Jesus gives many earthly metaphors to point to God's will not because the earth is a means to an end but because it is inherently valuable in itself. 'I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?' (John 3:12)

Earth is our basic premise for heaven and where all theology begins. Similarly there is no aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought that does not implicate the body and his descriptions encourage us to acknowledge the body's practical capacity to act in the world and not in terms of essential traits.<sup>46</sup>

As once God became earthly at the dawn of creation, and as once God became human in the body of Jesus, so now God continually enfleshes Godself through the Spirit in the embodied reality of life on earth.<sup>47</sup>

Ecology as an essential focus for theology for the sake of the earth and all its inhabitants is slowly filtering into mainstream Christian theology, but frustratingly it does not do so by engaging more viscerally, more carnally or with a greater

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<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.72

<sup>47</sup> Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological Promise Of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2000), p.23  
2005)

understanding of the energetic<sup>48</sup> power within the earth, whether in Christian discourse, in academic theological discourse or in the worshipping, serving church.

When the disciples were full of joy and praise and the Pharisees remonstrated disgustedly with them for their vibrant exuberance, Jesus pointed out that if authoritative attitudes continue to repress human appreciation about divine presence on earth, ‘even the stones will cry out.’ (Luke 19:39-40) How can we find ways to discern and be exuberant in the same way, to be concerned with real feeling, true love for this life, this earth, experiencing the taste, smell, sound and sight and touch of it with little omitted. ‘A sort of dehiscence opens my body in two and ...there is overlapping or encroachment so that things pass into us as we into the things.’<sup>49</sup> I know at the depth of my being how much I am indebted to these experiences and found little in theology to express this depth of fusion with nature.

### THE WOUNDED BODY

But why express this depth through the lens of disability? As a disabled person, I have grown to understand the anxiety of the able-bodied who suffer the imagined fear of disability, the very possibility of illness, injury, ageing and dying which can amount to hatred of their own mortality.<sup>50</sup> This is often projected onto the disabled who, perhaps, are in a position to see more clearly the

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48 Energetic is a term frequently used by Freya Matthews as she argues for a deeper engagement with sentience throughout the earth in her book, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards A Rediscovery Of Culture* (New York:State University Of New York Press,2000)

49 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible op.cit.* p.123

<sup>50</sup> See Jenny Morris, *Pride Against Prejudice* (London:The Women’s Press,1991), Chapter 2

multiple avenues of aversive and abjecting escape routes taken to avoid engaging with the physical world and the brute facts of their existence. The testimonies of disabled people and their struggle to find a voice are akin to the struggles of the diverse creatures of the earth, in their bid to survive human cruelty, and also to the struggles to create an ecomysticism powerful enough to resist the fear of physicality.

It is precisely the unsettled non disabled persons who must discover true love of self in order to be liberated from their egoism and filled self hate. People with disabilities alone can do this.<sup>51</sup>

Women, too, have fought to be liberated from bearing humanity's ambivalence about physicality and have challenged the patriarchal structures which have encouraged them to hate their own bodies. This study is indebted to the analysis and visions of the last forty years of feminist theologies and the more recent ecofeminism, sometimes called the third wave of feminism.<sup>52</sup> This has continued the in-depth and difficult task to eradicate the oppressive influence of some of the language of disgust in the Christian tradition which has denigrated or dominated the feminine and the earth, both too carnal for abstract masculinity to appreciate. 'The language is often demeaning and abusive; one does not feel like a sister in Christ when on the receiving end of it.' 'Such language,' writes Isherwood, is fed into structures which feel 'justified in subduing and controlling women. They have done this physically.' Women's bodies have been linked to

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<sup>51</sup> Don Saliers, in Nancy Eisland And Don Saliers, *Human Disability And The Service Of God* (Nashville:Abingdon Press,1998), p.11

<sup>52</sup> Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminism* (Sheffield:Sheffield University Press, 2002)

fallen nature and both have been abused.<sup>53</sup>

Patriarchal words about a patriarchal God have created our western culture...Patriarchy affects everyone. All kinds of dualism are set in place that diminish people different from the dominant group or elements in life.<sup>54</sup>

The resistance to such dualisms offered within feminist theologies with a view to the formation of a new kind of relating to the natural order, directly challenges some of the destructive powers of disgust and begins to deconstruct its negative effects. To work creatively with these beginnings and recognise them as the work of love, all humankind can benefit by ingrafting this motivating power into its own life and purpose. Pivotal to such work is a new appreciation of the body which Merleau-Ponty considered so connatural with the world that the emotions become a temporal and expressive unfolding in the creative act of bodyself meeting the world in perception.<sup>55</sup>

To all who desire love... may God grant  
That they be so prepared for love  
That they all live on her riches  
Until after themselves becoming love,  
They draw love into themselves  
So that nothing evil on the part of cruel aliens  
Can befall them more; but they shall live free  
To cry: I am all love's, and love is all mine!  
For under love's power stand  
The sun, moon and stars!<sup>56</sup>

Throughout Scripture we see the tension between the divine gifts of great

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<sup>53</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Theology Op.cit.* pp.117-118

<sup>54</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p. 217

<sup>56</sup> Hadewych, *The Complete Works*, trans. and introduced by Mother Columba Hart OSB (New York:Paulist Press, 1980), Stanza 7 p.159

fertility and also the power of divine rescue; (Psalm 23:6) 'I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' Claus Westermann points out that these two themes run throughout Scripture, calling them the theology of blessing and the theology of deliverance. Just as the disabled must keep hope and acceptance in equal balance so the Christian keeps these themes in tension inseparable from the earth beneath our feet. 'The land creates the environment in which the prophetic word of Yahweh is accessible to Israel, it is the very material condition of being in the land which creates a prophetic situation.'<sup>57</sup>

The awesomeness of nature, its potential to shock and delight humanity is given due reflection in an equalhanded way that has been lost to the modern world.

The old story of God's covenant with both the earth and humankind and its assignment to human beings of the role of..faithful servants, was....before it was interpreted and twisted in the service of the Cartesian worldview...a powerful, noble and just explanation of who we are in relationship to God's earth. What we need today is a fresh telling of our story with the distortions removed.<sup>58</sup>

The Scriptures can help reconcile modern divisions and dualistic tendencies which separate matter and spirit; carrying forward the insights of the past, bringing its earthen/spiritual engagement and discernment spiralling forward into today's consumer ridden world to ground ecomysticism in the centuries of knowledge of the earth and experience of the divine within it. They are the springboard for the critique of modern norms which follow and the motivation for

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<sup>57</sup> Claus Westermann, 'The Land: Place Of Gift, Promise And Challenge In Biblical Faith,' *Overtures To Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p.91

<sup>58</sup> Albert Gore, *Earth In The Balance:Ecology And The Human Spirt* (New York: Penguin Books,1992), p.218

new sensory awareness of creation.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not  
bread. And your labour for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me and eat what is good... for my  
thoughts are not your thoughts.  
Nor are your ways my ways says the Lord. (Isaiah 55:1-  
9)

Merleau-Ponty's springboard of thought was to break down the  
subject/object, transcendence/immanence and self/world system of Cartesian  
dualism and as his thought matured he stressed even more the fusion of self and  
the seen in the natural order, feeling that humanity still saw 'things in the world'  
from a standpoint of transcendent subject. Interdependence became of prime  
importance; he presented our origins and connections with nature from which we  
have arisen, in which our very earliest beginnings have been positioned bit by bit,  
and placed them at the forefront of his attempt to reorientate philosophy.<sup>59</sup> This  
emphasis on what contains us and sustains us can also be picked out in the Genesis  
story, the fatherhood of God,<sup>60</sup> and the motherhood depicted in the psalms.<sup>61</sup>

If the earth is the mother of all life,  
Its father must surely be  
The air, a spectacular sea of gases that  
Feed all living things.  
We say we live on the earth –we also live in a  
vast sea of air.<sup>62</sup>

In fact scientists have traced humankind's beginnings to an astonishing and  
peculiar scum of the primordial seas.<sup>63</sup> The reservoirs of the earth's oceans were a

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<sup>59</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*  
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/Merleau-Ponty> accessed 3/4/ 11 p.7

<sup>60</sup> See Psalm 103 v:13

<sup>61</sup> See Psalm 131v:2

<sup>62</sup> The Reader's Digest, *op.cit.* p.28

<sup>63</sup> Rutherford Platt, 'Microscopic Multitudes' in *op. cit.* p.82



‘unique milieu for chemical adventures. Through dim epochs . . . gel droplets simmered in the tepid seas.... on a silent, invisible and majestic scale the elements struggled towards life.’<sup>64</sup> This realization should be part of all Christian ritual, even the lectionary; but such incubation of life has been pushed aside and liturgy makes little reference to the details of its magnificent ecological past. Mary Midgeley writes that it is not by a slight stretch of imagination that we can recognise our interdependence with, rather than dominance over, the ecological web of diversity around us, but a huge turnabout in consciousness to acknowledge what has been neglected. Bacteria and microbes do not rely on humanity. ‘It is indeed the reverse; we..see our dependence for we are a small minority of them.’<sup>65</sup>

Human fleshly beginnings have never been a very popular topic in theology. The details of motherhood, the maternal matrix, as Kristeva describes the site of human beginnings in chapter one, are often abjected along with the mother in the Christian tradition, denigrating her, even though women are ‘the sex who carry physical life, incarnate spirituality directly with them, the sex whose hands have often patted and puked new life into its first squalling overture. (Such rejection) betrays a stunning ignorance of the incarnation.’<sup>66</sup> If humanity denigrates the means and the love by which it enters into the world can it value its physical basis very much at all?

Capitalism and industrial riches, with their artifacts and manufactured easy living, have swamped human interest and distorted psychic abilities to remain

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<sup>64</sup> *Op.cit.* p.83

<sup>65</sup> Mary Midgeley, *Evolution As Religion: Strange Hopes And Stranger Fears* (London, New York:Methuen,1985), p.151

<sup>66</sup> Mary Collins, ‘Women In Relation toThe Institutional Church’(unpublished paper *Leadership Conference of Women’s Religious National Assembly* Alburquer1991), p.11

content with earthen values. However, this has not ensured happy or guilt free existence. As the story of Dives and Lazarus portrays graphically, the one who begs at the gate of the rich man's house covered in sores, who we can immediately place as those in the third world who suffer most from environmental degradation and waste and who are growing in number, is visceral testimony to a narrative that cannot be ignored. (Luke 16:19-31) There are many rich people epitomising the extravagant consumption associated with Dives; high users of fossil fuel and rich land resources, oblivious to the cost to the earth, to those disabled by lack of resources and pollution, their land taken away or laid to waste and having to exist on pavements and in slums.

Women, children and the disabled suffer particularly, there are countless poor, anaemic women struggling for subsistence, on land despoiled and abandoned, on low wages, whose hard work benefits others in distant market places.<sup>67</sup> These disabled bodies forcefully and increasingly challenge by their very existence, the powerful, now critiqued for their lifestyles and callous indifference to the earth and vulnerable people; the rich and powerful are subject to new review at the level of air, water, land use, waste and sustainability. Christianity is probed for its response to these bodies at its gates. By asking for clarification about the kingdom of God at the level of biological protology, the root of love and community, the intention is to think once more from within a deeper organic existence at the level of cells and changing matter and ongoing existence. Love of neighbour begins at the basis of everyone's existence where disgust must be challenged in the name of Christ.

Much more academic theological reflection needs to take place through

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<sup>67</sup> See Mary Grey, *Prophecy And Mysticism: The Heart of The Postmodern Church* (Edinburgh:T&T Clark,1997)

the lens of biology in the context of ecological demise. David Attenborough's wildlife programme, 'Life On Earth' brought the rawness of nature into the living room. His book 'The Trials of Life' was even more explicit about the bodies of animals and how they behave bringing their lives sharply into focus.<sup>68</sup> Merleau-Ponty believed that other creatures 'bring to light the movement by which all living things, ourselves included, endeavour to give shape to a world that has been preordained to accommodate our attempts to think and act upon it.'<sup>69</sup> Revitalising our view of them revitalises our view of our own lives. Humankind, through a little more adventuring into its elemental environment, could rediscover a hardy engagement once more, uncomfortable and adverse as it might seem at first and in the process as Merleau-Ponty advocates, reassign animals their rightful place in the world.<sup>70</sup>

One is constantly reminded of the infinite lavishness and fertility of nature's inexhaustible abundance and what seems like enormous waste. And yet when we look into any of her operations that lie within reach of our minds we learn that not one particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty yet to higher beauty and we soon learn to cease to lament waste and death and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable wealth of the universe and faithfully watch and wait the reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies around us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last.<sup>71</sup>

The secret is in the looking and in the looking discover a new sense of

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<sup>68</sup> David Attenborough, *The Trials of Life* (London, Glasgow, Auckland, Toronto: BBC Books, 1990)

<sup>69</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Resumes de cours* (College de France 1952-1960 Paris Gallimard, 1968), p.76

<sup>70</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>71</sup> John Muir, 'My First Summer In The Sierra,' *In Nature Writings* (New York: Library Of America, 1997), p.290

being, a new sense of who we are in relation to the natural order. As the ecological situation becomes critical so it becomes critical to think more planetarily into a new emerging ontology.

Basically all ontology, no matter how rich and firmly compacted a system of categories it has at its disposal, remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task.<sup>72</sup>

The meaning of being must incorporate the means to reacquaint ourselves with nature in order to nurture it. This can be begun by just entering the space of nature, the revelatory potency of place can revolutionise thinking and galvanise action. I stayed on an island on the Isles of Scilly one stormy November when the boat for supplies could rarely visit and I was surprised by how soon one adapts to a simpler life, to an outdoor respect, and the spaces that become available for contemplating other than human life. When I returned to the mainland, the shops were full of tinsel and baubles and pressure to buy for Christmas.

The contrast was startling and brought home the real pure/impure divide which we should be transforming now between nature and human manufacture. The artificial lavishness seemed obscene and yet I had only been away six weeks. It was enough to realise how such trumpery obstructs the finer subtleties of sentience within the universe. Humankind has manufactured a huge junkheap of impedimenta weakening its capacity for true empathy with the environment, an empathy which would give the act of existence, the meaning of being, a new interdependent slant.

Adrienne Rich writes, 'My heart is moved by all I cannot save; so much has been destroyed. I have cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely,

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<sup>72</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being And Time*, Trans John Mcquarrie, and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, (1927) 1962), p.11

with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.<sup>73</sup> No extraordinary power is granted through disability and illness yet it often can move the heart to all that is in danger of being destroyed and can bring new insights into what has been termed the underside of life. But neither feminism nor disability studies would immediately embrace an engagement with the underside of life, that bodily reality of pain, disease and suffering, in case those people seeking empowerment were treated instead to a large helping of disgust rather than helped as agents of their own lives. Their fear is warranted. There is always a risk of being overwhelmed by negative reactions.

Simply advocating inclusion rather than exclusion, however, has not worked to combat the emotional compulsions which strike at the heart of sexism, disability phobia or ecocide no matter how much identity politics cement boundaries around experiences as hermeneutically privileged sites of reflection. These of course are vital to establish a new orientation and sense of independence in a world which can only spurn diverse, vulnerable bodies but there seem to be so many groups competing for their rights. A theology which burrows deep into the reasons for exclusions and the emotional compulsions of disgust, exposes the physical roots of fear. Rosenkranz believed that, 'whoever embarks on a pathology and therapy of illness must prepare himself for the most disgusting.'<sup>74</sup>

One seeks a universal spiritual acceptance of matter at the root where oppositionalism makes little sense, stressing the common ground of matter in the bid to sustain a common earth which is crying for attention. The divine Spirit incarnated at this root is tangible and fertile theological ground in which one can

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<sup>73</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Dream Of A Common Language: Poems* (New York:W W Norton,1978)

<sup>74</sup> Rosenkranz, cited in Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History Of A Strong Sensation* (Albany:State University Of New York Press, 2003), p.7

begin to see the beginnings of new valuations of matter, the seeds of new thought.

‘You have been our dwelling place...you turn men back to dust.’(Psalm 90:1-3)

‘Where can I go from your Spirit? You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.’(Psalm 139:7-14)

The centre of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. The centre is the recognition of the presence of God in the world and the presence of the world in God.<sup>75</sup>

It is hoped that disgust and ideals of perfection, often based on an ideal of a perfect, abstract God, can be forgotten in new perusals of the magnificence of corpuscles, atoms, mites, drops, glimmers, grains and morsels of life which pulsate with life in and around humanity. For instance, ‘in a typical human cell thousands of ribosomes carry out more than a million amino acid binding reactions every second, producing an estimated two thousand new protein molecules per second.’<sup>76</sup> In viewing at the level of the particles and waves of quantum reality and the myriad bacteria and other minute life on which flesh and blood depends, ‘we are about to embark... upon an extended meditation upon the extraordinary dynamic nature of matter and energy, one that differs markedly.’<sup>77</sup>

Thus, this embodied contextual theology embarks on a carnal journey, believing that the lack of reflection on what has been termed disgusting, the less agreeable facts of fleshly existence, has worked against the mutuality and kinship with the natural order that is so desperately needed. Exposing the screened out elements and scrutinising them for clarity, one perhaps can work at the edge of

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<sup>75</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *God In Creation: A New Theology Of Creation and The Spirit of God* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 1993), p.13

<sup>76</sup> Boyce Rensberger, *Instant Biology*, (New York:Fawcett, Columbine,1996), p.53

<sup>77</sup> David Toolan, *At Home In The Universe* (New York, Maryknoll:Orbis), p.129

some of the Christian tradition's negative polemic about bodies and positive affirmation of incarnation, and at this edge, find that, paradoxically, theology can hold and contain all fear and hope within its discourse, and in so doing provide authentic insights for love and healing action

Einstein, after many years of wrestling with physical reality, was full of wonder at creation and could only come to the conclusion, 'my religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds.'<sup>78</sup> Some anthropomorphic mainstream theology in contrast projects a hubris which leaves little room for such humble admiration. 'Somehow we are caught in a vast cultural lag, ethically and emotionally. We have not kept pace with our physics or (biology.)'<sup>79</sup>

Becoming ecologically aware without getting immersed into the elemental is like trying to farm without the top dressing on the land, vital for the next year's crop, and having romantic notions of milking cows, as had many a tourist visiting our farm when I was a child, until they encountered the dung. One is reminded of the modern kitchen, sterile from too much chemical artificial cleansing, eradicating any form of bacteria, any kind of nasty! These sterile spaces are now thought to be our undoing, as children grow less resistant to disease, having developed little natural immunity but a good deal of disgust for the organic. Humans need engagement in the rough and ready of creation, hardening up, not mollycoddling or cocooning from every kind of bacteria.

The silent avoidance of the subject of disgust is palpable; of course

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<sup>78</sup> Albert Einstein, cited in John Roger and Peter McWilliams, *Life 101* (California:Prelude Press,1991), p.42

<sup>79</sup> Toolan, *op.cit.* p.91

everyone knows about excretion and bacteria but why dwell on them speaks the silence? Is it demeaning to reflect on such things? Vicki Kirby agrees that bringing such matter(s) into theological or philosophical discourse is met with a strong wave of disapproval. What people are avoiding, she writes, 'is expressed in a silent acknowledgement that the sense of risk is warranted, that the substance of biology will inevitably thwart our puny efforts with the force of its reality.' In what she terms, this 'inadvertant Cartesianism,' the 'intellectual defensiveness that kicks in with the swiftness of a visceral reflex,' there is also the sense that there is always a hidden agenda; that her critics had 'a better grasp of what they were defending than I had of what I might be threatening.'<sup>80</sup> The word demeaning itself needs deconstructing; the vision of this writer is that the word itself might one day come to mean the process of changing monological, squeamish attitudes in the light of a greater acceptance of matter, in all its shapes and guises. This work might seem to overstate the visceral and scatological and offend,

but there come times –perhaps this is one of them-  
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or  
Die;  
When we have to pull back from the incantations,  
Rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,  
And disentrall ourselves, bestow  
Ourselves to silence, or severer listening, cleansed.  
Of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static  
Crowding the wire  
We cut the wires  
Find ourselves in free-fall.<sup>81</sup>

This is a theology of movement, engagement and encounter to recapture

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<sup>80</sup> Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of The Corporeal* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), p.76 and p.1

<sup>81</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Transcendental Etude,' in *op.cit.* pp.74-5



appreciation through the flesh. There is no thought apart from the flesh.<sup>82</sup> It seeks knowledge of the world in embodied situations for ‘ecological ethics cannot sit happily with utter social constructionism; that we create our bodies and our environments utterly freely and arbitrarily.’<sup>83</sup>

We must leave the office and the study, step outside the walls of academy and be available for encounter with reality in the raw.... The land that we ignore except as raw material for the actualization of our own designs is coming undone. The environmental record may...be taken as testimony that the preSocratics and the civilisation they inaugurated got it wrong..a form of inquiry that leads its followers and their world to extinction cannot have found adequate answers to its foundational questions.<sup>84</sup>

This dynamic of perceiving the world as it unfolds must somehow be incorporated into Christian praise and worship ‘Truly participating in liturgy warrants our human bodiliness at full stretch...the full gambit of bodily emotions to liturgy. Then the grace of God becomes audible, visible, palpably kinetic.’<sup>85</sup> Then humans might learn about their extraordinary make up, their bodies and what keeps them alive.

‘The wonders of even one speck of blood the size of the letter ‘o’ contains thousands of cells; it is a sea stacked with the most amazing pulsating matter,’ life which protects us from disease. Humans are ‘intersecting cycles of water, earth, air and fire, that’s what I am, that’s what you are.’ Are we aware of such pulsating movement within us?

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<sup>82</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible. op.cit.* p.127

<sup>83</sup> William C French, ‘Ecological Concern And The Anti- Foundationalist Debates’ In James Gustafson, ‘Biospheric Constraints’ In D M Yeager,(ed) *The Annual Of The Society Of Christian Ethics* (Washington D.C:Georgetown University Press,1989)113

<sup>84</sup> Matthews, *op.cit.* p.10

<sup>85</sup> Don Saliers, *Worship As Theology* (Nashville:Abingdon Press,1994 ), p.24

Water-blood, lymph, mucus, sweat, tears, inner oceans,  
tugged by the moon, tides within and tides without.  
Streaming fluids floating our cells washing and  
nourishing through endless river ways of gut and vein and  
capillary. Moisture spouting in and through and out of  
you, out of me, in the vast poem of the hydrological  
cycle. You are that. I am that.<sup>86</sup>

What mystery lives within us, working away with very little comprehension from  
us or indeed connection to our everyday norms and categories of concern. How  
much more do we perhaps miss of God's presence?

"The divine spirit roams where it will not be focused on  
the likeminded; but permeating, suffusing and energising  
the innermost being of each and every entity in creation  
in ways unknown and unknowable in our human personal  
categories."<sup>87</sup>

The Kingdom of God was described in similar terms, as the magic growth of  
the mustard seed, full of fertility and power too wonderful for humans to fully  
comprehend.

This is what the kingdom of God is like; a man scatters  
seed on the ground, night and day whether he sleeps or  
gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not  
know how. All by itself the soil produces grain, first the  
stalk, then the head and then the full kernel. (Mark 4: 8)

In a climate of uncertainty about the very survival of the earth, human exploitation  
and inability to tolerate physical reality becomes sacrilegious. Human disregard  
of matter, overconsumption and burning of fossil fuels has initiated and recently  
rapidly accelerated the earth's decline. In the eventuality that one believes that  
this is scaremongering or exaggeration, Thomas Berry is very clear.

We have changed the very chemistry of the planet, we  
have altered the biosystem, we have changed the

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<sup>86</sup> Joanna Macy, and John Seed, 'What are you? What am I?' In Neu, *op.cit.* p.151

<sup>87</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body Of God* (London:SCM,1993), p.147

topography and even the geographical structure of the planet, structures that have taken hundreds of millions and billions of years to bring into existence. Such an order of change in its nature and in its order of magnitude has never before entered into earth's history or into human consciousness.<sup>88</sup>

Difficulties and tensions arise in any theological writing on disability or ecology, one is a need to believe that creation is 'good' and another is the need to be as frank as possible about nature. Another is to avoid being reductionist. Christianity has affirmed the uniqueness of the human, its eternal significance and value in the sight of God, because Jesus did, and the prophets before him; humanity is always an image of the divine. The balance between the human sense of its uniqueness and its sense of ecological integration is hard earned, a product of love, gratitude and awareness of the numinous in our intersubjective openness to the environment.

The Sydney Morning Herald ran a concerned article in March 2007 reporting that conversation at dinner in Australia had taken a turn for the worse. The ten year drought had turned all thoughts to water conservation, necessitating a change in the way people regard wasteful people. Those flushing the toilet unnecessarily or running a tap for too long had become pariahs, the new sinners of the ecological dilemma. Divorce proceedings had arisen as a result of the lack of awareness of the need to value water. 'Have we become quite delusional, like a parched man in the desert, no longer able to spot the normal conversational boundaries'<sup>89</sup> asked the article? No, quite the reverse, refinement is seen for what it is, when ecological matters become paramount and a new realism through

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream Of The Earth* (San Francisco:Sierra Club,1988), p.xiii

<sup>89</sup> The Sydney Morning Herald cited in *The Week* 10 March 2007 issue 604 p.16

necessity replaces some of the civilising processes which have shielded humanity from nature.

A deeper reflection on the cross should dispel fears of being reductionist. It challenges human abstractions and infuses love into every part of life, it can mark the end of scapegoating others for one's own fears and the end of abjecting the natural.<sup>90</sup>

If we speak of Jesus Christ as God we may not speak of him as the representative of an idea of God who possesses the properties of omniscience and omnipotence (there is no such thing as this abstract divine nature!)..we must speak of his weakness of the cradle and the cross; and this man is no abstract God.<sup>91</sup>

'Love is our sympathy with organic life, the touchingly lustful embrace of what is destined to decay.'<sup>92</sup> It is to commit to physicality, no longer evacuating the world, but seeing it in a novel and fresh way, sure of facilitating an encounter with the numinous and beginning to reflect theologically even from an anchorage on the base line of life.

It is possible to build an ethics based on respect for the activities of our bodies: drinking, urinating, defecating, sleeping, making love, speaking, listening etc... to force someone to live upside down is an intolerable form of torture... Rape fails to respect another's body. All forms of racism and exclusion constitute, in the last analysis, ways of denying the body of another. We could reread the entire history of ethics in light of the rights of bodies and the relationship between our bodies and the world.<sup>93</sup>

The greatest ethic is the love to recognise other worlds apart from our own. The

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<sup>90</sup> See *Chapter Five* for more discussion on the crucifixion.

<sup>91</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (London:Collins, 1966), p.108-9

<sup>92</sup> Catherine Keller, *op.cit.*

<sup>93</sup> Humberto Eco, *Interview:Folha de Sao Paulo* (Brazil) (April1,1994), Sec 6 p.7

existence of the disabled point to other, often inexplicable, worlds that exist within the earth.

The world of the able-bodied conceives of itself as the only world....although sighted people know..that they are sighted, it is unusual to find a sighted person who knows that he or she lives within a world which is a projection of the sighted body... sight projects a world and sighted people are embodied within that world. They know that there are others but they seldom know that there are other worlds. Therefore they think of others as being excluded from their own world. Thus they unconsciously create a discourse of dominance. There can be no dialogue between the disabled and the non disabled until the plurality of human worlds is recognised. As long as the non-disabled world retains its hegemony, the relations which it has with the world of disability will be those of care for the helpless and patronisation. The relationship will be that of charity, of condescension, and not that of mutual respect based upon acknowledgement of otherness.<sup>94</sup>

The plurality of worlds is sought through radical bodily engagement, taking to heart Adrienne Rich's plaintive insight; 'I am convinced that there are ways of thinking that we don't yet know about...we have by no means explored or understood our biological grounding.'<sup>95</sup> Finding love at the edge of what has been considered 'other' or disgusting, reclaiming the darkness and the chaos so often associated with women, can we, like the woman with the continual flow of blood, catch at the edge of Christ's coat.<sup>96</sup> Filled with fear that she was disgusting to society, can we be healed, like her, from such fear, and the pure/ impure divide be eradicated be ever? It would be a miracle. (Luke 8: 42-48) At this edge too we are not lost as we might have expected, but held.

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<sup>94</sup> John Hull, 'A Spirituality of Disability,' Cited In *Network* Issue no 71 June 2002

<sup>95</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York:W.W.Norton,1976), p.192

<sup>96</sup> A woman bleeding could be stoned to death if she touched a man in public.

And there was no terror only stillness  
And I was wanting nothing and  
it was fullness and it was like aching for God  
and it was touch and warmth and  
darkness and no time and no words and we flowed.  
and I was given up to the dark and  
in the darkness. I was not lost and  
the wanting was like fulness.<sup>97</sup>

Let us begin, then, with what is edgy or abject, paying attention to human bodies, to begin creating an ecomystical contemplation where ‘one does not flee the world but finds it anew.’<sup>98</sup> Where one discovers one’s fears and hopes amidst the extraordinary emanating, vibrating and throbbing elements in the depths of our one precious world, believing that, ‘love cannot be disembodied even in its most sanctified form, nor is it without sanctity even at its most fleshly.’<sup>99</sup>

Love for the natural order has formed the basis of this introductory theological method, it has much to combat in the force of disgust. Humanity finds myriad ways to avoid or cover over its natural traces and religion has played a part in this evasive stratagem. It is sometimes difficult to deflect the cynics view that it seems we have just enough religion to make us hate and not to love. Pray God that this will change through Merleau-Ponty’s method of what he terms ‘reintegration’ to the body and the world. Having considered Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical method in order to tread more lightly, lovingly and more honestly on the earth, and the all important spiritual motivations that have inspired this study throughout the years of suffering the stigmatism of disability phobia and sexism, it might

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<sup>97</sup> Janet Morley, *And You Held Me in All Desires Known* (London:Women In Theology, 1988), p.56

<sup>98</sup> Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press,2005) p.203

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* s new translation from the German by John E Woods (New York:Vintage, 1996), p.590

become possible to discover that

the experience of continuity and relation with others, with the natural world of mind and body, provides an ontological base for developing a non problematic social synthesis which does not depend on any of the forms taken by abstract masculinity.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Nancy Hartsock, 'Epistemology and Politics: Minority vs Majority Theories' *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987), pp.187-206

# PART I



# Chapter One

## WOMEN, DISABILITY AND DISGUST

‘I can scarcely detail for you all the things that resolve themselves into excrement for me.’<sup>1</sup>

You are nothing but your sex and this sex so the doctors added is fragile, almost always ill and always a source of disease. You are the disease of man.<sup>2</sup>

Any theological reflection on the embodiment of women and of the disabled often runs immediately into the very visceral human fear of defilement. Despite some positive elements in pockets of the traditions, there are also many ambivalent attitudes towards humanity’s bodily processes which throw light on religious symbolism and ritual, the very ground of western tradition and civilisation. These bear a direct link to the oppressive attitudes and fears which are projected onto women’s bodies and the bodies of those affected by disability. Paul Ricouer writes that, ‘Dread of the impure and rites of purification are in the background of all our feelings and all our behaviour relating to fault.’<sup>3</sup> If this is the case, research into disgust is of utmost importance.

Studying female and disabled bodies in concert is challenging; have Christian feminist theologies not been working very hard to extricate themselves

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1 Sigmund Freud To Wilhelm Fliess, December 22 1897 cited In Claire Kahoone, ‘Freud’s Sublimation: Disgust, Desire And The Female Body’ *American Imago* vol 49 No 4 422-425 1992 p.411

2 Michel Foucault, ‘Non Au Sexe Roi,’ Interview With B H Levy, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 664 (12 March 1977), p.98 ‘Power And Sex: An Interview’ *Telos* 32 1977

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricouer, *The Symbolism Of Evil* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1967), p.25

from denigrating, disabled images of the female body? Yet probing into the dominant discourse of the Judaeo/ Christian tradition one uncovers striking parallels between the terror of maternal origins and the terror of disability. Indeed the whole issue of the body and some of its processes have conjured up some very ambiguous, religious emotions often expressed through the affective, expulsive responses associated with notions of heresy and the occult, images of the demonic or the abyss.

Human origins and bodily survival seem to have held culture in a grip, in unacknowledged awe and fear throughout the centuries, the fact that we are born and will die, that the whole process is a ‘messy one emitting substances and odours that make us doubt ourselves and fear our neighbours,’<sup>4</sup> has often initiated a loathing of the human body especially the female body. Women bear the brunt of such fears.

There is much to combat in the genealogy of disgust that has been inherited with its connection with human maternal origins. For many philosophers and theologians of the past, female bodies were alien to the will and to the rational being made in the image of God. This alienation was often described in the visceral language of disgust. What, for instance, could induce Sartre to write the following passage?

I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me... it is a soft yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking... It draws me as the bottom of a precipice might draw me. Slime is the revenge ...A sickly sweet revenge. The obscenity of the female sex is that of everything that gapes open. It is an appeal to being as all holes are.. beyond any doubt her

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, *op.cit.* p.xiv

sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside empowering images of human goodness and love there have also been many damaging portrayals and representations of bodies saturating western culture, so entwined with the Judaeo/Christian religious tradition, and this chapter explores and makes more explicit the very visceral depth of the terror behind some of these schemes and practices. I am not careful about the language used to describe disabled or women's bodies, knowing it continually runs the risk of making explicit all that has caused women and disabled people exclusion and oppression, but language to describe the disabled is constantly changing.

New words to describe their condition soon become saddled with the same negative connotations and it is this readiness, the immediate gag reflex of disgust and negativity, that needs to be exposed. 'Imbecile' was an innocuous term introduced to describe people with learning difficulties, it is now a term of abuse. Hillyer writes that language is controversial and political acceptability changes.<sup>6</sup> I agree with Susan Wendell who believes that while much of the controversy centres on denying difference to emphasize abilities rather than disabilities, to protect feelings and promote integration, no matter how far the political correctness extends, 'for every ability remaining in one person there is another person who lacks it.'

The attempts..to reform language..seem to me to invite denial, if not of difference, then of painful consequences of difference. I regard denial as far more dangerous than feeling angry, sad or envious.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Sartre, *Being And Nothingness* trans Hazel E Barnes (New York:Washington Square, (1943)(1992), pp.776-7

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Hillyer, *Feminism And Disability* (Norman And London:University Of Oklahoma Press,1993), p.21

<sup>7</sup> Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (London, New York:Routledge, 1996), p.81

A deeper, alternative acceptance of difference is the approach adopted here and I will continue to refer to ‘the disabled’ to describe those who suffer in mind or body and have experienced being treated as different in some way because of their mental or physical behaviour or appearance. Like homosexuals and Jews in the past,<sup>8</sup> disabled people have been feminized, a method of denigrating any group or person considered degenerate or inferior (prisoners of war were often feminised and raped, men and women), sharing a common oppression at the hands of those who perceived them as lacking a masculine logic which operates on dualistic oppositions excluding all that threatens its narrow boundaries.

Age old suspicions of images that suggest demonic influences and fallen nature along with somatic phobias in Christian psyches are not easy to eradicate and sometimes, despite many advances in eradicating superstition, it is difficult to believe that some branches of the Christian church have even begun to relinquish imperial attitudes towards nature or surrendered a masculine superiority over women and different species. A deep analysis of the fear of materiality is sought, trying to understand what lies at the heart of human lack of empathy, for any comprehension of Christian anthropology is incomplete without an indepth inquiry into what disgusts and makes humanity turn away.

### DISABILITY AND THE EARTH

If creation is ‘good’ (Genesis 1:31), and God is present in the midst of what he has created as Christians have believed and encountered over centuries of

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<sup>8</sup> See Rosemary Radford Ruether, ‘Jews like women were seen as impious, faithless contumacious and lusty.’ *New Woman New Earth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p106

theological reflection, a deep sedimented factor of belief and practice, ('In God's hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of every human being.' (Job 12:10), why have the emotions of disgust and aversions of organic matter not been considered heresy? It is no longer possible, writes Alice Walker, to evade this question at the level of vibrant physicality in order to urgently reconceptualize the sustainability of everyday life.

Our thoughts must be on how to restore to the Earth its dignity as a living being; how to stop raping and plundering it as a matter of course. We must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence in itself is equal.<sup>9</sup>

It is what we do with disgust, often experienced as the gag reflex, that becomes the crucial point of reflection. It is in the raising of awareness and in the readiness to be more participative in natural processes that this consciousness will begin to develop. It is in the fusion of the vision of what could be...transcendence, and the everyday working with what is given...immanence, that Christianity has something to offer, having been practiced in the interstices of paradoxical insights in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Keller believes the interstices of bodily experiences are revealing; they provide a space to think beyond human boundaries. 'Bodies disclose in the interstices of their essential and not accidental relatedness to other bodies, our planetary ecology.'<sup>10</sup>

These interstices are also the site of the oscillation of the two powerful emotions of fear and hope, ever present in human life and thought (like the

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<sup>9</sup> Alice Walker, 'Everything Is A Human Being,' in *Living By The Word* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), pp.148, 151

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Keller, 'No More Sea' In Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Dietrich Husserl, (Eds) *op.cit.* p.132

probability waves and particles dancing into the reality of quantum physics, full of potential creativity at the edge of order and disorder), particularly in the dreaded concept and experience of suffering. Suffering brings a human being face to face with the organic in a way that is often beyond the capabilities of texts and theological discourse. A more encompassing organic ecomystical theology understands suffering not only as the physical and mental pain of human subjects, but also as the common ground of suffering organisms and environments and the whole earth. Regarding suffering in relational and earth centred terms and the whole environment as much more of a subjective reality, one begins to ask how humanity can desist from barricading itself against its environment and open its heart.

As I go into the earth, she pierces my heart.... As I penetrate further, she unveils me. When I have reached her centre, I am weeping openly .. Her renewal washes over me endlessly, her wounds caress me. ...My body reaches out to her. She is delicate as I am; I know her sentience; I feel her pain.<sup>11</sup>

Abe Isanon was a theological student working with disabled people who discovered a sense of empowerment and a greater sense of reality in the visceral awareness of their needs, he became engrossed in their midst and in his care for them to the extent that the encounter became 'the key to unlock the mystery of my struggles to come to terms with my own humanity and that of others.'<sup>12</sup> Isanon's insight is not so common today, apart from the caring quarters of society, it is quite contrary to modern tendencies and sensibilities which survive by the denial

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Griffin, *Women And Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (London: The Women's Press, 1984) p.219

<sup>12</sup> Abe Isanon, *Spirituality and The Autism Spectrum Of Falling Sparrows* (London, Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), p.105

of suffering flesh and painful encounters. Yet it is on this track of love that we can begin to establish an active relation with those subjective realities, the world of other species and wildlife, which now dys/ appear in their woundedness. Dys is used as prefix to mean bad especially in the medical world. Leder incorporated Merleau-Ponty's views of the body into his own reflections on the body in illness, recognising how vital the body is to all human conceptions of the world and the disruption that occurs when the body changes. Most of the time the body goes unnoticed, writes Leder,<sup>13</sup> it is only when something goes wrong that attention focuses on the corporeal reality of normal/abnormal bodies, 'the body becomes unceasingly present'<sup>14</sup> in the public arena, usually in a dysfunctional or remarkable way.

The effect of this on culture cannot be underestimated, it causes all to see a new way of being in the world, vivid but unwanted, and throws light on the space, time and movement of normality. Along with Merleau-Ponty, Leder recognised that illness or disability affects the proprioceptors of human bodies that are the sensory receptors which receive stimuli from within the body, the ones which respond to position and movement. The suffering body is one that cannot be taken for granted, it is transformative. Human physiology is challenged from within by the woundedness of any matter that it encounters.

Leder emphasizes the sensory intensification brought into play, factors which together produce the peculiar hold disability has over human attention, 'it rearranges our lived space and time, our relations with others and ourselves.'<sup>15</sup>

Merleau-Ponty believed one is forced into a new corporeal schema, the intentional

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<sup>13</sup> Leder, cited in Nick Crossley, 'Merleau Ponty And The Phenomenological Body' *Body And Society* vol 1 pp. 43-65 1990

<sup>14</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit.* p.53

arc which completes the unity of the senses; intelligence and motility goes limp in illness, engendering a certain kind of lived body.

As meaning came from the movement of the body, disability creates a different form of existence so the disabled have to come to terms with the huge change in emotions this brings about.<sup>16</sup> This is also true in relation to the angst coming over the physical changes in the human/ earth encounter as humanity discovers and encounters the alien, brute results of ecocide. Classifying these facts objectively can be detached, but engaging viscerally in suffering, analysing at biological, material and constitutive level with greater awe, reverent attention and understanding in this time of urgent necessity can stir the best of human emotions of empathy, love and contemplation for action to heal and sustain.

Such a 'spirited' response is needed from people of faith, writes Michael Serres who adds that at the current level of ecocide, 'there are no more excuses left, no more smokescreens to hide behind.'<sup>17</sup> Fear must to be faced and hope clung onto as the disabled know only too well. There need to be deeper ways to learn how to live with the suffering body, with that which cannot be fully experienced without pain, and that which cannot be adored without recognising its vulnerability.

He (Jesus) has penetrated into the depths of darkness,  
Loneliness, rejection, agony and fear,  
In order to touch the depths of darkness  
In each one of us  
And to call us to belief,  
To call us to walk in this world of darkness,  
Loneliness, rejection, agony and fear-  
Hoping, trusting in the resurrection.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception op.cit.* p.136

<sup>17</sup> Michael Serres, cited in Toolan, *op.cit.* p.221

<sup>18</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body: Journey To Wholeness* (London:Darton, Longman and Todd,1988), p.60



Spirited responses do not entail, rejecting or refusing to engage with the darkness. The Christian tradition has always known this but for some reason has lost its nerve in modern times and does not make it explicit enough for today's world. The richness of the incarnation should once again be seen as divine solidarity with the abundance and fear/ambiguity of the whole of creation, and the hope of resurrection seen as the hope for new life and healing from the very depths of creation. 'Divine life is dynamic and fecund, not static or barren.'<sup>19</sup> Humanity has been invited to look again at the constitutive elements of those depths and to put aside the fear in holistic contemplation of the universe through the lens of the incarnation, in a time of renewed cosmic contemplation of God with us in every eventuality. This place of encounter with the heights and depths is the nursery of Christian ecomysticism and the site of Merleau-Ponty's focus on intentionality, incarnation and temporality as the key issues in the act of human perception.<sup>20</sup>

This is the Christian continuum, holding the two sides of the concepts of hope and fear together entwined and interlocking in tension over and over again in its ongoing encounter with the reality of matter and the divine infusion within it. Held in binary tension, incarnation and resurrection stand as counter cathexis<sup>21</sup> to all forms of fear, of violence and domination of the oppressed. In Jesus' suffering the fear and hope merge, they can be held in tension where we can encounter and touch, put ourselves in the position of the worlds of other subjects who suffer, the loving empathy no longer diminished by overwhelming fear; Christ who is in all things has

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<sup>19</sup> Lacugna, *op.cit.* p.106

<sup>20</sup> Mary Rose Barrrol, *op.cit.* p.254

<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to Timothy Gorrige, for this phrase in *Furthering Humanity: A Theology Of Culture* (Aldershot:Ashgate, 2004)

overcome. 'He delivered me from all my fears.' (Psalm 34) Analysing more viscerally and biologically, we feel the pain of other organisms, no longer shutting out the horror until, 'whoever we are and wherever we are, whatever our doubts or shame, our turmoil or anger, we are healed and can come together in the fullness of the body of Christ.'<sup>22</sup> The bodily form of Christ, the one who suffered, was made abject and killed is the one who takes us into the kernel of darkness and fear within the gospel. 'For in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form and you have been given fullness in Christ who is the head over every power and authority.' (Colossians 1: 9)

This fullness in which the acceptance of the abject becomes a strength, the strength becomes weakness, (2 Corinthians 1:1 8-25) is the paradigm of the Christian message of the body and of Christian love. It asserts empowerment through the paradoxical potency of vulnerability which deconstructs all tyrannies of perfection and opposes the many physically based aversions and exclusions of contemporary life.

Theology is doing no more than reproducing the bodies that are culturally in fashion. But if so, then theology really has lost its critical way, and needs to return to the wounded and violated body of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Anaesthetised and reticent about the death and suffering of Christ, Christianity loses its edge, that painful transition once so freely contemplated and understood, neither taboo nor fetishised in the ancient world. It was knowing God, as Job discovered, 'with only the skin of my teeth.' (Job 19:20)

The sufferings of the human condition are not explained or glorified by either Jesus or Paul. They are just

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<sup>22</sup> Vanier, *op.cit.* p.60

<sup>23</sup> Graham Ward, 'On the Politics Of Embodiment And The Mystery Of All Flesh' in Marcella Althaus –Reid, and Lisa Isherwood, (eds) *The Sexual Theologian* (London, New York: T&T Clark International Continuum, 2004), p.85

acknowledged to exist and made the starting point for the process of salvation.<sup>24</sup>

Mark's gospel ends with the women experiencing 'fear and bewilderment.' (Mark16:8) Yet the narrative is about new life on a grand scale. Stephen Pattison writes that becoming ill can be the beginning of a similar experience of bewilderment, yet new reflection, and can be likened to a conversion experience. He describes the extraordinary emotions of fears and doubts of some people who have been diagnosed with HIV and Aids and remarks how alive many seem. Yet this is a dreadful carnal terminal sentence which diminishes and destroys bodies. It is an edge of the abyss in the most fearful circumstances and it is important to state clearly that amongst the poor and the dispossessed in Africa there is little good to claim from the experience except that the churches in some of the worst affected areas are often full of the most joyous worship the Christian church could hope to find; another paradox in the midst of suffering.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the fact that many despair and give up all hope, there are those who see the experience as a chance to see how extraordinary life is. 'Suddenly life becomes precious and precarious.'<sup>26</sup> All the emotions of fear, shame, love, honesty and need for fellowship bring forth all the great theological themes of life, death, guilt, creation and providence, vividly and chaotically. Positive and negative aspects of living fuse into a synthesis, and diverse, creative strategies abound as fear and hope chase each other's tails madly in an artless and

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<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Through Brokenness* (London:Fount,1990), p.77

<sup>25</sup> The Anglican connection at Truro, Cornwall was set up in 2007 to work with the church in Umzibuvu in Africa, a badly affected area, inviting ministers to Cornwall and sending ministers to Africa. All report such joyous music in the African churches, such giving and embodied worship, that it puts our reserved worship in England to shame. Many even dance up to the altar to give their offerings.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Pattison, 'To The Churches With Love' in James Woodward, (ed) *Embracing The Chaos* (London:SPCK, 1990), p.11

unreserved journey of carnal exploration. These have not been valued enough as resources for all people, able-bodied and disabled.

Because the illness experience can burst in on one in the way religious experience does, there is a need to tell others that, the presence of illness, like the Spirit, was always there at the edge between life and death. Pattison writes, 'everyone is living in the presence of this possible experience just as they are living with the present reality of salvation.'<sup>27</sup> In the group he visited at London there was a yearning to write a 'sacred text' to show others the extraordinary depth of spirituality, fellowship and love that came out of the horrific reality of Aids. 'They were deeply alive and aware people converted to life by the threat of death, longing to share what they had with others in the context of compassionate fellowship, members of a new kind of spiritual movement.'<sup>28</sup> Is Christianity also not based on this fine line between life and death, which illness discovers, this brink into new life? Liminal and insightful, illness, like baptism in Christ occupies a space where the boundaries of identity have to be rethought. 'All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.... There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.' (Galatians 3: 27-28) The ill and the baptised are both closer to life and death, the one because death might be imminent, the other because death no longer means the end of the body but a life transformed by God.

Elizabeth Stuart brings out this element of living the different reality that baptism brings about. 'Death is not in dualistic relationship to life any more than male is to female.' Baptism 'is a leaving behind of the life of constructed

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<sup>27</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Op.cit.*

identities for a new type of belonging, of body determined only by God.’<sup>29</sup> The church has understood itself to be the body of Christ, brought into being by Christ’s request and fed in the Eucharist according to his words. ‘Eat...This is my body.’ Here all is to be incorporated into the body of Christ, reimagined into a new reality of love and justice. This body is about the coming together of death and life, fear and hope, horror and safe haven. Opposite ends of the spectrum of life and emotions come together in Christ’s life and death and resurrection. It often seems in modern times that these extremes, these ends have been blunted so that we have neither the capacity to truly mourn nor truly celebrate. A satiety reigns.

We played the flute for you,  
And you did not dance;  
We sang a dirge,  
And you did not mourn. (Matthew 12:17)

### SHARPENING CHRISTIAN AWARENESS

The body of Christ on which all is based, was a body like no other. Graham Ward describes Christ as a displaced body, born to a virgin, changing from flesh to divine in the transfiguration, to bread and wine, from human to cosmic Spirit in the resurrection and ascension.<sup>30</sup> In fact the narrative portrays a reality of chaotic carnality, of life and death, order and disorder, flux yet diuturnity which trigger a new quickening of the human spirit. Stuart Kauffman describes such an edge as ‘phase transition’ between order and chaos where life is most prolific.<sup>31</sup> The context for the incarnation is very much a ‘phase transition,’ full of the profusion of aliveness that lies on the threshold of life and death imagery.

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, ‘Queering Death,’ in Althaus –Reid, and Isherwood, *op.cit.*p.59

<sup>30</sup> Graham Ward, cited in *op.cit.* p.8

<sup>31</sup> See Stuart Kauffman, in Toolan, *op.cit.*

What is needed is a literacy to make the confluence of the fear and hope, 'alive' experience a well winnowed part and factor of the Christian imagination.

No such literacy exists at present in my own church community for my own carnal chaos of disability, which means I am forever trying to explain why my energy level is different to others, that I cannot eat and talk at the same time without feeling faint, that I cannot walk and talk for energy seems to go to one area of the body and not to the other, and often my brain cannot keep pace with the minutiae of people's daily speech, delivered at high speed. The able-bodied are unfamiliar with impairment, with people like us, it is a different reality; one sees that the scripts for movement and timing are preset for the able-bodied.

Imrie writes that life does not carry the carnal information for disabled people, their software and hardware and the hardware of norms are incompatible.<sup>32</sup> Recognising one's different view, acknowledging the autism to suffering that is pervasive in culture, means that one's theology becomes a creation outside the walls of all the familiar, like Golgotha, the lonely place of suffering. Yet Merleau-Ponty believed that despite the distinction between the lived experiences of illness and its conceptualization as a disabled state by the able-bodied both the disabled and the able-bodied share life experiences which could inform each other and provide a positive basis for a shared world of meaning between them.<sup>33</sup>

A literacy and an appeal to theologically reflect more deeply on suffering would not only combat loneliness but, also help humanity become more skilled at managing perplexing paradoxes and the merging of contrary emotions: ambivalence and yearning; love and disgust. These can often be the tears that 'call

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<sup>32</sup> Imrie, cited in Crossley, *op.cit.* p.53

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.31

forth holy work,'<sup>34</sup> as Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth century mystic describes them. They are often situated on the fine line in circumstances when one does not know whether to laugh or cry. These are the margins of understandings of the human condition when we straddle the threshold between joy and tragedy.

An Aids sufferer struggles to explain how it feels to live on this threshold;

I regard myself as on a journey with trials and tribulations with darkest despair and also hope, laughter and happiness. My hope is that those around me can sit with me, be alongside me as I struggle and grow. I feel at the moment that, just possibly, physical death is a doorway to all of us realizing that incredible spontaneity and potential that is continually bursting around and in us.<sup>35</sup>

In this testimony again we see the need to share ambiguous euphoria from revelation with others. Resurrection is a laugh freed for ever and ever, wrote Patrick Kavanaugh<sup>36</sup> and Gillhus writes that laughter from 'holy fools' in the Eastern church was considered a 'sign of how close that person had come in both body and soul to the state of resurrection.'<sup>37</sup> Gilhus further reminds us that the mediaeval Feast of Fools was an outburst of laughter, described as incarnational energy, reminding the church of its failure to realize that energy in its ecclesial life.<sup>38</sup>

The church today could use some of this rallying energy but it often fears relinquishing its tight authority for fear of chaos, loss of control, fending off those

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<sup>34</sup> Gabriel Uhlein, *Meditations with Hildgard of Bingen* (Sante Fe: Bear and Co 1982), p.110

<sup>35</sup> Nigel Seldrick, In Woodward, *op.cit.* p.21

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Kavanaugh, cited in Daniel W Hardy, and David F Ford, *Jubilate* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), p.73

<sup>37</sup> Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter In The History Of Religions* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), p.69

<sup>38</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.78-88`

who have rediscovered this energy in facing up to the void. Christ's death and resurrection holds polarity in tension, it offers a space of reflection on horrific suffering, of flesh and blood existence experienced at root level, of hard won new life, life and death mingling into a new sense of aliveness, but my own experience is that the chronic illness experience is met with silence, cringing embarrassment or even disbelief.

The inability to be open to the kind of experience shared by Nigel Sheldrick and others is more akin to the inertness of death, in contrast to the verve of those seeking meaning within disability. It reveals a fossilisation of norms, patterns of avoidance and rejection of the numinous in all things. The question is how to make more explicit to what, is in effect, the metaphorical power of the 'cadaver,' amidst the deadening categorisations of disability phobia, misogyny and ecocide. How can we 'live' into creation at the level which Mary Oliver described as 'that porous line where body is done with and the roots and the stems and the flowers begin.'<sup>39</sup>

Hildegard was continually ill with what are thought to be recurring bouts of rheumatic fever. She was sure that this experience gave her access to just such a porous line where she touched the divine power active through all that is close to the earth, she felt she was as humus, at the edge of death and new life, teetering tenuously like a taproot where she heard God reveal, 'thoroughly seared, so to speak, by countless grave sufferings of the body, the depth of the mystery of God has completely permeated you.'<sup>40</sup> Hildegard found it entirely possible that in illness one can experience a personal rich phase transition of energy, sensitively

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (New York:Beacon Press, 1992), p.59

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Fox, (ed) *Hildegard Of Bingen's Book Of Divine Works* (Sante Fe: Bear And Company, 1987), p.265



proprioceptive to a thicker and deeper, greener sentience and be enabled to restructure and reorder former priorities about the environment and the body, to understand beauty, love and wonder more viscerally. In the same vein, describing her cancer, Lucy Grealy writes,

a sort of physical awareness would take hold of me. Each breath was an important exchange with the world around me, each sensation on my skin a tender brush from a reality so beautiful and so mysterious that I would find myself squealing with the delight of being alive.<sup>41</sup>

Discovering this edge, which appears just like Merleau-Ponty's vision of the flesh, the chiasm, in which humans are entwined with their environment, means bringing to light the many human constructs which thwart and block the route to receptivity. Jesus was quite clear that humanity needed a new approach. 'I want mercy, not sacrifice, go and learn what this means.' (Mt 9.13) What does this mean? It means uncovering all the subtle and varied methods humanity abjects and projects to eliminate the fearful from its borders. It is the self searching, arduous task of digging deep into the human psyche as well as the sedimented norms of culture and learning to develop the capacity to stand against sacrificing practices and increase understanding of what happens when we find ourselves loving participants in God's creation once again.

St Francis of Assisi found that because Christ's spirit really does make himself one with the physical outcasts, he can be found again in solidarity with them. He found a fleshly opportunity to be close to Christ. After first cringing from lepers in total disgust, he got down from his horse and touched and kissed one. Jantzen writes that, 'it was as St Francis responded to the invitation to follow

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<sup>41</sup> Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography Of A Face* (Boston:Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p.57

Christ in his identification with the lepers, that his spiritual vision was enlarged: his love for Christ increased in direct relation to his involvement with the outcasts of his society.’ His account of this is not to be understood as heroic behaviour or condescension in any way but rather as an opportunity to be with divine Spirit in a visceral way.<sup>42</sup> Such loving action comes as a result of an ongoing self critical dynamic, and the subversive power which breaks open those ‘systems of goodness,’<sup>43</sup> which James Alison fears, often tend to create obstacles between the sacred and secular, surreptitiously labelling others as unclean or outsiders.

By contrast, in Jesus we see

an entirely gratuitous, unbound, peaceful and genuinely creative process at work in and through a human being...furthermore this is something discovered by us as being contemporary to us and wherever it emerges, it tends to break down the sacralised constrictions of victim creating order.<sup>44</sup>

Some institutional churches can sometimes be likened to St Francis from his lofty position on a horse before dismounting, there is scant engagement at such a visceral level with the immanence of God in suffering creation. Liturgy can be all rather tranquil; high, wide and handsome, instead of particular, ground in and authentic. Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, wished to deepen the phenomenological project to rethink the paradoxical link between transcendence and immanence, to ‘reveal the mystery of the world.’<sup>45</sup> When one focuses alone on the ethereal subject or just on the raw data of empiricism, he believed, we have no way to

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<sup>42</sup> Grace Jantzen, ‘Aids, Shame and Suffering’ in Woodward, *op.cit.* p .23

<sup>43</sup> Pat Pinsent, citing James Allison in the Tablet. ‘Network’ *Journal For All women interested in spirituality, theology, ministry and liturgy* Spring No 90 March 2007 p.3

<sup>44</sup> James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment* (London:Darton,Longman And Todd, 2001), pp.156-7

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception op.cit.* p viiii

bring the disparate aspects of life into a synthesis and meaning is lost. As I begin to describe my own uncovering and contemplative journey, I am reminded of Eavan Boland's words about the scarcity of authentic reflection on such creative spaces of life in her poem about a journey.

Depend upon it, somewhere a poet is wasting  
His sweet uncluttered metres on the obvious  
Emblem instead of the real thing.<sup>46</sup>

Liturgy could and should be a wonderfully inviting space for the power of the vivid material/spiritual God to be truly expressed. A diminutive form of praise and honesty about embodiment in theology is challenged, using the insights of feminist theologies alongside a spiritual orientation towards disability to facilitate new spaces, to modify the patterns used to think about the world. Instead of discontinuity between creator God and creation and between humanity and creation, a fluid continuity is sought to help understand how the ideal has arrested human ingestion and absorption of the energies which surround us in creation's cycles and rhythms.

#### MORE CARNAL FEARS

Multilayered prejudices, influences and emotions present in human phobias become reified over time, especially the ones that are often left unspoken, those which are considered too distasteful to articulate; they are the last bastion of human self defence against the signs of transience, still intact despite myriad liberatory theological tactics to free the oppressed and excluded.<sup>47</sup> Theology like most disciplines relies on a hermeneutical framework of the contemporary given

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<sup>46</sup> Eavan Boland, 'The Journey' in *New Territory: The Journey And Other Poems* (London:Carcanet Press, 1986) (1967)

<sup>47</sup> See Christopher Rowland, *The Cambridge Companion To Liberation Theology* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1999)

schemata of the world. Globalisation and the recent high profile of ecological demise has thrown many frameworks into disarray. 'The fact is that theology is not enough and in itself is insufficient as a discipline to provide us with a basis for explaining critically the reality in which we live.'<sup>48</sup> Many different voices are called for.

Nuclear weapons, global warming, ozone depletion, pollution, deforestation, and genetic destruction; taken singly or together, they are all too much, both for our philosophies and for the institutions that were built for a different and smaller world.<sup>49</sup>

Lisa Isherwood writes in the context of sexism that, despite huge strides to address oppression in theology, differences are subsumed into equality which does little to really change systems of exclusion. Both Isherwood and Marcella Althaus –Reid argue for a qualitative change in theology, a revolutionary challenge to the normativity of theological reflection. Their reforming approach is through the challenge of queer behaviour to heterosexual behaviour. Mine is through the lens of the disgusting, the challenge of the scatological to the purity of theological reflection, a material challenge to the normativities of purity, gender segregation and the ghettoising of the disabled and the disgusting in creation. Searching for the 'experience of the discovery of ourselves as a moment of creation in which we exceed the confines of oppressive expectations, repressive social definitions and egregious political practices.'<sup>50</sup>

Only a more racy theological anthropology can help get to the root of exclusionary attitudes. Merleau-Ponty, by reawakening basic experiences of the

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<sup>48</sup> Isherwood, And Althaus –Reid, *op.cit.* p.4

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Berry, *op.cit.* p.74

<sup>50</sup> Thandeka, 'The Self Between Feminist Theory And Theology' In Rebecca Chopp, And Sheila Greeve Davaney, (eds) *Horizons In Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition And Norms* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press,1997), p.96

world and stressing that the perceptual something is always in the middle of a field and always part of something else, introduces complexity and sophistication as well as excitement into all understanding of alterity.<sup>51</sup> Normalization begins to be viewed with suspicion.

The gender paradigm, even in dialogue with a liberationist one has never been enough to produce radical transformations. The problem is that gender paradigms tend to normalize theologies in the long term by subsuming differences into equalities.<sup>52</sup>

Normalization condescends to integrate difference on its own terms but does not offer real inclusion, it retains its privileged meaning system and makes sure that others are aware of their abnormality. 'Shared meaning systems become essential for human beings as a way of hiding them from the contingency of their world building actions and the uncertainty and fragility of their embodied self-identities.'<sup>53</sup> Breaking into these shrouded shared meanings is a spiritually motivated radical coup, an insurrection of multifarious hiding places set up to obscure any attempt to affirm the genre of the disgusting. Such insurrections involve a wide sweep of thought and vision.

The 'essential' cover of these hiding places needs to be blown apart by a radical love, to be spoken in order to create a reconnaissance of being. This rediscovery of Christian love and justice in those experiences and reflexes which speak volumes of human alienation from materiality, begins to demolish the opaque wall screening humans from matter. Can humans once again find value in what it has habitually termed detritus, asks David Brown? 'Christianity has always said so... indeed a religion that has its central affirmation in the valuing of

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<sup>51</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op cit.* p.viii

<sup>52</sup> Isherwood, and Althaus –Reid, *op cit.*

<sup>53</sup> Peter Berger, *The Capitalist Spirit: Toward A Religious Ethic Of Wealth Creation* (San Francisco:ICS Press, 1990), p.177

the despised and neglected, could scarcely say otherwise.’<sup>54</sup> This central affirmation needs translating into greater reflexivity and a turning around of distorted, fearful and often disgruntled desire, in a return to planet earth.

We want a whole race in pursuit of the rainbow’s end never honest, nor kind nor happy now but always using as mere fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the Future, every real gift which is offered to them in the present... we have trained them to think of the future as a promised land which only heroes attain-- not as something which everyone reaches at the rate of sixty minutes an hour, whatever he does, whoever he is.<sup>55</sup>

The difficulty lies in human denial that there is a problem in human attitudes, most people would argue that humanity has progressed and can face up to the body’s potential; prudish aversions belonged to the nineteenth and early twentieth century when aesthetic and moral culture ‘explicitly constructed some groups as ugly or degenerate bodies in contrast to the purity and respectability of neutral rational subjects.’<sup>56</sup> Young argues, in dispute, that such feelings are still there, ‘not so blatantly obvious but subtly present all the same,’ they have gone ‘underground yet dwell in our habits and cultural meanings.’ She believes that we must not fail to notice that these complexes erupt from people who appear quite ‘liberal minded, who intend to treat everyone with equal respect.’<sup>57</sup> Piercing the veil of unconscious fears we begin to realise how sadly lacking is the empathic ability to relate with respect and how much there is yet to do to remedy this.

Feminist theologies have for four decades fought for respect for all marginalised people and creatures. Ruether writes that ‘the women’s movement,

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<sup>54</sup> David Brown, *God And The Enchantment of Place* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2002), p.224

<sup>55</sup> C.S.Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London:Fontana Books,1960) (1949), Chapter xxv

<sup>56</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice And The Politics Of Difference* (New Jersey, Chichester:Princeton University Press, 1990), p.125

<sup>57</sup> *Op. cit.* p.11

properly understood encompasses all other liberation movements... the issue of sexism covers and includes every field of specialization...encompassing the entire scope of the human dilemma.'<sup>58</sup> It has challenged the embedded philosophical, scientific and religious pervasive discourse which has fixed a unifying unbounded reason in opposition to, and in control over, the body. Despite its revaluation of the body in theology and philosophy, what has often been missing from feminist theologies has been a specific focus on disabled women.<sup>59</sup> In its bid for a voice and a celebration of the woman's body as a strong icon of creation, it too has displayed some fears and avoidance tactics about disability,<sup>60</sup> more often referring to the patriarchal effects which cause illness and disability rather than the symptoms and the ongoing realities of living with such symptoms. This study's confluence of disability and feminist theology challenges the deficit and widens feminist discourse to integrate the myriad symptoms of disability as the living reality of many women.

#### DEPTHS OF OPPRESSION

It is the magnitude and corporeal reality of these symptoms which leads one to ask, 'what it is about bodies'<sup>61</sup> that can paradoxically be painful and oppressed but also inspire the impetus for change, new ideas and certain kinds of knowledge? What can be a site of oppression can also be a site of creative

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<sup>58</sup> Ruether, *op.cit.* 1995 p.xviii

<sup>59</sup> Morris, *op.cit.*

<sup>60</sup> *Op.cit*

<sup>61</sup> See Philip A Mellors, And Chris Shilling, *Reforming The Body--* for insights into carnal knowing. This work will be discussed in chapter two (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi:SAGE Publications, 1997), p.18

resistance and subversion.<sup>62</sup> Both women and the disabled have suffered group oppression and there has been an abundance of activism and literature from the late twentieth century seeking justice to redress their silent marginalisation in church and society. Iris Marion Young describes such oppression as a ‘structural phenomenon.’ Though it is acted out personally, what each oppressed group shares is the ‘inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts and feelings.’<sup>63</sup> Andrea Dworkin paints this rather more graphically. Oppression is not ‘a minor irritation’ nor is it a trivial inconvenience, an occasional aggravation (feminist backlash often attempts to hint that sexism is no more than this) or a regrettable but frankly harmless lapse in manners. It is not a point of view that some people with soft skins find offensive.’

It is the deep and destructive devaluing of a person in life, a shredding of dignity and self- respect... an imposed exile from human worth and human recognition, the forced alienation of a person from even the possibility of wholeness or internal integrity.<sup>64</sup>

Women and the disabled have suffered this kind of isolation and alienation in society. Feminist theologians have agonised over the reasons for such abuse and enumerated in detail the crimes of omission, physical violence and exploitation experienced by those who were silenced and weakened by patriarchal power in western culture. Very many of them are clear that the abuses have been

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<sup>62</sup> See Michael Foucault and the potential of his thought for feminist theology cited in Grace Jantzen *Becoming Divine* (Manchester:Manchester University Press), p.54

<sup>63</sup> Young, *op.cit.* p.40

<sup>64</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (London,Melbourne,Sydney,Auckland, Johannesburg:Arrow Books,1987), p.198



underpinned and shaped by the Judaeo/ Christian tradition.<sup>65</sup> Dorothee Sölle, in her book on ‘Suffering,’ wrote that extreme pain and oppression are often internalised as the person’s own fault and become unspeakable, often hidden and accepted as self-loathing rather than shared and transformed. In reaction one must move through three stages; moving first of all from the paralyzing silence to a site of anger and then to the third step, placing the oppression in its social context for positive moves for change.<sup>66</sup>

Yet the wide ranging discourse about such things, while leaving us with knowledge of the ubiquity of the fear of bodies that repel, does not give us any clue as to the internal logic behind the intensity of these fears. Irigaray writes that sociology ‘describes what already exists without inventing a new subjectivity which I don’t believe can be reduced to a neat social effect.’<sup>67</sup> Violence, grievous bodily harm against the disabled, especially disabled women, is well documented; it is thought that people with disabilities are one and a half times more likely to

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<sup>65</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Essays On Gender Fragmentation And Redemption: The Human Body In Medieval Religion* (New York:Zone Books, 1991), p.146

Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for Heaven, The Catholic Church and Sexuality* (London:Andre Deutsch Limited, 1990)

Nancy Eisland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1994)

Judith Abrams, *Judaism And Disability* (Washington D C:Gallaudet University Press,1998)

Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According To Women* (London:Elm Tree Books, 1986)

Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology* (London:The Women’s Press, 1981)

Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women And Redemption* (London:SCM Press, 1998)

June Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London:Verso, 1991)

<sup>66</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* trans by E R Kalin (Philadelphia:Fortress Press, 1975)

<sup>67</sup> Luce Irigaray, ‘Equal To Whom?’ trans Robert L Mazzola, *Differences*1(2) 1989) p.74

experience at least one kind of physical assault than the able bodied.<sup>68</sup>

Irigaray writes, like Sölle, of another kind of violence, one that is caused by a kind of paralysis, which she describes as ‘an immobilisation of being’ and it is this violence that also needs to be addressed for it pervades our religious heritage, distorts our sense of the divine and blights our relationality, our ability to live out Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. (Mark 12:3) The first commandment to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your mind and with all your strength, is also constrained by oppression. (Mark 12:30) Beverly Lanzetta explains why, stressing that it is the spiritual core of a person that is damaged by oppression, that potential of the authentic self to relate to the world.

Spiritual oppression goes beyond external evidence of social and cultural forms (it is) directed at her unique embodiment of the divine in this world... (It) reverberates in the mental, physical and emotional sphere (and has) a direct impact on integrity, health and moral agency.<sup>69</sup>

Eisland says that it is this kind of discrimination that most disabled people experience at the depths of their being and rally against. Although people with disabilities span a wide spectrum of illness and disability, appearances, functions and conditions, she writes that studies have shown that whatever the circumstances, whatever the context, whether in education, religious settings, family life or social welfare,<sup>70</sup> ‘a common set of stigmatising values and arrangements have historically operated against us.’ Revulsion and immobilisation

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<sup>68</sup> Nancy Eisland, ‘Things Not Seen,’ In Denise Ackermann, and Riet Bons-Storm, *Liberating Faith Practices* (Uitgeverij Peeters, Bondgenotenlaan, 1998), p.119

<sup>69</sup> Lanzetta, *op.cit.* p.1

<sup>70</sup> Eisland, *op. cit.*

go hand in hand.

### THE FORCE OF DISGUST

Addressing underlying emotions of disgust, revulsion and horror which may explain the violence shown towards certain bodies, the hidden aggression and the elements which make up such action, is an exercise rarely done; few want to delve into such feelings; one runs the risk of being ostracized perhaps in disability theology and feminist theologies by merely mentioning them. Very few disciplines which concern themselves with the emotions will tackle this basic human passion for fear of breaching a certain decorum.

Religious rites and civilising processes have raised our senses to disgust to such an extent that we find it difficult psychically and socially to discuss appalling matters without the excuse of being childish, mad or possessed of an uncouth sense of humour. Hence the dynamics of the phobias which cause oppression, go unaddressed. Indeed what emerges from some of those writers who do broach the subject, Rozin, Fallon, Miller, Kristeva and Ricoeur,<sup>71</sup> is the intensity of humanity's avoidance of the whole issue. Paul Ricoeur believes that we have blocked off any acknowledgement of defiling processes. 'Defilement is immersed in a specific sort of fear that blocks reflection. With defilement we enter into the reign of terror.' He believes humans have lost the ability to consciously grasp this kind of terror yet it continues to rule our actions.

What resists reflection is the idea of a quasi material something that infects as a sort of filth, that harms by

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<sup>71</sup> Miller. *op.cit.*

Paul Rozin, 'Taste-Smell Confusions And The Duality of the Olfactory Sense' *Perception And Psychophysics* 31 (1982) pp.397-401

Julia Kristeva, trans by Leon. S. Roudiez, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection* ( New York:Columbia University Press,1982)

invisible properties that nevertheless works in the manner of a kind of force on our undividedly psychic and corporeal existence.<sup>72</sup>

It seems less problematic to discuss other passions; malice, hatred, anger and envy rather than disgust; there is an aversion to the thought of grotesque physical ugliness, nauseating illnesses, offensive tastes, smells and sights and all that emits from our orifices, the idea of being soiled by waste products, of matter out of control, of the horrific and the uncanny, of contamination and contagion and of the connection of the excremental to the sexual. Disgust is a complex emotion which arises on multiple occasions, according to Miller, from 'the fetid ooze of what I call life soup... the rolling stuff of eating, defecation, fornication, generation, death, rot and regeneration.'<sup>73</sup>

So what has this to do with the liberation of female bodies and disabled bodies and neglected aspects of nature which share the same somatic margin in our society? Does it not all seem unnecessarily undignified to bring this to discourse and denigration of the body? The researcher who looks into things we would rather forget, faces the risk of being 'suspect... contact with the disgusting makes one disgusting... contamination jokes about his or her unwholesome interests soon greet the disgust researcher.'<sup>74</sup> Freud pointed out that the proximity of the anus to the genitals, the vagina, the sexual orifice of the woman was a dominant cause of concern. (As a consequence his name has often been synonymous with the unmentionable, with slight sniggers of embarrassment in polite circles. I run the same kind of risk!) All spell horror of bodies and matter, stimulating escape routes formed from highly developed concepts of disgust

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<sup>72</sup> Ricoeur, *op.cit.* p. 25

<sup>73</sup> Miller, *op.cit.* p.18

<sup>74</sup> Susan B Miller, 'Disgust Reactions: Their Determinants And Manifestations In Treatment' *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 29 (1993) pp. 711-735

driving human minds to create 'higher' activities of science, art and religion to convert the dross of the body into something of value.

Freud makes clear that it is the intolerable confusion of sexual and excretory organs in the maternal body, a confusion out of which the human subject is born, that causes that disgust which is the key to sublimation. In this anal logic it is disgust with the smell of sex, which takes the female body particularly as its object that is the ground for the founding of civilisation.<sup>75</sup>

Such passions are of relevance to all theories of civilisation including many religious rites and rituals which have ranked human societies according to their ability to appear as unmaterial as possible. 'People in the course of the civilising process seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic they feel to be animal.'<sup>76</sup> Laura Kipnis believes that high culture is formed by the compulsive revulsion at those who cannot appear to hide their bodily processes, their grotesqueness and their lack of taste and refinement in matters of eating, sexuality or illnesses. She refers to Bakhtin's observations of the classical body as a 'refined, orifice-less, laminated surface.'<sup>77</sup> Even in the disability rights movement, rejuvenated by the social model of disability, which has enabled many people with impairments to challenge prejudice, lack of access, unfair discrimination at work and in the social arena, and inadequate support, there is often a resistance to making public the actual bodily descriptions of their disabilities. Jenny Morris writes; 'there is a tendency within the social model of disability to deny the experience of our own bodies, insisting that our physical

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<sup>75</sup> Kahoone, *op.cit.* pp. 411-25 p. 413

<sup>76</sup> Norbert Elias, *The History Of Manners* Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Vol 1 Of *The Civilising Process*. (1939) ( New York:Urizen 1978 ), p.120

<sup>77</sup> Laura Kipnis, 'Reading Hustler' in Lawrence Grossberg, and Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, (eds) *Cultural Studies* (New York:Routledge,1992), p.376

differences and restrictions are entirely socially created.’<sup>78</sup> Sandra Lambert writes that this often arises from the need for love and not discrimination.

I pretend to forget how deeply disabled people are hated. I pretend to forget how this is true even within my chosen home, the lesbian and feminist communities. My survival at every level depends on maintaining good relationships with able-bodied people.<sup>79</sup>

This is partly in reaction to the earlier prevalence of the medical model of disability which puts the emphasis on cure, rehabilitation or prevention maintaining the age old idea that disability is a personal tragedy and that puts the stress on the individual as somehow to blame for their infirmities. This is understandable. However, the continuing silence about impairment and the difficulties of living in our society when one’s body fails, does not have energy or certain functions, also stems from disabled people themselves and their inherent awareness of the confluence of illness and the emotion of disgust, indeed it arises from the experience of being treated with disgust.

The fear of admitting to pain, frustrations, lost hopes, fear of death or degenerative disease is the fear of capitulating to culture’s own fear of such things. When the Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibited some photographs of people dying with Aids, taken by Nicholas Nixon, an unsentimental, honest portrayal of the worst ravages of this disease, the most virulent protest came from disability activists and ACTUP, (The Aids Coalition to Unleash Power), complaining that this exhibition misrepresented the lives of the majority of people with Aids. ‘We demand the visibility of PWA’s (people with

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<sup>78</sup> Morris, *op.cit.* p.10

<sup>79</sup> Sandra Lambert, cited in *op.cit.* p.26

Aids) who are vibrant, angry, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.<sup>80</sup> Of course; but we also need to come to grips with the reality of what actually happens to people with Aids as well. Not wishing to weaken the social movement of disability at all, or to present an alternative framework of analysis, I wish to add to the debate, extending and broadening the contemporary discussions without underscaling the importance of its action in theology, politics and education, in its bid to fight for more inclusion. It is vital to make impairment more public, even at the risk of appearing a victim, for even if all social barriers were to be lifted, the symptoms of impairment will still be present and with them, the fears of those who disavow, who have not come to terms with all the contingencies of what it can mean to be human.

Unless creative spaces for theological reflection can be pursued, cultural attitudes will continue to distort and misrepresent those who have particular bodily processes and many experiences will remain lost and not integrated into sacred writings, liturgies or healing rituals. Susan Sontag writes,

Illness is the night side of life...Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged at least for a spell to identify ourselves as citizens of that place....It is hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill, unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped.<sup>81</sup>

Despite much Christian charity and pastoral help, there have been few points

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<sup>80</sup> Douglas Crimp, 'Portraits Of People With Aids' *In Cultural Studies op.cit.* p.118

<sup>81</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness As A Metaphor* (London:Allen Lane, Penguin Books,1979), p.5

of reference for the visceral reality of illness and few words of real comfort for those who suffer impairment, or disability in churches, and little explanation at the level sought here. Disabled activists like Nancy Eisland and Jenny Morris tackle this prejudice and distortion. Nancy Eisland writes on this issue in a theological context<sup>82</sup> while Jenny Morris, explores the embodied experiences of disabled people from the context of feminist theologies and both analyses are full of the betrayal and exclusion felt in liberatory discourses designed to help the marginalised.<sup>83</sup> The search for equality or token integration by remaining in silence about impairment in order to be included in the mainstream, serves to make a greater taboo out of the arbitrariness of our human processes.

As Liz Crow believes,

‘suppression of our subjective experience of impairment is not the answer to dealing with these risks; engaging with the debates and probing deeper for greater clarity may be.’<sup>84</sup>

### THE AMBIGUITIES OF RESISTANCE

Why launch from such a position, knowing the dangers of navigating one’s way through the accusations of essentialism, of reductionism, of playing into the hands of those who would justify their powerful positions on the basis of the bodily vulnerabilities and inadequacies of the ‘naturally’ subordinate? One takes the risk of all these challenges, the motivation being that glimmer and space of hope that such justifications implode in the face of a reappropriation and reintegration of more honest reflection. This is cutting the umbilical cord of the safety tactics of the

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<sup>82</sup> See Eisland, *op.cit.*

<sup>83</sup> Jenny Morris, (ed) *Encounter With Strangers* (London: The Women’s Press, 1996), p.5

<sup>84</sup> Liz Crow, ‘Including All Of Our Lives’ in *op.cit.* p.223



silence, the ghastly expression that is soon spontaneously triggered and the stepping back away from the speaker, that are all played out in the ideals of social discourse. Hegel wrote that ‘we learn nothing from history.’<sup>85</sup> Terry Deare writes that making explicit ‘horrible’ history, that is the visceral reality of history, is different; the more humanity engages with the fleshly reality of Viking raids or the horrors of Auschwitz, the more there will be signs erected, as there were after Nazi atrocities which stated very plainly, ‘Never again.’ Deare suggests that Hegel might have declared that we learn nothing from history but we learn a great deal from engaging with the bodily reality of cruelty; that is, ‘from horrible history.’<sup>86</sup> When humans are shocked they react and resist. ‘When people learn from horrible history, then things do start to change.’

Synthesising the tension between admiration, awe for all that exists, and the ever present ubiquitous fear of physical processes and suffering, the aim is for authenticity and courage. Michael Serres writes that it is out of what he describes as,

the oceanic clamour of suffering that all our knowledge  
and all the conditions of our practical activities  
spring...our science has no other foundation than this  
permanent collapse, this lack, this endless slippage into  
the abyss of pain.<sup>87</sup>

If this is true, then it must be probed more deeply in theology for here is where the crude physical body meets up with the pure, cerebral, abstract body, it is the seedbed of human paradox, oppression and projection. ‘The body is the site of the

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<sup>85</sup> Hegel, cited in Terry Deare, *The Horrible History Of The World* (London, New York:Scholastic Ltd, 2003), p.92

<sup>86</sup> Deare, *op.cit.* p.92

<sup>87</sup> Michael Serres, in Toolan, *op.cit.*

creative operation which itself participates in the facticity of unreflective experience.’<sup>88</sup> Merleau-Ponty treats the body as an emblem of a natural base in which all reflection takes place, it is a field of different influences which must receive our utmost attention.<sup>89</sup>

Yet some of these influences have been ignored or displaced as Jo Spence discovered. She describes both the desperate need to acquire knowledge as a result of her cancer diagnosis and the humiliation of being treated as the ‘refuse of the social body’ and how both experiences changed her whole idea of what knowledge is. One thing disability knowledge amounts to, she reiterates, is the stone wall of lack of interest in one’s experience. She writes that if people inquire after her health, immediately the eyes glaze over and they think, ‘I hope she’s not going to tell me.’ The inquiry is not to be taken seriously.

This is very common and also sums up the nub of thwarted human/earth relations arising from the inattentive, musing, human preoccupation with its own theoretical fabric and investment. ‘That whole absenting body as a site of struggle does meet its final nemesis within disability and the access issue.’<sup>90</sup> The hope is that, having the courage to look into the realms of disgust and defilement will not sicken, but encourage new thought about the origins of prejudices and broaden understandings of the vulnerabilities of the body which would facilitate all to go through the veil of fear and come to grips with violent gut reactions.

Disgust (and contempt), emotions of status demarcation that assign to lower status those against whom they are directed, have an important role to play in hierarchical societies. Disgust... plagues democracy as it continues to motivate class, race and ethnic divisions. ... disgust is

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<sup>88</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.61

<sup>89</sup> *Op.cit.* p.119

<sup>90</sup> Jo Spence, in conversation with David Hevey, in David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot* (London, New York:Routledge, 1992 ), p.12

a recognition of danger to our purity... It underpins the sense of despair that impurity and evil are contagious, endure and take everything down with them.<sup>91</sup>

‘God strengthen me to bear myself..that heaviest weight of all to bear... inalienable weight of care.’<sup>92</sup> The jettisoning of life on its own terms of materiality is one of the main causes of ecological deterioration and the complex systems of sexism and disability phobia. ‘Disgust has a vice,’ writes Miller, ‘it demoralises those at whom it is directed. It is a moral sentiment of extraordinary inclusiveness and does more than register simple aversion... it degrades them in some moral way... so it may clash with other moral sentiments like guilt and benevolence.’<sup>93</sup> Yet there are examples of Christians challenging the fear of the apotropaic, St Francis kissing a leper, as mentioned, and Catherine of Sienna, deliberately exposing herself to disgust, in drinking poison from the infected wound of a patient, claiming that Jesus had revealed to her the false boundaries of purity and impurity. It was

the last barrier to test the level of one’s commitment. to test how far one would go in giving up on the deepest held, most fundamental norms of bodily integrity, inviolability and self respect..Jesus understands nature to reside in the human gag reflex and the instinctive recoil in the face of the disgusting.<sup>94</sup>

This Christian relationality, at the level of the most feared bodily processes, would test most of us but does illuminate that disgust can be conquered in Christian love. ‘The Kingdom of God does not come with your careful observations.’ (Luke17:20) Humankind is to be ‘down to earth’ about its

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<sup>91</sup> Miller, *op. cit.* pp. 204-205

<sup>92</sup> Christina Rosetti, <http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/29548> Accessed 10/2/2007

<sup>93</sup> Miller, *op.cit.* p.197

<sup>94</sup> Catherine of Sienna, cited in *op.cit.* pp.159- 161

embodied life. 'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' (Luke 18:14) No matter how hard humans try to escape the body, it crops up in each and every context. In the eschaton, Jesus tells his disciples, 'not a hair of your head will perish.'(Luke 21:18) If every part of the human body is so valuable, why then is disgust so prevalent?

### EARLY SIGNS

Disgust appears early in a human life and the benefits of feminist psychoanalytical theory offer some revealing insights into this most powerful emotion and its connection with the Western Judaeo/ Christian tradition. 'We already know what it feels like to be poor, isolated, segregated, done good to, stared at and talked down to... far better than any able bodied expert;<sup>95</sup> we now need to ask why and ask if psychoanalytic insights into the reasons for misogyny can begin to make some connections and give some answers. Julia Kristeva, a continental philosopher who was trained in psychoanalysis, writes, 'I do not believe it possible for a rational system, based on the data of consciousness, to respond to the evil and horror that exist in the world.'<sup>96</sup> Psychoanalysis has been valued for its revolutionary way of considering the developing subject, offering a discourse on needs, aversions, repression and projection, it can be a nuanced way of looking at subjects and their activities instead of concentrating on a single utilitarian rationality alone.

In what Ruether calls the 'Psychoanalytic Revolution,' the emergence of

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<sup>95</sup> Colin Barnes, and Graham Mercer, (eds) *Exploring The Divide: Illness And Disability* (Leeds:The Disability Press,1996b), p.8

<sup>96</sup> Julia Kristeva, '*Nations Without Nationalism*' Trans Leon S Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press,1990), p.1

subjectivity is given a thorough analysis, exposing the ‘dynamics of sexism,’ and what she describes as, the ‘self deceit and false perceptions’<sup>97</sup> of male discourse in everyday consciousness. It has shown the dynamics and shape of dominant discourse, how power influences have reproduced and sustained themselves and highlighted an asymmetry of the sexes in the social order. The dawning realisation that feminist egalitarian and liberal movements to free women from androcentric power and oppression, despite increased opportunities, have not changed an internal misogyny, has drawn the feminist movement to believe that sexual discourse is not an ‘entirely logical or consistent affair.’<sup>98</sup> Critiquing the overreaching influence of rationality and claiming the importance of the sexed nature of the subject, psychoanalysis introduces into discourse, the pre- rational, the bodily roots of our knowing, the value of the emotions and the role played by the neglected maternal feminine body. These are also the areas where disgust and Merleau-Ponty’s primordial influences become apparent.

Criticised and often ignored by many western traditional philosophers and theologians as conveniently untestable, guarded by analysts in ‘a hidden, devious and cunning manner’ and the privilege of an ‘upmarket catchment area,’<sup>99</sup> psychoanalysis directly challenges some of the ‘givens’ of those discourses. For those who benefit from such givens, psychoanalysis presents a threat to their autonomy and traditional privilege. Richard Swinburne, for instance, believes that ‘it falls into a certain sloppiness of argument, a tendency to draw big, vague, general pictures of the universe without spelling them out very

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<sup>97</sup> Ruether, *op.cit.* p.xviii

<sup>98</sup> Carol Squire, *Significant Differences: Feminism In Psychology* (London, New York:Routledge,1989), p.95

<sup>99</sup> Ernest Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement* (London, Paladin:Granada Publishing, 1985), pp. 204-207

precisely or justifying them very thoroughly, a kind of philosophy nearer to literature than to science,'<sup>100</sup> but it is this kind of thinking that feminist theologians and Merleau-Ponty have been seeking. They have wished to challenge the scientific mindset which puts rationality at the centre of discourse at the cost of neglecting empathy, intersubjectivity and relationality. Grace Jantzen brings home the power of psychoanalysis when she asks of the Cartesian subject how he became a rational conscious subject: what were his maternal origins, his sources of nourishment as an infant?

His subjectivity, like everyone else's emerged out of his bodily development that had its origins in his mother's womb, was dependent on material sustenance and learned to speak and think within a symbolic order- a language and culture- which pre-existed him and within which his subjectivity was formed. Human subjectivity does not arrive fully adult into the world: it emerges and it is not without pain and cost that conscious subjectivity develops out of the preconscious materiality and pre-existing discursive conditions of every human life.<sup>101</sup>

Freud, as the founder of psychoanalysis, recognised the importance of prereflective influences on subjectivity but only some of his ideas relevant to our study will be mentioned here.<sup>102</sup> The use of psychoanalysis set the agenda for many feminists wishing to explain the subjugation of women and find the psychological means to rise above resentment and despair. 'Our society enacts the oppression of cultural imperialism to a large degree through feelings and reactions and in that

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<sup>100</sup> Richard Swinburne, 'An Intellectual Autobiography' In Alan G P Padgett, (ed) *Reason And The Christian Religion: Essays In Honour Of Richard Swinburne* (Oxford:Clarendon Press,1994), p.2

<sup>101</sup> Jantzen, *op.cit.* p.33

<sup>102</sup> As a work of this length cannot do justice to the complexity of Freud's thought I would point the reader to the Penguin editions of Freud's works. e.g Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Freud Library: Penguin, 1993)

respect oppression is beyond the reach of law and policy to remedy.’<sup>103</sup> For Teresa de Lauretis, it is the only way to understand why the concept of ‘woman’ is a borderline concept, evoking fascination and horror, it is a way to think within and against dominant discourse, and it can also liberate to create a ‘new female, feminist subject.’<sup>104</sup> Yet the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism was at first fraught with difficulties because of its prescriptive attitudes towards the female and its patriarchal priorities.

The major focus on the neurosis of women and the terms used by Freud, which effectively exclude women from the arenas of moral decision making and autonomy, the Oedipus complex focusing on the boy’s development, the castration principle. The lack of a penis and the concentration on the paternal metaphor for all identification of the developing subject have been difficult for women. Its discourse has had to be liberated by feminists who, nevertheless, have reflected on Freud’s more gender neutral concepts surrounding the unconscious, child development and his explanations of the effect of our psychic orderings.<sup>105</sup>

For our purposes, the connections of our bodily fears, our fear of the other and the loss of clearly defined clean and proper somatic body boundaries, we can trace the beginning of such terrors to Freud’s view of the emerging subject in the ‘uncanny strangeness’ of our unconscious. He presents an image of hatred which appears very much as a disgust reaction.

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<sup>103</sup> Young, *op.cit.* p.124

<sup>104</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, cited In Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns Of Dissonance* (Oxford, Cambridge:Polity Press, 1991), pp 209-213

<sup>105</sup> Some critiques of psychoanalysis and their implications for women are discussed in Juliet Mitchell’s, *Psychoanalysis And Feminism* (London:Penguin, 1974) and Jane Gallop, *The Daughters’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1985)

In the beginning was hatred, Freud said basically (contrary to the well known biblical and evangelical statement) as he discovered that the human child differentiates itself from its mother through a rejection effect through the scream of anger and hatred that accompanies it and through the 'no' sign as prototype of language and all symbolism... to recognise the impetus of that hatred aroused by the other, within our own psychic dramas of psychosexual individuation- that is what psychoanalysis leads us to.<sup>106</sup>

The awareness of undifferentiated being, the horrifying and yet fascinating realization of one's separation from the mother is recalled in Freud's observations of the child's 'fort/ da (gone/ here) game showing the emerging ego in a game of autonomy and mastery, in balancing the desire to not lose the love of the mother with the wish to be free of the overwhelming presence of the maternal body. The child plays with a cotton reel attached to a piece of string, throwing it out of his cot (gone) and retrieving it again.(here) Freud argued that in this way the child plays out his fantasy of being in control of his mother, making her come and go as he wishes; it marks the beginning of control over others. Braidotti writes that in this action, can be seen the initiation of all thought and fears and threats to hard won independence.

One can only start thinking in experiencing the visceral fear of the loss of the primary object that is the mother's body. Every effort to theorize is the effect of this double terror: terror of an excessive distance from, but also of an overwhelming presence of the maternal site...the act of reflection will forever resonate with the vital necessity to balance oneself on the oscillation; between presence and absence of this privileged other that is the maternal body.'<sup>107</sup>

Freud likened woman to a dark continent, he felt that the feminine

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<sup>106</sup> Julia Kristeva, *op.cit.* pp. 29-30

<sup>107</sup> Braidotti, *op.cit.* p.30



was so hidden in the unconscious that nothing could be theorised about it.<sup>108</sup> It was Jacques Lacan<sup>109</sup> who, despite relegating ‘woman’ to that which is outside discourse, signifying nothing, created the greatest impact on continental thinkers like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva who wanted to create a space for women in misogynistic discourse. Lacan interprets Freud in terms of structural linguistics; for him the relevance of the fort /da game is the beginning of language as the child plays with the cotton reel. The sounds spoken are substitutes for the mother’s coming and going and begin to illustrate how the child’s needs are expressed in language. Language, as a symbolic and social system, becomes essential to the creation of the subject. ‘Language constitutes his sexual identity and structures the social-symbolic system which the child enters when he learns to speak’<sup>110</sup>

The word Lacan uses for this social order, is the Symbolic which represents all systems of society, the law, religion, signs and images as well as language. The main signifier for the Symbolic is the ‘Phallus’ which represents authority, the ‘Name of the Father,’<sup>111</sup> which breaks open the mother / child dyad and takes the child into culture, it represents power and order which structure and influence us all.<sup>112</sup> The period of the child’s development before entry into the very paternally privileged Symbolic, Lacan calls the Imaginary. In the beginning of the subject when the infant only senses fragments of autonomous being and cannot distinguish a sense of itself apart from the mother, it lives in a chaos of existence

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<sup>108</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy Of Religion* (Oxford, MA: Blackwell Publishers,1998), p.104

<sup>109</sup> Jacques Lacan, cited in Jantzen, *op.cit.* p.43

<sup>110</sup> Anderson, *op.cit.* p.105

<sup>111</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz for a full explanation of Lacan’s terms and feminist responses. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London, New York:Routledge,1990),Ch 6

<sup>112</sup> See more of this topic in detail in Juliet Mitchell, and Jacqueline Rose, (eds) *Female Sexuality* (London:Macmillan,1982), p.28

and comes to a sense of single identity very gradually. Merleau-Ponty believed that this stage is never totally eradicated and remains in those feelings when self and the world feel fused together and influence perception as remainders or residues of feelings of connection with others and nature. He suggested that such human primordial contact with the world always presented adult perception with a 'back side of things that we have not constituted.'<sup>113</sup>

The entry into the symbolic is reached only through difference and the infant becomes separate from the mother only through alienation and Lacan describes this process through his use of Freud's mirror stage of development. He rejects the idea that the ego is a pre-given reality; it has to struggle for a unity and make sense of the bits and pieces of its sensory perceptions. The identity that is constructed is out of these snatches, out of the desire to be, a mimetic desire, and the ideal 'I' that is seen in the environment, but it is accompanied with anger and frustration so it becomes a mimetic conflict, as Lacan observes. 'It is invested with all the original distress resulting from the child's intra-organic and relational discordance during the first six months,'<sup>114</sup> never fulfilling its needs nor fully recovering from the wrench from the maternal body. Thus, it is believed that human identity is formed in a turbulent way, in isolation from its familiar lived experience and it is characterised by a splitting, a rupture and by an internalisation of its grief for the mother.

When confronted with an idealized and unified image (in a mirror or through another's mirroring gaze) of another, the human subject establishes itself at the site of that image.... the subject comes to be in a place where 'it' is not....the subject's source of security (wholly

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<sup>113</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs. op.cit.* p.180

<sup>114</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage As Formative Of The I As Revealed In Psychoanalytic Experience,' (1966) 1977), p.19 Article cited in Jantzen, *op.cit.* p.34

unacknowledged) rests with its being beholden to that which has mirrored it.<sup>115</sup>

Julia Kristeva takes up the fragility of this process, the fragile hold that the subject takes in society, in the Symbolic, and makes connections with the readiness in which subjects invest in somatic violence if their positions are threatened in any way. This illuminates the marginalisation of women and disabled people and any 'other' whose body in some way lies between the subject and the security of his/her identity. Kristeva makes explicit the links with our society's tendency to victimise in a sexually differentiated way, in its return to the maternal feminine body when life is threatening, re-enacting the terror of its separation and alienation in its early struggles for identity. Kristeva reinterprets the fort/ da game as the first demonstration of victim creating order, of sacrifice, she believes that Lacan does not adequately stress the force with which the child expels his feelings. Renee Girard, too, believes that in the throwing of the cotton reel he is enacting a 'sacrificial expulsion,'<sup>116</sup> behind which lies a need for revenge on the absent mother. Reading Kristeva's works on sacrifice, one begins to reflect how pervasive is aggression at both the micro and macro level of interrelation, how much there is to understand about human actions and defence strategies. 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34)

### THE ABJECT

Most applicable to our study is Kristeva's notion of the abject.

Neither subject nor object of being, the abject is neither material nor sign. It is

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<sup>115</sup> Martha Reineke, *Sacrificed Lives* (Bloomington And Indianapolis:Indiana University Press,1997),pp18-19

<sup>116</sup> Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since The Beginning Of Time* (Stanford:Stanford University Press,1987), p.402

wholly incoherent, unassimilatable into our social order and in fact must be expelled for the social order to exist. It attests to the marks of the maternal body, the bodily fluids, the waste and all that is thought necessary to reject to retain body security. Like defilement the abject is ‘a translinguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self’s clean and proper body.’<sup>117</sup> The abject in Kristeva’s terms encompasses feelings of dread and disgust, terror and horror, it is the place where ‘meaning collapses’ where identity, system and order fails. ‘It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled.’<sup>118</sup> She asks, ‘Why does corporeal waste, menstrual blood and excrement or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail parings to decay, represent... the objective frailty of the symbolic order?’<sup>119</sup>

Kristeva argues that psychoanalysis has paid scant notice of these pre-oedipal drives, semiotic stages, in its discussion of ego development and focus on symbolization and representation. Similarly, we so rarely delve behind our theological symbols and representations. Kristeva illuminates this heterogenous, material, affective quality of the abject experienced in gestures, tone of voice and melodies of language without being directly signifiable. ‘The speaking self always carries along this shadow, its spilled over body expressed in comportment and excitation.’<sup>120</sup> Abjection arises from the primal repression of the rejection of the mother’s body, for separation can only arise by expelling the nourishing maternal body which Kristeva names the maternal matrix. Kristeva calls this matricide, the maternal body has to die for the subject to establish itself.<sup>121</sup> In trying to attain a sense of body control, ‘there is a violent, clumsy breaking away

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<sup>117</sup> Kristeva, *op. cit.* p.73

<sup>118</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.3-4

<sup>119</sup> *Op.cit.* p.70

<sup>120</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, p.43

<sup>121</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression And Melancholia* Trans Leon S Roudiez, (New York:Columbia University Press,1989), p.27

with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as secure as it is shifting.’<sup>122</sup> The separated self experiences nausea and repulsion of the maternal matrix in order to keep its borders clear and firm even while yearning to return to its safe enclosure, yet paradoxically fearing loss of identity by being sucked back into it. All body excretions are met with this feeling of abjection.

I react to the expelled with disgust because the border of myself must be kept in place. The abject must not touch me for I fear that it will ooze through, obliterating the border between inside and outside necessary for my life...the movement of abjection makes signification possible by creating a being capable of dividing, repeating, separating.<sup>123</sup>

Although the abject releases its early gripping fear, it does not free the subject from its feeling of danger whenever it is threatened by a crisis or disorder or a feeling of strangeness, remembering its tussle to enter the Symbolic. In this way Kristeva is developing her ideas about the work of the unconscious, not so much as an abstract, theoretical activity of the interiority of the mind so much as a visual, material, boundary making practice, a visceral labour very much active in the Symbolic, a force that cannot be denied. Like Merleau-Ponty’s primordial dimension it makes its power felt in signification though not itself signifiable. The abject is a manifestation of what Kristeva terms ‘negativity, the not-yetness of a subject who is in process and on trial.’<sup>124</sup> It is a mysterious element that representation cannot eliminate. With visceral connotations in the term as created in French, L’ abjection, it is the waste, the filth and all that is expelled, yet it

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<sup>122</sup> *Op.cit.* p.13

<sup>123</sup> Young, *op.cit.*

<sup>124</sup> Reineke, *op. cit.* p.43

remains like the 'tain'<sup>125</sup> in the silverlining of the mirror, unnoticeable, yet necessary for the mirror's functioning.

Kristeva's discussion of the abject can help humans begin to comprehend aversive attitudes to bodies which threaten the subject's sense of security, 'an involuntary... judgement of ugliness and loathing.'<sup>126</sup> Such disgust can be challenged, she believed; humans can become more responsible for gag reflexes through becoming aware of the creativity inherent in the remainders of the early stages of development which can often be expressed in aesthetic pursuit, poetry, painting and drama, incorporating and defusing violent longings, phobias and disgust. The disturbing way in which the child makes its entry into language after the mimetic conflict of the mirror stage and the fear of the return to the maternal matrix where the subject suffers loss of autonomy and being in this scenario, bears similarity to the narratives of those who fear becoming disabled. Robert Murphy,<sup>127</sup> an anthropologist, who became paralyzed, wondered why a young man declared that he would rather be dead than disabled, a common response of the disgust and fear of disability. The fear of dependency, of loss of autonomy, of returning to that maternal matrix is akin to a fear of death to many. It often calls for a violent response.

Furthermore the tragic consequences for many women in androcentric cultures is that they bear abject marks of body fluids and blood and signs which link them to the maternal matrix and so are made to bear the brunt of the subject's

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<sup>125</sup> Ewa Ziarek, 'At The Limits Of Discourse: Heterogeneity, Alterity and The Maternal Body In Kristeva's Thought.' *Hypatia* 7, 2 1992 pp. 91-108 (100)

<sup>126</sup> Young, *op.cit.* p.45

<sup>127</sup> Robert Murphy, *The Body Silent* (New York: Henry Holt And Co Inc, 1987)

fears. The combination of the patriarchal structures of the social order and the maternal abject marks, target the female for violent rejection. A victim creating order targets the female and the disabled body and any part of nature which disgusts. Girard, who agrees with Lacan's observations of subject formation but emphasizes the violence that accompanies the subject's origin, stresses the importance of taking heed of such a stormy beginning. If we do not heed such violence it becomes, 'mystified and removed from the human culture and the arena of human responsibility.'<sup>128</sup> Like Kristeva he traces violence to the mimesis in the subject's desire to be and its attempts at identification, and writes that only if such violence is reflected on back to its source, at the origins of being, will we be able to come to terms with its persistent presence in our lives.<sup>129</sup> Girard is known for his term, 'Scapegoat mechanism,'<sup>130</sup> a theory which places mimesis in patterns of social conflict when there is so much violence in interaction that people turn in situations of unified violence against a single person. Sacrifice seems to resolve the violence and bring order and even a 'plenitude of being' and his work attests to patterns of this collective murder recurring throughout religion's history.<sup>131</sup>

Thus in disgust there is a fear that the person's sense of self will be lost, be overwhelmed by his past. Such fears feel like very material dangers which need defusing in a visceral way. 'When females predominate among victims in the sacrificial economy that we call patriarchy, those who violate them are acting to

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<sup>128</sup> *Op.cit.* p.74

<sup>129</sup> Girard. *op.cit.* p.402

<sup>130</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.24-25

<sup>131</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.25-28

<sup>132</sup> Reineke, *op.cit.* p.86

counter the abject menace on which sacrifice turns.’<sup>132</sup> Considering Kristeva’s thought on the sources of human agency and on the way the body is invested with meaning at an early age, it might be felt that Kristeva implicitly argues for the inevitability of misogyny and phobias. Is it possible for the ritual and liturgical practices of Christianity to defuse threats of defilement, disgust, violence and matricide, working through the body to affirm its beauty in the image of God and recognise the signs of early fears by means of a more positive aesthetic awareness? Christians are called to probe into their pasts and even leave behind their upbringing and early securities.

No-one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come. (Luke 18:29)

The next chapter discusses the symbolic associations of some bodies with horror and evil which must be explained as historically and culturally variable. Psychoanalysis provides fruitful narratives to explain infantile development and the structurality of beginnings, it is a strong model for understanding acquired and ingrained meanings by the very young. Merleau-Ponty believed that this early sympathetic state of indistinction, the sign of the child’s affective stage, is also apparent, not only in the arts but in the generosity and intercorporeality of human interaction in the world. This ability to interact colours much of his work and his ideas on affect and sensibility show how the ‘intellectual elaboration of our experience of the world is constantly supported by the affective elaboration of our inter-human relations.’<sup>133</sup>

It is now time to explore socially constructed influences on views of the

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<sup>133</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception op.cit.* pp.112-113



body, the complexity of various social influences on embodiment, restructured over time and according to differing regimes of power; to examine the ‘shift in the manufacture of objects, the historical and social specificities of control and skin and social etiquette or ambiguously experienced body invasions and minutely graded hierarchies,’<sup>134</sup> all affecting adult goals, ambitions and cultural status and the way these interact with early beginnings. Seeking to treat all humanity and creatures with respect and responsibility, it is vital to heed Girard’s warning to remember the turbulence of the past and to link these with the self-securing practices of the present to create new modes of being in adulthood. Merleau-Ponty’s later work strained to find the means to create a new sense of being and we follow his example. He strained at the edges of fears, thought, concepts and norms to transgress and reform them.

The association between groups and abject matter is socially constructed; once the link is made however, the theory of abjection describes how these associations lock into the subject’s identities and anxieties.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Gayle Rubin in conversation with Judith Butler, in Naomi Schor, and Elizabeth Weed, (Eds) *Differences* (Bloomington:Indiana University Press,1994), p.79  
<sup>135</sup> Young, *op.cit.* p.145

## Chapter two

### UNCOVERING IDENTITIES

We respond to gestures with an extreme alertness and one might almost say, in accordance with an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none and understood by all.

Edward Sapir.<sup>1</sup>

I know of no woman-virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate -whether she earns her living as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves- for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire...its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings.

Adrienne Rich.<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

This second chapter considers western cultural attitudes that have been developed around the body and some affective somatic responses and defences that have promoted social inequalities and created social norms intent to break free from the risks and possible fluctuations of the biological body. It also continues to explore the emotion of disgust and the way it is implicated in somatic anxieties. In this theological reflection on the ambiguities of the lived body in order to live more peacefully with them, it is important to discuss the way humanity has negotiated its way between what it has labelled the acceptable and the non

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Sapir, Cited In Robert Plutchik, *The Psychology Of Biology And Emotion* (Harper Collins: New York,1994), p.24

<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Of Woman Born' Cited In Emily Martin, *The Woman In The Body* (Open University Press:Milton Keynes,1989), p.1

acceptable and Christianity's part in this.

As Kristeva writes, social texts conceal,

under the cunning orderly surface of civilisation, the nurturing horror that they attend to, pushing aside by purifying, systematizing and thinking; the horror that they seize on in order to build themselves up and function.<sup>3</sup>

Theorising about the female body and its potential to arouse both fascination and horror<sup>4</sup> and discussion about disabled, extraordinary bodies can sometimes lead to a neglect of the 'norms' of society with regard to the human body, the way that the body is taken up, given meaning in its birthing and inclusion into the world of social relations and the subsequent labelling as defective of those who do not match these norms. The recent interest in the body, in disciplines of study, including feminism, theology and sociology, has increasingly illuminated the malleability of the body to social constructions; 'the extensive identity of the sign swells like an illicit pregnancy,' says Vicki Kirby.<sup>5</sup>

In exploring the conflation of the female and disabled /chronically ill body, the way they have often been pathologised in parallel ways in various representations of culture, it is necessary to distance oneself from some studies which view such bodies objectively *only* as the casualties of our environmental hazards or abuses of capitalism and patriarchy as in some feminist discourse, or as metaphors to stand for what is wrong with society as in some sociological discourse. There is a common

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror* (W Sussex, New York, Chichester:Columbia University Press,1982), p.210

<sup>4</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'The female shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror.' *Nomadic Subjects* (Columbia:Columbia University Press, 1994), p.80

<sup>5</sup> Vicki Kirby, *op.cit.* p.51

tendency to pathologise and label certain practices as diseased. This relegates the experience of disability to the waste bin, it treats the concept of disability as a rhetorical device, as prologue to better things, rock bottom and not worth analysing in its own right. Such a reductionist view is entirely alien to the emphasis on perception of the other which, Merleau- Ponty was so eager to state, came from the encounter with the other and not from abstract ideas about perceiving them. Unfortunately such abstract ideas abound.

### BODY NORMS

In discussing norms one is moved to ask why this or that classification and not another? The multiple ways the physical body has been used to shape and sustain attitudes and norms and the vehement emotional support for them are myriad and only a few of these can be discussed here. As Edward Sapir suggests, in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, aversions and responses can be strongly felt but not always articulated adequately. The mind /body, nature/nurture problem; that which just cannot seem to be completely settled once and for all; the fear of being caught in the 'embrace of the carnal envelope,'<sup>6</sup> as Kirby says, is well summed up by Paul Valery who writes that if there is often little rapprochement between mind and body discussions, it is because of the feeling that the sense of self, with its need for stability and permanence, is contradicted by the fluctuations of nature.

We speak of (the body) to others as of a thing that belongs to us; but for us it is not entirely a thing; and it belongs to us a little less than we belong to it... this thing that is so much mine and yet so mysteriously and sometimes- always, in the end - our most redoubtable antagonist, is the most urgent, the most constant and the most variable thing imaginable, for it carries with it all

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6 *Op.cit.* p.73

constancy and all variation.<sup>7</sup>

Naturalistic accounts of the body alone raise the ghost of biological reductionism justifying the political and ideological oppression of ‘inferior’ bodies<sup>8</sup> and social constructionist theories alone have highlighted the way the body has been used by powerful elites to subjugate others, how it has been invaded shaped and classified, to such an extent that no-one trusts the term ‘natural.’ In social constructionist theories alone, the body itself seems merely like a shadow, rarely discussed as a reality. My own approach, incorporating the emotions, the senses and a greater awareness of our bodily processes, is an ‘interactionist’<sup>9</sup> one. This unites all the capacities of the human being in the act of perception and is aware of the way that the environment affects us.<sup>10</sup> As Merleau Ponty writes,

we are in the world through our body, and..we perceive that world within our body... by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world we...also ..rediscover ourself, since perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self, and as it were, the subject of perception<sup>11</sup>

Feminisms’ insights over four decades into male power over female bodies have alerted us to the fact that many of the past texts of western culture have neglected the body altogether in a Cartesian dream that one could speak as a disembodied spirit and be objective without the constraints of the physical body.<sup>12</sup>

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7 Paul Valery, ‘Some Simple Reflections On The Body’ In M Feher, With R Naddaff, And N Tazi, (eds) *Fragments For A History Of The Human Body Part Two* (New York:Urzone,1989 ), pp.398-399

8 See Chris Shilling, *The Body And Social Theory*, (London Thousand Oaks, New Delhi:SAGE,1993), chapter 3

<sup>9</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.206

<sup>11</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> See Jantzen, *op.cit.* See Beverley Clack, And Brian Clack, *The Philosophy Of Religion:A Critical Introduction* (Oxford:Blackwell Publishers,1998)

Yet although the body became a new project, reclaimed as site and location of knowledge for these writers, there has seemed to be a fear of a residue of essentialism, a determinist naturalistic view of the body which has become taboo, as if there were a chance that women could be once more associated with the devalued aspects of their identity. 'The polarizing effects of the outbreak of phobias about essentialism have often found feminists lining up on different sides of a divide.'<sup>13</sup>

On one side are those who believed the female body could be created anew unaffected by nature or history and on the other are those, 'for whom the female body is a source of pleasure, knowledge and power to be revalued rather than remade.'<sup>14</sup> Very few of the latter however have included the vagaries and vulnerabilities of the body at any great depth. In the craving for reconfiguration and transformations especially in postmodern feminism, women seemed to be looking for pure possibilities relinquishing, the attempt to understand the body as a material reality.<sup>15</sup>

The intertwining of the biological and social attributes of the body seem common sense, yet like many things taken for granted they are difficult to describe. Turner writes that it is difficult to say exactly what the body is any more as so much of it has been written over with cultural significance. The cacophony of themes of embodiment have led some to view the body as a blank screen which can be typed on and deleted over and over again as ever new programmes shape

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13 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London:University Of California Press,1993), p.37

14 *Op.cit.*

15 See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs And Women: The Reinvention Of Nature*, (London:Free Association Press,1991a) And Braidotti, *op.cit.*

our bodies in different directions.

We now have discursive and material bodies,  
physical, communicative, consumer and medical  
bodies, individual and social bodies and  
medicalized, sexualized, disciplined and talking  
bodies. <sup>16</sup>

Though it is inconceivable to think we can analyse the human body without recourse to socially generated skills, such as language history and culture, there are certain elements of the body which constrain and enable social constructions and have us in their grip in the way they interact with embedded norms of behaviour. 'The body is not only affected by social relations but forms a basis for and enters into the construction of social norms,' writes Chris Shilling.<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty described this conception of the body as 'a constituting noetic presence.'<sup>18</sup>

Norms are distinguished from ideals by Len Davis who says that by definition ideals can never be found in this world; they were the qualities of mythic poetic body that is linked to that of the gods. 'When ideal bodies occur they do so in mythology so Venus or Helen of Troy, for example, would be the embodiment of female physical beauty.' Norms, however, as concepts, enter the English language and European culture in the nineteenth century and project the idea that most people should and do live up to all or part of the norm; 'the norm pins down that majority of the population that falls under the arch of the standard bell shaped curve.'<sup>19</sup> Taxonomies of bodily value were also present in Greek thought; 'anyone who does not take after his parents,' wrote Aristotle, 'is really a monstrosity since in these cases nature has in a way strayed from the generic

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16 Bryan Turner, cited in Chris Shilling, *op.cit.* p.39

17 *Op.cit.* p.199

18 Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.67

19 Shilling, *op.cit.*

type.’<sup>20</sup> Such types set the scene for later notions of the average and norm. The generic type for Aristotle was the male figure and Rosemarie Garland Thomson remarks on the way he was able to construct a spatial metaphor, placing a certain corporeal figure, who is considered the norm, at the centre of his system of thought.

On the outer margin is the monstrosity, the corporeal consequence of Nature’s having strayed from a central paradigm along a path of deviance, the first stop along which is the female body. Aristotle’s choreography of bodies thus conjoins the monstrosity and the female on a course leading away from the definitive norm.’<sup>21</sup>

Ideas of monstrosity imposed on psyches, have the capacity also to be embodied through the generations. Shilling writes that evolutionary processes included bodily experiences and knowing and social constructions; everything about the human characteristic patterns of social life have the potential to be adopted by evolving generations.

Our current state of embodiment derives from evolutionary processes which incorporate social as well as biological factors; the organic body changes historically and over the course of an individual’s lifetime because of its biological and social constitution.’<sup>22</sup>

Margaret Miles writes about carnal knowing which has always been associated with knowing another person sexually. She uses it, however, to describe an activity in ‘which the intimate interdependence and irreducible cooperation of thinking, feeling,

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<sup>20</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ‘Feminist Theory, The Body And The Disabled Figure’ In *op.cit.* p.281

<sup>21</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Shilling, *op.cit.* p.104



sensing and understanding is revealed.’<sup>23</sup> Understanding the body as both naturally and culturally formed illuminates the power that the web of social forces and biological processes have over attitudes to human physical processes and over defences against the external world and against each other.

Gendered categories and practices operate as material forces which help to shape and form women’s and men’s bodies in ways that reinforce particular images of femininity and masculinity. The mind’s conceptualisation of bodies is closely related to people’s experiences of bodies.’<sup>24</sup>

Yet this is only possible because we have, what Connell describes, as the ‘species’<sup>25</sup> capacity for certain skills such as intellect and language and for maintaining a sense of self and keeping bodies safe from harm and risks. Humans are so constituted as to have to create concepts, meaning, and create order out of the physical reality of the environment. Animals seem programmed from birth to follow certain patterns of behaviour; humans, however, have to invent them to keep their bodies secure and safe. The vulnerabilities of embodiment, the high risks and fears of pollutions, new viruses immune to antibiotics, Aids and numerous other dangers to health and security mean, as Turner says, that humanity needs to invest its defence mechanisms with a feeling of depth and irrefutability. ‘Human beings require stable meanings and cannot live in permanent awareness of the socially constructed and precarious nature of everyday reality and they are

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23 Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1989), p.9

24 R Connell, cited in Shilling, *op.cit.* p.107

25 *Op.cit.* p.108

forced to clothe these certainties with permanent significance.’<sup>26</sup>

Alan Gibbard distinguishes between cultural forces which have humans permanently in their grip and those which he describes as accepting norms. The latter are what they maintain and sustain at the discursive level; representational influences of society.<sup>27</sup> Humanity becomes attuned to the historical effects of these influences which mediate a good deal of social reality from art, medicine, academic texts from philosophy to literary works to film, fashion and the media. These mediate offensive or assertive matters of power relations in contrast to the former more aversive and reactionary human strategies which sustain social inequalities affecting even the most justice seeking of people who might appear at the discursive level to be democratic yet who cannot seem to help betraying an underlying stigmatising attitude or fear.

Those norms and forces which have us in their grip are those which are often so powerful they feel embodied. Described by Foucault as those finely embedded webs of power instilled in us by daily practice and habits, ‘a productive network which runs through the entire social body,’<sup>28</sup> they are also described by Judith Butler as having the power of performativity;<sup>29</sup> they have been repeated so often they call forth responses which are total and automatic: humans have internalised them to such an extent they feel embodied and part of the inner self.

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26 Bryan Turner, *Regulating Bodies: Essays In Medical Sociology* (London, New York:Routledge,1992a), p.117

27 Alan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory Of Normative Judgement* (Cambridge, Mass:Harvard University Press,1990 ), pp.55-82

28 Michel Foucault, *The History Of Sexuality Vol 1 An Introduction* (London:Allen Lane, 1979), p.36

29 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism And The Subversion Of Identity* (New York, London:Routledge,1990), p.10

Such ‘machinations’<sup>30</sup> as Jack Katz describes the minute designs of personhood, lie at the foundation of many aversive and reactionary attitudes demonstrated towards the dangers that are felt to lurk in the environment and in those bodies which seem different and threatening. Such norms are difficult to pin down; humankind likes to give the impression that their personalities were given and arrived ready made rather than worked at and struggled over for many years. They ‘work constantly from early in life to obscure the machinations of producing their identities,’<sup>31</sup> writes Katz, yet it is possible to study them because of the propensity of human emotions to betray deepest feelings and motivations. ‘Through our emotions we reach back sensually to grasp the tacit embodied foundations of our selves...(we have failed) to appreciate the hidden sensual and aesthetic foundations of the self.’<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty believed that such emotions are unrecognised and unacknowledged. Yet they effect day to day attitudes so that each perceptual act is influenced by their presence.’<sup>33</sup> Appearing as the gag reflex, disgust is the most dramatic of these emotions.

#### UNDERSTANDING DISGUST

Women and the disabled have been treated to large doses of this reflex emotion directed towards their bodies. Disgust, expressed through the medium of the senses, is more than just a matter of good taste and a marker of what is clean and unclean, it gives us our ideas of what is abhorrent, repulsive and horrifying and marks out what is to be seen and hidden, what is good and bad and too often

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30 Jack Katz, *How The Emotions Work* (Chicago, London:University Of Chicago Press,1999), p.171

31 *Op.cit.*

32 *Op.cit.* p.7

33 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs op.cit.* p.180

who is good or bad and who should remain hidden from view in our everyday interactions and exclusions.

A great many of the ideas about what is disgusting are culturally set, revolving around the classifications of pure and impure, yet humans feel disgust very keenly in their bodies and the experience has sometimes been interpreted as close to an instinct. Disgust has been the forgotten emotion, related to taboos and so too uncomfortable to decipher. As stated Darwin<sup>34</sup> and Freud<sup>35</sup> attempted to analyse disgust, Darwin arguing that it was innate and Freud that it was a learned response to the need to control bodily impulses as well as bodily fluids. Val Curtis, at the London School of Hygiene, has continued the debate on the nature / nurture divide, arguing that what humans find disgusting is a consequence of evolution, their very survival has depended on them keeping away from polluting and contaminating substances.<sup>36</sup>

Paul Rozin believes both nature and nurture determine disgust responses, for the newly born demonstrate distaste through an early form of rejecting facial expression marking the beginning of a visceral and cultural response to the disgusting.<sup>37</sup> Dr Mary Phillips carried out brain scans on certain people while they were experiencing disgust. Her results suggest that when humans feel disgusted they are using a part of the brain which is much older than the part which deals with rational thought. 'It is millions of years older than the oldest human

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34 Darwin, *op.cit.* pp.256-257

35 Sigmund, Freud, 'Three Essays On The Theory Of Sexuality II' In James Strachery, (ed) '*The Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud* (London:Hogarth Press,1953-1974) pp.177-178

36 Val Curtis, 2000, *The Anatomy Of Disgust*. Online. Available from <http://channel4.com/nextstep/disgust/culture.html>. Accessed on 25th August 2000.

37 Paul Rozin, April Fallon, and Mary Lynn Augustoni-Ziskind, 'The Child's Conception Of Food: Development Of Categories Of Rejected And Accepted Substances' *Journal Of Nutrition Education* 18 (1986) pp141-151

civilisations' was her conclusion; disgust is so deeply sedimented in human psyches that it 'could not be determined purely by cultural influences.'<sup>38</sup>

We like to think of the natural world as a place of beauty and wonder as it certainly is, as 'clean, sterile, beautiful and manageable' as the picture in astronaut Russell Schweichert's view of earth from space. A blue and white Christmas tree ornament with none of the reality, as Sallie McFague writes,

of the detail,.... the smells and sounds and tastes of earth.....the blood, sex, faeces, sweat and decay that marks the life on the planet.<sup>39</sup>

'Life must be packaged just right, not to make us cringe when it touches us,'<sup>40</sup> writes Miller. Meat comes in the supermarket in clingfilmed cartons concealing the process of death and even the shape of the animal it was obtained from. The material successes of people are assessed by the pristine homes they live in, those depicted in upmarket magazines epitomising obsession with orderly and hygienic appearances. With the salience of consumer culture there are now many disinfectants, and humans shower, use deodorants, wash hands on a hitherto unprecedented level, and increasingly sanitize and sterilise every part of their lives. We are antiseptic to the point of purity yet the disgusting continues to cause consternation.

Stuart Brisley horrified the Institute of Art in America by bringing rubbish in every day and arranging it within one of the galleries to point out that humanity's view of the world as 'clean and regulated is false and dangerous. They are simply sweeping it under the carpet. But hiding it does not make it

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38 Dr Mary Phillips, 2000 User: Online: *The Anatomy Of Disgust* Available from: <http://www.Channel4.com/nextstep/disgust/t-science.html>. (Accessed 25 August 2000)

39 Sallie McFague, *Super Natural Christians* (London:SCM,1997), p.32

40 Miller, *op.cit.* p.64

disappear.’<sup>41</sup> Humans feel disgust about much of life around them and about many of their own physical processes, says Miller, and this sensation is experienced viscerally at a depth of reality that cannot be denied. We feel sick, our skin cringes and recoils and we argue for the palpability and concreteness of what is disgusting and the way that we are experiencing it. One’s whole body is caught up in a web of connectedness and fear experienced in the interstices of the body, social upbringing and the environment.

Emotions, writes Katz, are ‘three dimensional ways of making explicit what is usually the invisible reality of our being interlaced with the world.’ There seems to be ‘no place where one’s identity neatly ends and the social environment obdurately begins.’<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Grosz thinks of the Mobius Strip to illuminate this process further, the three inverted dimensional figure eight can be used, she says, to show the ‘inflection of mind into body and body into mind which through a kind of twisting....one side becomes the other.’ It also shows, she believes, the relations between the inside of the subject and the outside, ‘the passage, vector or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside.’<sup>43</sup>

An ecomysticism,<sup>44</sup> advocates a greater visceral courage, a stouter stamina needed to challenge the many human defences invested in preserving society’s pure and impure categories. It must begin however by recognising how much fear is implicated in the body and how many influences there are to unpack to understand evasions and exclusionary reactions. What humans have considered disgusting and

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41 Stuart Brisley, Cited In ‘The Anatomy Of Disgust’ *op.cit.* p.1

42 *Op.cit.* p.16

43 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: and Indianapolis:Indiana University Press,1994), p.xii

44 Discussed in *chapter five*

omitted from religious practices and socialization is all encompassing, it is abundantly overdetermined and most of all it cuts them off from nature along with all those who represent the impermanence, fluctuations and uncertainties of nature.

‘The socialization of the body refers to the way in which we have become associated with our bodies as social phenomena and have sought to hide away from view any traces of their natural functions.’<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Clarke distinguishes between the naked human body and the nude in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

It is widely supposed that the naked human body is in itself an object upon which the eye dwells with pleasure and which we are glad to see depicted. But anyone who has frequented art schools and seen the shapeless, pitiful, models which the students are industriously drawing will know that this is an illusion... a mass of naked figures does not move us to empathy but to disillusion and dismay. We do not wish to imitate, we wish to perfect...We are immediately disturbed by wrinkles, pouches and other small imperfections.<sup>46</sup>

Humans have, more often than not, been unenamoured with their natural functions. As Clark points out, landscapes and animals need no touching up by artists; it is their own bodies that humans have difficulty with, which the cosmetics and air brushing and special lighting of the film industry make very clear. They are always trying to improve human bodies to fit some ideal.

How richly determined the disgusting is, culturally, socially, morally, physically but ultimately never far removed from human sensory perception and the horror of the flux around us...the difficulty is that we fear life itself and have been concerned with a presentability of self which denies much of what we are and are fearful of becoming.<sup>47</sup>

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45 Shilling, *op.cit.* p.187

46 Kenneth Clarke, *The Nude: A Study In Ideal Art* (London:John Murray,1956), p.3

47 William Miller, *op.cit.* p.266 note 9

Once the pure/impure classifications are set in place humans guard the boundaries of their bodies according to the oppositions they have set and feel through the senses, maintaining them as rules through the emotion of disgust. Polluting objects, substances as well as ideas, carry the sense that they endure and are contagious and bring everything within ear, eye and nose shot down with them. Our silent awareness of the asymmetry and power of the contaminating is illuminated by Miller. 'A teaspoon of wine does little for a barrel of sewage but a teaspoon of sewage ruins a barrel of good wine. Furthermore,

disgust is organized by laws of sympathetic magic; a law of similarity holds that similarities in appearance mean deeper similarities in substance and a law of contamination holds that once in contact always in contact.<sup>48</sup>

Mary Douglas, writing in her study, 'Purity and Danger,' believed that there was no such thing as dirt, only 'matter out of place; it exists in the eye of the beholder.'<sup>49</sup> In this view disgust would just be part of a positive attempt to organise the environment; 'not because of craven fear still less holy dread or terror nor do any ideas about disease account for the range of human behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt.'<sup>50</sup> Humans have tidily ordered their cultural life, and their social relations depend on them keeping to that order; they hate anomalies and label them dirty because they do not fit into the scheme of things. This theory works for some of the things abhorred; for example, the fear of bats.

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48 *Op.cit.*

49 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, New York:Routledge, 1991) (1966), p.2

50 *Op.cit.*



Being mammals that fly they do not belong to a category so they certainly fit into Douglas' scheme of anomalies, but Miller points out that dolphins too are anomalies, they are mammals in the sea and confound human classifications yet rarely do they have occasion to cause panic, screams and disgust on the same scale. Menstrual blood and excrement are considered extremely disgusting across many cultures yet they are not anomalies for they fit into the necessary, if not celebrated scheme of life. The more likely explanation, says Miller, is the human fear of the fluctuations of the external world and of their own bodies, that life is full of flux, too turbulent for fixed structures to get a hold on and some substances exist along a qualitative axis of texture, taste, smell and sight that leave them fearful, inducing a recoil in horror through the gag reflex.

Although tastes and aversions are variable across different cultures, there are convergences about certain matters of the disgusting; indeed excrement and menstrual blood and semen seem to have a gravitational pull everywhere and no matter where or when, as Miller points out, it is harder to make the squishy and slimy non disgusting than the non slimy and non squishy. The disgusting almost seems to have a structure of its own which has always given cause for alarm.<sup>51</sup> Humans fear death but also fear life itself, the potential for life in the scummy pond, the lower phylle and fecundity. 'Slimy, wiggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation, rankness, excessiveness and a certain kind of disorderly productivity and reproductivity that passes beyond lushness into the rankness of surfeit,'<sup>52</sup> disgusts all but the most seasoned anatomist or biologist.

In contrast to the metaphysical images of human interiors bearing the heart

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<sup>51</sup> Miller, *op.cit.* p.107

<sup>52</sup> *Op.cit.* p.41

and soul and character, human actual fleshly interiority is something most humans would rather not think about and they take pains to protect the integrity of the body's seal to keep the reality of the internal mass of flesh and bone and blood of the inside from destroying abstract illusions. By barricading itself against defiling external reality with elaborate routines of cleansing, humans protect the insides with great aplomb. Such obsessions initiated derision from Jesus; they were 'the rules taught by men.' They were symptomatic of artificial relations and erroneous priorities and he gives a clear condemnation of letting disgust reactions to dirt take precedence over love.

The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash and they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles....you hypocrites...these people worship me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.' (Mark 7:3-7)

The orifices are vulnerable areas of bodies leaving humans open to danger from without, as well as from the inside spilling out into the clean environment. Feminist theologies often recoil against the ascetic tradition of the early church with their lurid descriptions of the body as a bag of excrement. However, today, as Giddens<sup>53</sup> points out, there is little opportunity to discuss the raw elemental make up of bodies in a realistic or ritualistic way. Modernity has dispensed with narratives about such things except in a clinical sense. It is doubtful too if Merleau-Ponty would have delved into this realm.

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53 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences Of Modernity* (Cambridge:Polity Press,1990)

## EVASIONS

Self care of the body as a means of building one's identity has become vitally important but formed from abstract systems of thought about what the body is and how identity is to be formed. The training, shaping, dieting and control of the body has become of paramount importance but this is more about the will and discipline. We know less about what the body is and deny more and more of its limitations and ultimate death. The modern emphasis on body projects, self care and health obsession are survival strategies to ward off death and its meaningless dread as long as possible. Bauman writes, 'If the cancellation of death is not a realistic goal of life, life-long health is.'<sup>54</sup>

Holistic ideas of the spirit, mind, and body, bodyselves, being completely under cultural control, have led many to believe that the control of illness is entirely in their own hands; one only has to think well. The comfort that science or fitness therapy are always in control of nature denigrates further those who suffer from symptoms beyond anyone's control. This is often called the illness personality theory and Arthur Frank, diagnosed with cancer, found this attitude a very hard pill to swallow. It was tinged with particular bitterness when it was dispensed from friends. Taken to its extremes it means that bad things happen to bad people, health like wealth is earned and a right. It becomes a very cruel statement on illness and disability.

Frank surmises that for those around him he was 'an intolerable reminder of

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<sup>54</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality And Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992c), p.141

how risky life is.’<sup>55</sup> This is not a modern phenomenon, of course, as anyone who has read the narrative of Job can testify. Job does not spare any of the details of disability. ‘My breath is loathsome to my wife, even the little boys scorn me....all my intimate friends detest me.’(Job 19:17) These intimate friends ask what he has done wrong to deserve suffering; they are ‘miserable comforters.’ (Job 16:2) In the midst of pain and oppression however he sees very clearly the stance that humanity should take.

There should be love, not fear, compassion, not blame and words for healing. If the shoe was on the other foot, even though he would then be in a position of power, ‘my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief.’(Job16:4) He sees from his vulnerable, ailing position that his tormentors are also ailing from a lack of empathy and connection. He sees that disability in their midst has disrupted their self securing norms and security too. ‘What ails you that you keep on arguing?’ (Job 16:3)

## DEATH

Thus illness and disability are socially disturbing concepts and never more so than in modernity where a great deal has been invested in body image and control. Security over the body is so prevalent now that life for many shatters around the realities of disability and death. ‘They remain the great extrinsic factor of human existence and the point zero at which individuals lose control over themselves and

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55 Arthur Frank, *At The Will Of The Body* (Boston, New York:Houghton Mifflin Company,1991), p.111

their bodies,' says Giddens. These are anxieties, he says, of an 'utterly fundamental sort.'<sup>56</sup>

Martin Heidegger believed that the very fact of death oriented a particular possibility of being, bringing people to the point of recognising their unique qualities which encouraged them to define life and establish an authenticity while they are on earth. 'Death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. Thought and reflection on this possibility discloses to Dasein its ownmost potentiality for Being.'<sup>57</sup> Yet death, for Levinas, more often marks for most people the end of virility and mastery and heroism, 'indeed, the reversal of activity,' he says, into passivity.'<sup>58</sup>

Both observations are true. Death and illness call us to question and are revealing about the, 'innate precariousness of even the most basic of assumptions on which our relation to our bodies and our world is based,' says Peter Berger.<sup>59</sup> They can spur to action or paralyze into inaction. Hence the necessary caveats in any attempts to write a theology of disability for there must always be room for lament and silence. Even so, such writers do not discuss what we perhaps fear most about the end of life; that it is, as Bynum says, and as the writing of late antiquity spelled out, the site of horror, of death and putrefaction. She writes, 'Death was not horrible because it was an event that ended consciousness but because it was part of oozing, disgusting, uncontrollable, biological process.'<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps when burial was more haphazard, such a process was an everyday

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56 Anthony Giddens, Cited In Shilling, *op.cit.* pp.184-185

57 Heidegger, *op.cit.* p.284

58 Emmanuel Levinas, cited in Jantzen, *op.cit.* p.134

59 Peter Berger, Cited In Shilling, *op.cit.* p.180

60 Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York:Columbia University Press,1995), p.113

street reality. Fear of death today is much less visceral than this but so it often seems is the love of life. The intense foreboding surrounding death which has paradoxically, led to a preoccupation with it, a concern termed necrophilia in Western culture, has been central to the critique of some feminists like Mary Daly, not only in the way it neglects biophilia, love of life, but because of its linkage with women and misogyny.<sup>61</sup>

### THE EFFECTS OF FEAR

Becker points out that the symbolic structures of life are so formed as to enable 'man' to assure 'the expansive meaning of his life in the face of the real limitations of his body.' The symbols and texts of religious awareness of creation have often been designed for just this purpose but they also often operate against true love of the earth and each other. Humanity can no longer afford just to deliberate on its texts alone, the ever more compacting straits of mental concepts, self ascriptions and allusions about the world, in a logocentric circle of indifference to visceral reality. In this created bubble of human construction, the earth and its creatures have been allowed little subjectivity.

The natural world has been caught between being described in idealism as mere appearance, a product of human consciousness alone, or, in the subject denying, deadening categorisations of materialism, merely a system of reflexes. A human centred focus of hubris and dominion exists continually referring to its own needs and values. Anthropomorphic concerns juggle around in myriad discourses which often never do more than glance and bounce off the outer spheres of human existence while nature is confined to the back yard of human concerns. In contrast

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61 Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London:Women's Press, 1979) p.61f and *Pure Lust* (London:Women's Press,1984), p.339

Merleau-Ponty advocates immersion into nature to avoid rashly giving it no latent meaning, kinaesthetically encountering a world not of our making. The body 'is not just 'in' space and time but inhabits space and time.'<sup>62</sup>

Richard Dawkins intuits, 'There is an anaesthetic of familiarity, a sedative of ordinariness, which dulls the senses and hides the wonder of existence.'<sup>63</sup> Vibrant liturgy is needed to really take on the day to day reality that humanity is precariously situated in the universe, that it is such a miracle that we exist at all and could perish at any time. For instance, 'each one of us is a city of cells and each cell is a town of bacteria. You are a gigantic megalopolis of bacteria. Doesn't that lift the anaesthetic pall?'<sup>64</sup> Yes it does and this knowledge is just what is needed to challenge anthropomorphic and androcentric norms. Man has not faced up to nature, he has distanced himself from it and, as Dorothy Dinnerstein writes, 'the mucky, humbling limitations of the flesh become the province of the female.'<sup>65</sup> There has been little solidarity before nature between man and woman.

Norbert Mette makes the valid point of how difficult it is to talk of human solidarity in the face of the extreme conditions of nature, namely death and contagious disease. 'One grows out of pity when it is useless' says a character in Albert Camus work, 'The Plague.' Solidarity, love and friendship go out of the window, says Mette, who challenges any easy talk of relationality.<sup>66</sup> Yet this bitter reality is integrated into the Christian narrative and accepted as part of the natural

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<sup>62</sup> Merleau Ponty, *op.cit.* p.114

<sup>63</sup> Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving The Rainbow* (London Ontario, Auckland, New York, Victoria:Penguin Books,1998) pp.6-9

<sup>64</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>65</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid And The Minotaur* (London:The Women's Press, 1979), p.133

<sup>66</sup> Norbert Mette, 'Plague And Its Human Price:Albert Camus in Beozzo and Elizondo, *op.cit.*(SCM Press,London:Concilium and Maryknoll:Orbis Books,1997), p.85

human propensity for fear. Jesus said to Peter, 'before the rooster crows you will disown me three times.' (John 14:38) The presence of the risen Christ to the fearful disciple paradoxically marked this denial as a turning point, not the end of Peter's reciprocal solidarity, love and friendship, and has given hope to all who despair in the midst of fear. (John 21:15-20)

The fear of death is often gendered as a return to the place of origin, the womb, the fearful beginning and end of existence. Freud<sup>67</sup> explored the links with death and the maternal site of origin and connected the desire to control the mother's absence with the death drive while Kristeva believed the original abode, the maternal site, and the beyond of death are both fixed in mythical thought as a female body.<sup>68</sup> In the Jewish tradition the word for uterus means grave. Pattai Raphael writes that when a child is born, it is believed that the grave begins to open for the child as the woman is placed on the birthing stool and blood begins to issue from her body.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed for many contemporary people, reproducing and ensuring the next generation brings with it a sense of one's own mortality, marking the beginning of the end of one's own life. Similarly the means of begetting, human sexual intimacy, has been associated with dying or dissolution. 'The descent into death is held to be synonymous with penile descent into the woman which ends eventually and inevitably in detumescence. Buried in dirt the penis strikes and then dies.'<sup>70</sup> Even the word fornication comes from the word 'fornix' an underground arched

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67 See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* in *op.cit.*

68 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression And Melancholia* trans Leon Roudiez (New York:Columbia University Press,1987(1989), p.27

69 Pattai Raphael, *Sex And Family in the Bible and The Middle East* (Garden City: Doubleday And Company,1959), pp.155-6

70 Norman, Brown, *Life Against the Body:The Pyschoanalytical Meaning Of History* (Middletown, Conn:Wesleyan University Press,1988), p.221



vault.

### THE POWER OF DIRT

Graham Greene betrays his feelings about such burying in dirt in one of his novels, creating a character who has mixed feelings about sexual intimacy, experiencing the terror of the repeated act of love as one 'trapped in slime, wallowing in dirt; going on soiling himself and repenting and soiling himself again.'<sup>71</sup> In this kind of thought, writes Dworkin, women are epitomised as, 'sex and dirt in one physical body.'<sup>72</sup> The relation of dirt to racist, sexist, classist, ableist, boundaries can be summed up by George Orwell's insight about the way he had been conditioned to avoid contamination.

Orwell writes in the context of what he considers to be the barriers to socialism's success, believing that it does not matter if one is told that the working classes are boorish, ignorant, lazy, drunken or dishonest, 'it is when one is brought up to believe that they are dirty that the damage is done.'<sup>73</sup> Orwell is also aware that such conditioning, the result of a particular kind of bourgeois upbringing, could not be relinquished in a hurry. It was part of his very being and was responsible also for his morality, his sense of humour, for his taste in books and music and table manners, of aesthetics; even 'my characteristic movements of my body...to get myself out of the class racket I have got to suppress not merely my private snobbishness, but most of my other tastes as well.'<sup>74</sup>

Hitler's hatred of Jews was shared by the nation because of his habitual insistence and by a process of conditioning that they were dirty and that such dirt

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71 Graham, Greene, *The Man Within* (New York:Penguin Books, 1981), p.167

72 Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (London, Auckland, Melbourne, Sydney Johannesburg:Arrow Books,1980), p.214

73 George Orwell, *On the road To Wigan Pier* (New York:Harcourt Brace,1958 (1937), p.128

74 *Op.cit.* p.161

was pervasive. 'Was there any form of filth or profligacy, particularly in cultural life without at least one Jew involved in it? If you cut even cautiously into such an abscess, you found like a maggot in a rotting body, often dazzled by the sudden light - a kike.'<sup>75</sup> A nation subjected to such persistent propaganda would probably not realise the reason for their knee jerk reactions against the Jew. The disabled, the homosexual and the Jew, those considered inferior, were raped and made dirty by the act of intercourse and made to live in dirt in concentration camps, as the sign of their inferiority. In Fania Fenelon's book 'Playing for Time the conditions of the camps are described and Dworkin sums them up;

the immersion in filth, including death by filth, an immersion in the scatological, an assault on any self-conception of human cleanliness and any possibility of being clean, was an integral part of the punishment for being inferior, for being filth.'<sup>76</sup>

Dworkin, never afraid to push our noses into the reality of notions of dirt and filth, extends this thought to the issue of sexism and further adds,

there are dirty words for every part of the female part of her body and for every way of touching her. There are dirty words, dirty laughs, dirty movies....she is reviled as filthy, obscene in religion, pornography, philosophy and in most literature and art and psychology..... fucking her is the dirtiest though it may not be as dirty as she herself is.'<sup>77</sup>

Miller sees disgust for semen as a major factor in distorted sexual relations and gender conflicts. 'Semen has the capacity to feminise and humiliate that which it

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75 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* Trans Ralph Manheim (Boston:Houghton Mifflin Company,1962), p.57

76 Fania Fenelon, and Marcelle Routier, *Playing For Time* Trans by Judith Landry (New York:Berkely Books,1979)

77 Dworkin, *op. cit.*p.199

touches and it just may be that the durability of misogyny owes much to male disgust for semen.’<sup>78</sup> That women can allow themselves to be penetrated by such a foul substance means that it is they who must be dirty, not men. Hence they project dirt onto the women they have touched for, as Elizabeth Grosz says, the difference between a clean woman and an unclean woman is often decided by the number of men she has been with and hence the huge value of virginity. She is like a sponge, says Grosz, a ‘conduit of other men’s dirt.’<sup>79</sup> It is painfully noticeable that there is a plethora of descriptive literature on the ambivalence shown towards women’s bodily fluids from menstruation to birthing and the absence of blood in the menopause but there is very little on men’s bodily fluids.

Luce Irigaray writes that we lack a positive ontology of fluids, altogether.<sup>80</sup> The liquidity and seepage which have been associated with women’s bodies and their propensity to viscosity which supposedly is capable of entrapping and engulfing all who venture in their path, are filled with fear and mystery. There has only been the solid, the one, for men have created solid boundaries which solidify their flow into what it creates, achieves and makes. This is so whether it be another human being or a wife of his own for they are the concrete results of his intimacy, marking his possessions; it is the end products that are stressed.

Even his sperm are described in various medical and clinical accounts as ‘masters of subversion,’ powerful and active, penetrative and prolific whereas, as Emily Martin says, in marked contrast, the egg is passive, and if not fertilised, becomes debris, scrap and expelled production. These ‘are not neutral terms but

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78 Miller, *op.cit.* pp.19-20

79 Grosz, *op.cit.* p.197

80 See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* Trans by Catherine Porterwith, Carolyn Burke, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985a), p.113.

ones that convey failure and dissolution.’<sup>81</sup> There is medical discourse on male fluids in the context of Aids but very little on the specificity of male fluids. Yet women soon pick up the male fear of associations of fluidity in the female body, the ambiguities inherent in the sexual relation.

The metaphors of uncontrollability, the ambivalence between desperate fatal attraction and strong revulsion, the deep-seated fear of absorption, the association of femininity with contagion and disorder are all common themes in literary and cultural representations of women.’<sup>82</sup>

Barbara Brooks even suggests that the intense interest in cyberspace arose as a direct result of the Aids crises in the 1980’s as men, she says, suddenly became aware that their bodies were permeable and subject to disease, a capacity they had always attributed mainly to women. Cyberspace gave them an escape from this uncomfortable realisation.<sup>83</sup> It has no body boundaries, limitations, disgusting sensory experiences of odours, disease, illness or slimy textures and dankness, no decay, fecundity or any of the less pleasant features of humanity; it is the world of the mind and pure intellect. Merleau-Ponty saw the dangers of intellectualism; writing, ‘the emphasis upon rationalistic thought and its tendency to dissect human behaviour through the ‘I think’ can conspire to turn us away from the body’s acclimatization to its own environment.’<sup>84</sup> Is that the attraction of intellectualism today in the face of ecocide; finding ways to avoid the disgusting and removing

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81 Emily Martin, ‘Body Narratives, Body Boundaries’ in Grosberg, and Nelson, and Treichler, *op.cit.* pp.409-423

82 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies, Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington And Indianapolis:Indiana University Press,1994), p.203

83 See Barbara Brooks, *Feminist Perspectives On The Body* (London, New York: Longman, 1999), p.146

84 Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception op.cit.* p.146

oneself far away from the physical? Elizabeth Grosz elaborates pertinently on this question, the one often asked but seldom tackled.

Could the reduction of men's bodily fluids to the by-products of pleasure and the raw materials of reproduction, along with men's refusal to acknowledge the effects of flows that move through various parts of the body and from the inside out, have to do with men's attempt to distance themselves from the kind of corporeality - uncontrollable, excessive, disruptive, irrational - they have attributed to women? (is it that )... women are attributed the very powers and capacities that men fear in themselves?<sup>85</sup>

In this way, she says, men 'demarcate their bodies as clean and proper' and project their fears onto others.<sup>86</sup> The sad fact, as Germaine Greer says, is that many women have taken men's lead and abhor their own bodily processes.<sup>87</sup> The boundaries of the clean proper and pure body seem to take on more and more significance as the body is analysed; relations are strained and Miller's insight, that we are fearful of what the body is and has the potential to be, comes to the fore time and again. As Susan Bordo picks out in her book 'Unbearable Weight' the most extreme example of the fear of women's bodies is obvious during times when they are trying to assert themselves in the social and political arena. Men's fears of women who find a new sense of empowerment are often expressed in somatic terms, they are explicitly aimed at female bodies. The aversions 'almost always revolve around her sexuality (and) are strikingly full of eating and hungering metaphors reminding us, 'of woman's unnatural and insatiable lust.'<sup>88</sup>

The expectations of the ideal female bodily shape has changed over

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85 Grosz, *op.cit.* p.200

86 *Op.cit.* p 201

87 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London:Paladin Books,1971), pp.271-5

88 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (London, California:University Of California Press,1993), p.161

different ages and Bordo analyses the way that such shape has been bound up with issues of social control and the passivity and invisibility of women's lived bodies. Intensive ideas about women's appearance and behaviour have meant the female sex has had an intimate relation with the body throughout most of their lives.

For women associated with the body and largely confined to a life centred on the body (both the beautification of one's own body and the reproduction, care and maintenance of the bodies of others) culture's grip on the body is a constant intimate fact of everyday life.<sup>89</sup>

Bordo's extensive study elaborates on the fact that food has been an important element in the control of women's bodies and this fact has burgeoned in contemporary society. Many men and women are involved in dieting and bodybuilding and are considered abnormal in some parts of America and in Britain if not involved in some form of body shaping programme.<sup>90</sup> However, the overwhelming majority who are dissatisfied with their bodies and who suffer from Anorexia Nervosa are still female, trying to match up to the ideal of a firm, contained, slim, taut body. This is a body that shows no chaotic tendencies from within or without.

Parts of the body that are soft, loose or wiggly are unacceptable. Contemporary life, especially as portrayed on the media, projects an image of the ideal woman in control of nature and in denial of female physical processes. Is this because the feminine has been viewed as 'morphologically dubious'<sup>91</sup> in her ability to change shape during pregnancy, breast feeding as well as puberty and in

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89 Lack of space prohibits me from discussing this in detail but Susan Bordo's study gives an indepth explanation of this subject.

90 See R Crawford, 'Cultural Influences On Prevention And The Emergence Of A New Health Consciousness.' In N Weinstein, (Ed) *Taking Care: Understanding And Encouraging Self-protective Behaviour* ( Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,1987)

91 Braidotti, *op.cit.* p.80

her potential to provide the moist, fluid basis of fertility too often described in negative terms; even as the 'swamp' by Sartre?<sup>92</sup>

### THE CIVILISING PROCESS

The civilising process according to Norbert Elias has drawn further and further away from the material body and moved closer to the ideal of Plato's ideal of pure beauty, 'not growing or decaying or waxing or waning' but,

the true beauty... the divine beauty, I mean pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life -- thither looking and holding converse with the true beauty, simple and divine.<sup>93</sup>

People have interpreted the pure in various ways; Hitler wanted to preserve the purity of the blond Aryan race to recapture the blood line of ancient civilisation believing that it was the only authentic beautiful humanity. His obsession cost millions of lives and destroyed nations in the process.

Purity, beauty and goodness are thought synonymous, their linkage is pervasive in contemporary society, from the media to classrooms, the beautiful, the good and the pure stand up and against, in public imagination, the ugly and deformed, the bad and impure despite attempts at equality. Such equations are a tall hurdle to overcome in attempts to deconstruct the dualities of racism, sexism, disability and ecocide, for the roots, sources and pervasive influence of aversion to ugliness, stigmatisation and disgusting sensations have been underestimated in their influence on cultural attitudes.

Ugliness, deformity and those things that call forth disgust cause

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92 Jean- Paul Sartre, Cited In Brook, *op.cit.* pp.45-48

93 Plato, 'Symposium' 2-7-12 Cited In Beverley Clack, *Misogyny In the Philosophical Tradition: A Reader* (Basingstoke, London:Macmillan Press Ltd,1999), pp.24-25

reactions that have been almost institutionalised in society. Beauty will be considered again in the next chapter but as a strong aesthetic norm it is adored by poets and artists, philosophers, naturalists, cosmeticians and athletes alike and equated with efficacy and with potential for harmonious social and economic relations.

Anthony Synott writes that 'aesthetic relations are perhaps as significant as class, gender or ethnic relations as determinants of life chances.'<sup>94</sup> The reverse side of this of course is that lack of beauty, the conflation of the bad with the ugly causes similar significant lack of opportunity and active reversal of life chances. Care for the vulnerable and the organically suspect suffers from the beauty paradigm. 'Nothing is so much set against the beautiful as disgust,' writes Immanuel Kant in, 'Of The Beautiful And The Sublime.'<sup>95</sup>

The Christian is called to break this pattern. 'I do not accept praise from men... How can you believe if you accept praise from one another yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God,' asks Jesus? (John 5:41) Yet Miller believes that we are even surer of our judgements about the disgusting and ugly than about the good and beautiful.<sup>96</sup> David Hume writes that when another expresses a preference for something or likes someone we can only guess the extent of their emotion; when they are disgusted, however, we know exactly how they feel; a different kind of language emerges which we expect everyone to agree with.<sup>97</sup> There is a concurrence about the impure and an expected consensus of agreement, a common body language.

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94 Anthony Synott, *The Body Social* (London, New York:Routledge, 1993), p.101

95 Immanuel Kant, 'Of The Beautiful And The Sublime,' 1764, Cited In Clack, *op.cit.* p.150

96 Miller, *op.cit.* p.181

97 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning The Principles Of Morals* (La Salle Ille:Open Court, 1966 Rpt From 1777 Ed), pp.110-111



One should not call attention to oneself or stand out from others.<sup>98</sup>

This has historically been difficult for the disabled and women; they have been subjected through the ages to the stare and the gaze respectively. Miller says humans are ranked in hierarchies of purity which clearly mark gender and ablebodied divisions while non human creatures have never been ranked at all except perhaps as pets or exotica. In western liberalism the disabled or different corporeal figure destabilizes the essential competence that is needed for self determination and self government in a nation of self reliant autonomous individuals. Thomson writes that in such contexts the disabled come over as being, 'badly managed, unbounded, a fortress inadequately defended.'<sup>99</sup> Their bodies are not stable and safe and are often unable to keep the bodily seal intact and so, open to violation by external forces and contamination. Behind the aversion lies the sure knowledge that biological processes, life, will come to overwhelm the will eventually for us all.

Norbert Elias marks the growing standardization of the body through the ages and the increasing rationalisation and socialisation of the body's presentability.<sup>100</sup> Though criticised for his portrayal of the Middle Ages as overly vulgar and uncivilised,<sup>101</sup> his analysis of the civilising process is valuable in marking the way humans have heightened their thresholds of disgust to meet the standards and maintenance of high levels of decorum today. From the exuberance of earlier times there has been increasing individualisation which has built an emotional

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<sup>98</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, (New York, W Sussex, Chichester:Columbia Press, 1997), p.46

<sup>99</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>100</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process, Vol 1:The History Of Manners* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,1978a) (1939)

<sup>101</sup> See Stephen. C. Jaeger, *The Origins Of Courtliness: Civilising Trends and Formation Of Courtly Ideals* ( Philadelphia:University Of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp.939-1210

wall between human bodies and the bodies of others; a greater distance between their sense of self and other selves until the foibles of flesh itself become almost unmentionable. In controlling their impulses, in rationalising them and moving the struggles within, Elias writes, people can no longer express impulses so violently but ‘often struggle no less violently against this supervising part’ of themselves in emotions.<sup>102</sup>

Elias graphically describes the way humans have increasingly defined and managed the body in social terms rather than in biological or natural terms. From a fifteenth century book on conduct, he writes, it is clear that ‘it is unseemly to blow your nose on the tablecloth’ to the seventeenth century, he notes, where one could not even mention such parts of the body as the nose. The process betrays signs of growing somatophobia. ‘Humanity moved from the ‘expulsive to the repressive,’ from ‘shaming sanctions to internalised disgust rules.’ The body, he says, has gradually become a site for and a representation of codes of behaviour.’<sup>103</sup> As more and more demands have been placed on humans to maintain cleanliness, decorum, purity and strategies of control, so more and more becomes censurable. Social mechanisms ensured that notions of cleanliness expanded. Although humans have had different ideas of purity in different ages they now make cleanliness very much next to Godliness, if not more important than Godliness in a secular society. Thus disgust and abstract notions have escalated over centuries. In the end, says Miller,

violation of purity rules means contamination and defilement and some mixture of fear, loathing and disgust. The entire civilising process depends on us imbuing greater portions of the social order with

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102 *Op.cit.* p.242

103 A Fifteenth Century ‘Conduct Book’ p.144 Cited In Miller *op.cit.* p.172

uncanny power..the power to pollute and revolt us.'<sup>104</sup>

Social order remains in place by the expectations of public appearances where no-one disrupts the smooth running of life that the majority feel they can count on. Thomson says that subtle webs of communication are complex enough without the added difficulty that the disabled make, either by not seeing or hearing or having difficulties with their choreography, memory or energy levels. Family and working life is about production and keeping up with the smooth running of social life. Relationships become strained under the weight of slower, malfunctioning bodies.

The disabled figure stands for the self gone out of control, individualism run rampant: it mocks the notion of the body as compliant instrument of the limitless will and appears in the cultural imagination as ungovernable, recalcitrant, flaunting its difference as if to refute the fantasy of sameness implicit in the notion of equality.<sup>105</sup>

Without a fuller empathy and recognition of such bodily difference humanity fails to discern the valorization of purity, separateness, transcendence and beauty which blinkers and obstructs its knowledge of its connections to the earth. These valorizations in the extreme have strong roots, often impervious to intellectual argument; their enduring power can be pervasively demonstrated through the emotions and block the acceptance of natural processes. This chapter has searched for signs of disgust in many avenues of life. There are many more and it is hoped that bringing them to conscious awareness can defuse some of their destructive influences. The way that humans penalise bodies which do not fit their

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104 *Op.cit.* p.173

105 Thomson, *op.cit.* pp.44-48

ideals and specifications is a cultural malaise and increasingly an ecological issue.

Its persistence

becomes not goodness but evil, not an investment but waste, not truth but a lie, not wisdom but stupidity, not fun but political, not life but dangerous to life and health, not freedom but a trap, not a solution but a major social problem.<sup>106</sup>

What is it about bodies that arouses such fear? Merleau-Ponty's experientially grounded route to the true source of being and to meaning begins to deconstruct these norms and civilising processes as we journey deeper into physicality and away from the distortions of disgust. We need what Kirby describes as a new corporeography of bodies to resist the closure that exists in much discourse.<sup>107</sup> What is it about the androcentric texts of Christianity that have resisted the material, what is it about man's desire that it has wanted to distance itself from the body of the world and caused such pain to different incarnations of flesh, blood and bone that have been refused legitimacy by such aversion? The next chapter looks at Christianity's struggle with carnality but also its potential to combat disgust and restore more holistic authentic attitudes in surprising sites of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's radical reflection perhaps can come into its own, it is one which seeks 'a rationality that recognises its own contingency and dependence on the given existence of the world.'<sup>108</sup>

Opening the question of corporeality through the nature/  
culture divide, we are confronted by the alien within...

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<sup>106</sup> Synott, *op.cit.* p.102

<sup>107</sup> Kirby, *op.cit.* p.81

<sup>108</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception op.cit.* pp 55-57

in the form of a very real possibility that the body of the world is articulate and uncannily thoughtful.<sup>109</sup>

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109 *Op.cit.* p.5

# PART 1 1

# Chapter Three

## RETURNING TO CREATION

May I be not like those who spit out life  
because they loathe the taste, the smell, the muss  
of happiness mixed with the herb of grief.<sup>1</sup>

The trouble with the whole world is that we despise ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION:

A question mark will always hang over theological reflection on the more scatological issues discussed in the previous two chapters, on the wisdom of engaging more deeply with what are regarded as the woeful elements of creation, disease, disability and disgust. Few tackle such a daunting task and those who do, like Jackie Scully, are aware of the pitfalls and ask whether it is possible to create a positive theology at all?

For however it might be true that disability is a social construction, pain and degeneration constitute a different sort of suffering from that created by a society unable or unwilling to embrace the disabled body and any attempt to theologize about them is unconvincing.<sup>3</sup>

If a valid theological response is to be attempted, only a dual approach is advocated, holding in tension, fear and hope, lament and acceptance in tandem; only this will suffice to do justice to the perils and possibilities of human existence

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<sup>1</sup> Vassar Miller, cited in Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty* (Aldershot, Burlington, Singapore, Sydney: Ashgate, 2001), p.104

<sup>2</sup> Charlie Chaplin, cited in Louis Smedes, *Shame And Grace* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), p.97

<sup>3</sup> Jackie Scully, cited in Elizabeth Stuart, 'Disruptive Bodies' In Lisa Isherwood *The Good News Of The Body* (ed) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p.166

in the search for meaning and the divine in a world which is both very beautiful and meaningful and yet often dangerous for humanity; a place where bodies often experience change, pain and suffering.

This chapter explores varied means to integrate these paradoxes into ritual more holistically and comprehensively, to point to ways to develop a new corporeography of those physical experiences which cause fear, aversion or repulsion. It claims that while there are many that people would like to change or eradicate, there are others to accept, reflect on more deeply, recuperate in theological discourse and perhaps, at times, even celebrate. It argues for a stance that is both positive in eliminating all that would destroy the dignity of the human being, hope for an end to suffering but also for a more accepting, wondering stance for all that is out of human control, a facing up to fear with its distortions removed and honouring life's mysteries to counteract the denigration of nature of past decades. 'The day is not far distant when humanity will realize that biologically, it is faced with a choice between suicide or adoration.'<sup>4</sup> That theological/ecological moment is now upon humanity.

No-one would wish to deny that all possible avenues should be explored in the battle against bacteria, dirt and disease, or indeed forget the technological marvels of modernity or return to ignorance about the causes of diseases such as TB, cholera or smallpox which still prolong misery around the world. People now live longer, healthier lives in western culture due to scientific progress, but science can often objectify events to such a degree in its measuring and abstracting that reality becomes the totality of researched details, the body is

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, Cited In Diamuid O' Murcho, *Quantum Theology* (New York:Crossroad Publishing Co,1997), p.137



seen merely as a system of reflexes or, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, ‘the mere sum of accumulated data.’<sup>5</sup> He believed that the ‘construction of the body as object was a pivotal moment in the construction of the objective world out there,’<sup>6</sup> resulting in lost empathy with the bodies of others and of the earth. ‘The more we think that the real is the focused, the abstracted, the quantified entity that our institutional tasks foster on us, the more we lose the otherness, complexity and mystery of the real.’<sup>7</sup>

It can be argued that this thinking has been applied to theology too. Some religious institutional life has inclined people towards adhering to fossilised, authoritative texts, a given exacting idea of divine justice and human responsibility and pointed more to ideal consolations of the future than the present, far removed from the day to day complexities of ordinary existence, projecting divine superiority rather than solidarity. Some churches still give the unfortunate appearance of projecting holiness as an unattainable quality for ordinary bodies, let alone disabled bodies, the emphasis still on individual sin at the beginning of every communion service before one is invited to feel and experience the love of God within and around us.

Friends shake their head at me for persisting in my Church of England attendance, refusing to come to listen to irrelevancies to their lived experience that favours a language of ideas about the divine which is alien to them. As I write this I remember the service this morning when the church celebrated Christ the king. We had to chant ‘God is mighty in battle;’ the language of Lord and king took

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<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.72

<sup>6</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols, Their Postmodern Effacement And Reclamation* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania:Trinity Press International,1996), p.64

prime place and dominated the whole hour, rather than that of Jesus the friend who showed the true love which could have defused my friends' fear of overlordship and superiority. In a world of war and patriarchy this language is far from enlightening. Religious symbols that are not subject to constant revision in the light of lived experience have a tendency to become anachronistic and have often distracted people from the difficult, bodily engaged questions of reality. We do not get an idea of the Christian God or of Christian love from fixed concepts, the parlance of norms, but from what life and the divine presents to us in day to day existence.

Disability and illness are disruptive, biographically transforming experiences for many people and these cannot be understood by any one kind of fixed norm, theory or praxis, based on traditional concepts and symbols of normality or one set of cultural values. A radical rethinking is needed, not on the pastoral periphery of Christian doctrine alone, confined to the team of visitors (who I confess to fear, for it is often condescending pity and complacent charity which often dominates their approach) or to intercessory prayer for the sick or to access alone, vital as all these can be at times. Effective strategies for inclusion must include a major transformation of human attitudes to the body. In many ways a theology of the body is yesterday's news, for feminist theologies have extensively critiqued patriarchal control and objectification of the body and its underwriting by religious authority.<sup>8</sup> The core Gospel notions of love, relationality and justice integrated with a reclaiming of the dignity of women's bodies and of nature have driven Christian feminist theologies to find creative expressions of empowering love for embodiment. 'Our bodies are vehicles of joy and relationship,' writes Isherwood,

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<sup>8</sup> See Lisa Isherwood, And Elizabeth Stuart, *Body Theology* (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press,1998)

and Carter Heyward too writes of ‘embodied justice seeking,’ while Hunt writes of ‘mutual pleasuring.’<sup>9</sup>

Feminist theologies offer many revisionist theological paths to create liberation from oppressive practices<sup>10</sup> (moral evil) and it has indeed stressed that ‘the ability to work for justice is profoundly spiritual.’<sup>11</sup> The positive measures that can be taken to redress the social oppression toward disabled bodies and women’s bodies constitute one of the poles of this binary theological approach to a better grasp of living more creatively with the more ambivalent aspects of biological life. Those aspects of existence that cannot be transformed, which theology has termed natural evil: disability, degeneration and death; suffering that cannot be controlled by human agency, has been an area less addressed in feminist theologies.<sup>12</sup> Relationality, affirmation of the body, love and justice seeking are still paramount in natural disasters and tragedy but they cannot eradicate them altogether.

Love is not all, it is not meat nor drink  
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain  
Love cannot fill the thickened lung with  
breath nor clean the blood nor set the  
fractured bone.<sup>13</sup>

The disabled body acts as a reminder to postmodernism’s endless process of construction and becoming that the prediscursive realm and the reality of pain and physical change are elusive to the power of language and culture to contain or fully understand. Using the symbol of the grotesque to stand for that which

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<sup>9</sup> Isherwood, *op.cit.* 2001 p.138

<sup>10</sup> See *Chapter Four*

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic Of Risk* (Philadelphia:Fortress Press,1990), p.172

<sup>12</sup> Some feminist theologians to tackle this are Kathleen Sands (1994) and Wendy Farley (1990) and Kristine Rannka.(1998)

<sup>13</sup> Edna St Vincent, *Collected Poems* (New York:Harper Row,1956), p.659

evokes the horror of impurity, negation and terror, or simply the unknown potential of the body to seek a new realism about the underside of creation, one can argue for a new understanding of 'being'<sup>14</sup> in theology which brings people back to a visceral way of relating to experiences which cause pain, degeneration and disability and to a new way of approaching those natural processes which repulse or baffle. This is by no means a straightforward task and it is important to acknowledge their mystery, slipperiness and elusiveness: that it is often only in the allusive portrayal that one can begin to understand them. 'Spelling it out (if one could) would belie the experience of horror as a terror that disassembles.'<sup>15</sup>

To try, if not to spell it out, but to display or represent it in some manner and to seek a better way of engaging with such mystery, inclines the theological inquirer to the use of the arts, especially the visual arts and the performative arts of tragedy. Perhaps only a blending of theology and the arts provides the courage to attribute the darker side of creation to God and expose more of life to theological scrutiny. The arts can subject the act of perception to multiple perspectives in the way that Merleau-Ponty advocated, simultaneous viewpoints suffusing the experience which also sometimes appear in mysticism.

He felt the artist was trying to do what he was attempting to do, describe or reproduce the world in the truest way possible, 'the visible world is reconstructed in the process of appearing.' He sought to restore the solidity of the lived qualities of the world, especially the depths of primordial contact with the earth.<sup>16</sup> He

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<sup>14</sup> For Martin Heidegger the authentic is what gives truth (aletheia, unconcealment) to being. In his view the western tradition has been an ongoing story of the suppression of the question of being. See *Being And Time op.cit.* See also David Krell, (Ed) *Basic Writings* (New York:Harper And Row, 1977), p.387

<sup>15</sup> Alan Radley, 'Aesthetics Of Illness' *Sociology Of Health And Illness* Vol 21 No 6 1999 p.784

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.256 p.296

wished to advocate ‘the return of the meaning of painterly work to the gesturing and speaking subject.’<sup>17</sup> He was particularly interested in the potential of art not as subjective creation of the world through intellect alone nor as record of the world as object, but of illuminating ‘flesh’ as fusion of self meeting the world.<sup>18</sup>

In a work of this size it is impossible to do full justice to the detailed exposition of the intricacies of the various mediums; no expert understanding is claimed, merely pointers which the reader could explore to expand ideas about the structure of reality. More controversially the use of asceticism to transgress the theological norms of purity and beauty will be briefly mentioned, as a route to find a new bodily subjectivity amidst the exigencies and necessities of life. Before that it is necessary to probe a little deeper into the reasons why theology has turned its gaze away from such things as disgust.

#### The turning away of theology from the disabled body

Marcella Althaus-Reid has critiqued the ‘decency’ and respectability of theological reflections on the body in her book *Indecent Theology*.<sup>17</sup> Her central focus, as mentioned, is to make explicit the often unstated biases of the heterosexual norms of theological texts and attitudes but can be appropriated to apply to those often unstated biases of purity and ablebodiedness which exclude disability. Simply put, she writes, ‘Purity contradicts materiality.’ The purest entity of all, God, stands apart from all materiality and gives approval or disapproval to various material practices. ‘God controls the body,’ in place of real life experience, in the scripts which western culture has inherited. These scripts

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<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.* Introduction

<sup>18</sup> *Op cit.*

have distorted reality, made scapegoats of certain bodies and bequeathed, what she terms as, plastic, artificial images which have little bearing on life and are impossible to live up to, becoming tools in the hands of the powerful elite and capitalistic ideals.<sup>19</sup> It is important to remind ourselves in theology that ‘human experience has always been a starting point for theological reflection, but the experience of the ablebodied elite has become normative.’<sup>20</sup> It is necessary to redress this heavy imbalance in favour of forgotten experience for the sake of neglected life and the forgotten earth.

Thus the lack of questioning and conscious awareness about normative images discussed in the last chapter has benefited those who have become rich and powerful from the structures which keep them in place. The religious thinking in the western world is grounded in such body politics and has accompanied and reinforced changing cultural fears or abhorrence of raw nature and matter itself. Late Greek dualism infiltrated into Judaism<sup>21</sup> and Christianity, and their separations of spirit/ body, male /female and reason/emotion and the corresponding valuable /valueless still ‘live’ in religious tradition today so that in some way humanity feels ashamed of being in the body. ‘Our Christian past

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<sup>19</sup> Althaus- Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversion In Sex and Gender And Politics*. (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), p.103

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Isherwood, *Liberating Christ* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p.20

<sup>21</sup> Jesus was born into a Hebrew societal view of the body which was more holistic. Judith Abrams writes, however, of the fear and disgust that prevailed with bodies which did not function properly; in her indepth study *Judaism and Disability* (Washington D C: Gallaudet University Press, 1998)

lingers on and we still accept as natural much of the constructed reality emanating from that mindset.'<sup>22</sup>

This movement away from the created order is the great paradox of incarnational faith. It has set in place a hierarchy with God and spirit presiding and the various manifestations of the flesh in descending order.<sup>23</sup>

Souls alone could receive the knowledge of the pure purposes of God and these were filled with the longing to cast off the fleshly prison of bodily necessity. The effects of this thinking lingered on to the effect that many of the early Christian church fathers 'could not help but see the incarnation as a concession to human imperfection.'<sup>24</sup> It is still necessary to keep filtering the Jesus tradition from its Greco/Roman acculturation.

Althaus- Reid uses the words indecenting, undressing, obscening or queering to describe the uncovering of theology's fear of the body. She undresses the niceties of theological concepts, the sanctimony of which is nothing more than fear of the material. It is a method of retrieving the authentic described as 'odd ...by the ideology and mythology makers alike...Queering is 'not oddity, it is the opposite, it is the very essence of a denied reality.'<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva wrote that this was the point of emphasising the horror of being. It was, she said, to realize that,

abjection is the other facet of religious, moral and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies. Such codes are abjections' purification and repression.... the return of their repressed makes up our apocalypse.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lisa Isherwood, 'Sex And Body Politics: Issues For Feminist Theology' in Lisa Isherwood, (Ed) *The Good News Of The Body* (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press, 2000),p.21

<sup>23</sup> Isherwood, and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology op cit.*p.16

<sup>24</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Althaus- Reid, *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror* (NewYork:Columbia University Press,1982), p.210

It is a return to the ‘zero point,’ the deconstructed point of looking again at reality, where there might be ‘a zone of possibilities always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet articulate.’<sup>27</sup> This is similar to the phenomenological reduction which Merleau –Ponty maintained could return one to the things themselves apart from social norms and ideas, a bracketing of suppositions.<sup>28</sup> Norms, cherished values, emotions such as disgust and fear, and ideas are challenged and transformed and new theological horizons have a chance to generate. Grading bodies according to purity and beauty in religion is narrow and shortsighted. In looking straight into the object,

in suggesting there is a world which we cannot comprehend, indicates the limitation of our ways of perceiving and via negativa laughs at our determination to enter the mind of God....  
it prepares us to open ourselves to the holy, to the experience of the numinous in which our finitude is rooted and in light of which our finite world can be made sense of.<sup>29</sup>

If theology can dare to take the body as a site of theological reflection as incarnational theology has been advocating for the last few years, it must take the whole range of human experience into account.<sup>30</sup> Such thinking is ‘a present reality in the bodiliness of all people taking theological reflection from the abstract to a starting point within the bodily experience of life.’<sup>31</sup> It aims to

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<sup>27</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York:New York University Press, 1996), p.3

<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception. op.cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Luther Adam, and Wilson Yates, (Eds) *The Grotesque In Art And Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan:Eerdmans Press, 1997), p.52

<sup>30</sup> See for instance James Nelson, *Body Theology* (Westminster:John Knox Press,1992)

<sup>31</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.43



transform ideas about the biological not as limit but as a positive foundation for rethinking and new potential for change as many who have disabilities experience for themselves. Virginia Woolf, who experienced profound changes in her creativity during bouts of relapse of her manic depression, said that her most intuitive writing occurred at this time. Creative concepts came complete and finished, not needing alteration unlike in periods of good health, of ‘normality,’ when ideas came slowly and stiltedly.

In its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shouts out of one, everything shaped, final, not in mere dribbles.... and the six months not three, that I lay in bed taught me a great deal about what is called oneself.<sup>32</sup>

It is surprising that theology has not probed this mysterious and yet common side of illness more deeply.

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing the undiscovered countries that are disclosed...it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle among the prime themes of literature. (*and theology*)<sup>33</sup>

These transmuting experiences could be translated into a new Christian liturgy, ritual and praxis, dealing more supportively and creatively with the ‘negative’ and unavoidable aspects of existence. John Keats believed that one had to be willing to put oneself in a particular state of mind which he named ‘negative capability’ in

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<sup>32</sup> The Letters Of Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill. The Moment And Other Essays* Vol 4 (New York:Harcourt Brace World 1996), p.180

<sup>33</sup> Woolf, *op.cit.* p.193 (emphasis in brackets, my own )

order to be creative. One in which one 'is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after facts and reason.'<sup>34</sup>

#### Religion as a source of ideas of impurity and stigmatization

Mary Douglas wrote that much of religion's purposes are underwritten by the inability to remain in uncertainty, with the need to maintain norms and ordering ritual, even though it is not always apparent; there is nothing not 'seized upon to dramatize the way we want to present our roles and the scene we are playing in. Everything is significant, nothing is without its conscious symbolic load.'<sup>35</sup> She maintains that ritual is linked intimately with the awareness of the potential of the disorder that can arise from the natural world. The notions of purity and impurity are maintained by consistently powerful, emotional themes throughout many religions and they radiate around the boundaries of the body, especially the orifices, and the matter that comes into proximity with these become issues of special importance. Douglas believes that these are food, waste products, shed blood, menstrual blood, sexual emissions, birth and death.

Susan Griffin recounts experiencing the importance of food to a disgust reaction in the gag reflex rejection of a person looking nauseous in a restaurant. 'I felt an anger towards her: why was she sick in this restaurant, why force people who are eating to participate in her misery? I wanted to shout at her that she should go home.' Realising what had happened she acknowledges that 'I had projected on to her my own fear of death, of the possibility that my body might

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<sup>34</sup> John Keats, Cited In Betty Edwards, *Drawing On the Right Side Of The Brain*, (London:Harper Collins,1993), p.102

<sup>35</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity And Danger* (London, New York:Routledge,1991) (1966), p.100

fail me and instead of giving hunger, give me nausea.’<sup>36</sup> All that touches humanity seems to carry with it the possibility of danger, of making it dirty and has to be subject to suspicion and a programme of purity. ‘Historically vast resources, most notably religion, have been mobilised on behalf of those forces which would do battle with the abject.’<sup>37</sup>

The longer such structures are in place the more confident people are that they are divinely mediated and the more violently they defend them. It is as a child in western culture that one learns these defence tactics in a bodily way for religion gravitates around the body and the way it should behave until such rules seem self evident and it is easy to assume they are natural, God given, and one forgets or is oblivious to their interpellative origins.

To be initiated is not to have learned truths to believe but to have received a tradition in a way through all the pores of one’s skin... During the centuries of Christendom initiation was primarily brought about through a slow incubation of the body.<sup>38</sup>

The Holiness code of Leviticus cuts off the human being from all that is unclean. It ‘utters a ‘No’ to uncleanness and disgust so absolute that it is often enforced through the execution or the ‘cutting off’ of the polluted.’<sup>39</sup> Julia Kristeva discusses the specific taboos of the biblical texts of Leviticus, and says that whether they are written as a result of natural ‘loathing’<sup>40</sup> or the need for a strict

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Griffin, ‘The Way Of All Ideology’ in *Sign: Journal Of Women In Culture And Society* 8 (3): pp.648-9

<sup>37</sup> Reineke, *op.cit.* p.93

<sup>38</sup> Louis- Marie Chauvet, and Francis Kabalese Lumbala, *Liturgy and The Body* (London:Concilium, SCM Press,1993), p.31

<sup>39</sup> Douglas, *op.cit.* p.23

<sup>40</sup> This view comes from Jacob Neusner, *The Idea Of Purity In Ancient Judaism* (London:Brill,1973), p.12 For him some material things were incompatible with the temple.The word profane comes from a Greek word meaning outside the temple.

code of classification,<sup>41</sup> the effects are the same, there are separations of dietary prohibitions, female/male/ sacred separations and healthy/ disabled separations. Nutrition has always been a material aspect of human life that has been linked to a core disgust manifested in elaborate rituals of oral incorporation and food rejection according to Paul Rozin.<sup>42</sup> Other rejections radiate out from this primary separation of what is and is not acceptable to ingest. The etymology of the word disgust is directly linked to taste and rejection.<sup>43</sup> 'From its very beginning, the biblical texts insist on maintaining the distance between man and God by means of a dietary differentiation.'<sup>44</sup> For women the distance is even greater.

The eating of the apple which was forbidden in the garden of Eden, has become a symbol of feminine wiles and of temptation as well as all that has been considered grotesque in the world. The narrative of that first transgression of dietary separation, demanded by God, developed into the doctrine of Original Sin in Christianity and has been behind centuries of poisonous polemic and misogyny about the reasons for all the various aspects of human deformity, sickness, sin and death breaking into God's intended paradise. 'They were now subject to pain, sorrow, exhaustion and death.'<sup>45</sup>

Kristeva traces the many separations in chapters 11 to 18 of Leviticus and remarks on the fact that between the theme of food and sickness, the biblical text deals with women and childbirth. The impurity and defilement attributed to some

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<sup>41</sup> The view espoused by Douglas, *op.cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Paul Rozin, April Fallon, and Marylynn Augustoni- Ziskind, 'The Child's Conception Of Food:Development Of Categories Of Rejected And Accepted Substances.' *Journal Of Nutrition Education* 18 (1986) pp.75-81

<sup>43</sup> See 'Why disgust' note 6

<sup>44</sup> Kristeva, *op.cit.* p.95

<sup>45</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According To Women* (London:Elm Tree Books,1986), p.25

foods become projected onto the mother and women in general. (Leviticus 12) 'Dietary abominations have thus a parallel -unless it be a foundation- in the abomination provoked by the fertilisable or fertile feminine body. (Menses, childbirth)',<sup>46</sup> The text directly moves on to the body with leprosy, (Leviticus 13-14) the skin decay which, Kristeva argues, threatens with impurity and loss of identity and which all seem linked to the fear of the maternal body. She writes that the text progresses,<sup>47</sup>

from within the maternal body to the decaying body. By means of what turning about is the mother's interior associated with decay?..Evocation of the maternal body and childbirth induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides. Now the skin apparently never ceases to bear the traces of such matter. These are persecuting and threatening traces, by means of which the fantasy of the born body, tightly held in a placenta that is no longer nourishing but devastating, converges with the reality of leprosy.

Similarly, Howard Eilberg Schwartz writes of the elaborate rules surrounding the 'problem' of the body in the priestly writings of the Hebrew Scriptures. If taken literally that humans are made from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7) there should be no distaste with the earthly functions, (or malfunctions) and needs of the body. It is when it is believed that humans are made in the pure image of God that the paranoia begins and the need for separation becomes necessary. Reproducing is considered very much part of God's will for humanity but, paradoxically, semen is considered contaminating even in the essential act of

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<sup>46</sup> Kristeva, *op.cit.* p.100

<sup>47</sup> *Op.cit.* p.101

intercourse. (Leviticus 15:16-18) The rules around food, women and disease were 'in part an attempt to control a puzzling object....the absorption in legal regulations also diverted attention from the fundamental conflicts that surrounded the body.'

Thus the rules and symbols created were an escape from the problem of the body, a way of diverting attention from the more disgusting elements of human life. 'The superimposing of themes on bodily processes and organs effects a transfer of energy from the conflicted object to the theme symbolized and thus heightens the power of the latter.'<sup>48</sup> Perhaps that is why to get back to authentic meaning, to see the divine and humanity differently, it is advisable, as George Orwell suggests, to step aside from the norms and symbols and 'put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations.'<sup>49</sup> Hence the value of the arts.

Norms and themes that dilute in some way the ambiguous parts of the body, those that threaten to disgust, expand the ecclesial power of those who set them and have excluded many from intimacy with God. Those who embody the fears of others have often been utilised as countersign to authentic existence. Disability has been used to describe God's punishment for the sins of the fathers to the third or fourth generation. (Exodus 20:4) It has also been used to demonstrate the healing power of prophets and of Jesus in the midst of dire circumstances. 'Do not sin any more so that nothing worse happens to you.'(John

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<sup>48</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 'The Problem Of The Body' In Timothy K.Beal, And David M Gunn, *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies* (London, New York:Routledge, 1997), p.52

<sup>49</sup> George Orwell, 'Politics And The English Language,' In S. Orwell, And I Angus, (Eds) *In Front Of Your Nose Vol 4 The Collected Essays Of George Orwell* (New York:Harcourt Brace and World.1968), p.138

5:14) and it has also been described as a ‘thorn in the flesh...a messenger from Satan.’(2 Cor 12:7-10)

Throughout the biblical texts there are signs of the emotional force of disgust and the effects this had on certain people. ‘The monstrous person is a warning, a potent and punitive lesson.’<sup>50</sup> Certain bodies elicited disgust and modern culture is still dealing with the consequences of the past effects of the misogyny and somatophobia of the tradition. Women were not circumcised and so excluded from the covenant. If God was male and woman was not male, then whatever God was, woman was not. Likewise illness and deformity could not be visible in the sight of God’s sanctuary and holy law.

No-one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or limb too long... He shall not come near..because he has a blemish; that he may not profane my sanctuaries.(Leviticus 21:16-22)

Such separations are often dismissed as ancient biology, a subject for anthropological studies or the special concerns of strictly orthodox religious people like the Jews or Hindus and of little relevance to contemporary views. However, old fears and occlusions are not so soon eradicated. The insula, that ancient part of the brain that is thought to trigger the disgust sensation, mentioned in chapter two, is maintained by such religiously initiated compulsions and sustains humanity’s strongest and most tenacious reflexes to the environment.<sup>51</sup>

Simone Weil, on the same lines, maintains that, despite the many caring organisations to give aid to those who suffer, arising from Christian charity, these compulsions remain pervasive at every level of society and cannot be

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<sup>50</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Theology And Embodiment* (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press,1996), p.203

<sup>51</sup> See Dr Mary Phillips, ‘The Anatomy Of Disgust’ *Channel 4 com/culture* Accessed May 13th 2002 12.15 am See note 33 in Chapter 2

emphasised enough. The misfortune of the one who is ill or deformed in some way is still treated as impure in today's society and faces being cut off.

Everyone despises the afflicted to some extent although practically no one is conscious of it... Our senses attach all the scorn, all the revulsion, all the hatred that our reason attaches to crime, to affliction. Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt the others rush upon it attacking it with their beaks.<sup>52</sup>

Mary Douglas writes, 'The polluter becomes a doubly wicked object of reprobation, first because he crossed the line and second because he endangered others.'<sup>53</sup> To try to explore the extent to which biology determines religious interaction is not a simple task for not only is there is a bedrock of bodily aversion to uncover, but a stubborn intellectual refusal to accept negativity in religious discourse, considered the arena of good intentions alone.

Much of the history of cultural interaction has been one of alternating imitation and rejection. It has been a history ...of disguised discrimination and undisguised disgust yet those who attempt to subordinate and deprecate different and rival tastes are rarely conscious of discrimination in the negative sense. Often on the contrary they have every intention of making their judgments on the basis of the best in education, science or philosophy, not to mention religion.<sup>54</sup>

Religion has been a major force in the fixing of the perimeters of human thinking about existence. Rene Girard writes that the 'sacred is that movement that engenders, organizes, observes and perpetuates.'<sup>55</sup> Mircea Eliade, too, believed that religion is the 'paradigmatic solution for every existential crisis.' It has arisen

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<sup>52</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting For God* Trans Emma Crauford (New York; Harper And Row,1951) p.122

<sup>53</sup> Douglas, *op.cit.* p.139

<sup>54</sup> Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste And Christian Taste* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2000), p.170

<sup>55</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence And The Sacred* Trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore:John Hopkins University Press, 1977), p.242



from the very earliest times for the ‘naming and grasping of nature and human life.’<sup>56</sup> By setting transcendental values one is no longer at the mercy of the contingent and unknown, the world of religious symbols frees one from the terrors of the unsavoury present into a world of metaphysical purity.

To explain away all religious discourse as the alleviation of *angst* and the avoidance of dirt, admittedly, is reductionist and this study does not want to be described as, what William James termed, medical materialism.<sup>57</sup> As Douglas writes, this kind of approach reduces Moses to the role of public health administrator rather than prophet.<sup>58</sup> However, the task to tease out the ideology of the aversion to matter that permeates the tradition remains a necessary one, for it is not matter that theology needs to problematise, writes Joanna Macy, but the way humanity has desacralised it. ‘Matter, if we attend to it mindfully and gratefully, can help liberate us from delusion for it is mind and not matter that is in bondage.’<sup>59</sup>

There is a need for a religious discourse that does justice to the creativity with which we conduct daily life and a need to bestow more of nature with loving significance. ‘All of nature is organized according to the activity of significance.’<sup>60</sup> Such acknowledgement needs broadening for ‘life pulses through its mind/body taking countless forms to accompany and teach us. They exist within us in the beautiful homeostatic systems of our bile, blood and mucous, they

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<sup>56</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred And The Profane* Trans Willard R Trask (London, New York:Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Harvest HBJ Book, 1959), pp.162-213

<sup>57</sup> William James, *The Varieties Of Religious Experience* (London: Collins (1901-2) 1952), passim

<sup>58</sup> Mary Douglas, *op. cit.* p.36

<sup>59</sup> Joanna Macy, *World As Lover: World As Self* (London:Rider Books,1993), p.84

<sup>60</sup> David Bohm, Cited In O’Murchu, *op.cit.* p.153

surround us in the ecosystems of swamp and forest.’<sup>61</sup> Yes but humans have not engaged with these forms enough. The liquid, inner constituents of bodies, the chaos of indeterminacy of nature remain the most thorny problem for any religious discourse; ‘how does one seize the liquid inner and outer of things..the difficulty of imaging the body illuminates that supreme representational problem?’<sup>62</sup> A Christian ecomysticism, with a more organic grasp of relationality, must begin to recognise such fears. Jesus asks, ‘you foolish people. Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?’ (Luke 12:40)

Yet it is considered less shocking to question the goodness of God than to probe into human internal bodily fluids and those aspects which disgust humanity. Irigaray, once again on fluids, writes that they are a part of reality that resolutely resist symbolisation. Fluids that have always been theologically and mythologically associated with women’s mysterious bodies, are those elements of nature which jam up the theoretical machinery’ and illustrate the ‘powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writings all the characteristic features of nature.’<sup>63</sup> The arts can engage us in those areas of human encounter where logic and idealism are powerless, where the visceral resists transcendent hubris, and give us a greater understanding of our fears. Sartre believed that viscosity engulfed being itself; his obsession with slime clashed hideously with his religious idealism.<sup>64</sup>

Any sense of transcendence is marked by this gelatinous,  
viscous condition, this fluidity which seems to taint and  
wet transcendental conceptions which want to deny the

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<sup>61</sup> Macy, *op.cit.*

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging The Unseen In Enlightenment Art And Medicine* (Cambridge MA, London:MIT Press, 1993), p.45

<sup>63</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.106-7

<sup>64</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being And Nothingness op.cit.* p.604

body. Theology cannot clean itself enough from *le visqueaux*.<sup>65</sup>

There surely are many aspects of this kind of visceral fear in the various separations, in the biblical texts, the fear of defilement and the rejection of matter that has been deemed to be ‘out of place.’<sup>66</sup> It seems directly responsible for the shame we feel for the way that humanity is constituted and, according to Althaus-Reid, is intimately linked with expansive ‘metaphysical underwear,’ created to clothe the body to cover up its embarrassment. The point is brought home clearly by Sartre who describes the grace of a female dancer. The dance is enjoyed while the grace of the movement conceals any awkward bodily movements which might remind the viewer of the more uncontrollable aspects of the body. As soon as there is any hint of the latter in the dance it becomes obscene for then the full body is seen clearly for what it is in its beauty but also in its finitude and vulnerability and impotence in the face of external forces. Obscenity is described by Sartre as that which ‘renders visible flesh as flesh.’<sup>67</sup>

Theology has been content to collude with this ingenious concealment avoiding anything more messy, visceral and bloody. Although it might be argued that religion has celebrated the changes of life from baptism, through confirmation and marriage to burial, these are very clinical rituals and very ‘decent.’ They carefully avoid embodied details of the changes of the body centred around the development of sexual organs, ageing, illness, disability, impotence, the menarche and the menopause and are ‘hopelessly’ unable to cope with menstruation and the

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<sup>65</sup> Althaus -Reid, *op.cit.* p.110

<sup>66</sup> *Op.cit.* p.35 Defilement in the western religious tradition and its transformation in the early Christian tradition is discussed more fully in William Countryman, *Dirt Greed And Sex* (London:SCM Press, 1989)

<sup>67</sup> Sartre, *op.cit.* p.401

birthing process. Mary is a virgin and managed to deliver Jesus without the passions of conception, the sweat, urine, blood and screams of birthing and afterwards emerged with her hymen intact,' writes Althaus –Reid. Yet she is to be a role model for all women in the Roman Catholic church. Jesus' 'apparent good health,' says Althaus-Reid, is the direct result of his absolute obedience to God and pure lifestyle. Humanity expects its theological concepts to 'state definitively what it is that humans should need, attain and be satisfied with.'<sup>68</sup> How can theology fill this need when it projects such impossible ideals to live up to? In humanity's varied needs, necessities and fluctuating physical processes such a 'tall order is bound to fail, in the excessiveness; the abundant hungers that are never satisfied completely: theology's attempt to homologise and compartmentalise can only be restricting.'<sup>69</sup>

For many Christians through the ages the world has been a stage set for the creating of redemption and the parousia, the destination of the soul, a temporary place for the development of people's true nature which will be consummated in a different existence. Their natures will be shed rather like a snake sheds its skin and their finitude or earthly bodies are symptomatic merely of the lack of perfection on earth; a sign of the inferiority of strength and knowledge that lies this side of heaven. The neglect of the body has been justified by the pure and rational search for the divine unencumbered by the physical which is a strident misinterpretation of the meaning of incarnation, God in flesh in all its forms and the resurrection of the body.

Your dead will live

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<sup>68</sup> Althaus -Reid, *op.cit.* pp.198-9

<sup>69</sup> *Op.cit.*

Their bodies will rise  
You who dwell in the dust  
Wake up and shout for joy  
Your dew is like the dew of the morning.  
The earth will give birth to her dead. (Isaiah 26:19)

Despite Christ's resurrection appearances, in a body that ate and drank and could be touched, (John 20:26) the abstracting and over spiritualisation of the resurrection have perpetuated a denial of the goodness of the body and God's creation; humanity seems doomed to feel unfulfilled in this life and not to recognise what has been given with love. 'If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that we are then found to be false witnesses about God.' (1 Corinthians 15:14-15) Yet many aspects of bodily life are regarded as remainders, something to survive and one day leave behind. George Bataille expresses this kind of ambiguity as the 'wound of insufficiency felt by every individual who wishes to surpass his limited experience.'

Our desire to communicate with what exceeds us  
our nostalgia for immediacy  
our outrage that existence should be reduced to the realm  
of project, continue to resurface, continue to prove a  
dissatisfaction with our attempts to evade what we are.<sup>70</sup>

Theology's dissatisfaction is only matched by its shame at the human condition, juxtaposed with guilt at what people do which has always received more attention. Shame arises at what people are, and its pervasive power in religion is often neglected. Lewis Smedes describes this prevailing element in religious discourse and the many ways people will invent to escape a sense of shame.

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<sup>70</sup> George Bataille, *Inner Experience* (Albany:State University of New York Press,1984), p.xi

When I heard I was a sinner through and through I only felt my old shame for all the natural goings on in my body. My spiritual malaise lined up with my chronic feeling of shame for being human and the two of them brought forth in me a mess of homologised shame. By the time the good word got to me I could feel no lightness of grace.<sup>71</sup>

Smedes writes that shame, furthermore, can disorientate to the extent that people tend to over compensate by displaying hubris in an attempt to persuade others that they are more acceptable as a human being than anyone else.<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, in the same vein, believed that ‘an arrogant person never fully believes in his own hubris but doubts himself and the more he doubts the more he struts his arrogant self.’<sup>73</sup>

There surely should be a way to incorporate more of people’s physicality into the vision of what it means to be made in the image of God particularly through the acknowledgement of God made flesh in Christ’s body as well as the resurrection of the body. For Althaus-Reid, only those theologians who realise this are the honest ones who acknowledge that it is oppressive to create pure hegemonic divine concepts around neat categories of people who are acceptable to God, to be statutory for all times and for all cultures.<sup>74</sup> This ongoing conflict in religious tradition between the desire to affirm the basic beauty of humanity as *imago dei* and the underlying habit of despising materiality, everyday life as most people know it, obstructs the empowering potential of Christianity; God with us in bodily form.

By despising the workings of some parts of human anatomy, it must be assumed one despises oneself and parts of God’s creation and implicitly questions the goodness of God. Of course the divine has habitually been considered perfect

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<sup>71</sup> Lewis Smedes, *op.cit.* p.97

<sup>72</sup> *Op.cit.* p.150

<sup>73</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, cited in Smedes *op.cit.*

<sup>74</sup> *Op.cit.*

and far removed from the anatomical issues discussed here. Stephen Moore writes that 'the essence of divine worship is an overwhelming sense of one's own imperfections, relative to the power and perfection of the deity.'<sup>75</sup> John Hull writes extensively from the viewpoint of disability, of the able-bodied bias of the Bible and of the assumed perfection of God. As a blind theologian he challenges the concept of blindness put forward as a model for spiritual stubbornness or non-receptivity. The tradition projects a certain able-bodied epistemology which Hull calls the 'hegemony of the average;' God has all the attributes of the able-bodied human but magnified so that he is superman, he sees better than anyone, hears everything and when he speaks everyone trembles. 'The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars.' (Psalm 29:4) People with blemishes and imperfections are not quite part of God's intentions. 'Such people are not like those who have come straight from the hands of the creator.' They were not whole and could not stand before God. (Malachi 1:8 1-4) 'God is perfect. It would insult God's handiwork if that which deviates from it were to be presented right in front of God's own altar.'<sup>76</sup>

Christianity has bequeathed an epistemological ceiling which has never been removed, writes Althaus-Reid; it has fixed the conditions necessary for redemption and wholeness before God and the purity requisite for eternal life. The 'symmetry fixed for all time' in the quest for an out of body transcendence, she says, is rooted in purity. From Jesus clothed in pure white clothes saying, 'don't touch me,' to Mary and the 'stone hymen' of the Virgin Mary whose bodily functions are etherealised, to pure white angelic hosts, the icons of Christianity help to make religious acceptance nigh impossible for those who live lives rooted

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<sup>75</sup> Stephen Moore, *God's Gym* (London, New York:Routledge, 1996), p.118

<sup>76</sup> John Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness*. (London:SCM Press, 2001 ), p.72

in experiences with their more earthy, messy reality. Real lives, especially, if one's body does not appear 'normal, male or ablebodied appear 'indecent.' In this context, she says, women (and I would add the disabled) become like 'living graffiti' in a tradition geared towards the ablebodied male.<sup>77</sup>

Stephen Moore also discusses the image of God as super body builder, asking if humanity has conferred a superior material base onto the divine; the slippery, ambiguous body is something that only women and the deformed are endowed with while God and men are normal and sacred. The prevailing use of male ablebodied language for God, 'strongly reinforces this view: the symbolic world of the tradition is bound up with the physicality of health and strength and maleness. Purity is 'shorthand for a regulated system of lines, boundaries and divisions coupled with an obsession with physical integrity.'<sup>78</sup> Moore goes on to ask the ultimate reductionist question.

What if at the core of all these subtle, scholastic formulations there was nothing but a superhuman being after all? The God of revelation might be just such a being, just such a creature, just such a revelation.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast by making the disabled body at the centre of a search for the divine, I want to appeal to the root and source behind every kind of materiality, in both its magnificent beauty and pathos. The search for this eternal source in and through both the dangers and potentiality of all density is more than adequately expressed in Teilhard de Chardin's 'Hymn Of The Universe,' in which fear and hope abide comfortably side by side.

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<sup>77</sup> Althaus -Reid, *op.cit.* p.100-5

<sup>78</sup> Moore, *op.cit.* p.84

<sup>79</sup> *Op.cit.* p.120



Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil,  
stubborn rock: you who yield only to violence, you who  
force us to work if we would eat.

Blessed be you, perilous matter, violent sea,  
untameable passion: you who unless we fetter you will  
devour us.

Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march  
of evolution, reality ever new-born; you who, by  
constantly shattering our mental categories, force us to  
go ever further and further in our pursuit of the truth.

Blessed be you, universal matter, immeasurable  
time, boundless ether, triple abyss of stars and atoms and  
generations: you who by overflowing and dissolving our  
narrow standards of measurement reveal to us the  
dimensions of God.

Blessed be you, impenetrable matter: you who,  
interposed between our minds and the world of essences,  
cause us to languish with the desire to pierce through the  
seamless veil of phenomena.

Blessed be you mortal matter: you who one day  
will undergo the process of dissolution within us and  
will thereby take forcibly to the very heart of that which  
exists.

Without you, without your onslaughts, without  
your uprootings of us, we should remain all our lives  
inert, stagnant, puerile, ignorant both of ourselves and of  
God. You who batter us and then dress our wounds, you  
who resist us and yield to us, you who wreck and build,  
you who shackle and liberate the sap of our souls, the  
hand of God, the flesh of Christ: it is you, matter that I  
bless.<sup>80</sup>

De Chardin's challenge and uncovering of human awe in the face of  
physicality goes hand in hand with the challenging of hegemonic constructs of  
religion. Only then will it be noticeable that ideas of purity and bodily  
acceptability have emptied much of creation of sacral meaning and presented us  
with a tame, bland, sterilised world. It is only our full participation in the physical  
and biological world that humanity will see its full creative potential. Redemption  
must begin in the midst of human physical processes in the marvels of nature and

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<sup>80</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn Of The Universe* (London:Collins Sons and Co,  
1961), p.64

the cosmos, 'these are also the form in which the Christian experiences Christ's sufferings and suffers himself to that end,' as Rahner writes.<sup>81</sup> 'In every case man's whole cognitive and appetitive powers takes part and this total sensitive spiritual human conative act precedes man's free decision and is its necessary precondition.'<sup>82</sup>

Lisa Cahill Sowle writes, that recovering the body in discourse does not 'obviate the need to investigate the commonalities of human experience furnished by the irreducibility of our bodily existence.'<sup>83</sup> She believes that authenticity emerges from both holism and reductionism. Merleau-Ponty in his bid to describe the paradoxes of the perceptual act recognised the difficulties of the either/ or approaches and maintained that features of perception infuse and inform one another and cannot be treated as autonomous elements. There is movement and a process of overlapping.<sup>84</sup>

It is neither true that what biological drives suggest, moral expectations must accept, nor that every bodily tendency which must be rearranged, sublimated or even curtailed to accomplish moral excellence is an outlaw to humanity's true nature.<sup>85</sup>

James Lovelock also takes up what he terms the battlefield between the holists and reductionists in biology, ('the materialist world of undiluted fact is unacceptable but so is the world of undiluted faith and culture.')<sup>86</sup> and argues the value of both scientifically based body knowledge and the gifts of the more

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<sup>81</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* Vol 11 (London:Darton, Longman And Todd, 1974), p.382

<sup>82</sup> *Op.cit*, p.359

<sup>83</sup> Lisa Cahill Sowle, *Sex, Gender And Christian Ethics* (New York, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.80

<sup>84</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible op.cit* p.127

<sup>85</sup> *Op.cit*. p.55

<sup>86</sup> James Lovelock, *The Ages Of Gaia* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1995), p.204

mystical, the spiritual side of life. ‘No one now doubts that it was plain, honest reductionist science that allowed us to unlock so many of the secrets of the universe, not least those of the living macromolecules that convey the genetic information of our cells.’<sup>87</sup> Gaining more knowledge about the body is deeply satisfying but also spiritual, he says. ‘Art and science interconnect with each other and with religion and are mutually enlarging.’<sup>88</sup> The Arcadian tradition was able to blend these seemingly disparate arenas of human thought.<sup>89</sup> Lovelock, with his theory of the Gaia Hypothesis, inspired many people to look at the earth as a living organism, containing extraordinary resources and complex self generating powers of renewal.<sup>90</sup> In the 1980’s it paved the way for new poetical and mystical language about the unity of the whole earth and humanity’s (less arrogant) place within it.

## PART TWO Aesthetics as a source of theological knowing.

The second half of this chapter discusses various ways of acquiring a less arrogant, less fearful and enlarging image of somatic processes. Looking into the face of the ‘grotesque’ in art is one way of denaturalising familiar structures and thought. Lovelock warned that looking at difference in nature is like bathing in an ice cold sea; at first it feels dreadful but it, ‘soon stirs the blood and sharpens the senses.’<sup>91</sup> This approach tackles head on the less agreeable aspects of creation with which, Lovelock believed, both science and religion in their own ways have always been tacitly obsessed. Science has focused on ‘disease rather than health, storm rather than calm’ while religions, in a more mystical way, have been

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<sup>87</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>88</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>89</sup> See *chapter 5* p.46

<sup>90</sup> Lovelock, *op.cit.*

<sup>91</sup> *Op.cit.* p.31

inherently intrigued with demons, dark spirits and powers beyond human control.<sup>92</sup>

The movement of entropy overrides everything else in the universe. It is its most inevitable process, 'its tendency to run down, to burn out.... everything is, always has been and always will be, running down to equilibrium and death.'<sup>93</sup> Unpopular as it is, (Lovelock writes that his membership of Friends of the Earth could be in jeopardy by such an emphasis) it is a fact that excretion makes the world go round; it is pollution from vegetation that gives humans their oxygen and human pollution that gives vegetation its necessary carbon dioxide; 'the pollution of one is the meat of another.'<sup>94</sup> Living entities are vast plumbing systems; the origin of earth and other planets depends on this movement of decay for without it there would be no sun to initiate life in the first place.

Human life only continues because there is more excretion of entropy than the internal generation of entropy which Lovelock describes as a 'marvellous improbability.' Marvellous but also perilous! He describes this underlying awareness as a paradoxical feeling of miracle but also as almost a feeling of illegality and of instability.<sup>95</sup> Is human identity underwritten by this emotion, and should there be more theological reflection on it? 'Believing my body has a history, that history in interpretation of experience is meaning making.'<sup>96</sup> Jacques Monod believes that the meaning has been negatively interpreted by humanity, and reflects on the prevailing human *angst* that underlies humanity's reflections

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<sup>92</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>93</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.22-3

<sup>94</sup> *Op.cit.* p.26

<sup>95</sup> *Op.cit.* p.25

<sup>96</sup> Melanie May, *A Body Knows* (New York:Continuum,1995), p.23

that the universe did not come into existence purely for the sake of homo-sapiens; a human is 'like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world.' Humanity itself is an improbable fluke; 'our number came up in the Monte Carlo game. Is it surprising that like the person who has just made a million in the casino we should feel strange and a little unreal?'<sup>97</sup> On the same theme Paul Lovecraft believes the arts are essential to keep creating new ways to stave off this feeling of alienation. In writing about the need for horror, fiction, and drama to help contain the fears and fascinations that the 'centre cannot hold,' he states,

there is an inherent cosmic fear in humanity, that the vastness of the sinister forces in the world are intuitively known. Horror confirms some instinctual intuition about reality... which intuition is denied by the culture of... sophistication.<sup>98</sup>

How can theology begin to uncover its decent sophistication a little more to incorporate and stem the combined fear and distorted fascination with physical processes? Gary Snyder puts the issue bluntly: 'the other side of the sacred is the sight of your beloved in the underworld dripping with maggots.'<sup>99</sup> A more developed aesthetic awareness may be the answer. For instance, Anthony de Mello advocates some meditations on the corpse, charting its decay from death when it becomes cold and rigid through nine steps of decomposition until it lies in a pile of dust. He claims that this can give a greater sense of peace and acceptance

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<sup>97</sup> Jacques Monod, *Chance And Necessity* Trans Austryn Wainhouse, (London: Fontana, 1974), pp.160, 165,137

<sup>98</sup> Paul Lovecraft, cited in, Noel Carrol, *The Philosophy Of Horror* (London:New York:Routledge,1990 p.162

<sup>99</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Practice Of The Wild* (San Francisco:North Point Press,1990), p.111

of life and depth awareness that is all too often blocked out by paralysing horror and fear.<sup>100</sup>

Yet sometimes it seems we would do anything to avoid such reality, there are many who would believe that avoidance and silence about such things is as essential to the successful 'marketing' of religion as it is to kitsch art.<sup>101</sup> Milan Kundera writes that everything needs to look totally agreeable with all working out for the best. Too much kitsch

is nothing if not comforting and fit for a good cry..devoid of genuine complexity or irony... When it is acknowledged as kitsch it can be forgiven, 'it loses its authoritarian power and becomes as touching as any other weakness... Yet mostly it goes unrecognised.'<sup>102</sup>

Does theology suffer from this weakness and does it go unrecognised? Mostly there is, what Scott Cowdell describes as, 'a cosmic Toryism,' the idea that there are a few unpleasant experiences in life which are sent by God to mature and challenge people but in the end all will be well, 'a western white cosiness'<sup>103</sup> and comfort about physical processes which blanks off the brute facts as Gary Snyder would present them. 'Life is not just a diurnal property of large interesting

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<sup>100</sup> Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana A Way To God* (London:A Doubleday Book,1984), p. 98

<sup>101</sup> Marketing is a term used by Althaus-Reid as she emphasizes throughout her book the interdependence of economic and religious systems.

<sup>102</sup> Milan Kundera, cited in Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,1989), p.130

<sup>103</sup> Scott Cowdell, *A God For This World* (London:Mowbray, 2000), p.118

vertebrates, it is also nocturnal, anaerobic, cannabilistic, microscopic, digestive, fermentative, cooking away in the warm dark.’<sup>104</sup>

A deeper aesthetics engages with this minute, multitudinous activity at the heart of creation. In his greater focus on the meaning of being and aesthetics in later life, Merleau-Ponty writes of wishing to explore the joints and ribs of being.<sup>105</sup> Aesthetics, according to Joseph Kosuth, deals with ‘opinions of perceptions of the world in general.’<sup>106</sup> The varying definitions of the concept of aesthetics imply that such opinions are variable but I believe that most people associate aesthetics with the search for what has been traditionally called beauty.

I shall use the definition, however, that is stated in the Encyclopedia Britannica, for the purposes of this study, where aesthetics is perceived to be ‘the theoretical study of the arts and related types of behaviour and experience observing that beauty is only one of the many motifs gathered up into artistic experience.’<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, according to Schiller, it ‘represents an integration of human faculties.’ Spirit, reason and sensation blend together in perception, he believes; the ‘borders between spirituality and sensation are blurred. It has the potential to represent ‘our spiritual and sensual powers in greatest possible harmony.’<sup>108</sup> Portraying the grotesque in the arts has such an expressive potential, giving new insights into the exigencies of life, of how humans rise to the unknown and to the traditionally aversive.

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<sup>104</sup> Gary Snyder, *op.cit.* p.110

<sup>105</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.45

<sup>106</sup> Joseph Losuth, ‘Art After Philosophy’ *Art International* 1969 no 915 Oct p.13

<sup>107</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (London:International Ltd, 1992)

<sup>108</sup> Friedrich Schiller, (ed) Trans E Williamson, and L Willoughby, *On the Education Of Man* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1967), pp.140-143

The art of looking straight into what horrifies people is a way of ‘grasping the sublime’ in the midst of fear, according to Alan Radley, who argues that it becomes a way of recovering the self and ‘peeling off the layers’<sup>109</sup> of abstract theories that humanity has inherited from the past. In the context of chronic illness, he argues that only when people have shaken off ancient biology (and, I believe, ancient religious phobias about the body) and even modern medical terminology, can they experience something for themselves and transmute it and recover a sense of ‘direction and coherence.’ This is to ‘create one’s own space grounded in the reality of the event.’

This sensual aspect of dealing with illness and disability is the very opposite of evasion; sidestepping difficult issues. It is opposed to any form of alienation or romanticism or colonisation of the illness experience; it is intended to ‘show forth’ the reality of the bodily experience and, as Sontag writes, that ‘it is what it is.’ ‘It is in the aesthetic awareness that one is best able to express the pains of the body: for the modern consciousness, the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer.’<sup>110</sup> Gillian Rose, diagnosed with terminal cancer, wrote ‘keep your mind in hell and despair not,’ which was her way of avoiding the sometimes well meaning but distorted interpretations of others, experiencing the sensual factors of her condition and staying close to what she called the ‘edges of life.’<sup>111</sup>

It is in the ‘chasm,’ says Radley, between the horrific and the everyday that one can remain close to bodily experiences such as illness, and

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<sup>109</sup> Radley, *op.cit.* p.9

<sup>110</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Octagon, 1978b), p.42

<sup>111</sup> Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), p.98 She died not long after this was published.



learn, if not to love them, then to accept with a greater clarity that which once seemed abhorrent.<sup>112</sup> ‘Something that is never experienced in health comes through pain. What a grotesque detour...Not everyone makes such a journey to such experiences. But the door into new spaces is there and it can be opened.’<sup>113</sup> It is a challenge to theology to express this unfathomable insight.

Yet surely some aspects of human existence are too terrifying to look at. Timothy Gorringer writes that we cannot look at a painting by Francis Bacon for long because we do not like being reminded that ‘we are all bound up in the bundle of life together.’<sup>114</sup> How is it possible to re-educate minds, rethink the biological as site of transformation and not limitation? Alice Walker says that ‘art makes a way out of no way.’<sup>115</sup> One can learn to be more open to what terrifies or disgusts as well as to what attracts. ‘Art stretches the cramped world, colours the black and white and teaches even grief to sing.’<sup>116</sup>

For many people in the postmodern world and what is thought to be a secular post Christian world, where metanarratives are viewed with suspicion, says Anthony Monti, the visual or performative arts have become their primary sources of spiritual sustenance. ‘Indeed for many, their encounters with... paint on a canvas, or sounds from an orchestra provide the most profound spiritual insights they have ever experienced.’<sup>117</sup> When art is viewed as a possible source of

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<sup>112</sup> Radley, *op.cit.* p.9

<sup>113</sup> Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell, *I Am My Body* (London:SCM Press, 1994), p.25

<sup>114</sup> Timothy Gorringer, *The Education Of Desire*, (London:SCM Press, 2001), p.39

<sup>115</sup> Alice Walker, cited in Kathleen Sands, *Escape From Paradise: Evil and Tragedy In Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 1994), p.15

<sup>116</sup> Sands, *op.cit.* p.15

<sup>117</sup> Anthony Monti, ‘Types And Symbols Of Eternity: How Art Points To Divinity’ *Theology* March 2000 p.118

revelation of reality, says Diane Collinson, one's self is surrendered and 'becomes absorbed in what it contemplates and explores.'<sup>118</sup>

Collinson might resist calling this a divine exploration but it is very much like the detachment practised in religious mysticism, when, as she writes, one comes up against a 'stasis'- a sensation of stillness apart from the self and concentrated in the 'Other.'<sup>119</sup> This emergence of the divine arrives as something one would not wish to impose upon, 'something that reveals itself as complete and whole in itself...a world within the larger world, constituted as its own domain by its integrated order and unity.'<sup>120</sup> Many artists, even those who think of themselves as religious sceptics, have this experience. It expresses the form of love that is sought in this work. Wordsworth, describing such an experience, wrote,

Great God!  
that aught external in the living mind  
should have such mighty sway, yet so it was:  
A Weight of Ages did at once descend  
Upon my heart...Weight and power,  
Power growing with the weight:  
Twas a moment's pause.  
All that took place within me came and went  
as in a moment and I only now  
Remember that it was a thing divine.<sup>121</sup>

Through the emotions one can view, in art, that part of the world that has been neglected or denied as a result of the human need to dominate and control and forget its links to nature. The theological journey to find the divine in the arts

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<sup>118</sup> Diane Collinson, 'Aesthetic Experience' in Oswald Hangling (ed) *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction* (London:Blackwell,1992), p.175

<sup>119</sup> *Op.cit.* p.155

<sup>120</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>121</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1799, 1805, 1850), (ed) Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (Norton1979) 1805 Version. 1 (693-710)

works through, what Michael Polanyi describes as, ‘tacit understanding,’ that is ‘we know more than we can tell.’<sup>122</sup> Art is fluid, like life, it captures complexity and process for, as Patrick Heron wrote about his modern paintings, one cannot think the same thing twice over, each one has to be unique.<sup>123</sup> Art which is unpredictable, introducing the unknown in its form and symmetry is inviting to the eye and fulfilling for something in it reminds people of the fluctuations and unpredictability of real life.

Farley agrees that to be sensitive to the real one must retain some suspicion of all paradigms that seem to exercise control over creation, in self securing norms and concepts, and to remain open to whatever is and whatever comes, seeing the real in ‘otherness, fragility and concreteness..openness to whatever comes; consent to being, is a posture of empathy, appreciation and wonder.’<sup>124</sup> Compare Farley’s view of creation, with all its fragility and wonder, with that of the inclusive thinking of the artist, Richard Rees;

the painter has to go out and meet and make contact with something that is not himself. This attempt to react to one’s visual impressions has a strangely cleansing and releasing effect because it seems to transport one into a world beyond good and evil, a world in which everything has equal value because everything is worth reacting to and studying... It is roughly true that almost anything is worth drawing and painting.<sup>125</sup>

This indeed is carnal praise; to be open to the disturbing and to what repulses as well as to what attracts, is to reflect on creation anew. It does not seek to escape or define the world too readily but stays freely ready to accept it in all its

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (London:Routledge and Kegan Paul,1958), passim

<sup>123</sup> Patrick Heron, ‘Video’ produced by John Read *Melvyn Bragg (ed) R M Associates*, 1986

<sup>124</sup> Farley, *op.cit.* pp.71-72

<sup>125</sup> Richard Rees, *A Theory Of My Time* (Secker And Warburg, 1963), p.82

complexity and otherness and vulnerability. Beauty is superficial when it is seen as a utility; as a tool to pleasure or consolation. Beauty as 'Being' promotes a reconciliation with life, with the mystery of the cosmos and recognises that being would not be possible without all the wonder of the depth, proportion, differentiation, as well as distinctive form, unity and also complexity of all that is.

To be more inclusive one has to realise that 'to experience beauty as harmony or unity in difference is also to simultaneously comprehend accident, confusion and the spaces and times that make change and the harmony of opposites possible.'<sup>126</sup> Courage and creativity is called for, to include the mix of beauty and grotesque, order and disorder in creation and to stop repressing a creative response to them. 'Every creative act involves...a new innocence of perception, liberated from the cataract of accepted belief.'<sup>127</sup> This 'turning toward' and not 'shrinking from,' is the very opposite of the mindset that has often been traditionally encouraged in Christianity which has sometimes viewed matter as instrumental, raw data and object rather than intrinsically valuable in itself. Merleau-Ponty challenged such an empirical approach in philosophy as sterile and erroneous.<sup>128</sup> In Christian theology it is blinkered and insulting to the Creator.

For most of the history of Christianity the tendency to view the material world as alienated, as evil or as having at best only meaning and significance as instrument to a separate higher spiritual realm, has triumphed'<sup>129</sup>

The difference an open stance toward creation would make to religion would be particularly noticeable in the resistance to self-securing practices which deny the changes of bodily life, to cliches about sin-illness conflation and to narcissistic

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<sup>126</sup> Farley, *op.cit.* p.102

<sup>127</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, cited in Edwards, *op.cit.*p.26

<sup>128</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.*

<sup>129</sup> Moore, *op.cit.* p.106

and individualistic tendencies which are consolatory at the expense of the real.<sup>130</sup>

‘We would expect the interpretation of the Gospel to take place in rigorous consideration of the reality of the context of the gospel, its mystery, complexity, relationality, depth.’<sup>131</sup> Some of the Thessalonians had stopped all activity, in anticipation of a spiritual eschaton. Paul writes, ‘We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.’ Paul urges them to ‘settle down,’ to be more grounded and ‘earn the bread they eat.’ (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12) Idealism crept in very early, as Paul discovered. ‘Beware of those organisations that proclaim their devotion to the light without embracing, bowing to the dark for when they idealise half the world they must devalue the rest.’<sup>132</sup>

Body art incorporates the dark and makes discoveries about what humanity has in common so that the stress can be put on these things and we can see our interdependence; Christianity can explore this fluidity more profoundly or act as an impediment to clear vision about bodily processes keeping its predominantly charitable attitude to the disabled and continuing to use the difference of disability,

to enhance the merits of the just through their patience to safeguard virtue from pride, to correct the sinner, to proclaim God’s glory through miraculous cures and finally as the beginning of eternal punishment.<sup>133</sup>

The aesthetic awareness of the human body as the ‘original text’ as Melanie May describes it, is a way of treating the body as an active knower in theology and she

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<sup>130</sup> For further discussion about the narcissism in contemporary society see Christopher Lasch, *The Culture Of Narcissism* (London:W W Norton, 1981)

<sup>131</sup> *Op.cit.* p.73

<sup>132</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming The Dark* (new ed) (Boston:Beacon Press, 1988), p.43

<sup>133</sup> Oliver Tempkins, *The Double Face Of Janus And Other Essays In The History Of Medicine* (Baltimore and London:John Hopkins Press, 1977), p.54

argues that to only speak of processes written over the body, ‘relegates my body to the realm of the productive rent from the realm of presence.’<sup>134</sup> Art has a way of portraying the reality of the body that avoids the old and also the modern illusions of perfection,<sup>135</sup> yet does not give in to an inevitability of despair about its finitude; rather it introduces a new appreciation. ‘To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then and only then does it come into existence.’<sup>136</sup> Is this what Socrates meant, when he said, ‘what I understand thereof pleases me. I think the rest would please me no less if I understood it.’<sup>137</sup> In Merleau-Ponty’s terms we need to ‘disrupt our absorption in the world thereby destroying its ordinary character.’<sup>138</sup>

If theology is to give people the courage to be more fully human, i.e, to tell the ‘story of my body as the location of God’s revelation of my life... what our bodies know is a life giving source of knowledge of God,’<sup>139</sup> then the healthy, ablebodied, ideal body must give way at times to the fragile, ageing and degenerating body that is the experience of many people at some stage in their life. It is possible for creative art to incorporate the double dynamics of joy and pathos, hope and fear. Picasso’s ‘Three Dancers’ comes near to doing this; as he portrays some bodies revelling, others are in agony and the one in the centre is depicted in the shape of the cross. Art like this is unsettling at first but it can ‘show us not one

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<sup>134</sup> Melanie May, *op.cit.* p.103

<sup>135</sup> See Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London:Vintage, 1991)

<sup>136</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘The Decay Of Lying Intentions And The Soul Of Man’ in *Intentions* (London:Methuen, 1913)

<sup>137</sup> Socrates Of Heroclitus cited in *The Week* February 2002 No 345 p.21

<sup>138</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception. op.cit.* p.xii

<sup>139</sup> May, *op.cit.* p.21

moment of dramatic change but a constant state of the human heart, the daily dialogue between the pursuit of pleasure and the panic fear of death.’<sup>140</sup>

This kind of duality is picked up by Bynum who writes that it is more ‘profound than gender...this tension between the pain and the body as locus not merely of pleasure but of personhood itself.’<sup>141</sup> The emphasis on sexuality and gender in theology in recent years has overlaid this tension. For some reason whenever the body is mentioned it has been assumed that the issue is sexually or gender based. Liberation theology has extensively critiqued sexual and political and economic structures with fixed patterns of relating that conform to the needs of the elite, and the traditional theological reinforcement of these oppressions.<sup>142</sup> The hermeneutical suspicions of oppressive modes of relating and of sexuality uncovered in the past few decades have been very welcome for no area of human life is so filled with emotion as the yearning for mutuality and reciprocity.<sup>143</sup>

However, the concern with the material tends to end there or only concern itself with the genitalia as directly linked with sexuality and erotic desires. ‘The disabled body queers a great deal of the pitch upon which theologies of sexuality and gender have built themselves.’<sup>144</sup> Disability is a very powerful identity; when present there is always the inherent possibility that it could transcend other

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<sup>140</sup> Neil McGregor, ‘Pain And Pleasure In Britain’s Paintings.’ *The Daily Telegraph Supplement* Saturday March 2nd

<sup>141</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation And Redemption* (New York:Zone Books, 1992), p.19

<sup>142</sup> See Lisa Isherwood, *Liberating Christ* (Sheffield:Sheffield University Press, 1999)

<sup>143</sup> See Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart, *People Of Passion* (London: Mowbray, 1997)

<sup>144</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, ‘Disruptive Bodies,’ in Isherwood, *op.cit.* 2000 p.166 1974), p.179

identities and overwhelm everyday concerns. Woodward is describing old age but also applicable to disability is her insight that in the degenerating body,

we move to the limits of representation ... the body becomes the bottom line. Socially constructed differences such as race and gender blur and blend into the final triumph of the natural over the social.<sup>145</sup>

A focus on the extreme moments of bodily experience highlights this limit. The triumph of nature and the negating of the sexual and representation is reported by Celine in the ultimate body experience, that of birthing, ‘the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death, horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual.’<sup>146</sup> Dramatic bodily experiences which startle threaten the familiar and ordinary with chaotic upheaval. The increasing dialogue between science and religion has shown theologians the creative necessity of chaos, that without its changes and twists and turns there would be no life at all. Some of the elements of creation’s chaos that theologians for centuries have rejected as repulsive and evil, are also the qualities of life, ‘without which nothing can come about or obtain differentiation, pattern or continuity: elements of chance, possibility, time, freedom, incompatibility of aim and competitiveness.’<sup>147</sup>

When one can label something in theology as natural evil one can dismiss it, be finished thinking about it any more and a little more of reality is lost. However a nagging suspicion remains that reality is so much more than religious

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<sup>145</sup> Kathleen Woodward, *Ageing And Its Discontents: Freud And Other Fictions*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Press, 1991), p.194

<sup>146</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Celine, *Rigadoon* Trans Ralph Manheim (New York: Dell, 1974), p.179

<sup>147</sup> Edward Farley, *op.cit.* p.152



theorising and symbolising can contain. There is a need to ‘come out and denounce that human beings live and love according to reality and not Christian indexes or morals,’ says Althaus- Reid, for ideologies do not suffice and the fascination with the real remains. Religious discourse, despite itself, like village life, cannot help but be immersed in the complexity of people’s relations and bodily functions in the repressed private zones of life, and remains ‘unendingly tangled around the theologian’s gaze at other people’s beds, bathrooms or sofas.’<sup>148</sup> Yet it is not admitted and Althaus- Reid derides its double standards and ‘decent’ epistemology which continues to

confess and repeat from normativity and its policy of toleration, never seeing differently or thinking in an alternative way: the time has come for a see, judge, act analysis in theology as a material act of grounding Christianity in reality.<sup>149</sup>

Beauty in art has come under such an analysis in the last few years. Art from the last decades of the twentieth century has exhibited, what is for many, jaded works of art portraying beauty and ugliness together, the seductive and the repellent, joy and also pathos simultaneously. Picasso, as mentioned, could paint monstrous images alongside those which carried more conventional enjoyment, combining those qualities which usually clash: the organic with the non organic, the beautiful and the horrific, the comic with the terrifying, the sublime with the gross. Kiki Smith’s work has centred on the mechanics of the body, its plumbing and its rejected elements, ‘to expose all the life that happens between the tongue

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<sup>148</sup> Althaus -Reid, *op.cit.* p.88

<sup>149</sup> *Op.cit.* p.131

and the anus.’ Though completely scatological in subject it has also been admired for its ‘subtle delicacy.’<sup>150</sup>

In similar iconoclastic style, Gerard Richter painted romantic landscapes to parody the ‘classical pristine’ art of the past, stressing the unreality, the glorification of classical landscape art. By his anachronism he points out the sheer romanticism of much past aestheticism.<sup>151</sup> Felix Gonzalez elaborates on the point of this kind of probing art. ‘Beautiful things can be very deceiving, they make you feel good for a little while...it’s a placebo... it’s a substitution. Yes it was beautiful but only for a few days.’<sup>152</sup> The Institute of Contemporary Art became involved, in 2000, in a controversy over the very issue of art that introduces the disturbing or disgusting (mostly conceptual art like Tracy Emin’s disorderly bed) to the public. The chairman was sacked after complaining that

shock has become the new establishment; visitors to the ICA have watched a naked woman fire a peach from her vagina, they have smelt endless faeces and been scared by a chamber of horrors paraded as art.<sup>153</sup>

No one pretends that looking into the disgusting and the scary or obtuse is easy at first, the shock that one feels emanates from the realisation that such exhibits are not absolutely ugly, it is the conjunction of the beautiful and ugly together that one has to become acclimatised to. Whatever is portrayed in the arts, no matter how disturbing, one has to use the very familiar tools of the trade, the colours, resonances, language and sounds of the world. Even if the very depths of degradation are being exposed, they are done so with all that is part of being itself,

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<sup>150</sup> Kiki Smith cited in Farley, *op.cit.* p.104

<sup>151</sup> Gerard Richter, cited in *op.cit.* p.124

<sup>152</sup> Felix Gonzalez cited in *op.cit.* p.126

<sup>153</sup> Ivan Massow, ‘Conceptual Art: Nothing More Than Pretentious Self Indulgent Tat’ *The Week*. February 2002 No 345 p.24

introducing us only to a new aspect of being which has not been considered before. Frederick Franck describes this process.

It is in order to really see, to see ever more deeply, ever more intensely, hence to be fully aware and alive, that I draw what the Chinese call the ten thousand things around me. Drawing is the discipline by which I constantly rediscover the world. I have learned that what I have not drawn I have never really seen and when I start drawing an ordinary thing I realize how extraordinary it is, sheer miracle.<sup>154</sup>

Alan Ecclestone writes that Bacon's art was capable of reaching into such depths of creation. A little of the struggle of reality was revealed in and through the body.

Bacon can help us see how the struggle with chaos and old night goes on in the flesh and spirits of humankind...a search for the truth of man's being takes over. The strains, the misgivings, the fears, the interior twists, are all to be faced and revealed....Bacon is important as a painter because his work is expressive of just that scanning in depth that prayer endeavours to do.<sup>155</sup>

The inclusive appropriation of images associated with the under belly of creation can only be uplifting in a culture which has ridiculed, humiliated and loathed the processes involved in birthing, menstruation, illness and disability, those parts of nature that are often filled with mystery and human vulnerability and chaos. Janet Morley's psalms extol the presence of the divine in the very midst of chaos.

Even in chaos you will bear me up  
if the waters go over my head  
you will still be holding me up  
For the chaos is yours also  
and in the swirling of mighty waters  
is your presence known.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Frederick Franck, *The Zen Of Seeing* (New York:Alfred A Knopf, 1973)

<sup>155</sup> Alan Ecclestone, *Yes To God*, (London:Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), pp.53-4

<sup>156</sup> Janet Morley, 'I Will Praise God, My Beloved,' *All Desires Known* (London: Women In Theology, 1988), p.50

Keller writes, 'We need not conclude that the chaotic depths represent an independent anti divine matter... chaos comes from the sheer creative potency that God is.'<sup>157</sup> If, however, chaos has always seemed to threaten with non being, Tillich believed, one can challenge such a threat by an act of 'being' a kind of acceptance and taking in.<sup>158</sup> This is the logic of the incarnation in that what is not taken up cannot be healed.

### THE GROTESQUE

Such a positive step toward the unsavoury can be represented in art by the depiction of the grotesque. The grotesque is the very opposite of taking a lightweight approach to reality for it is in the conjunction of the known with the unfamiliar and the 'caughtness' of human limits that the depths of nature are probed and illustrated as facts of existence. They are explored by showing them forth and challenging viewers to deepen their awareness of life. If some aspects of the grotesque are not fully comprehensible, at the very least a response is encouraged as an act of being. Bacon's work for instance 'turns the facts onto the nervous system in a more violent way in such fashion that we can't screen, rationalize, flee to places of emotional or critical distance before we see the heart of the matter.'<sup>159</sup>

The grotesque is one way of giving artistic expression to the elements of creation which horrify or mystify humanity, labelled demonic, evil or the depths

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<sup>157</sup> Catherine Keller, *The Face Of The Deep: Theology At The Edge Of Chaos* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), p.7

<sup>158</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Volume 1 (Digsweil Place: Nisbet, 1953)

<sup>159</sup> Wilson Yates, *op.cit.* p.16

of creation. It is an art form which illuminates existence but upsets the familiar view of the everyday. It has been demonstrated often in very outlandish forms and shapes, either absurd, monstrous or terrifying, ever since the Renaissance by artists like Bosch, Van Gogh and Bacon and been prevalent in medieval architecture. Bakhtin marks the beginning of the grotesque motif in the medieval carnivals and festivals while some mark the Renaissance as its beginning point and it is most commonly painted in contemporary art by the Surrealists.

There are disagreements about its meanings, some think of it in psychological terms as an expression of the 'id,'<sup>160</sup> while others think of it as an expression of the break up of social order, a revolutionary attack against oppressive powers, some as a spiritual anxiety or neurosis or cultural revolt, an expression of the demonic and others again as a unique type of aestheticism or a conduit of mythic consciousness. The variety of views illustrate the lack of norms about the underside of creation, either through neglect or fear or perhaps because it is, as Harpham writes, beyond the scope of human language.

The grotesques have no consistent properties other than their own grotesqueness..the word designates a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language.. it indicates that portions of experience are eluding satisfactory verbal formulations.<sup>161</sup>

The grotesque illuminates the outrage and repulsion that erupts, especially in contemporary consumer and appearance oriented society, when familiar beauty is challenged by the distorted and one's senses are assaulted with the juxtaposition of the natural with what has been termed the unnatural, the comfortable with the strange. The imaging and mixing up of parts of animals and separate organs with

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160 A Freudian term to describe the depths of the personality.

161 Geoffrey Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies Of Contradictions In Art And Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey:Princeton University Press, 1982), p.3

humans or the confusing of the biocosmic cycle so that a laughing, frightening old 'crone' who is also pregnant, represents life and death in one body upsetting the secure norms, throwing humanity off balance and shaking the viewer to the core. It shows how the ordered world can so suddenly seem life threatening and disturbing. The emotional response to the grotesque ranges from horror to amusement but also to curiosity as to the hidden meanings that might be inherent in the images.

Kayser has explored the etymological basis of the word grotesque and discovers that the 'suffix *esque* indicates participation in a spiritual essence.'<sup>162</sup> There are certainly many paintings of the grotesque that are explicitly religious and many images in medieval architecture. Through the eyes of faith it has generally been interpreted as sin, judgement or eternal damnation. Bosch painted horrific sights of the effects of sin and the ensuing punishment that could be meted out. Punishment was embodied in the form of the grotesque and his paintings were commonly displayed in churches, so strong was the supposition that God could be glorified as Redeemer from the worst ravages of hell and damnation.

Looking into the abyss was a way of illuminating God as deliverer and stating a clear message about morality. Today, with the loss of belief in hell and the finality of judgment and even the after life people have lost the ability to look as serenely into the abyss; escape comes from not looking! For the grotesque throws up nerve wracking questions about mystery and destiny, the reality of living on a planet which has left something to be desired by way of purity, of consistent form, order and bodily safety.

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<sup>162</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, in Adams, and Yates, *op.cit.* p.22

The concreteness of the grotesque does not seem to appal humanity so much, due to the fear of death, as to the fear of life and its processes and all that is involved with matter. The visual reminders of the fragility of life and the need to justify belief in God in the midst of the ambiguity of bodily processes serve to bring theodicy sharply to the fore as the grotesque pushes to the boundary some of the focal concepts of religion. Events, disasters and actions are invoked in the grotesque which have been denied or which people thought they had eliminated, only to find out that they were not so easy to destroy. Thus the grotesque, like theology, is concerned with the enigmatic questions of life. The Christian faith would do well to incorporate them and reshape norms of beauty and pleasure into a new sensibility, one that 'flows from consent, participation and empathy, not from autonomy, self survival or self securing.'<sup>163</sup> Farley writes that beauty is often used by people to 'exorcise their demons.' Through the life of faith, however, the human predisposition to beauty has the potential to become the 'self transcending, pathetic, consenting benevolence' to all being, to look in wonder at the 'beautiful, vulnerable face of finite entities in all their mystery, peril and promise.'<sup>164</sup>

What the redemptive activity of the cross has done for hegemonic concepts of power, so it can do for notions of beauty which have been manipulated to exclude and suppress the chaos of the grotesque. Karl Barth expresses this succinctly. 'If we seek Christ's beauty in a glory which is not that of the Crucified we are doomed to seek in vain... In this self revelation, God's beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call ugly as well as what we call

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<sup>163</sup> Farley, *op.cit.* p.107

<sup>164</sup> *Op.cit.* p.113

beautiful.’<sup>165</sup> Theology has lost its touch and embodied empathy with this as a visceral resource of theophany. Thomas a Kempis made use of the graphic language of the grotesque which appears very alien to modern theological reflection.

The merciless way in which you were stretched out upon the hard wood of the cross, so roughly spread for you as your reclining board for the sharp piercing of your hands and feet and for the driving into them of huge nails, the noise of which could be heard far off and must have moved to tears even the most hard hearted of beholders ..so ruthlessly indeed was your body stretched out lengthwise and breadthwise as if it had been the skin of a drum that all your joints were loosened and your bones could be distinctly counted.<sup>166</sup>

Crucifixion was a gruesome method of punishment for those who challenged the rule of the Romans, for anyone who envisaged a different way of relating and community. It was very public and outside the city walls to stress the punished were complete outsiders. The corpse was often left for carrion to pick the flesh so that the grotesqueness of the cadaver became like the bodies so graphically painted by Bosch. Flogging preceded the crucifixion and the body could be positioned on the cross in many different ways to amuse the soldiers.

Executed publicly, situated at a major crossroads or on a well trafficked artery, devoid of clothing...left to be eaten by birds and beasts, victims of crucifixion were subject to optimal, unmitigated, vicious ridicule.<sup>167</sup>

Graphic pictures of Christ’s sufferings are few and far today, such a disintegration of the subject thought gratuitous and unnecessary. Many found the

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<sup>165</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol 11/1 The Doctrine Of God* (Edinburgh:T&T Clark,1957), p.750

<sup>166</sup> Peter Toon Marshall, *Christ For All Seasons* (London:Pickering,1989), p.37

<sup>167</sup> Joel Green, ‘Crucifixion’ in Marcus Bockmuehl, *The Cambridge Companion To Jesus* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,2004), p.90



brutality of the scenes in Mel Gibson's film, 'The Passion Of Christ' in 2005, as such, even describing it as pornographic violence. The qualities of the grotesque have been lost in the sterilised, modern mind, in fact they have become sexually distorted; humanity seems to have become psychically desensitised to the numinous in the inelegant, and perhaps that is why the profound love and hope encapsulated in the message of Christianity has been so little understood in the present age.<sup>168</sup> Theology needs the aesthetic arts in its bid to bring the whole of life into relation with the divine, bringing the most frightening aspects imaginatively to life so that people can once become agents in the midst of illness or difficult bodily experiences, rather than merely reactors. 'Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.'<sup>169</sup>

Like illness, the grotesque alienates at first but it often offers the beginning of new life. Geoffrey Harpham stresses that the artistic expression of the grotesque stems from the world of which 'we are very much a part... it is a 'mirror of aberration' yet one that can turn our world upside down so that we can see the possibilities of a new world beyond.' It is ubiquitous and elusive, it appears in 'endless diluting forms....always and everywhere around us for it has its own life.'<sup>170</sup> It is not nihilistic or sceptical for there lies creative potential and hope and pathos in its midst. The paradox of the grotesque is more than adequately summarised by Kayser.

The responses to the grotesque are diverse.... We are fascinated by and attracted to its power while being threatened by it and compelled to repudiate it. We experience its denial of our canons of truth while

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<sup>168</sup> See *Chapter Five* pages 40-41 for a continuation of this point.

<sup>169</sup> Anais Nin, cited in Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path To Higher Creativity* (London:Pan Books,1994), p.156

<sup>170</sup> Geoffrey Harpham, cited In Yates And Adams *op.cit.* p.xx

glimpsing a truth that our canons deny us....We are confronted with the demonic from which we wish to pull back while knowing that we must engage its power to maintain our well being. We respond with alarm at its distortions and exaggerations, its fusing of organic and inorganic, human and inhuman aspects of reality while gaining through those distortions insights into different ways of being and perhaps new possibilities for wisdom and wholeness. We experience how the grotesque distorts and ridicules the religious life while posing to us questions and the yearning for spiritual transformation ...(All this) while realizing that the works are nothing more than the creation of the artist's imagination.<sup>171</sup>

The iconoclastic artistic possibilities of the grotesque were noticed and embraced by Bakhtin who saw it as a way to deconstruct hegemonic structures of bourgeois culture and the hierarchy of religious institutions. He viewed the carnival grotesque as liberating from the kind of authority which he saw all around him as dogmatism and formalism and absolutism, creating an atomistic and individualistic self which destroyed human intimacy with nature, abstracting and privatising the self to the detriment of equal and intimate relating.<sup>172</sup>

Seeking to establish the authenticity of social life that had disintegrated under bourgeois, mannered culture, he delved without fear or apology into the more scatological aspects of human existence and celebrated them. With flamboyance, he reinstigated those activities centred around the orifices of ears, eyes, nose, vagina and anus and bawdily incorporated spitting, copulating and urinating amongst other things into his artistic endeavour to turn the world upside down. Little was left to the imagination and while his contemporary writers were transcending the body, Bakhtin was arguing for

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<sup>171</sup> Kayser, Yates, And Adams, *op.cit.* Preface

<sup>172</sup> See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* Trans by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge MA London:Institute Of Technology,1968)

freedom and regeneration, through all that had been termed disgusting, illmannered and vulgar.

The carnival grotesque was a way of celebrating and participating, in an almost sacred way, in a performance to counter those repressions and conventions which had been imposed from authoritative repressive norms prohibiting the love of the natural.

The intrusion of everything forbidden or slanderous or joyfully blasphemous into the purified domains of officialdom expressed a complex sense that the material world was not unequivocally base: every death contains within it the meaning of every rebirth, every birth comes from the same region of the body as does the excremental. And the excremental itself is a source of regeneration- it manures life... References to the lower body... were used to produce a regenerative, an affirmative, a healing.<sup>173</sup>

The liberating elements of the grotesque work to illumine how sharply and suddenly norms, status, fixed identities and rationality dissolve when there is an unexpected fusion of factors or qualities which are usually kept apart. Rigid concepts rapidly fade away and one is impelled to rethink. Thus the grotesque is much more than a morbid fascination with the distorted or disgusting, it is not mere negativity lacking hope but a possible 'harbinger of cultural renewal.'<sup>174</sup>

Thus lifting the veils on assumed notions of beauty and ablebodiedness, trying to open the eye to both joy and pathos as integral parts of existence, can best be achieved by way of startling people in a visceral way. One can then see that the body has been a major factor in flights of fancy. 'Anyone who does not

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<sup>173</sup> Wayne Booth, 'Freedom Of Interpretation' In Gary Saul Morson, (ed) *Bakhtin: Essays And Dialogue On His work* (Chicago:University Of Chicago Press,1986), pp. 161-2

<sup>174</sup> Kayser, cited in Adams and Yates, *op.cit.* p.xiii

grasp the close juxtaposition of the vulgar and the scholarly has either too refined or too compartmentalised a view of life. Abstract and visceral fascination are not so far apart,' believes Stephen Gould.<sup>175</sup> Bacon's work challenges the ordinary in this way and only gradually is the viewer released to the facts behind the image. He believed that, 'for the authentic and incorruptible artist, impervious to social hypocrisy, the only available transcendence from man's poignant and vulnerable condition, is achieved through the experience of art.'<sup>176</sup> It works as a kind of purgation and transcendence at the same time, in a similar way to a sacrament, leading in, through and also beyond the material to consider deeper meanings; there is a blurring of the material and the spiritual. Sometimes these meanings are awesome and not easy to swallow; the experience of disability and illness can never be eased from its pain and suffering. Bacon makes this point about the reality that he sees and tries to apply to his paintings,

I'm really trying to make them as real from my point of view as I possibly can. I mean you've only got to think about life for just ten minutes, what it is really: it's a horror which I certainly wouldn't have the talent to be able to trap-- the real awfulness of life. It's marvellous but it's awful.<sup>177</sup>

At the end of the twentieth century the Whitney Museum in New York invited artists to exhibit art that depicted the grotesque, work with the potential to

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<sup>175</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Living with Connections Are Siamese Twins One Person Or Two?* Cited In Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), Introduction

<sup>176</sup> Sam Hunter, 'Metaphor And Meaning' In *The Exhibition Catalogue Of The Hirshorn Museum*. 1952 p.33

<sup>177</sup> Joshua Gilder, 'I Think About Death Every Day,' *Flash Art* No112 May 1983 pp. 17-21

transform pain and the repulsive into aesthetic form.<sup>178</sup> Perhaps it too began to see that acceptance of the grotesque is a part of a new urgent understanding of nature. Art, like this, does not spare the pain and suffering but is a form of transgression which can liberate and heal, accept and see differently. Only then do the prejudices show up, the forms of beauty which have been preserved through the ages and the assumptions about creation; the neglect and exploitative decisions made on such grounds.

‘Cleanliness, order and beauty,’ were defined by Freud as the ‘cornerstones of civilisation,’<sup>179</sup> Plotinus described the ugly as something that makes the soul shrink into itself, as something that makes people turn away and be resentful.<sup>180</sup> What is considered beautiful, on the other hand, makes people turn to God, for it is considered a gift and sign of eternity. Such a dichotomy has shaped thinking for centuries and developed a satiety and complacency that is responsible, I believe for much indifference to the vastness of creation. ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.’<sup>181</sup> Goodness, truth and beauty have been considered synonymous for so long that it is difficult to break the tradition that beauty gladdens and the grotesque saddens. James Hillman believes that ‘the most significant unconscious today is beauty.’<sup>182</sup> Linked to the sacred it carries an aura of inviolability, a taboo that must be protected. Rivera surely echoes many people’s thoughts;

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<sup>178</sup> Neal David Benezra, Olga M. Viso, Arthur Coleman Danto, *Regarding Beauty A View Of The Late Twentieth Century* (Illinois:Smithsonian Institution, 2000), p.97

<sup>179</sup> Dominique Laporte, *The History Of Shit* (Cambridge, MA, London:MIT Press, 2000), p.56

<sup>180</sup> Plotinus 1 6:2 cited in Benezra, *op.cit.* p.272

<sup>181</sup> John Keats, cited In Anthony Synott, *The Body Social* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), p.90

<sup>182</sup> James Hillman, cited in Benezra, *op.cit.* p.274

without the language and experiences of beauty and the beautiful the church will find difficult the expression of faith much less her conviction of the dignity of the whole person and even less be a sacrament to the world. Human life has a worth and dignity which only beauty can reveal through the beautiful.<sup>183</sup>

Of course, as Rivera says, what has been termed beauty, is life affirming and fulfilling and I am not advocating an unbalanced, undue preoccupation with the disturbing and grotesque, but a reminder that 'these elements haunt every beautiful thing' and to dismiss their existence in such a cut and dried manner in extolling beauty only as the grounding of the sacred, is restricting. As Sands believes, it is necessary also to 'remember how the world goes on... in its messy multiform continuance.'<sup>184</sup> Leo Tolstoy challenged the pervasiveness of beauty's supremacy. 'It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness.'<sup>185</sup> Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* was once beautiful in the guise of an angel but, banished from heaven, he became 'squat like a toad' and 'mixed with bestial slime' and finally became a 'crowd of ugly serpents.'<sup>186</sup> Seldom is beauty admitted as a driving force behind human action and values, but the effect is to be seen all too clearly.

Beauty, shackled to the pursuit of pleasure, is a major factor in style, in relations, in dress and in mannerisms and is the datum line in the decisions that people make to live one way and not another, judging homes, friends and status of jobs and the divine image according to images received from films, media and

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<sup>183</sup> Alejandro Garcia Rivera, *The Community Of The Beautiful* (Collegeville Minnesota: The Liturgical Press A Michael Glazier Book, 1999), p. 11

<sup>184</sup> Sands, *op.cit.* p. 169

<sup>185</sup> Leo Tolstoy, In John Bayley, (ed) Trans Louise Aylmer Maude, *The Portable Tolstoy* (New York: Viking Press)

<sup>186</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Airmont Publishing Co, 1968), Book 4, Page 800 Book 9 p. 165 And Book 10 p. 89

literature that are full of the obsession with beauty. Beauty literally acts as a spirit level in all senses of the term but there is no level playing field for many are not considered beautiful enough to be included. For the disabled this means that ‘those who seek out beauty in persons will regard every disability as ugly.’<sup>187</sup> Those seeking a superficial beauty in God, will regard disability as evil and nature as fallen.

### ASCETICISM

Pursuit of beauty, as a common human response, expresses itself in numerous ways to evade and escape reality through drugs, television, alcohol, the pursuit of pleasure, compulsive shopping, narcissism and body building and new age psychotherapeutic programmes. Kathleen Sands writes that ‘logical patriarchal spirituality cannot survive the encounter with real multiplicity, embodiment, pleasure and pain without collapsing into despair or fleeing from commitment.’<sup>188</sup> Evasions need to be addressed; liturgy needs to help humanity swap escapism for a little more confrontation with the real. Thomas Merton describes how vital this is to well being.

Indeed the truth that many people never understand until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering the more you suffer, because smaller and insignificant things begin to torture you, in proportion to your fear of being hurt. The one who does most to avoid suffering is in the end is the one who suffers most and his suffering comes to him from things so little and trivial that one can say that it is no longer objective at all. It is his own existence, his own being that is at once the subject and source of his pain and his very existence and consciousness is his greatest torment.<sup>189</sup>

Merton believed that asceticism in the religious life has traditionally offered a

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<sup>187</sup> Gorringer, *op.cit.* p.113

<sup>188</sup> Sands, *op. cit.* p.66

<sup>189</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York:New American Library,1948), p.86

route, albeit a difficult and controversial one, to a more authentic lived experience.<sup>190</sup> It paradoxically denied some of the bodily needs and desires but often opened up a new awareness and sense of being present to reality. ‘The ascetic life offers the means of divesting oneself of the falsely socially constructed self to discover one’s own true self.’<sup>191</sup> A certain amount of asceticism is needed to fulfil any ambition whether it be an athletic or academic goal or religious piety: some kind of discipline is always essential to deal with the conflicting desires and tensions which have to be brought under some kind of control to complete a planned purpose.

Thus asceticism can be a visceral force in the development of identities and ideas, goals and acceptance. It is very much a bodily force, ‘necessarily deeply fleshly and material.’<sup>192</sup> While it might appear to be based on an oppressive self- abnegation, it experiences the body in a most profound way; fasting, for instance, is not an escape from the body but a journey into extreme physicality. Kloppenburg believes that it exhibits the desire to be ‘somehow more presently... more completely, more plainly, more transparently...more enduringly,

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<sup>190</sup> Feminist theology’s views on this topic will be mentioned in chapter 4. Kathy Galloway’s views are symptomatic of many feminist views of the tradition of asceticism. ‘There can be few doctrines that have been so damaging to so many, can have so defaced the image of God as one which splits the human person into parts and declares the physical intrinsically bad. Still today, lovers and counsellors, therapists and doctors are helping to pick up the pieces of lives blighted by this interpretation. It has allowed all that is sensory and feeling, all that is instinctive and intuitive to be despised, and the intellectual and spiritual to be idolized. It has deprived countless men and women and children of the experience of much of what is most delightful, most hopeful and most joyful about being human. It has divided people against themselves, against each other, and against God. Kathy Galloway, (ed) *Dreaming Of Eden* (Glasgow:Wild Goose,1997), p.113

<sup>191</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom Of The Desert Fathers* (London:Sheldon Press, 1974), Introduction

<sup>192</sup> Jack Ralph Kloppenburg, cited in Leif Vaage, And Vincent Wimbrush, *Asceticism In The New Testament*. (New York, London:Routledge, 1999), p.425



more utterly human.’<sup>193</sup> In some of the past Christian ascetic exercises the body was subjected to intense and intimate scrutiny which often led to the rejection of the external norms of authority. Despite the extreme fasting and flagellation that took place, when asceticism was used to exercise power over other bodies and its particularly oppressive use to control women’s bodies, it could also, paradoxically, act as a tool of resistance to hegemonic structures. Virginia Burrows writes that for some women, asceticism offered resistance to male control, rejecting the roles assigned, the sexual gaze and objectification of women’s bodies; it, ‘shatters the spatial boundaries which define women’s social roles.’<sup>194</sup> This freedom was available for those women who were able ‘to remain...attentive to the knowledge and experience of their own bodies.’<sup>195</sup>

The potentiality of asceticism bears a resemblance to the aestheticism that has been discussed in this chapter. Valantasis experienced it in the same way as a drama or a new way of seeing that occurs through the arts. ‘Asceticism may be defined as performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations and an alternative symbolic universe.’<sup>196</sup> The dominant consumerist obsessions in contemporary society, in the rich northern hemisphere, are sorely in need of such alternative visions. Eric Fromm describes this most graphically;

having fun lies in the satisfaction of consuming and taking in commodities, sights, food, drinks cigarettes, people, lectures, books, movies- all are consumed, swallowed ... the world is one great object for our

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<sup>193</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>194</sup> For more detail on this see Virginia Burrows, ‘Word and Flesh’ *Journal Of Feminist Studies Of Religion*. Spring 1984

<sup>195</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>196</sup> Richard Valantasis, Cited In Vaage, and Wimbush, *op.cit.* p.62

appetite, a big apple, a big bottle, a big breast; we are the sucklers, the eternally expectant ones, the hopeful ones-- and the eternally disappointed ones.<sup>197</sup>

The effects of such pleasure seeking on the planet are all too apparent;<sup>198</sup> sadly, as Rudolf Bahro notes, the evil consequences of human greed on nature are due not to some 'self-evidently evil regime,' but the result of norms and ideals which are taken for granted.'<sup>199</sup> Avarice 'has deadened their hearts.'(John 12:40) The potential of a little more asceticism in people's lives might promote a new look at common expectations, desires and the norms which encourage such destruction. David Korten reported that at the end of the twentieth century between twelve and fifteen per cent of Americans had opted for a simpler lifestyle, keeping their pleasures minimalist and finding satisfaction in keeping a check on their bodily desires.<sup>200</sup> Indeed the ascetic life represents a bodily resistance to the overwhelming asymmetry of the wealth of the northern section of the world compared to the south and a challenge to the unhappy and dispirited obsession in the west with the body beautiful and the endless money oriented search for escape and ecstasy. Gorringe writes, 'The Christian ascetic tradition represented the 'reality principle' as opposed to the 'pleasure principle' and it has much of value to offer us.'<sup>201</sup>

If the power of asceticism to resist the norms of correct body appearance and the need for instant gratification, was seen as an iconoclastic medium for many

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<sup>197</sup> Eric Fromm, *The Art Of Loving* (New York:Harper Collins,1995), pp.62-3

<sup>198</sup> See *Introduction and Chapter Five*.

<sup>199</sup> Rudolf Bahro, *Avoiding Social And Ecological Disaster* (Bath:Gateway, 1994), p.220

<sup>200</sup> David Korten, *The Post Corporate World* (Connecticut:Kumarian, 2000), p.219

<sup>201</sup> Timothy Gorringe, *op.cit*, p.96

female ascetics of the Middle Ages, it was also seen as a way of working through the grotesque. Those brute facts of life of putrefaction and decay, ‘this promiscuity between the living and the dead’ and of ‘death, so omnipresent, that it was familiar’ to the medieval mind.<sup>202</sup> Asceticism looked straight into the face of the reality of dubious bodily processes. Peter Brown describes this period and believes that ‘seldom in ancient thought had the body been seen as more deeply implicated in the transformation of the soul and never was it made to bear so heavy a burden.’<sup>203</sup>

It provided an opportunity to encounter the sensual and the present and for many, too, asceticism was a route to Christian relationality, of standing alongside those who suffered. Many of the women ascetics ministered to the poor and the ill and they could only do this by maintaining a simple lifestyle, realising that authentic help comes from standing with and empathising with those who suffer. ‘It was the choice of voluntary poverty to put one along side those enduring involuntary poverty.’<sup>204</sup> It promoted a more authentic approach to the disabled. Gorringer writes of the internalization of the discipline of asceticism: a self-transcendence and benevolence was often the result of this ‘education of the senses;’ this shaping of dispositions and learning how to transform life in the raw. The outcome of the ancient ascetic was the truly compassionate and just person.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death From The Middle Ages To The Present* (London, New York:Marion Boyars, 1994), pp. 85 and 25

<sup>203</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body And Society* (New York,London:Routledge,1990), p.235

<sup>204</sup> Gorringer, *op.cit.* p.98

<sup>205</sup> *Op.cit.* p.100

There is no way of knowing if this is true but St Anthony was portrayed as ‘someone whose heart had achieved total transparency to others’,<sup>206</sup> and there is plenty of literature in the Christian past to indicate that many did try to live according to Christian values of love and relationality through the practices of asceticism.<sup>207</sup> Rudolf Bahro believes that it is only through such a spiritual turning about of current obsessions with pleasure and control that people will find a path to a more authentic way of living.<sup>208</sup>

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world why as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules? Do not handle. Do not touch. Do not taste. These are all destined to perish... because they are based on human commands and teachings... they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Colossians 2:20-23)

Transcendence of the ego and increased aesthetic awareness seem to be the crux of the ascetic movement for all its vulnerability to abuse and manipulation. It seemed to promote a compassion and benevolent acceptance for all being by working through and deeply within the body. ‘All things appear more beautiful, the more we are conscious of them and the less we are conscious of ourselves.’<sup>209</sup>

Asceticism, like aesthetics, considers the effect of being immersed in the enigma of feelings and sensations in the body; this does not have to be translated as a denigration of the body but as new awareness of it with its potential of taking humanity to the beyond of God’s mystery. ‘Do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life.’ (John 6:27) Balthasar wrote that the modern

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<sup>206</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>207</sup> See for instance Shawn Madigan, (Ed) *Mystics, Visionaries And Prophets* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 1998)

<sup>208</sup> Bahro, *op.cit.*

<sup>209</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Representation* Vol 11 Trans. E.F. Payne, (Indian Hills, C O:Falcon Wings Press,1978), p.368

world has lost this sense of wonder and intelligence from nature; 'its ideal knowledge has been one derived from mastery and exploitation.'<sup>210</sup> Just as one becomes bodily involved in conceptual art, in vibrant installations, as the viewer is encouraged to interact with the works, so faith can be experienced in participation, transmuting the ordinary and finding the mystical element which exists in all of creation. The dynamic potential of sacraments to bring this into reality must be expanded to the width of the universe.

This chapter has challenged the respectability of theology and the norms and ideas and values set against the disgusting and the more dramatic aspects of finitude. It has questioned assumptions from those, like Solzhenitsyn, who believed that the 'good must be seen as beautiful, joy filled and fulfilling.'<sup>211</sup> It has argued that fulfilment comes from a greater grasp of reality in the natural world rather than a search for pleasure and comfort. Collinson describes this as 'regaining the enhanced self,' a new satisfaction. It is 'an ultimate aesthetic approval that is experienced as delight in a new clarity, a broadening or deepening or enrichment of sensibilities.'<sup>212</sup>

## TRAGEDY

The performative art of tragedy is another kind of aesthetic approach to the ambiguity of life, that deals less with notions of human guilt or certainties and more with fluid explorations of the depths of experience; it tackles the unfathomable seeking clarity amidst the chances and fragmentation of life;

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<sup>210</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, cited in John Riches, (ed) *The Analogy Of Beauty: The Theology Of Balthasar* (Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 1986), p.24

<sup>211</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, cited in Richard Viladesau, *The Aesthetic God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (New York, Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1999) p.124

<sup>212</sup> Collinson, *op.cit.* pp.171-2

bringing into the open the uncomfortable, asking why some things happen rather than others and why human agency is often powerless in the face of fate.

Reflecting theologically on tragedy one is challenged to think anew about the divine and the chance occurrences of life and interpret them into, 'inquiry, discernment and action.'<sup>213</sup>

Tragedy is able to include more of life's ambiguous experiences into its fold than any other performative art and its potential for producing a theological response to natural evil is beginning to be recognised.<sup>214</sup> Indeed a concept of the Godhead which cannot incorporate some of its darker, deeper elements and inclusivity should surely be challenged. Tragedy

is perhaps the most general, all accepting, all ordering experience known. It can take anything into its organisation, modifying it so that it finds a place. It is invulnerable; there is nothing which does not present to the tragic attitude when fully developed a fitting aspect and only a fitting aspect.<sup>215</sup>

One of the constituent elements of tragedy is *anagnoresis*, the awareness and sense of something previously only imagined or dreaded come to reality. It is the stark reality, the now which before had only been a nightmare. Tragedy, like the crucifixion, has this quality of permitting no evasion.

It is what tragedy is about, the realization of the unthinkable.. it has a sense of totality and gives us an image of what lies in wait for us on every day until our last... when a writer shows us a man saying 'this is the end, this is how it feels, this is how life feels in relation to it, 'there we have the basic material of tragedy.'<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Sands, *op.cit.*p.66

<sup>214</sup> See for instance Wendy Farley, 1990 Kathleen Sands, 1994. Kristine Rankka, 1998

<sup>215</sup> A Richards, 'Principles Of Literary Criticism,' reprinted 1934 pp.246-7 cited in Clifford Leech, *Tragedy* (London, NewYork:Routledge, 1969), p.8

<sup>216</sup> Leech, *op.cit.* p.68

Another element of tragedy is *peripety*, the suddenness of people's misfortunes, the abrupt change from one state of being to another. This chaotic element brings home in a powerful way how quickly one's circumstances can alter and is one of the reasons illness is feared so much. People with disabilities have labelled the ablebodied, TABS, the 'temporarily' ablebodied, claiming that theirs is a club that one can join at any time.<sup>217</sup> Moltmann Wendel puts this succinctly, 'As soon as tomorrow my body can grasp me and take me where I do not want to go.'<sup>218</sup>

Much has been written about Aristotle's thoughts on tragedy, and the way that its dramatic form shows forth new elements and qualities which are healing and illustrative of the human condition, 'with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.'<sup>219</sup> It is less easy to evade difficult questions in the performative art of tragedy than in the convoluted social discourse and subterfuge of everyday conversation, and people can often find a new language that provides new possibilities of expressing their spiritual responses and needs in concrete situations, that allow less sophistry or sham. The Christian play can bring the message of faith in the torrid midst of human experience vividly to life, in the way that a text cannot. 'People are brought into violent and intimate contact with the phenomena that concern us... the raw stuff that can finally be salvation or damnation...(it)..is danger and rescue that the

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<sup>217</sup> Sona Osman, 'A to Z of Feminism' *Spare Rib* Nov 1983 'Disabilities are an issue for us all, not just because many will (for instance) lose our hearing and mobility if we live long enough, but because notions of having to have 'perfect' bodies disable us all.' pp.27-30

<sup>218</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, *op.cit*, p.22

<sup>219</sup> Aristotle, *The Poetics* Trans by Ingram Bywater (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1909), Chapter VI

Christian play is about.'<sup>220</sup> Fear and hope together reach a synthesis in this fluid medium.

Christian theology has been inclined to view tragedy in terms of the end result of human sin or to see its attitudes as overly fatalistic and an evasion of human responsibility. The performative arts have also been associated in the past with immorality, egocentrism or the carnal pleasures of pagan and orgiastic festivals. The high arts, however, are now coming into their own as they negotiate the world's 'enchantments, unpredictabilities, complexities and mysteries to display deep and fresh means of self discovery in the sounds and movements of the human body in theatre as with any tactile experience.'<sup>221</sup> John makes evident that the Jesus experience was tactile. 'That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched.' (I John 1:1) Tragedy invokes a more concrete approach to the vagaries of finitude, the tenuousness of undeserved suffering, puzzling occurrences, chance and the vulnerabilities of physical and psychical life.

The whole sky has fallen in on you and all you can do about it is to shout... but you can shout aloud, you can get all those things said that you never thought you'd be able to say- or even knew you had it in you to say... and you don't say these things because it will do any good to say them: you know better than that. You say them for their own sake; you say them because you learn a lot from them.<sup>222</sup>

The quality of the creativity in the interpretation of difficult situations, in the grounding of human spirituality in the concrete expression of finite life;

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<sup>220</sup> Rosemary Haughton, *The Drama Of Salvation* (London:SPCK,1976), p.vii

<sup>221</sup> Farley, *op.cit.* p.113

<sup>222</sup> *Antigone*, (1942) Trans by Lewis Galantiere (1951) cited in Leech, *op.cit.*p.9



accepting its pleasures and pains and its dispelling of control obsessed resolutions to the ambiguities of life's processes, all work to a more honest reflection and acceptance of life to the point where it is possible to say, 'We could only wish the world to be made otherwise, if we could wish to be creatures of another sort.'<sup>223</sup> Theology needs these rich arts to engage pithily with the material body, with the sensuous, with the ambivalent, abjected or more visceral aspects of existence; 'for it is not that we are gladdened by Lear's suffering, by the wrong done to Desdemona or by Othello's blind passion, but that we have been admitted to an understanding of meaning and realities that are of great importance in human life.' There is a feeling of experiencing a truth with extreme clarity and certainty.<sup>224</sup> 'My God my God why has thou forsaken me,' is such a moment? (Mark 15: 34) An unmistakable performance of tragic solidarity with all suffering.

It is the aesthetic awareness of the supreme Christian ascetic performance of the cross that aborts any and all self-securing efforts to maintain that the life of faith is easy or comfortable, consistently pleasurable, escapist or trivial. 'You will drink of the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptised with.' (Mark 10:39) St John of the Cross is one of the strongest exponents of the Christian reality principle, as demonstrated in the cross, of the givenness of the truth of the paschal mystery which defies comfortable norms, words or images, yet is not utterly negative.

The joy of Christian life, he maintained, has no depth without the reflection of the darkness and the way that all conceptions are continually broken and renewed as God works through the paradox, the messiness, bloodiness and

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<sup>223</sup> Austin Farrar, *The Science Of God* (London:Geoffrey Bless,1966), p.61

<sup>224</sup> Collinson, *op.cit.* pp.171-2

horror of the cross. It is in total rejection, grotesqueness and negation that the God of creativity is astonishingly glimpsed with stark reality and suddenly seen anew again in the newness and nowness that emerges with the resurrection promise.

The experience of the cross illuminates that moments of terror and horror are part of life; the encounter, like aesthetic knowing, does not countenance a turning away or shrinking from life's ambiguities.

John will allow no softening images or consolatory concepts, the cross must be worked into life in its full reality. One must be prepared for the darkness to move into the light and recognise their inseparability.<sup>225</sup> One must be prepared, too, for comfortable dogmas of religion to be challenged and human concepts of God to be rethought.

The test of integrity is whether a man or woman has lived in the central darkness of the paschal event, whether they have known why it is that God is killed by his creatures and their religions and how God himself breaks and reshapes all religious language as he acts through vulnerability, failure and contradiction.<sup>226</sup>

The ambiguity which has been present throughout this study of disability and bodies which disturb, is present in the central Christian narrative of the cross. That which is most new and promising can emerge from the most utter dereliction and negation, and the origin of this creativity is the divine. Simultaneously there is suffering, sheer degradation and creativity.

The genetic movement of Christian experience, the fundamental novelty of understanding which gives Christianity its identity, is at once an experience of the

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<sup>225</sup> E. Allison Peers, *The Complete Works Of St John Of The Cross* (3 Vols London: Image Publications, 1959), pp.19-21

<sup>226</sup> St John Of The Cross Described By Rowan Williams, In *The Wound Of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, (1979) 1990), p.181

creatively new become manifest in human articulation and an experience of an ultimate source, the hidden God...who has made his transcendence known in the darkness of death. If the experience were not both at once it would split apart into an insipid humanism of progress (or a revolutionary arrogance) or an esoteric mystique of world abnegation.<sup>227</sup>

Christian theology has tried to hold this tension together over centuries but somehow liturgy has lost the extremes of the pain and the joy in juxtaposition and become lukewarm. Knowledge of suffering is in abeyance; people who suffer are not seen as those with particular insight and the cross is sometimes seen as a symbol which might encourage fetishistic or sadomasochistic ideas, so far has the church moved from the aesthetic clarity of tragedy.

The tangible world is there to be experienced in all its magnificence and pain and John points through and beyond it to the divine, to the freedom of God, by leaving behind the safe and the secure. John's work is often viewed as entirely negative about creation with an austere vision of the physical and spiritual life. Rowan Williams writes that, on the contrary, John was advocating a spiritual life that 'can dispense with the ersatz and the comfortable' in order to probe deeper into the ultimate fulfilment of human living. 'It is a movement toward fulfilment, not emptiness, toward beauty and life, not annihilation. The night grows darker before it can grow lighter.'<sup>228</sup> This is not at all similar to a mindset that holds no value in nature, it is not an escape so much as a working through and into life more thoroughly. Learning to know more about nature, and the need to gain new

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227 Cornelius Ernst, *World Religions and Christian Theology I New Blackfriars* Vol 50 Issue 593 Oct 1969 pp.693-699

228 Williams, *op.cit.* p.167

understanding and a new light on the things of nature is also to grow to know

God.<sup>229</sup>

I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture  
through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
Something more of the depths-  
What was that whiteness?  
Truth -a pebble of quartz? For once, then  
something.<sup>230</sup>

This attention which is selfless and self forgetful in order to be fully absorbed in the otherness of any created entity is the prerequisite for meditating on God. 'It involves that basic displacement of the dominating ego without which there can be no spiritual growth',<sup>231</sup> John's detachment from many of the comforts of religious discourse has been criticised as almost inhuman and, as such, has been open to abuse by ecclesiastical powers in the past.<sup>232</sup> Feminist theology has argued that patriarchal structures have for too long insisted that women should practice self abnegation and mortify their bodies to rectify their inherent sinfulness. The distortions of pain and suffering of course are manifold but these are often more about power than suffering and humanity is very inventive around the issues of power. John makes it plain, however that extreme mortification in ascetic practices which are contrived, too power or self oriented, become ends in themselves and illusions.

Rather,

it is this quality of 'unillusionment,' the destruction of fantasies, in the night of the spirit which explains why it is, paradoxically, a part of what theologians have called the illuminative way.... it is the beginning of the new level of insight and enlightenment because the truth about

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<sup>229</sup> See McFague, *op.cit.*

<sup>230</sup> Robert Frost, 'For Once, Then, Something' *The Poetry Of Robert Frost* (New York:Holt, Rinehart, And Winston,1969), p.225

<sup>231</sup> Williams, *op.cit.* p.180

<sup>232</sup> The practice of encouraging women to abuse their bodies in extreme mortification is described by Armstrong, *op.cit.*

the human relationship with God is obscurely and confusedly becoming evident.<sup>233</sup>

Williams believes that reality emerges when language and even thought runs dry when one runs into paradoxical situations which resemble the cross, the heart of Christian belief. The theology of this event articulates that which becomes visible of the divine in the suffering of the world. Many saints and mystics affirmed such a greater sense of reality through suffering, illness and pain and enduring the dark side of life 'below the level of consciousness...in suffering they are aware, though not in an emotionally satisfying way, which would neutralize the pain, that they are more in the truth, closer to reality and thus to God.'<sup>234</sup> Thus, what seems to be the 'caughtness' of finitude, deep things out of darkness and the grotesque or the prison of a disabled body can sometimes turn out to be a new opportunity for reflection in theology. Bodily difference can kick start one onto a new journey as Andre Gide believes: 'among those who enjoy perfect health I have never met anyone who was not in some way a little limited, like those who have never travelled.'<sup>235</sup>

These concepts of the costly routes to the divine in fragility and vulnerability all need expanding so that liturgy can help others on such a journey. The easy familiarity of the body can often lead us to overlook the extraordinary, writes Merleau-Ponty. It is when this familiarity is disrupted in disability or ecocide and by an aesthetic response to them that we can begin to see more clearly

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<sup>233</sup> *Op.cit.* p.171

<sup>234</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines For Mystical Prayer*, (London:SCM Press,1976), pp.101-2

<sup>235</sup> Andre Gide, Cited in Mohrmann, And Wurzbach, *Krankheit Als Lebenserfahrung*, (Frankfurt,1988), p.258

what he describes as the ‘unmotivated upsurge of the world.’<sup>236</sup> This comes from ‘expressive parts of the body which themselves give rise to thought.’<sup>237</sup> Lorna Collins writes of the aesthetic encounter as one ‘which brings us into intimate proximity with the ontological, transgressive and libinal tenets, either manifested or implicitly latent, entwined by Merleau-Ponty’s flesh.’<sup>238</sup> Its empowering potential is explored further in the next chapter, as the specific contribution of feminist theology’s vivid spiritual/material approach to flesh, love, disgust and hope in creation is discussed.

A dynamic ecomysticism takes up these themes and delves into the nuances of the dialectic between the limits of human freedom and the extent of human responsibility in faith, viewing the world as one in which people need to become more aware of both susceptibility to fate and the potential of creative agency.

‘The dialectic between freedom and fate remains ambiguous.’<sup>239</sup> Many mystics and religious leaders have shared the revelations and religious images which they have received during the ambiguous fleshly experiences and aesthetic encounters of their lives, engaging with the abyss and chaos, and left humanity all the richer.

The abyss and chaos become fertile ground for more insights in the next chapter but for now Kay Jamieson shall have the last word.

Such people have always sailed in the wind’s eye and brought back with them words or sounds and images to counteract human woes. That they themselves were subject to more than their fair share of these woes

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<sup>236</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception. op.cit.* p.viii

<sup>237</sup> *Op.cit.* p.205

<sup>238</sup> Collins, *op.cit.* p.4

<sup>239</sup> Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision And Divine Compassion:A Contemporary Theodicy.* (Louisville, Ky:Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1990), p.25

deserves our appreciation, understanding and very  
careful thought.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Kay R Jamieson, *Touched With Fire* (London, New York, Sydney,  
Toronto:Free Press Paperbacks,1993), p.260

# PART THREE



# Chapter Four

## FEMINIST THEOLOGIES AND EMBODIMENT

Woman is unclean in her sex...she is created to be  
A defilement and a temptation..  
A snake with breasts like a female..  
A succubus, a flying vagina.  
So that the singing God  
The secret of God  
The name winged in the hues of the rainbow  
Is withheld from her.<sup>1</sup>

I don't want to become a chronicler of horror or of  
sensations. It still all comes down to the same thing, life  
is beautiful. And I believe in God. And I want to be there  
right in the thick of what people call horror and still be  
able to say: Life is beautiful.<sup>2</sup>

Biology is messy and we like our spirituality clean...  
religious history is one of the reasons why it can be easier  
to get a mystical high from the contemplation of distant  
stars.... than from say, blood clotting.<sup>3</sup>

### CHAOS

So far this interrogation of disgust has focused on the corporeal experience of  
people with disabilities, women's physiology and the exploited earth to elicit a  
perspective of what humanity deems to be the dark, vulnerable aspects of creation:  
those blanked out and psychically denied. Once brought to awareness, some of  
these aspects can be reviewed and loved, not held in the grip of paralyzing fear

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Ostiker, *Feminist Revision And The Bible* (Oxford:Blackwell,1993), p.18

<sup>2</sup> Etty, *A Diary* (London:Persephone Books, 1941-43)

<sup>3</sup> Jackie Leach Scully, *Playing In The Presence* (London:Quaker Books, 2002), p.  
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triggered by disgust. They can be iconoclastic, full of potential for new insights and transforming energy.<sup>4</sup> These aspects of nature are multiple and can encompass anything that reminds humanity of its dependence on nature and the earth; anything that reminds it of its lack of control over mortality, chaotic systems or the depths of creation. As seen, women have been the symbolic representation of these undesirable elements throughout the Judaeo/ Christian tradition. 'Fluid and flaming as she is, are they not impatient to dry her up? To contain her in some enclosure where she finds her end.'<sup>5</sup>

Probing once again into the depths of these emotions, the aim is to create an ecomysticism capable of integrating the paradoxes of creation and the creator, as Anne Primavesi advocates, to give the Christian God the space 'to be God of the whole earth system: enchanting and terrible, giver of life and death, not separate from and not confused with the world and its sacred gifts events.'<sup>6</sup> To find the divine mystery in the midst of beauty and terror is to reinforce Christian notions of the integrity of all creation, to incorporate the arbitrariness of matter especially the matter that seems out of human control, which Catherine Keller describes as '*tehom*.'<sup>7</sup>

Tehom is an ancient Semitic word for the oceanic depths, the abyss or chaos and is a close relative of the name for the earth mother, Tiamat, the Babylonian goddess of creation, slain by her son who then creates the world out of her dismembered body. Ancient people were able to mythologise about the

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<sup>4</sup> See Hannah Ward, and Jennifer Wild, *Guard The Chaos* (London:Darton Longman and Todd,1995)

<sup>5</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover Of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans Gillian.C.Gill (New York:Columbia University Press,1991), p.48

<sup>6</sup> Anne Primavesi, *op.cit.* p.279

<sup>7</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* 2003, p.xvii

immanent aspects of chaos in a much more ‘whimsical’<sup>8</sup> way than contemporary theologians. Chaos was not welcomed any more than it is today but ‘the author of Genesis, like virtually the entire ancient world, assumed that the universe was created from a primal chaos, something uncreated, something other that the Creator could...call to order.’<sup>9</sup>

When he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,  
when he established the clouds above and fixed securely  
the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its  
boundary so the waters would not overstep his command.  
(Proverbs 8:27-28)

This Proverbs text and the Genesis text which describes the Spirit hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2) attest to Keller’s claim that God created ex profundis and not ex nihilo.<sup>10</sup> Mary Grey, also writes of the need to address the very concrete manifestations of chaos, not, as she makes clear, to romanticise it but to acknowledge the ambivalent values attached to it in religious contexts. It was the

great theme of all Hellenic cosmogonies... not that order, form, separation are not necessary-- but a different, more flexible relation between the emergence of beauty, creativity and renewal of heart from chaotic flowing is needed. There is no need to glorify chaos.<sup>11</sup>

Timothy Beal observes that traces of Tiamat are found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures in the names and visions of monsters and epithets<sup>12</sup> referring to the

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<sup>8</sup> This description is Keller’s *op.cit.* p.15

<sup>9</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Mary Grey, *Sacred Longings* (London:SCM Press, 2003), p.94

<sup>12</sup> See Psalm 74 Psalm 89:9 Psalm 93:4 Psalm 148 Job 26:12-13 Job 41: 1-34 Isaiah 27:1 Lamentations 4:3 Revelations 21

watery power of primeval chaos: ‘am I a Tanin (sea monster ) that you set guard over me?’ (Job 7: 12) The ‘Deep’ threatens ‘to stir and rage out of control’ at any time. Tehomophobia or cosmic horror emerges consistently in western religious texts through, what Beal describes, as processes of reorientation and disorientation within God’s creation.<sup>13</sup> God as mediator is invoked to prevail between the precariousness, inherent in creation, and the order which always threatens to disintegrate once more into chaos.

When Job’s body fails him and he is confronted with the horrors of the fragile body, it is Leviathan the monster with which he identifies rather than the God he had always petitioned to keep chaos at bay. The familiar rules do not work any more; as his skin erupts so does his terror and his view of the abyss is rich with the lived perspective of the chaotic depths. (Job 3: 4-7) At one point he wishes to side with them against God for the world, as he knows it, has vanished and the God of order must give way to another more destructive power. Job loses his family and property and tries to hold firm but the decaying and disabling of his body throw him straight into the darkness of the deep. ‘Skin for skin a man will give up all he has for his own life but touch his bones and flesh!’ (Job 2:4)

Beal writes that as Job’s skin, his hide cracks, ‘so does his theological hide... there is an absence of all refuge.’<sup>14</sup> Here in its rawness is seen the suddenness of tehom, of illness, that brings theological trauma in its wake. Cioran writes, ‘as the microcosm of the body crumbles in pain so does the cosmos

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy Beal, *Religion And Its Monsters* (London: New York:Routledge, 2002), p.25

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.* p.40

itself.’<sup>15</sup> The ongoing battle with disruption, the knowledge that order was impermanent and that mother earth, Tiamat, was perpetually a danger and the prototype of the material and feminine which must always be flushed away before civilisation can begin, is a current thread, albeit in many different disguises, running throughout religious history. ‘Tiamat, the radically other, the anti cosmic and anti Babylonian is also the most immanent.’<sup>16</sup>

Yet Christianity has proclaimed the light as supreme over the darkness, order over chaos and the concurrent absolute separation has meant that there has been little reflection on the tensions and complexity of the chaotic. Despite Genesis 1:2, Christianity from the third century onwards proclaimed creation from nothing instead of from the oceanic depths, the chaos was blanked out.<sup>17</sup> When so much has been denigrated a renewed understanding of creation is called for, one that recognises the whole chaomic width of creation, to recognise the creativity and life that emerges from the depths and the darkness itself in which many creatures and plants thrive. At the interstices of chaos and order, the land, other creatures and plants are going about their business and humanity is in danger of remaining unaware of the breadth and depth of creation. This expanse is also where the divine is active.<sup>18</sup> Humanity is invited

to rethink the strict polarity between order and chaos, suggesting that a more flexible relation between the two would unblock doors to a more satisfying creativity and experience of the transcendent.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> E.M.Cioran, *On The Heights of Despair* trans Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnstone, (Chicago:University Of Chicago Press.1992), p.109

<sup>16</sup> Beal, *op.cit.* p.19

<sup>17</sup> See Keller, *op.cit.* pp.43-64

<sup>18</sup> See Grey, *op.cit.* p.98

<sup>19</sup> *Op.cit.* p.98

The polarities of order and chaos are resisted when one inclines towards a more amenable perspective of the tehom in a mystical attempt to integrate its depths into religious consciousness. Catherine Keller's term for this is 'tehomitic theology.' Not only, she believes, has Christianity neglected the tehomitic at a 'cost to its own depths' yet it has projected its fears of those depths onto bodies that bear the tell tale marks of the arbitrariness and darkness of matter: women, and black people and the disabled. 'An unclogging must be effected at the level of that heterogeneous depth in which multiple causes and effects must be thought together at a depth of language always already uncertain of itself, apophatic, shadowed.'<sup>20</sup> Both Keller and Grey believe darkness and the fluidity of the watery depths are 'fertile ground for the rebirth of theology.'<sup>21</sup> In its haste to negate these depths, theological orthodoxy has reduced the heterogeneous potential of the creation to 'exacerbated even divinised masculinities,'<sup>22</sup> writes Keller. The mastery of the Christian God and the Lordship of Christ brought forth the creation from nothing, there could be no other matter in the world to challenge male authority. To facilitate richer views of creation emerging into consciousness from primal chaos and the deep and in reaction to such mastery; Keller writes that a 'tehomitic theology will be feminist in kind for the foreseeable future.'<sup>23</sup>

### THE DIVERSE VOICES OF FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

How do the pluralist voices of feminist theology and thealogy contribute to a tehomitic theology, in their bid to retrieve the feared chaotic female body? Have they been able to make cracks and fissures in the edifice of

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<sup>20</sup> Keller, *op cit.* p.201

<sup>21</sup> Grey. *op.cit.* p.84

<sup>22</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* p.xvii

<sup>23</sup> *Op.cit.* pxvii

tehomophobic western religious discourse? Feminist theologies have gone to the edge of the tehom, the creative horizon where one can experience the indifference and terror of chaos as well as its diverse creativity.<sup>24</sup> Women have been charged with disorderly conduct in their quest to write about the experiences of the divine in a more fluid way. This is a 'semiotic baptism' of new ways of thinking, as Kristeva describes the poetical effects of the early infant development in the mirror stage, breaking into established order, the symbolic world of the father. It is at this edge that illness strikes terror.

This semiotic is the place where the speaking being finds a refuge when his/ her symbolic shell cracks and a crest emerges where speech causes biology to show through. I am thinking of times of illness... of death.<sup>25</sup>

At this edge, where new ideas are sought and controlling representations challenged, the backlash is violent as women who cause disturbance are met with an expulsion, an eruption of tehom labels ranging from 'maternal hysteria, pagan temptation, dark hoards, caves of terror, contaminating hybrids, miscegenation and sexual confusion..(to)..excess, madness, evil, death.'<sup>26</sup> In Irigaray's view, androcentric perspectives feed off the denigration of the female, their very ability to withstand the void or the chaos, depends on them defeating the female.<sup>27</sup> Can the female, in its response, embrace the tehom and can the linkage of women with the grotesque become not a shameful thing but a site of creativity? To hold sacred once more all that has been rejected, to reflect planetarily, ecologically and

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<sup>24</sup> *Op.cit.* p.16

<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater' In Morna Joy, Kathleen O Grady, and Judith Poxon, *French Feminists On Religion: A Reader* (London, New York:Routledge, 2002), p.86 and p.138

<sup>26</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* pxvi

<sup>27</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum Of The Other Woman* trans Gillian C Gill, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1985a), p.189

expansively beyond narrow boundaries and to see differently as Blake encourages? 'To see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower; hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.'<sup>28</sup>

Daring to think in terms of organic potentials and creative chaotic aspects of creation runs great risk of being tarred with connotations of being unfastidious, unrefined, obscene, excrementitious, tainted, insalubrious, abominable, unhallowed and unholy, to name but a few of the many words that have been created to give vent to what humanity think of the profane, the scatological and unsociable, as we have seen when anything considered disgusting was tentatively introduced into academia. Yet to dare to be true uncovers the convoluted subterfuge of years of ecocide in the name of purgation of what has also been termed beastliness, and the malodorous and the less than human. 'Dare to be true; nothing can need a lie. The fault that needs one most grows two thereby.'<sup>29</sup>

'The creation of multiple meanings is deeply threatening to patriarchy.... One cannot help but be struck by the enormous amount of effort expended, of sustained cooperative work performed and of oppression and violence done in the creation and maintenance of social dichotomies.'<sup>30</sup>

It is not only patriarchy that has felt threatened by ambiguity. James Nelson wrote that when people feel awkward about their bodies and find them embarrassing at times and take refuge in the 'higher ' matters' of spirit, everyone is in danger of losing the basic human emotions of caring which he considers to be the essence of

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<sup>28</sup> William Blake, *To See A World* in Untermeyer, *op cit.* p.305

<sup>29</sup> George Herbert, *Dare To Be True* in Untermeyer, *op.cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Nancy Jay, 'Gender And Dichotomy' *Feminist Studies* 7 No 1 (1981) pp.49-50



the Christian life.<sup>31</sup> The reclaiming of the bodily expressions of care and the bodily accepting paradigm of the Christian life are also vital to many reformist Christian feminist theologies and their sterling empowering paradigms need expanding here in more detail.

### THE GROWTH OF FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

The feminist theological movement which burgeoned in the 1960s has continued to flourish into diverse avenues of thought. Hence the pluralisation used when referring to the richness of ideas contained within the many voices and many bodies contributing to the issues arising from the lives of all women in the world. Controversies and differences arose in the perception of the term woman, of economic realities, ethnic origins as well as religious propensities and concepts. The different social situations of women meant that the early valorization arising from women's experience in order to make generalisations and reified concepts about women's lives had to be modified.

The unfolding of ideas emanating from perceptual awareness in the present embodied situatedness of women's lives mirrors the process of unfolding of ideas that Merleau- Ponty exposes as integral to the perceptual view of embodiment. The ambiguities and contradictions that are often present when humanity meets the other and the environment cannot always be cloaked in blanket terms. But Merleau - Ponty shows that we can describe them but not always explain them in dogmatic terms, and that this is not a failing but the very open opportunity of

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<sup>31</sup> Nelson, *op.cit.* p.23

creative potential. He valorizes the relationality of the encounter rather than the fixed concepts arising from it.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood stress the value of woman's encounter and expand it.

The exploration of her complexity and honouring of the findings are what give rise to the controversies in feminist theologies and this is where the uniqueness of this approach lies. It is in the delighted and joy-filled continued unfolding of the nature of woman and the divine, not in the hard, removed and objective controversies found in more patriarchal types of theology.<sup>33</sup>

Thus feminist theologies also began to value the diversity of thought arising from an openness to unfolding thought in each and every encounter as a strength rather than a weakness in method. Honouring complexity in perceptual awareness Merleau-Ponty paved the way for this kind of receptivity and dependence on the environment through intersubjectivity.

Feminist theologies arise from the lives of all women and are aimed at expanding those lives through justice-seeking and right-relation, this is an embodied activity which loses all credibility when confined to the page.<sup>34</sup>

Despite this distrust of dogma and the ongoing debates within Christian feminist theologies there are convergences of thought that have succeeded in bringing women back into the arena of mainstream Christian theological reflection; citing the body, especially the female body, as a place of discrimination, the location of multilayered fears and oppression but also of transgression, creativity and a more inclusive idea of beauty. This is the beauty of love and connectedness

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<sup>32</sup> See Merleau- Ponty in 'Philosophical Method' in *chapter one*

<sup>33</sup> Marcella Althaus- Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (London:SCM, 2007), p.3

<sup>34</sup> *Op cit.* p.2

unfolding all the difficulties, ambivalent passions and trials of being human in the encompassing and multilayered experience of being in God's creation.

As each layer is peeled back, more delights, more glorious revealing of the reality of women will be shown—the joys and sorrows, the exaltation and the agony-but in this is the struggle- the continued struggle of feminist theologies to give voice to a more just and open world.<sup>35</sup>

Keeping close to the ambiguities ensured that the kaleidoscope of voices have re-evaluated years of misogyny and male privilege, reclaiming the lives of many women in the tradition, especially those whose roles have been concealed, considered secondary to men or denigrated. Lisa Isherwood writes of the successes of many of the different voices of feminist theologies which emerge through what she describes as the smoke of backlash and marginalisation of the area of study itself in academia. It has,

developed hermeneutical disciplines, ethical disciplines. ....pushed for ordination, given women back a sense of the goodness of the body, delved into multiculturalism and postcolonial discourse ...opened up worship and many forms of spirituality, it has taken seriously the pagan traditions and embraced the positive nature of goddess religion.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover the creative diversity within feminist theologies has expanded theology's exploration in many different areas, in eco/ theology and in the philosophy of religion, challenging its male biased abstract rational thinking,<sup>37</sup> and set a precedent for other marginalised groups to challenge and see the links between many kinds of bodily oppressions. Isherwood continues to point out that

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<sup>35</sup> *Op.cit.* p.3

<sup>36</sup> Isherwood, and McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology, op.cit.* p.151

<sup>37</sup> See Beverley Clack, *Misogyny In The Western Philosophical Tradition A Reader* (London, Basingstoke:Macmillan,1999)

it has challenged women's health programmes, the sex industry, looked at the controversial question of gender from many different angles and encouraged people to perceive at depth the way their values and activities have been shaped according to masculinist discourse. 'Now there can no longer be any excuse that the churches do not recognise inclusive language,' nor can the church continue to ignore the fact that women too have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and received revelations for there has been a mass of crusading women, once encouraged, eager to say what God has revealed to them in their lived experience, affirming that they are also made in the image of God.

Many Christian feminist theologies have offered therapy for the present, assertiveness training, healing of the past, suspicion of power but most of all they have offered the love and friendship of Christ as solidarity with the silenced. They have offered hope for the future. 'Feminisms of all shades have taken away the excuses that polite males used to keep women out of the systems.'<sup>38</sup> The explosion of women's writing on the body testifies to the confidence that feminist theologies have given to many women to reflect on their bodies in a new way. Some feminists have offered a visceral perspective that incorporates the very material reality of a life lived as a woman through, not only the pains and pleasures of menarche, menstruation, mothering and menopause, but also through the bodily delights of creativity, artistry, poetry, dance and music.

A holistic reconnection of the body and spirit has been sought, allowing that which has been denigrated to be voiced and celebrated. Some of the work of female poets, artists and dramatists are now exposing even the stark realities of the authentically lived female body; insights increasingly used for theological

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<sup>38</sup> *Op.cit.*

reflection. Their approach of reclaiming and looking anew at their own bodies, rejecting the layers of repression and ambiguity that has been inherent in the tradition, has taken their reflection into the arenas of the political, the economic and the spiritual, indeed into the grounding structures of both church and society.

<sup>39</sup> Such potential for transformation emerging from new views of embodiment should be a vibrant resource within the Christian tradition, a faith with incarnation as its central message.

‘Incarnation, by which we mean that which we call divine, is redeemingly present in and between people and nature.’ <sup>40</sup>

### THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

However, disgust and fear have often blocked the feminist journey in the institutional church. While the many voices of feminism have been striving for many years, using different mediums, to establish the integrity and dignity of women’s lives, women in the church have taken some time to catch up with their work and action; to voice the pains of women in a tradition that neglected the egalitarian principles of the early church. <sup>41</sup> Suppression of women’s experience and participation is a powerful means of ensuring supremacy, and such measures have methodically excluded women from theological agency. The vitality of women’s faith, revering and reflecting on their bodily experience, needs to be

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<sup>39</sup> See Sands, *op.cit.* Sands welcomes the aesthetic work of feminists resisting classical theology which she says has a habit of ‘damning its others as demons or whitewashing them with neutrality.’ P.137

<sup>40</sup> Stuart and Isherwood expand the implications of the incarnation for more inclusive perspectives on the body in *Introducing Body Theology op.cit* p.10

<sup>41</sup> See Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory Of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction Of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983) Also *The Discipleship Of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ecclesiology Of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993 )

recalled and re-assembled out of the distorted somatic legacy of patriarchal frameworks within the tradition.

Christian history is the history of patriarchy and even misogyny, and as such feminist analysis needs to be brought to bear on it, not only to show its bias but also to reclaim women's story.<sup>42</sup>

Because of the ingrained repulsion of the female body in the tradition it has taken longer in a religious context to reclaim its beauty and worth, to affirm in prayer, ritual, liturgy and Christian praxis that the female form has the right to nurture self-esteem and the encompassing love of God in their lives. However, the various ways that feminist theologies and theology have challenged the embedded dualities of flesh/spirit, profanity/sacred and male/female, which pervade the Christian practices of the west, have all expanded the language of the material and the visceral bringing this into liturgy, often in alternative spaces. Recognising that the absence and fear of the lived body in the tradition has exacerbated their oppression, some have refused to surrender to a dearth of 'thickness'<sup>43</sup> in theological reflection.

Feminist theologies have developed increasing ecological and embodied awareness of creation's processes as a site of knowledge and sacrality, and their call for the goodness of creation, of being itself, have sent waves of renewal which refuse to be muffled. Through all the spectrum of feminism from secular, pagan, reformist and radical, from theology to feminist ecomysticism, its call for a breakdown of dominating images of God and creation in favour of appreciation and cooperation with all that is, is good news for a greater acceptance

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<sup>42</sup> Isherwood, and McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology op.cit.* p.101

<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty's term for the complexity of perception *op.cit.*

of bodies and the body of the earth. Ecofeminism opens up further avenues for new inclusivity.

### ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminist theology makes explicit the link between the denigration of the female body and the indifference to the balance and interdependence of the eco/system. It combines its critique and concern for the sacredness of creation with justice for women.

‘Ecological theology explores what promotes healthy interaction within this sacred web and what disrupts it-- usually through human greed and violence....ecofeminism focuses on the lost connection between the domination of women and the domination of the earth.’<sup>44</sup>

It seeks to re-member, to glue together what has been lost in human relations and the web of life. It is concerned with the religious representations of creation that succeed or fail to recognise humanity’s dependence on nature. ‘Time and time again it is the neat and ordered theories of human beings which have come to grief against the intractability of the observational evidence.’<sup>45</sup> There is a multitude of social attitudes which create illusions about human invulnerability and a harbouring of ‘attitude’ toward nature. Indeed much of humanity should be issued with an ASBO for its treatment of other creatures and nature, but no such legislation protects them.

Ecofeminist theology has felt the pain of nature keenly and brought a new vitality into neglected spiritual and ecological perspectives, embracing a

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<sup>44</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* pp.123-4 in 1974 Françoise D’Eaubonne coined the term ‘ecofeminism.’ Heather Eaton writes that ecofeminism offers ‘a lens through which all disciplines are examined and refocused.’ p.124

<sup>45</sup> Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion* (Oxford, MA:Blackwell,1999), p.220

diversity of women from all over the world, from different social situations and ethnic origins who bring insights from the struggles of very basic existence to restore the value of what has often been denigrated as the mundane, into the realm of theology. Schneider writes of the multiplicity of these realms of existence.....

where these experiences imply heretical multiplicity, uncompromising embodiment, tradition, oneness, unlimitedness, profound everyday finite particularity, resilient absurdity, magnificent otherness, alarming intimacy, shape, coherence, transience or even imaginative play.<sup>46</sup>

Their celebrations and laments in the midst of natural processes substantially resist images of the mannered, pure body as they peer over into what has always been feared as a negative world. Can such exploration, using the insights gained from feminist praxis and ecological wisdom, begin to challenge disgust and bring liberation?

## LIBERATION

Feminist theologies arose out of situations of oppression and one of the primary motivations behind their innovative springboards of reflection was the intention to be a liberation theology, that is, to deconstruct unjust social structures, institutions and attitudes which damage women's lives. Praxis in the furtherance of these aims is still of paramount importance for, as Gorringer writes, 'the priority of praxis is a shibboleth' in liberation theology. Nothing less than the unmaking and

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<sup>46</sup> Laurel Schneiders, *Reimagining The Divine* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1998), p.85



remaking of people's lives is envisaged.<sup>47</sup> Leonardo Boff describes praxis as the 'complex of practices orientated to the transformation of society, the making of history.'<sup>48</sup> For feminist theologian, Carter Heyward, this liberating power to transform is divine energy. 'Divinity and the humanity created in its image is a spirit of radical mutuality that is constantly liberating and forever creative.'<sup>49</sup>

Such liberation and praxis are vital to people with disabilities who believe, 'what matters most in identifying disability is identifying the difficulties people face in surviving and contributing to their societies.'<sup>50</sup> Yet illness experiences, as with any tectonic eruption, so often fail to register or be identified as part of normative life.

You never suspected what lay hidden in yourself and in the world, you were living contentedly at the periphery of things when suddenly those feelings of suffering which are second only to death itself take hold of you and transport you into a region of infinite complexity where your subjectivity tosses you about in a maelstrom.<sup>51</sup>

The able body has limits to its ability to imagine life with a vulnerable body; the concept of disability and the way to change attitudes to it, is still a relatively untrodden area, it is still conceived simply and merely as deficit rather than difference despite the social theory of the disability rights movement 'Quality of life leads to knowing ways to see how people can be enabled rather than be seen

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<sup>47</sup> Timothy Gorringer, 'Liberation Ethics' In Robin Gill (ed) *The Cambridge Companion To Christian Ethics* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.128

<sup>48</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Theology And Praxis* (Maryknoll:Orbis,1987), p.6

<sup>49</sup> Carter Heyward, *God In The Balance* (Ohio:Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.73

<sup>50</sup> Anita Silvers, 'The Crooked Timber Of Humanity: Disability Ideology And The Aesthetic.' In Mairian Corker And Tom Shakespeare (eds) *Disability/ Postmodernity* (London, New York:Continuum, 2002), p.242

<sup>51</sup> Cioran, *op.cit.* p.5

and kept disabled,'<sup>52</sup> write Brown and Brown in their indepth study on a positive, liberatory approach to disability. They emphasize again and again that the illumination that arose from identifying with improving life for the disabled, led to a paradigm shift to what is possible for all people and creatures. This illumination was an appreciation of being itself with all its vulnerable experiences and was applicable to all, whether ablebodied or disabled. 'Really we are talking about everyone.'<sup>53</sup>

Similarly the 'attentive loving eye' is one opposed to the 'arrogant 'eye which controls and objectifies. McFague writes that it is a view that is 'necessary for everyone's life at a deeper level of appreciation.'<sup>54</sup> We become more authentically human and see ourselves connected to the flesh of others and nature. 'When we use our terms of comparison to shut off any understanding of our connections with one another as human beings we risk becoming less than human ourselves.'<sup>55</sup> More exposure, more attention and more wonder at the diversity of nature can change the way creation is approached. As Anita Silvers writes, 'to change attitudes, it is not enough to demonstrate such negative attitudes; deeper more expansive views of creation must be encouraged' so that people can break free of destructive attitudes in existential as well as political

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<sup>52</sup> Ivan Brown and Roy L Brown, *Quality Of Life And Disability* (London, New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003), pp.251-252

<sup>53</sup> *Op.cit.* p.10

<sup>54</sup> SallieMcFague's term for a new appreciation of nature in *Life Abundant* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 2001)

<sup>55</sup> Martha Minow, *Making All The Difference* ( Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.7

ways. 'By reshaping beauty into a more expansive idea the issue of disability can be revitalised.'<sup>56</sup> By appreciating non-uniformity all creatures can be valued.

Silvers writes of her own expanded aesthetic view. 'To view anomalously configured people as we do novel art, we must appreciate them both as originals and as heirs of human biological history.'<sup>57</sup> In full unabated approbation of the incarnation humanity is challenged to expand its appreciation of the givenness of existence of all being, however frightening, unappealing or disgusting it might be termed at times. In voicing the everyday experiences of the lived body, feminist theologies have cleared a space for people to think of the incarnation on their own terms, in words relevant to the pleasures and pains of their own bodies, and not just those dictated by institutions and dogmas. 'The embodied Christ is emerging in many forms and in each incarnation issues are addressed and the creative/ redemptive space expanded.'<sup>58</sup> Liberation and inclusivity become rallying cries in this bellicose and grounded defiance.

### DIVINITY

Feminist thought which has made the link between patriarchal systems and the male God, between power and deity,<sup>59</sup> has experimented with many different models of God/ goddess. Often, as Raphael writes, it 'does not intend the literal application of any of its images but borrows spiritually nourishing images and

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<sup>56</sup> Silvers, *op.cit.*

<sup>57</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>58</sup> Isherwood, *op.cit.* 2001 pp.69-70

<sup>59</sup> Mary Daly, 'If God is male, male is God' *Beyond God The Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973)

transforms their meaning in a Christian context.’<sup>60</sup> Such models can range from the divine as goddess in theology, God as right relation, (Walsh) God as shalom of being, (Ruether) God as source of redeeming connection, (Grey) God as the lure to release new connections (Keller) and God as the power of compassion, (Farley)<sup>61</sup> as well as Heyward’s God as *dunamis*, ‘the current that flows between us, empowering us to insist on justice and love for all.’<sup>62</sup> Ruether writes that there is no adequate name for the true God/ess, and the limitations of human concepts are illuminated as we emerge ‘from false naming of God/ess modelled on patriarchal alienation.’<sup>63</sup> Such emergence, it is hoped, can include liberation and fresh understandings of the beauties as well as the tragedy of embodiment within the body of Christ. ‘Feminist renaming of God must come not only from the academy but from those numerous places where women are engaged in the struggles and joys of becoming.’<sup>64</sup>

The task to incorporate more of life’s ‘shocking elements’ into human understandings of God explicitly challenges the tide of exploitation and domination arising from an exclusive patriarchal image of divinity which has had such a deleterious effect on the planet as well as on relationality. ‘We can no longer see our well being or our dignity as divorced in any real sense from that of

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<sup>60</sup> Melissa Raphael, ‘Models of God’ In Lisa Isherwood, and Dorothea Mc Ewan, (eds) *An A- Z of Feminist Theology* (Sheffield:Sheffield University Press,1996), p.148

<sup>61</sup> All these popular praxis oriented models of God are cited in Mary Grey, *The Wisdom Of Fools* (London:SPCK,1993), p.8

<sup>62</sup> Carter Heyward, *The Redemption Of God* (Lanham:University Press Of America,1989), p.18

<sup>63</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism And God - Talk Towards A Feminist Theology* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1983), p. 71

<sup>64</sup> Raphael, *op.cit.* p.149

the whole earth household.’<sup>65</sup> In their scathing condemnation of patriarchal superiority, biased rationalism, masculinist images of God alone and monopoly of male priesthood, the institutional church has come under intense critique from feminist theologies. ‘Rationalists are priests busily ruling out, cleaning up the filth, expelling people, purifying bodies or ideas.’<sup>66</sup> Indeed because of this common thread running through some of the branches of feminist theologies this work dips into their spectrum of colourful and creative attempts to reclaim what has been so readily expelled. ‘The conclusion that traditional theology misrepresents the divine and does damage to women (and all that is not designated ‘man’) is widely dispersed throughout feminist literature.’<sup>67</sup>

From a Christian ecofeminist theological stance, open to a cross fertilisation of women’s writings, this work argues for inclusive Christological understandings, enlarging the Christ figure and the redemptive possibilities of the body lived in different ways; as different as, ‘God as a spastic child who can communicate nothing but his presence and his inarticulate wanting.’<sup>68</sup> This freedom to reimage the divine in the most feared of lived experience creates a larger sacred canopy encompassing fears and phobias. Paul Matthews writes that ‘everything we do refers to our ownmost existential predicament.’<sup>69</sup> Western theology has inherited a ‘constitutive fantasy of our virtue, our beauty, our spiritual light,’<sup>70</sup> which on its

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<sup>65</sup> Anne Primavesi, ‘Theology And Earth System Science’ In Susan Parsons (ed) *Challenging Women’s Orthodoxies In The Context Of Faith* (Aldershot:Ashgate, 2000), p.2

<sup>66</sup> Captain Ahab,cited in Keller, *op.cit.* 2003 Chapter 8

<sup>67</sup> Schneiders, *op.cit.* p.25

<sup>68</sup> Rowan Williams, cited in *The ‘Times’* Saturday October 26th 2002

<sup>69</sup> Paul Matthews, *The Revelation Of Nature* (Aldershot,Burlington:Ashgate, 2001), p.4

<sup>70</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* p.201

own amounts to a dislike of the more basic elements of life. God as perfection in this perspective functions as pure escapism. Many people think they are attracted by the ideals of a perfect God when in fact they are only disgusted by humanity.

The second Christian commandment to love your neighbour as yourself should perhaps be interpreted as, learn about and love yourself so that you can love others. (Matthew 22:39) The unsavoury facts of our existence, human preventative measures, reflections and avoidance techniques have limited divine reality to the perfect male, and human worth to the most superlative aspects of the positive world created as counterreality to the feared 'negative' world. Humanity distances itself from the divine and from physicality until it becomes increasingly unable to cope with it and those who represent the negative zone. 'When theologians insist God can only be greater than anything conceived they are in essence limiting God to greatness; nowhere is there a ground from which to affirm specific or embodied presence great or small.'<sup>71</sup>

### GOD IN OUR MIDST

A more amorphous appreciation of divinity is advocated and a greater inclusion of those ideas once discarded as pagan and even occult. If women who try to celebrate the body have been labelled as pagan, then those with disabilities who have raised their voices in ritual have been painted even more darkly, associated with the occult and persecuted in accordance with this, especially as in the witch burnings of the fifteenth century. A pluralistic and more inclusive approach invites previously excluded people to participate in theological reflection. It begins by asking in the political arena what is happening to bodies of

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<sup>71</sup> Schneiders, *op.cit.* p.147

the people of God, those of women and men and also to the body of the planet and to the wider universe? It asks how multinational companies are exploiting the bodies of cheap labour, women and children, the effects of displacement and globalization on children's futures and what colonisation does to indigenous races and the land which they ravage for immediate gains.

Once Christians unite their ethereal ideas of God with the concrete reality of the earth, its vulnerability to pollution and destruction and the reality of the body's needs and desires, a whole new world is opened up; otherworldly reflection is blended and grafted into the here and now, the future of the live new born baby becomes vital; in the hope of the spiritual destination of the soul is synonymous with the vitality of the present. 'What ever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' (Matthew 25:45) The feminist attempt to cast the net wide, to break through theological barriers of the profane and heretical, though often considered eclectic, draws together the various ingenious ways women aim to bring the everyday untidiness of the lived experience, of those marginalised because of their 'unruly' bodies, into the realm of divine reality once more. This is not to make the world or theology woman centred but to balance and include the perspectives of all perplexities. Feminist worship and ritual emerges from a 'longing in the pews' writes Joy Bussart.

It is communal and individual, it is traditional and post traditional and sometimes a syncretic combination of both. Yet most importantly it results in a transformative experience of the alleged divinity that confounds traditional negations of referential association.<sup>72</sup>

Taking the lead from Keller's theomic theology one is probing the depths and the spaces in between order, searching for a God that is beyond categories yet

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<sup>72</sup> Joy Bussart, cited in Schneiders, *op.cit.* p.126

infuses, perforates and percolates into all of creation rather as yeast penetrates into bread. 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour and mixed it into a dough.' (Matthew 13:33) Such things remain elusive to attempts to systemize them. The magic of the yeast in dough is the catalyst, the folding in of the vital ingredient to the raw materials. God in all, but not confined to it. On these lines Gorringer criticises any theology that cannot accept this magic ingredient and eruption of creativity. 'The impossible thing about systems is that they impose too neat a structure on the untidiness and messiness of reality not to mention of the freedom of God, they are free of surprises.'<sup>73</sup>

Far from creating a particular category or system of theological reflection on the divine and the vulnerable body this study has been intent to investigate a rough hewn, aesthetic or mystical approach to them with the aid of feminist narrative, art, drama and mysticism, borrowing from a wide variety of sources and reflection on embodiment. If the issue of the fluctuating and unknown entity which is the body demands a complex turn about; a volte face, theological reflection must be so as well and it is Christianity at its 'immanent best' when it can address both the pleasures and pains of the body.'<sup>74</sup> 'Feminist liberation theologies will always ground divine immanent presence in a privileged manner in suffering bodies and witness to the experience of God even in chaos, mess, disorder and disruption,' writes Mary Grey, yet there is much scope for this to be taken further.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Tim Gorringer, Karl Barth, *Against Hegemony* (Oxford, New York:Oxford University Press,1999), p.282

<sup>74</sup> An expression used by Melissa Raphael to argue that theology can sometimes overstate its case against Christianity and neglect varied Christian discourse about God's presence in the midst of life's exigencies. In *An Introduction To Theology* (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press,1999), p.58

<sup>75</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* p.97



Quakers make everyday concerns very much also spiritual concerns, making little distinction between the sacred and profane. 'It is in the trivia of visits to the doctor and shopping for food and the daily coming to terms with life that we most faithfully show our religious and ethical commitment.'<sup>76</sup> The explicitness of these visits to the doctor, the trivia which sometimes turn out to be life threatening and painful are all issues which need to be stated, the indepth, underlying strata of daily life rather than the superficial friendliness or sociality of some churches. This kind of interrelationality can be compared to the way billiard balls touch lightly and then go off into separate pockets. Christian relationality should be considered more as a journey in which one travels and finds the Christ, the one always moving around and dealing with matters and people as he found them in their own contexts.<sup>77</sup> Christian spirituality brought out into the community in this way becomes expanded once again through a plethora of new symbols and sacral opportunities. As Althaus -Reid writes, the whole,

Christological process starts not with the first meetings of church councils but with the construction of Christ, the Messiah, a process that depends on the interrelationality between a man called Jesus and a community of women, men and children.<sup>78</sup>

As the ordinary is viewed with new eyes and becomes the extraordinary, drama, art and mysticism promote amazement and greater depth of awareness to potentially meaningful aspects of experiences long considered as disgusting or terrifying. Isanon writes that spirituality can be transformed through this greater

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<sup>76</sup> Scully, *op.cit.* p.97

<sup>77</sup> See Rita Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology Of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988)

<sup>78</sup> Marcella Althaus- Reid, 'The Indecency Of Her Teaching: Notes For A Cureb Teaching Of Feminist Theology In Europe' In Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza And Shawn Copeland, (eds) *Feminist Theology In Different Contexts* (London: SCM Press, 1996), p.136

openness and awareness, moving, 'from knowledge to wisdom, from power to vulnerability, from pride to humility, from security to abandonment, from boredom to wonder.'<sup>79</sup> Foster writes that, far from arising from wisdom, much past polemic about bodies, has arisen from androcentric, able-bodied medical perspectives which, she writes, have often betrayed a lack of knowledge about the specific differences of women's bodies and any deviation from the male norm.<sup>80</sup> 'Incompetence can be as damaging as wickedness and is a lot more common.'<sup>81</sup> Alternative, knowledgeable, biophilic perspectives are needed. 'The more we know about what is there and how it works the more we can perhaps know about God.'<sup>82</sup>

#### INCARNATIONAL THEOLOGY

These biophilic perspectives are perhaps what is meant by the terms the 'breathtaking' or terrifying implications of incarnation, that some feminists have been describing recently; God taking human form and embracing all the embodiment that human form can take, with all its genetic inheritance?<sup>83</sup> Keller believes so for she writes that 'a theomic theology derives the incarnation from the chaotic width of the creation.'<sup>84</sup> Expanding the incarnation to all matter challenges all phobias about nature, disability or physical processes for it brings

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<sup>79</sup> Isanon, *op.cit.* p.119

<sup>80</sup> See Peggy Foster, *Women And The Healthcare Industry:An Unhealthy Relationship* (Buckingham, Bristol:Open University Press,1995)

<sup>81</sup> Scully, *op.cit.* p.92

<sup>82</sup> Sara Maitland, *A Big Enough God:Artful Theology* (London:Mowbray, 2002), p.14

<sup>83</sup> Mary Grey writes that feminist theology's 'breathtaking physicality of some of the language used still tends to shock but did humanity ever understand the implications of God's risk taking in the mystery of Incarnation?' *Introducing Feminist Images Of God* (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p.5

<sup>84</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* p.19

the divine back to the root of all that is. Everything and everyone becomes an awesome aspect of being.

If we took for granted that divinity that which is most respected and valued..means mutuality, bodiliness, diversity and materiality... then whether we believed such a concept of God was instantiated, whether or not we clung to a realist stance, the implications for our thoughts and lives would be incalculable.<sup>85</sup>

What a sense of excitement these words instil, creating empowering vision for those whose passion and agency have not been permitted to blossom. The notions of what it means to be human are expanded along with other creatures and the natural environment. They have the power to enrich the tradition with the forgotten experiences of all long excluded humanity and non humanity from mainstream theology. Grey writes that,

ecofeminism advocates, listening, watching, attending to all phenomena as revelatory of the mystery of God everywhere, observing both beauty's flaws and its perfection, receiving moments of vision, valuing the uniqueness of this moment, this place... to a new understanding of innocence, complexity, diversity and intricacy.<sup>86</sup>

This is Christianity crossing alien lines, perhaps into the unique worlds of blindness, Asperger's syndrome, disease or learning difficulties, into the tainted oceans, the suffering of creatures and landscapes and even the plants without which humanity would suffer from lack of oxygen. Much traditional reflection on nature has had either a romantic or as Grey describes it, a Walt Disney<sup>87</sup> view of nature, or else has had a callous attitude to it, regarding it as disposable material

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<sup>85</sup> Grace Jantzen, *op.cit.* p.269

<sup>86</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* p.168

<sup>87</sup> *Op.cit.* p.161

for humanity's pleasure, instrumentally but not intrinsically worthy. Instrumental reflections are unmistakeable, they have a blinkered look about them that never allow in the abnormal, the disgusting or the viral, they skirt around the awkward or the scatological, filtering them from consciousness; one often comes up against them at church when ecology is mentioned. It is almost as if only certain aspects of creation really fit the bill when it comes to a spiritual appreciation of God's world.

In the face of the chaotic many will return to structural order before justice. In traditional theology, order has often been synonymous with holiness, chaos with the sacrilegious. The transforming Christ who was made manifest in the life of Jesus was also shocking and subversive, and many of the taboos of his day were transgressed in order that a fuller picture of the glory of God could be seen. 'The kingdom that Jesus strove for was not a walled in paradise of like-minded and socially cloned individuals, it extended justice and dignity to all, especially the outcasts.'<sup>88</sup> Christian feminism reclaims some of these subversive practices of Jesus.<sup>89</sup> 'Many who are first will be last and the last first.' (Mark 10:31)

Indeed Christianity, according to Williams, has the flexibility to embrace all of life's exigencies, the depth of mysticism to realign itself with the constant flux and instability of the cosmos and of bodily life. The Christian creed and the Christian vision have within them a hope

and a richness that can embrace and transfigure all the complexities of human life. This confidence can rightly sit alongside a patient willingness to learn from others in

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<sup>88</sup> Isherwood, 2001 *op.cit.* p.70

<sup>89</sup> See Fiorenza, *op.cit.* 1993

the ordinary encounters of life together in our varied society.<sup>90</sup>

But the innumerable accounts of suffering on the earth raise a whole host of questions for theology and hope can appear as an impossible dream. Can the body of believers who are Christic community in the world deal with the age old difficulty of theodicy? Can feminist theologies analyse in greater depth the fear of suffering, face the tehom and also offer hope to those who suffer in order to create an expanded ecomysticism which could face some of the difficulties that the earth and its inhabitants now face?

### A FEMINIST THEODICY

A feminist theodicy is a reflection on pain and suffering in the light of Christian faith using the tools of feminist theologies. It points to the necessity to reflect authentically on the experience of it in the light of faith discourse and emphasizes the difference that such experience can make to images of the divine. Some women's writings on the shift from the intellectual to the more moral stance in theodicy will be examined to explore and expand feminist consciousness on what has been termed the negative world which are the major contributions that women's narratives and experiences bring to their faith.

Theodicy coming from the Greek for God (Theos) and Justice (Dike) seeks to demonstrate that God is just, despite the existence of suffering. It is concerned with a 'fair deal for God,' writes Walter Brueggemann,<sup>91</sup> though it gives just as much scope to those sceptics who argue that the good, theistic God could not exist if he is powerful enough to rid the world of suffering and yet chooses not to. It

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<sup>90</sup> Rowan Williams, 'My Task --To Point ToThe Source.' *Church Times* 26 July 2002 p.23

<sup>91</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Message Of The Psalms* (Minneapolis:Augsberg Press, 1984), p.170

tends to be thought of, writes Kenneth Surin, as the ‘problem’ of evil or the problem of God in the midst of suffering.<sup>92</sup>

David Hume’s famous dictum<sup>93</sup> in the eighteenth century that God is either able to eliminate evil but not willing, so is malevolent, or he is willing and not able, so is impotent, sums up the early traditional difficulties in theodicy in its struggle to preserve God’s goodness and power at the same time.<sup>94</sup> Feminist reaction to this is not to see the problem of God so much as the freely participative God /human relation in the very midst of the suffering experience itself. The emphasis is very much more on the function of God and less to do with the preservation of divine ontological status. The problem of preserving God’s controlling omnipotence and omniscience over humanity is more of an intellectual topic than a guide for the practical eradication of evil. The substance of God does not interest the disabled weekly worshipper so much as the Christian integrity, love and support that overflows into help and love.

Feminist theodicy reads more like an anthropodicy, the importance of human agency in the context of suffering. The veil of soul making argument put forward by John Hick, that evil and suffering are necessary for moral progress, (that a certain amount of suffering drives humanity on to better things and a greater good arises) is still a persuasive argument in some (possibly ablebodied) theological circles. In such situations, says Grace Jantzen, it is usually the white,

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<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Surin, ‘The Problem Of Evil’ In Alister McGrath, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia Of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford:Mass Blackwell,1993), p.192

<sup>93</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues, Concerning Natural Religion* (New York:Harper, 1984)(1779), p.66

<sup>94</sup> It is not possible in a study of this size to review the many excellent writings on traditional theodicy. See Richard Sparks for a clear typology of the diversity of theodices throughout the tradition. See ‘Suffering’ in Michael Downey, (ed)*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville:The Liturgical Press,1993), pp.950-3

privileged and wealthy who benefit from the moral lessons of disasters and evil while those who suffer are expendable in the process. 'Are those who suffer the same as those who make moral progress? Those who are dead or mad or utterly demoralized cannot make moral progress.'<sup>95</sup> Feminist theologies argue that the philosophical question of evil in the face of the omnipotent God takes reflection away from the cause, source and reality of the evil and its prevention or alleviation into a transcendent realm of abstract thought which detracts from the practical struggle and matters in hand. Jantzen writes that the philosophical questions could soon be settled in active engagement with those who are in the process of suffering.

If we dare to face the other the intellectual questions will come thick and fast in such contexts and the plausibility of answers will immediately be tested. There is much less scope for disengaged gymnastics and much less patience with answers trotted out by privileged academics.<sup>96</sup>

A feminist theodicy takes strong embodied images, ones that do not shy away from 'the patterned operation of seeing, touching, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulation, reflection, marshalling and weighing the evidence, judging, evaluating, and deciding, speaking, writing.'<sup>97</sup> All are bodily movements involving an expressive unity, concrete and involved in community, seeking to avoid those questions of suffering which do nothing to alleviate the pain. Isanon writes that it is the help and washing at bathtime with severely autistic<sup>98</sup> people that is the time to relate to them in a sacrament of dignity, touch and closeness.

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<sup>95</sup> Grace Jantzen, *op.cit.* p.260

<sup>96</sup> *Op.cit.* p.262

<sup>97</sup> Emilie Townes, *A Troubling In My Soul: Womanist Perspectives On Evil And Suffering* (Maryknoll, New York:Orbis Books,1993), p.123

<sup>98</sup> Isanon, *op.cit.* p.121

Jantzen also argues that traditional theodicy has deflected the more important questions of domination and subjugation, which have caused immeasurable amounts of suffering. Feminist theologies expand the question of evil to ask about human responsibility, the effects of uneven power in church and society and the collusion of religious authorities in their narrow definitions of suffering. Jantzen's impression of traditional theodicy is one that leads people to a 'detached intellectual perspective, as privileged onlookers, than that in solidarity with those in suffering.'<sup>99</sup> Where is the passion, love and tenderness that suffering cries out for?

What unites networks of groups against hierarchical, clerical, male absolutist and elitist models of church is a sense that traditional forms of imagining God and styles of worship fail to ignite the fire that turns the human spirit to deeper faith and action.<sup>100</sup>

Thus, much feminist writing on suffering tends to avoid generalised and abstract notions of natural evil and pain, they focus on experience and wisdom which will lead to some concrete movement and healing, having first asked about the context of the suffering situation, who are the sufferers, who caused it, how can one respond in the light of faith and with love. It also asks how traditional religion hinders or helps the situation? God becomes a power alongside the struggle for healing and justice and one does not have the time or inclination to ask if God 'allows' evil or is 'able' to heal it.

In this practical vogue a schema is suggested for exploring the many different ways women introduce empathy, compassion and love into situations of unavoidable suffering as well as anger and justice making in the situations of

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<sup>99</sup> Jantzen, *op.cit.* p.263

<sup>100</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* 2000 p.14



suffering which are avoidable. This schema is loosely adapted from the categories listed in Kristine Rankka's indepth study of some the theological insights that have emerged from the writings on women's suffering and it puts forward various approaches which can be drawn on to compile a feminist theodicy<sup>101</sup> to incorporate into a feminist ecomysticism.

#### A Reconsiderations of evil

Valerie Saiving wrote in the 1970's that sin has been gender specific and that feminists needed to rename evil and renounce the pervasive effects of the Fall. She stated that the sins named by the early church fathers were very much those of the privileged elite, pride and avarice and these were less applicable to those women from whom power and pride had been taken long ago.<sup>102</sup> Sin lay more in the passivity with which women allowed their power to be stolen from them. Carol Christ asks what woman today cannot identify with 'the image of the naked Eve, cowering in shame before an angry, male God?' The occasion marks the beginning of women's attempt at autonomy and self expression which became forever associated with disability; the heavily weighted bodily punishment meted out in the Genesis story? 'Female will, the sense of all evil and the naked female are all part of the same equation.'<sup>103</sup> Evil, disgust and bodily suffering became

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<sup>101</sup> Kristine Rankka, *Women And The Value Of Suffering* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), pp.58-60

<sup>102</sup> Valerie Saiving, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View' In Judith Plaskow And Carol Christ, (eds) *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader In Religion* (San Francisco: Harper And Row, 1979), pp.25-42

<sup>103</sup> Carol Christ, *Rebirth Of The Goddess: Finding Meaning In Feminist Spirituality* (Reading, MA: Addison -Wesley, 1997), p.22

<sup>104</sup> See Armstrong, *op.cit.*

synonymous and bodily punishment became a 'natural' route for the church fathers to mete out to women.<sup>104</sup>

Following Saiving's lead, evil and sin have been substantially re-evaluated by feminist theologies. All that deters a woman from claiming her own power and delight in her body is a sin, all that undermines justice in people's lives that prevents them from living life in abundance, that denies their humanity and subjugates them to others is evil. Evil emerges from personal action but also from systemic structures of oppression and domination. Personal sin occurs within contexts that are already shaped by distorted relationships between men and women, between the ablebodied and the disabled, between different races and between the powerful and the powerless as well as between humans and creatures. These systemic evils hinder good relations, the flourishing of bodies, they affect choices and actions without people realising it; so cooperating with and helping to maintain the system of domination and subjugation. Despite this bleak outlook of the pervasiveness of sin within the structures of society, feminist theologies do not think of all humanity as fallen in the Augustinian sense; they refute a view that encourages passivity in the face of evil and sin, any opportunity for fatalism and apathy instead of action.

In spite of the reality of systemic evil which we inherit, which has already biased us before we can choose, we have not lost our ability to choose good rather than evil, and hence our capacity for responsibility.<sup>105</sup>

Brock, in the same way, advocates that, 'all that patriarchal culture has named evil must be reclaimed as part of ourselves--sensuality, change, darkness, self

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<sup>105</sup> Ruether, *op.cit.* 1983 p.182

affirmation, nature, death, passion, woman.’<sup>106</sup> Sin in feminist theologies is most often viewed as distorted or violated relationship, alienation from our true natures which are to be fulfilled in mutual and reciprocal relations with others. Ruether writes that it is time the church changed its ideas about death and finitude, the natural cycles of life; early death is a tragedy but it can be distinguished from the evils that can be eradicated by human justice making.<sup>107</sup> The natural limitations of human life should be named as such and not seen as the consequences of sin or projected onto women.

Once it is possible to separate the often inevitable consequences of the fragility of the body from the injustices that are perpetuated on them with painful consequences it is possible to stop confusion and blame heaped on bodies already hurting. In other words there is a need to separate the pain from avoidable suffering. ‘What is appropriately called sin belongs to that sphere of human freedom where we have the possibility of enhancing life or stifling it.’<sup>108</sup> One must hold in tension the desire to eradicate all forms of pain and suffering if possible with the view that some acceptance of suffering is necessary. Not all bodily suffering can be changed by justice making and political action; there is a time and place to speak out from pain apart and at a distance from the discrimination and evil that unjust social structures impose on human beings. ‘We need courage to say that there are awful things about being disabled, as well as the positive things in which we take pride.’<sup>109</sup> An acceptance of the fragility of life where there is less human freedom but defiance and hope in response to suffering is offered, as we have seen in a tragic vision.

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<sup>106</sup> Brock, *op.cit.* p.59

<sup>107</sup> Ruether, *op.cit.* 2001 p.71

<sup>108</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>109</sup> Morris, *op.cit.* 1993 p.71

Tragedy as a performative art was considered in the last chapter; its vision can be incorporated into a feminist theodicy to illuminate the impotence of women when faced with the tragic reality of social structures, unmerited suffering and helplessness in the midst of limitation and choices which cannot benefit everyone, circumstances which are impossible to understand or change. The responses to these things, voiced in tragic reflection, is a rich resource for Christian ecomysticism. Grey writes that it is time to be rich and diverse in feminist theology about tragedy as a dimension of life because ‘it is one expression of the embodiment of God and it must somehow find its rootedness in the nature and mystery of God.’<sup>110</sup> Oppressed Korean women have described unmerited suffering and powerlessness as ‘han’ and Hyun Young Hak describes this as a somatic experience and reaction.

Han is a sense of unresolved resentment against injustice suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against... a feeling of acute pain and sorrow in one’s guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wiggle.<sup>111</sup>

Chyung Hyun Kyung writes that the effects can often lead to a disintegration of women’s body and spirit, and bodying forth ‘han’ is essential for holistic well being, a process named ‘han-pu ri’ which can be expressed in songs dances and rituals to ‘untangle their complex webs of ‘han.’<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* 2000 p. 86

<sup>111</sup> Hyun Young Hak, ‘Minjing: The Suffering Servant And Hope’ a lecture given at James Memorial Chapel, Union Theological Seminary New York April 13, 1982, p.2

<sup>112</sup> Chyung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle To Be The Sun Again* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p.43

Through resistance women's embodied responses to their pain and tragic circumstances can offer 'some of the paradigms we use to understand suffering and the choices that suffering presents to us.'<sup>113</sup> Wendy Farley attempts to incorporate the tragic vision into her Christian feminism with a realism which faces the effects of processes and the exigencies of life. 'The very structures that make human existence possible make us subject to the destructive power of suffering.'<sup>114</sup> Any work for justice comes up against conflicting values, histories and economic and political situations all dictate one's context before human fault comes into the equation. 'Human beings are not absolved from responsibility, but actions are performed in an environment that is not morally neutral; it is already tainted, disguised, even malevolent.'<sup>115</sup>

Classical tragedy highlights radical suffering; the hero or heroine is innocent and, despite all good intentions, suffers in a world and cosmos which seem indifferent to suffering, in a hostile and meaningless backcloth to good human endeavours. Farley writes how very realistic this is to people's real suffering. Christian theology's primary focus has been on human guilt as the chief cause of alienation but atonement and forgiveness cannot help this kind of alienation, writes Farley, 'it witnesses to the power of absurdity or malice or sheer force.'<sup>116</sup> Newly disabled people speak of their tragedies in correlated terms and women too speak of the incomprehensible break down of relations with the people to whom they were once closely related, who, perhaps without being conscious of

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<sup>113</sup> Larry Bouchard, 'Tragedy' In Thomas Reich (Ed) Rev Ed *The Encyclopedia Of Bioethics* Vol 5 ( New York:Macmillan Library Reference,USA: Simon And Schuster, Macmillan 1995), p.2491

<sup>114</sup> Wendy Farley, *op.cit.* p.29

<sup>115</sup> *Op.cit.* p.25

<sup>116</sup> *Op.cit.* p.24

<sup>117</sup> *Op.cit.*

their fears, become fearful and oppressive. Tragedy expresses the experiences that arise through 'chance, lack of full knowledge, negligence, misjudgement as much as through conscious deeds of malice, oppression and ill-will.'<sup>117</sup>

The responses to tragedy in the dramas studied by Farley highlight the power of the regenerative force of love and hope, for some unexpected or transcendent good is envisaged which makes resistance and hope fulfilling. There is an 'apprehension of ultimate goodness, some good persists that makes defiance of tragedy meaningful.' She writes that 'one is permitted to glimpse something beyond the apparent finality of evil.'<sup>118</sup> Tiina Allik describes this as grace, the often answered request for strength from God in the midst of inescapable pain and suffering. She is realistic about the outside forces which affect people, outside of one's control. These events should make theologians beware of thinking they have all the answers or complete control over the unexpected in such situations. Only grace and love can meet tragedy in the depths of natural evil and suffering. The deeper the tragedy, the more acute the need for and the deeper the experience of the grace of God, providing a context of larger meaning and purpose, comforting strengthening and transforming the situation. The tragic vision, to Allik, is synonymous with the 'need for dependence on God's help for making sense out of evil.'<sup>119</sup>

One becomes as open as Job to a different way of viewing creation. (Job 42:1-8) 'Job's very refusal to give up in the midst of... injustice is presented as the catalyst for a deeper revelation of creation, and ultimately the only possible stance

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<sup>118</sup> *Op.cit.* p.29

<sup>119</sup> Tiina Alik, 'Narrative Approaches To Human Personhood: Agency, Grace And Innocent Suffering' *Philosophy And Theology* 1 (1987), p.327

in the fight for a deeper justice than what happens to be on offer.’<sup>120</sup> This is a defiant ecomysticism, recognising the paradoxical need of humanity to be full of wonder in the face of nature, responsible with regard to the eco/system and to justice as well as open to a more realist understanding of the way creation has been set in motion with all its magnificence, flawed beauty and savagery.

This leaves room to acknowledge, ‘the primal energy of God among the most elemental realities, at the centre of which there is an indestructible power and indestructible joy.’<sup>121</sup> First it is vital to understand more about the way suffering has been traditionally viewed with disgust and fear. Then perhaps new ways of viewing it may be discovered and the disgust reaction challenged.

#### B Critique of traditional attitudes to suffering.

Not only has sin been revitalised but some feminist theologians have been vehement in their rejection of suffering as a necessary component of the Christian experience of redemption. They have made the critique of the glorification of suffering integral to their critique of patriarchal forms of religion for it is mostly women who are supposed to deserve suffering and have been advised to deform their bodies as penance for the fall and to follow Jesus’ sacrifice to atone for the sins for the world. Many of the foremothers of feminist theologies, Rosemary Ruether, Mary Grey, Daphne Hampson, Mary Daly and Carter Heyward have emphasized the disempowering and damaging effects that too much attention on the redemptive qualities of suffering on the cross has had on the bodies of women

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<sup>120</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* 2003 p.163

<sup>121</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *The Book Of Job* (San Francisco:North Point Press,1987), p.xx

and the vulnerable.<sup>122</sup> They have stressed the vital importance of challenging the atonement and retribution theories of redemption whereby God can forgive human sins because of Christ's ransom of suffering flesh to appease God's anger.

While those like Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson have radically left behind such tenets of Christianity, other feminist theologians have wished to remain within the Christian tradition and have attempted to critique, reform and turn around distorted understandings of the cross and those models of theology which have promoted self sacrifice and abusive attitudes as an act of atonement. They have worked to celebrate embodiment, believing that, 'by ritualizing the suffering and death of Jesus into a salvific act, Christian theology has disempowered the oppressed and abused and therefore encouraged the cycle of abuse.'<sup>123</sup>

The most vehement criticism of the abuse perpetuated by the focus on the bodily suffering of Christ on the cross is famously put forward by Joanna Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker who believe that a tradition that holds up the example of a deity demanding the death of a son in order to be appeased for the sins of the world, is an abusive one. This scapegoat model has repercussions throughout church and society, seen in the violence of other abusers, in the abandonment of people who suffer and a cruel to be kind attitude in all human relationality. For God's relationships seem only to be restored through punishment not compassion or empathy. A view of God's redemption through the willed death of his only son, as an atonement for God's anger or as a ransom or

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<sup>122</sup> For examples of this critique see any of the following, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk* (London:SCM Press,1983) Mary Daly, *Beyond God The Father* (Boston:Beacon Press,1973) Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition*(London:SPCK,1989) Daphne Hampson, *Theology And Feminism* (Oxford:Basil Blackwell,1990) Carter Heyward, *The Redemption Of God: A Theology Of Mutual Relation* (Washington, DC:University Of America Press, 1982)

<sup>123</sup> *Op.cit.* p.24



any of the bondage like terms that are used, means that the suffering body becomes a paradigm of human behaviour, one to be emulated and one that is Christ like.<sup>124</sup>

The church has added an extra spiritual burden onto believers with disability who seek sustenance from their tradition, not only in the focus on the moral influence of the suffering innocent Christ, the view that their patience and passivity can be a spiritual example to others, but in the whole idea of passive, virtuous suffering. There is the often heard statement that God will never send you more than you can cope with and then there is the guilt that is implied when people who pray for healing are not miraculously healed. These all too common insensitive reactions have brought forth some very forthright retorts from disabled people and feminist critics, they are the kind of theological responses which Patricia Wismer believes are 'so often used to keep women locked in their pain waiting for deliverance that never comes.'<sup>125</sup> They 'uphold action and attitudes that accept, glorify and even encourage our suffering.'<sup>126</sup>

Many Christian feminist theologians interpret the cross and salvific work of God through Jesus, in a more political way, emphasizing the teaching, friendships and daily life of Jesus. His horrendous suffering is the end result of his work for justice and love and is a risk for all who work for equality in a very unequal society. It might happen when one works to heal oppressive relationships but it is not the essential ingredient in reconciling human/ divine relations in the way that the work for equality and love is. Pamela Dickey Young writes that

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<sup>124</sup> Joanna Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, 'For God So Loved The World' In Joanna Carlson Brown And Carole Bohn (eds) *Patriarchy, Christianity And Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp.1-30

<sup>125</sup> Patricia Wismer, 'Women In Pain' In Ann O' Hara Graff, *In The Embrace Of God* (Maryknoll: New York, Orbis, 1995), pp.139-143

<sup>126</sup> Parker and Brown, *op.cit.*

redemption is the moment of redeemed relationship, 'that continuous offer of grace, of integrity, of fellowship restored... experienced by followers throughout Jesus' life and in his resurrection, not solely or even necessarily in his suffering.'<sup>127</sup> What is important in Jesus' life is his resistance to evil power structures and his ability to heal and reconcile human relations, his work for justice for the marginalised and for victims, those who are despised; not his passivity in accepting suffering. Suffering came about because he was a loving caring person living in a society of broken relations.

Thus suffering will come about, as Carter Heyward writes, often as a direct result of courage in the face of opposition and the desire to create justice.<sup>128</sup> Women who work to state outrage at the atrocities in the world, marching, campaigning and calling for an end to suffering, often pronounced as mad, know also the suffering that goes with opposition to violence. The Catholic Women's Ordination movement know this only too well and they wear purple stoles to 'symbolize grief for the lost gifts of many women, ignored and excluded by the institutional church.'<sup>129</sup> Persistence and dedication to justice against the odds means that there will always be tears and pain, it is part of the turbulence of change, of chaos, of reordering.

Heyward believes that Jesus taught humanity its potential for creating the divine in its midst, pointing to God in the process of relating one to another, as 'the ground of transformative mutuality.' God is not a being controlling bodies

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<sup>127</sup> Pamela Dickey Young, 'Beyond Moral Influence To An Atoning Life' *Theology Today* No 52 1993 p.349

<sup>128</sup> Heyward, *op.cit.* p.58

<sup>129</sup> Lala Winkley, 'Creating Common Ground. Taking Liturgy To The Streets' In Dorothea McEwan, Pat Pinsent, Ianthe Pratt And Veronica Seddon, (eds) *Making Liturgy, Creating Rituals For Worship And For Life* (Norwich:Canterbury Press, 2001)

and creation but 'rather the welling up of authentic life in and through creation, transforming us from death dealing to life giving relation.' She sees Jesus' death as a sign of his commitment to justice, the consequence of his resistance to bodily suffering wherever he found it and advocates a strong feminist stance against surrendering to suffering. 'The notions of welcoming or submitting oneself gladly to injustice flies in the face of Jesus' refusal to make concessions to unjust relations.'<sup>130</sup> Yet, paradoxically, by following Jesus' example and taking our God given powers of loving, empowering relationships seriously, theological reflection begins with the dynamic of pain, for the values of the world differ radically from the loving relationality advocated in the gospels. (Luke 18: 17-24)

The experience of suffering--actual endurance of pain--is foundational to an authentic understanding of the need for redemption. It is not that we should seek suffering as a spiritual path. Rather we cannot avoid it if we are living fully, human, passionate lives in solidarity with one another and other creatures.<sup>131</sup>

So suffering wears many faces and here it arises from authentic living, invoking and embodying divine energy in a broken world. Heyward's belief in divine energy, 'dunamis' as a raw force, energises not only justice seeking, but illuminates the creative cosmic power in the midst of all human activities, found even in the most abject of experiences. Instead of waiting for God to change events that make humanity suffer, Heyward writes that 'we should claim the responsibility we do have for making changes toward a just and less tormented world;' this is 'immediate redemption,' not an otherworldly one and occurs in the material grittiness of life.<sup>132</sup>

God will have a mastectomy

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<sup>130</sup> Heyward, 1982 *op.cit.* p.58

<sup>131</sup> Carter Heyward, 'Suffering, Redemption And Christ. Shifting The Grounds Of Feminist Christology' *Christianity And Crisis* No 49 December 11 1989 pp. 26-27

<sup>132</sup> Heyward, 1982 *op.cit.* p.132

God will experience the wonder of giving birth  
God will be handicapped  
God will run the marathon  
God will be down and out, suffering, dying  
God will be busting free, coming to life  
For God will be who God will be.<sup>133</sup>

Heyward's great contribution is the steadfastness she advocates in the face of suffering, that one might not choose it but one can do all one can to work and struggle to do the best one can in one's environment and with one's community. The disability rights movement has worked on the same lines refusing to be marginalised and acting in solidarity to prove the worth and rights of disabled people.<sup>134</sup> Heyward puts divine power and justice making right back into the body, into the actions of humans and everyday reality.

However it is slightly less helpful when the body is flawed through illness and vulnerable to natural forces which are impervious to human agency to heal, or improve through political justice. Equally when disability is not caused by unjust relations or hegemonic systems of power of the mighty over the weak, pure and impure, of the male over the female or the rich over the poor or by discrimination from the ablebodied over the disabled, oppressive as all these hierarchies are. But if the latter need a political stance in the affront to one's equal worth in the eyes of God, natural evil needs a more spiritual stance alongside it. There has to be an image of the divine that can strengthen humanity when human efforts fail or when human good intentions are misplaced or misguided. Isherwood's confident belief that everything is in human hands, even the power of God is dependent on human action, might lead one to ask why one needs a God at all?

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<sup>133</sup> Carter Heyward, *Our Passion For Justice* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1984), pp.26-27

<sup>134</sup> See Davis, *op.cit.*

Once we really value Jesus' humanity the dualistic gulf between humanity and God is breached. It becomes possible to assert that our own humanity can touch, heal and comfort the world and in so doing strengthen God.'

<sup>135</sup>

This DIY approach certainly could be read from Jesus' teaching, to love one's neighbour as oneself but it does not do justice to the vital commandment to love God first as the ground of authentic Christian love and action. (Matthew 22:37-38) (This is the first and greatest commandment.) As Grey writes, the work for justice, while vital, needs to be balanced with the realisation that redemption seeks to transform the world at a deeper level than do the movements for freedom and liberation yet it must include them.'<sup>136</sup> Understanding Jesus in political terms only as a model of social liberation neglects the spiritual aspect of the Christian story, the Christ who draws all people to God through the power of the resurrection, the promise of new life given within God's being.<sup>137</sup>

For Grey the meaning of Jesus' ministry has a mystical core pointing to 'the divine source of creative, relational energy in a way powerful enough to draw the whole world with him.'<sup>138</sup> Humanity is drawn further into the life of the divine through the raising of consciousness and development through Christ's resurrection power, and God is 'made more tangible in the world as the one who unites feeling, energy and action,' a deep process of change as humanity becomes more like God. Many mystics and saints, whose action and spiritual consciousness went hand in hand, have attested to this mystical process. 'By living

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<sup>135</sup> Isherwood, *op.cit.* 2001 p.60

<sup>136</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* 1989 p.87

<sup>137</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>138</sup> *Op.cit.* p.93

this resurrection we release endless creative energy that has the potential for huge change; it is in the change that we find the liberation.’<sup>139</sup>

Wismer writes that it is proper to challenge the glorification of suffering in the cross but ‘since the cross as a historical event and a symbol is more primary than, and more multidimensional than any theory of the atonement, a theory of the cross can be worked out which does not even implicitly glorify suffering.’<sup>140</sup> She writes of the need for two feminist voices on the subject of suffering similar to my own fear/hope juxtaposition. One is the ‘never again’ voice that has been discussed at length in this section, as Parker and Brown state, categorically saying no to any religious or cultural rationalisation that ‘encourages, trivializes, justifies or legitimizes the suffering of women’<sup>141</sup> and the other, she writes, is of a gentler voice which emerges from the suffering body of finitude, immersed in the reality of life, change and death which Wismer identifies as the ‘web of life’ position. This requires a more aesthetic, mystical approach summed up by Carol Christ’s vision of expressive ritual.

Knowledge that we are but a small part of life and death and transformation is the essential religious insight. The essential religious response is to rejoice and to weep, to sing and to dance, to tell stories and create rituals in praise of an existence far more complicated, more intricate and more enduring than we are.<sup>142</sup>

This is a theology impatient with the under resourcing of the church’s outreach to the complex and sophisticated experience of many who suffer and are afraid of being treated with disgust. It avoids blanket terms and tries to

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<sup>139</sup> *Op.cit.* p.39

<sup>140</sup> Wismer, *op.cit.* p.143 This theme will be expanded in the next chapter

<sup>141</sup> Parker and Brown, *op.cit.* p.27

<sup>142</sup> Carol Christ, ‘Rethinking Theology And Nature’ in Judith Plaskow And Carol Christ (Eds ) *Weaving The Visions:New Patterns In Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco:Harper And Row, 1989), p.321

incorporate some of the contradictions that arise. The juxtaposition of the 'never again' and 'web of life positions' challenges us all to think again about human encounters with natural processes. The 'spirituality of recycling, integrating our life processes with that of the rest of the earth that sustains us, demands a deep conversion of consciousness.'<sup>143</sup>

Yet there is no easy synthesis as Wismer points out. The web of life position must be well and truly counterbalanced with openness to human agency to work toward the flourishing of bodies. 'If the web of life position constituted our total framework we might be tempted to give in too soon rather than exploring all possibilities for healing.'<sup>144</sup> Dissatisfaction with views of dominant, dualistic values which devalue the earth, and with the idea of original sin, the web of life remedy challenges all that would hurt this web. Sin, as described in the tradition as disobedience to God, is expanded to become the inability to live peacefully on the earth with all other inhabitants. It is human meddling with the natural order and disobedience to the laws of nature. Whatever is natural and exists in harmony with the web of life is ethical and what humanity produces in its place that irrevocably harms such a balance is unethical.

For some ecofeminists nature has replaced God and provided the horizon for ethical thinking and planning while others see the task as a profoundly religious imperative. Heather Eaton writes that in reaching out for ecological horizons, secular and religious people come together in harmony in the common purpose of saving the earth.<sup>145</sup> Creation spirituality emphasises the relationality that exists in nature, the interaction with other species and the flourishing of a

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<sup>143</sup> Ruether, *op.cit.* p.119

<sup>144</sup> Wismer, *op.cit.* p.148

<sup>145</sup> See Eaton, *op.cit.*

spirituality around this interaction is becoming a vibrant one.<sup>146</sup> However, once again, there are differing perspectives to be taken into account in any discussion about nature. While many scientists look at the wonder of the universe and extol its creator<sup>147</sup> biologists such as Jackie Scully and Richard Dawkins see the mutations, the relentless tactics of gene reproduction, the ingenious viruses, the new bacteria always arising and the indifference of nature to human ideas of worth and relationality. 'The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation.'<sup>148</sup> Rarely do these issues, of the terrifying aspects of nature's processes receive indepth treatment in creation spirituality or ecofeminism, the awkward matter of viruses, bacteria or the scatological remain below the surface of their rhetoric, filtered once again from consciousness.

Scully argues for a more balanced, realistic viewpoint where human agency and acceptance work in tandem in a world that can be very hostile. 'Nature exists for itself,' taking a selective picture of it, uncritically, can be misleading.

Creation spirituality speaks to many people's desire for a religious awareness that incorporates nature and the body and this is right and necessary. I worry, though, that some versions of creation spirituality (by no means all) make use of a very selective picture of nature. For example they imply that everything would be all right if only human kind would stop interfering with a harmonious and balanced order. The data provided by the natural sciences suggest that far from being balanced, nature is constantly shifting and correcting itself... and the corrections can be as drastic as collapses of the earth's crust or the extinction of a species.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Fox, *op.cit.*

<sup>147</sup> See John Polkinghorne, *Science And Creation* (London:SPCK,1988)

<sup>148</sup> Richard Dawkins, *God's Utility Function* (London:Phoenix,1995), p.52

<sup>149</sup> Scully, *op.cit.* p.89



If some of the darker green ecofeminists make God in creation's image they also reject the transcendent aspects of divine/ human experiences in the midst of suffering and the grace which is often experienced as miraculous healing. While this study argues for greater exposure to all of nature's processes, especially the ones which frighten and disgust humanity, it argues for a flexible, perspective that is both in awe of nature and seeks the divine in the midst of it with gratitude and yet recognises that for humans to flourish they often have to do battle with nature.

The fine balance between the need for human agency and providential aid in the face of awe of nature's potential to destroy human life is caught by Churchill who had a staphylococcus infection resistant to treatment. He pays his respects to the virus, with the battle cry, 'this is its finest hour.' Nearly dying from pneumonia in 1947, he was pulled back to life by the use of penicillin and he was under no illusion about the wonders of human medical 'interference' in nature, aptly capturing the balance between the awesome/awful and human self securing which contains more than a little hint of divine rescue in its discoveries.

There ought to be a hagiology of medical science and we ought to have saints days to commemorate the great discoveries which have been made for all mankind... a holiday..a day of jubilation when we can fete St Anaesthesia and ..St Antiseptic and if I had a vote I should be bound to celebrate St Penicillin.<sup>150</sup>

Yet again, on the obverse side, there are those who would be happy to have complete control over nature. Joyce Davidson and Mick Smith write of the growing fantasy of control that technology seems to offer culture and its consequence 'bio - phobia.'

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<sup>150</sup> Dominique Enright, *The Wicked Wit Of Winston Churchill* (London:Michael O'Mora Books, 2001), p.157

The techno- philic move to the medium of cyber-space may actually exaggerate characteristically modern social relations that seek (but never convincingly manage) to assert complete 'cultural' control over the unpredictable 'natural' elements threatening our cultural integrity.<sup>151</sup>

It seems that the paradox and mystery of the suffering body is that suffering and pain must be eliminated wherever possible but also accepted as part of life.

Illness, as has been said, calls people into acute awareness of the body but often it calls, too, for a conscious response to overcome it. Susan Wendell writes of the particularity of this experience for this is not an alienation from or a devaluation of the body so much as a move of the body itself 'into and then beyond its sufferings and limitations.'<sup>152</sup> It is not transcendence in a Cartesian sense so much as a conscious disengagement from constant pain, strategies of daily living, expanding the possibilities of imagination and freedom from the ongoing loss of function. Murphy, as a paraplegic, describes this chosen space as respite from the usual routines of his physical struggles.

It is a breach of communication with the toils of social ties and obligations, a retreat into a private cerebral world and it is at these times that my mind wanders afield. In such deep quietude, one indeed finds a perverse freedom.<sup>153</sup>

Thus although the sense of the self is very much tied to the body, in this freedom yet another way of dealing with suffering, is envisaged. Wendell says,

we must also talk about how to live with the suffering body, with that which cannot be noticed without pain and that which cannot be celebrated without ambivalence We may find then that there is a place in our discussion of the body for some concept of transcendence.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Joyce Davidson And Mick Smith, Bio -Phobias And Techno- Philiat *Sociology Of Health And Illness* Vol 25 No 6 2003 p.644

<sup>152</sup> Wendell, *op.cit.* 1998 p.178

<sup>153</sup> Murphy, *op.cit.* pp.193-194

<sup>154</sup> Wendell, *op.cit.* p.179

Despite one's bodily limitations or perhaps because of them, some Christians, myself included, have felt dependent not only on the work for justice and healing but also on 'something greater than oneself or the world of which one is a part.'<sup>155</sup> The meeting with God in, through and beyond the vulnerable body is a meeting with a God of power, of relation, compassion and empathy but also of vulnerability. 'Openness to divine power is precisely through the vulnerability that God and humanity share with the processes of sentient life.'<sup>156</sup> In the midst of powerlessness one has a sense of grace and light within it, a way of 'seeing in the dark, not an end to darkness. And as Christians our way of seeing in the dark is through the commitment to the basic narrative of Christianity.'<sup>157</sup>

The force of the vitality of the Holy Spirit emanating from the narratives, and from prayer promoting and backing human endeavour and agency is an empowering force challenging ideologies which prevent bodies from flourishing, or which obstruct agency in the work for equality, mutuality and reciprocity between people and the earth. Thus for many Christians, this agency works in tandem with a dependence, trust and hope in a God who alone can heal some situations; 'both God's grace and one's faith working together can meet tragedy on its own terms in the realm of the unexpected, paradoxical, mysterious and incomprehensible.'<sup>158</sup> Reflecting theologically on suffering and the effects of disgust raises many questions and few answers. It touches on tragedy, for some times the experiences are destructive and annihilating, it touches on transcendence

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<sup>155</sup> Rankka, *op.cit.* p.235

<sup>156</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* 2000 p.97

<sup>157</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>158</sup> Rankka, *op.cit.* p.232

and hope in the midst of despair, it opens up creativity and new choices as well as new images of a God who is faithfully present albeit in countless different revelations ranging from healing power to vulnerable and compassionate presence.

Wismer's position represents an attempt to bring some of these paradoxes together in theodicy; she believes it is possible to hold what seem to be conflicting ideas in tension; suffering is not a means to redemption yet there is meaning to be found at the core of the experience. Her 'never again position' which advocates the political work of feminist theology and the 'web of life' position which acknowledges that the complexity of bodily suffering demands a suitably complex response, avoids trite, simplistic responses. The different forms of suffering and the varying forms of responses are met by this kind of approach, says Wismer. 'Even when dealing with only one type of suffering, the tension of working with and between both positions will produce a fuller and more adequate response than either taken alone.'<sup>159</sup> It works toward wholeness for humanity and creation, open to the reality of human vulnerability as well as its capacity for evil. It challenges all that would deny the integrity and worth of all bodies, determined to find meaning and hope within the experience and works

'to keep hope and faith alive and to heal the fracture of faith on earth ... to wrest a blessing from the faithful presence I name God, to be healed by the Risen One who I believe bodies forth hope for abundant life.'<sup>160</sup>

Kristine Rankka, taking her lead from Wismer, also speaks of the need for a dual framework and describes a mystical/ political spirituality,

characterized by two poles; protest, solidarity, and resistance (the active or political pole) but also by another which acknowledges our inherent lack of control over our lives and thus of our need for and openness to

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<sup>159</sup> Wismer, *op.cit.* p.148

<sup>160</sup> May, *op.cit.* p.22

God's activating presence in alleviating or transforming suffering.<sup>161</sup>

The mystical pole of her approach leaves room to consider the cross in a way that promotes no masochism, resignation or abuse but a deeper love for life and the depths of reality. It marks the fine line, the distinction between submission and acceptance. Acceptance is an affirmation of reality, an immersion in it and not a flight from it, which leads to creative possibilities, it is in one's attitude to suffering, loving life in all its ambiguity that suffering is 'able to show its transformative power.'<sup>162</sup> One agrees to suffering without glorifying it in any way, choosing to challenge the age old defences against suffering, the disgust reactions and those which promote masochism, doubt, despair or meaninglessness, and defiantly seeks to be transformed by it.

Rankka believes that this returns power to the sufferer, begins to remove the fear, the emotional, mental pain from suffering and enhances the sense of the presence of God. This kind of mysticism involves loving God unconditionally, with no hope of gain, making no conditions on what the divine should do for humanity and letting go of attachments, ideologies, privileges and power. Much powerful mysticism in and through the cross takes this stance in opening itself fully to the suffering of Jesus. 'The soul is open to suffering, abandons itself to suffering, holds back nothing. It does not make itself small and untouchable distant and insensitive, it is affected by suffering in the fullest possible way.'<sup>163</sup>

Mysticism in this way implicitly reaches out for strength beyond one's own resources, moving people out of debilitating situations into positions where they

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<sup>161</sup> Rankka, *op.cit.* p.206

<sup>162</sup> Sölle, *Suffering op.cit.* p.91

<sup>163</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.101-2

love life all the more, it teaches a greater readiness to act for change. (This) suffering makes one more sensitive to the pain in the world. It can teach us to put forth a greater love for everything that exists.<sup>164</sup>

Such assertion in the face of difficulty can also be achieved in ritual and liturgy.

Ronal Grimes writes, 'The ritualizing body is capable of creative, cognitive, critical function.'<sup>165</sup> It is capable, too, of a change of heart on the vast scale that is necessary to value bodies and protect the earth.

C Theological reflection on women's enacted rituals and liturgy as resources for the suffering body.

The potential of artistic freedom in new liturgy, new ritual to empower those who have been silenced, to lament and to protest and to express mystical experiences even in the very worst human crises, has been a lively resource for feminist theologies. Such practices have brought value, celebration, and an enhanced sense of beauty and emotion to women's ability to worship God and relate to others. Its inclusive paradigms have been relevant also for the disabled for its gentle, anti- hierarchical stance and remembrance of those who suffer or have suffered too much to engage in such liturgy. On their behalf the community has been able to lament and pray, mourn, petition, contemplate and celebrate their lives.

Ritualising women have become committed to the reaffirmation of life lived in the rawness and power of bodies through creating their own means of worship; often they have left their churches altogether to do this. Others are still church members but retreat to 'women church' to supplement their church membership,

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<sup>164</sup> *Op.cit.* p.125

<sup>165</sup> Ronal Grimes, *Reading, Writing And Ritualizing* (Washington, DC:The Pastoral Press,1993), p.16

seeking the extra spiritual nourishment such groups provide. Women, Word, Spirit, an organisation of women formed to inaugurate innovative liturgy, theology, ministry and spirituality sums up the need for spaces apart from the institutional church, to be creative on their own terms.

Church liturgies have become set in their ways and are seldom open to creative new approaches... there are particular issues of the lack of female images of God, the emphases on power, lordship and kingship and little use of symbols, images and stories reflecting women's day to day lives.<sup>166</sup>

The driving force behind these rituals is the passionate need to break the lack of women's self esteem fostered by the church, to ask why women should suffer their bodies to be treated with disgust or dishonoured, to ask who suffers with women in this lack and how such attitudes can be resisted and turned around? For all who have suffered, the impetus is 'not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel,' as Adrienne Rich writes.<sup>167</sup> Church liturgy has been dominated by male priests who have seldom deemed it necessary to create a ritual expression of people's tehomnic experience; it is not enough that some people merely take part in a liturgy which is fixed and steered by clerics.

When a ritual involves everyone in its creation, it is a shared process; each person's skill and knowledge and life experience is poured into it and the creative product emerges in the present, often unplanned, full of spontaneity, opening up reflection to the wide variety of ages and experience of embodiment of all involved. Ritual creates a change because, in communion with others, 'it can

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<sup>166</sup> Catholic Woman's Network, *Death And Renewal: A Woman's Approach To The Easter Experience* (London: CWN, 2002), p.3

<sup>167</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Dream Of A Common Language* (London:W W Norton, 1974), pp.10-1

create a liberated zone of the spirit, can change an atmosphere, make a space ours.’<sup>168</sup>

Such a witnessed change can become a political act, motivating people to reflect and move out of past oppressions and, together, declare their circumstances changed for the better. This kind of ritual has been described as women space or women church by Rosemary Ruether who advocates that Christian feminists spend nine tenths of their ‘time, energy and resources’<sup>169</sup> in such activities and the other tenth trying to change the institutional church; so important is it for Christian women to work on vital life giving liturgy in a protected space, a welcoming and creative zone, in order to promote new perspectives one day within the church.

Ritual is essentially a language- a language of demonstration. In ritual we act out with our bodies and find that we can say more than is in our minds. When our thoughts cannot move us forward, ritual often can. It can make statements about time, about what is past, present and future and it can define space.<sup>170</sup>

Drama, art, poetry, music, appreciating the environment and beauties of nature, incorporating the dark and the fearful are all ways new liturgy comes face to face with embodiment. Using mourning places in quiet rooms or the open spaces of nature for grieving, for anger and for expressing tragedy when it occurs, are some of the ways new ritualising releases pain and expresses it creatively rather than denying or repressing it. Eucharists, too, are re-styled; sometimes they consist of stale bread and bitter liquid to lament the many suffering experiences of the poor, the ill and the starving. The new styled communions become live, vibrant expressions of anguish

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<sup>168</sup> Starhawk, *Truth Or Dare: Encounters With Power, Authority And Mystery* (San Francisco:Harper and Row, 1987), p.149

<sup>169</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, cited in Ward And Wild, *op.cit.* p.123

<sup>170</sup> *Op.cit.* p.110



and prayer to God in the face of some of the devastating effects of disease and deformity. These break from the habitual Christian patterns of petition and thanksgiving which are inappropriate in dire, unretrievable circumstances. Who can petition or thank God upon first hearing that one is in the throes of terminal cancer?

A variety of ways and styles are employed to promote self understanding, self expression and group communication, from speech to chants, from meditative walks to inclusive language in circular groups (to emphasize their anti-hierarchical communal aspirations) and to the very valued appreciation of silence in situations of loss and pain. A ritual of silence is one that acknowledges that it does not have answers to some forms of suffering. In this space mystical contemplation is shared in loving presence and in, what Ward and Wild describe as a threshold of faith and meaning, waiting for 'love and knowledge to grow and flourish.' Important as it is to try to find answers,

it is also vital- literally lifegiving for us to find some deep breathing space in which to hear ourselves say, 'I don't know.' It is part of the essence of journeying and at the heart of the pivotal moment of change.' <sup>171</sup>

For many Christian feminists the needs to be met, resisted, challenged, worked for and prayed about are endless; they work in the gap between the covering up of loss in church and society and the awareness raising and new possibilities of women church or women space where bodies, once alienated, find warmth, energy and acceptance once more. By acknowledging the power of massage, dance and physical movement to respond to suffering in the body, women in these groups are empowered by the solidarity, the consciousness raising and most of all, in comparison to church passivity, 'bold audacious behaviour

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<sup>171</sup> *Op. cit.* p.122

(sass.)'<sup>172</sup> All help to convert suffering into strengths and change through the coming together of such creative activities. 'We may simultaneously possess our own power, be empowered by others and empower others.'<sup>173</sup>

Some of the liturgy devised by women, especially that of theologians, is quite shocking at first, as they seek to expand the boundaries of worship in extravagant rituals in and through celebration of bodies, not the young, athletic or even anorexic bodies that images of the media like to depict but through all bodies, which Monica Sjoo describes as 'living body organisms with all their splendid experiences of life, birth and change.'<sup>174</sup> Matter is considered sacred, full of intelligence of its own, filled with divine immanence, able to change forms and bodies at will. Spiritual feminists, as many theologians describe themselves, purposefully mix categories and ideas and celebrate the ideas of hybrid creatures and things labelled as impure and unclean by the tradition.

Spiritual feminists deliberately place themselves in the realm of the biblically unclean... it is social and imaginal cross breeding or hybridization ...that will reinvigorate the gene pool of religious language and ideas.<sup>175</sup>

Monsters and anomalies of nature are celebrated along with the powerful elements of water, fire and earth as the catalysts of change and new orders. Spiritual feminists try to imagine a new way of being and are proud of their marginality as a free space to protest against patriarchal tradition, as a magical liminal place to create

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<sup>172</sup> Rankka, *op.cit.* p.215

<sup>173</sup> Beverley Harrison, and Carter Heyward, 'Pain And Pleasure.' In Brown And Bohn, *op.cit.* p.165

<sup>174</sup> Monica Sjoo, *Return Of The Dark/ Light Mother* (Austin:Plain View Press, 1999), p.298

<sup>175</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Thealogy And Embodiment* (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p.281

new sacrality and from where to claim the powers of divine immanence. The deep seated recognition that their presence and activities are often considered defiling has often fuelled their cause and fierce defiance. At Greenham Common in the 1960's the women protesting for peace were challenging state and patriarchal territory synonymous with male and military power. Those bodies who defied such territory provoked age old deep seated fears from their adversaries expressed in vehement labels of such misogynistic terms as monsters, witches and harridans, images which still seem to lie only just below the surface of contemporary psyches. When women transgress, they become disgusting to those in power. Raphael writes, 'It seems significant that patriarchy pelted women with the byproducts of organic decay in order to desecrate or profane this feminist sacred space.' (Containers of maggots, blood and faeces were thrown over the protesters.)<sup>176</sup>

Greater exposure to the very things that are supposed to be defiling, celebrating the very things feared and refusing to be silenced or made invisible has been understood as a 'propulsive power by which a feminist transposes her being in the open sphere of the feminist sacred. It is an ontological mutation,'<sup>177</sup> writes Raphael. Mary Daly describes the process as a breaking of taboo. 'We become and are 'Other.' Finding our original otherness we break the terrible taboo. We become terrible taboos. By this crossing we are outrageous, contagious taboo.'<sup>178</sup> Holiness, perfection and purity are not synonymous. For spiritual feminists, holiness should carry the 'scars' of nature's processes for humanity does not participate in divine, creative energy unless it acknowledges and incorporates this lack of perfection in creation.

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<sup>176</sup> *Op. cit.* p.232

<sup>177</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>178</sup> Mary Daly, *Pure Lust op.cit.* pp.244-45

In nature, in creation, imperfection is not a sign of the absence of God. It is a sign that ongoing creation is not an easy thing. We all bear scars from this rugged process. We can and must -celebrate the scars.<sup>179</sup>

Spiritual feminists also feel that ancient wisdoms and powers which were once adored, even glorified in embodiment, are now lost to contemporary society, and novel forms of worship exploring different ways of embodied worship can revive joys and greater awareness of the body's ability to heal itself.

The rhythms of our body minds are in tune with those of the earth...we are in conversation with the earth all the time... within Earth - in her internal fires, ores, minerals crystals and waters -- there are mysterious life-creating powers that we no longer understand.<sup>180</sup>

On the other hand some women feel that this is essentialist and are concerned more with human representations written over the body. A reflexivity is sought to discover and subvert the way that the female body has been manipulated and represented in society and, by display, putting things out of their usual order, they use conflicting images in new ways or depict disorientating sculptures, shapes and texts. In this way female artists, writers and dramatists try to 'dispel the specular nature of representations that subject women to the gaze of a univocal male subject, to welcome a female spectator in the audience of men.'<sup>181</sup> Whether essentialist, claiming woman's embodied power or more interested in deconstructing damaging representations, these rituals have challenged the status quo, and new forms of worship are created yearly. They are 'unique events, full of

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<sup>179</sup> Mathew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer In Creation Spirituality* (Sante Fe: Bear & Co, 1983), pp.110-11

<sup>180</sup> Sjo, p.281

<sup>181</sup> Hal Foster, 'Subversive Signs' in Lawrence Cahoone (ed) *From Modernism To Postmodernism* (Oxford, MA: Blackwell Publishing), pp.310-318 (313)

spontaneity and born out of group participation.’<sup>182</sup> This also is the brewing place of possibility for ecological renewal.

Explicit body art and performance, perhaps more than any kind of feminist enacted resistance, brings out the fear of disgust, impurity and profanity prevalent in the religious sensitivities which have obscured more generous acceptance of material life. Feminist indecent or pornographic body performance, writes Rebecca Schneiders, ‘makes explicit the historical staging of the body, the legacies of writing over the body, the norms which continue to haunt today.’ Dramatists and artists delight in shocking the audience, in blurring matter and boundaries together to illuminate what have been termed sacred and profane and what have been pathologised in the name of preserving divine and patriarchal masculine purity. In her book, ‘The Explicit Body In Performance,’ Schneiders comments on the startling effect of pornographic performances but reflects through feminist eyes, ‘the ghosts of historical inscription on the bodies of women in such a way as to bring them to light making them more apparent by bringing them out of the shadows as players.’<sup>183</sup>

In the arts the obscene and sacred can be brought together. ‘A host of binary terrors’ ensures the arts convey the ‘cacophany inherent in unruly particulars.’<sup>184</sup> All can be seen as iconoclastic measures of resistance to the givenness of the tradition, subversive of stereotypical perspectives of ‘normal’ bodies. Images which awaken women to their past, shock but heal as they reflect

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<sup>182</sup> Gillian Limb, ‘The Language Of Symbols, Symbolic And Dance’ in McEwan et al *op.cit.* p.6

<sup>183</sup> Rebecca Schneiders, *The Explicit Body In Performance* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), p.20

<sup>184</sup> *Op.cit.*

and move to action. ‘The use of the whole body in worshipping God...evokes reflection on the misappropriation of women’s bodies and the philosophical and theological flaws in the formation of Christian theology.’<sup>185</sup> It is a place of ‘guarding the chaos’ at the edge of theological certainties as Ward and Wild describe it.<sup>186</sup> The eschaton, the edge, is where many Christian reformist feminist theologians stand in their attempt to hold together the faith journey and feminism. Some speak, as Peter Coles writes, of the ‘terror, sadness,<sup>187</sup> anxiety or depression’ as the familiar has to be transformed and as their churches often dismiss the insights of feminist theologies which have empowered their lives.

The ongoing paths walked here may be in the chaos just outside the boundary of the church or within the chaos inside it; but these are all travellers of faith...people willing to struggle with an engaged spirituality, to face doubt, injustice and inconsistency head on.<sup>188</sup>

The arts reveal the links of the subject’s early beginnings, it has tell tale signs of bodily affects and drives, inspiring and creative, ‘with its rhythm and lyrical movement.’ This biological driving force is a source of transgression to the symbolic, the language of culture which ‘expresses simple, univocal and direct meaning without inconsistency.’<sup>189</sup> It can be ‘wild, driven by unconscious drives and unpredictable, deconstructing and recreating in its challenge to the more linear form of the symbolic. This kind of freedom is the kind silenced in 1 Cor 14 33b-35, it is shameful for women to speak in church; it is disgusting for it pollutes the public space, it is heterodoxy (literally ‘other’ praise.) In contrast the arts encourage a new liturgical

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<sup>185</sup> Myra Poole, Liturgy’s ‘Powerful Effects’ In McEwan, *op.cit.* p.43

<sup>186</sup> Wild and Ward, *op.cit.*

<sup>187</sup> Peter Coles, ‘Twenty Years of Spiritual Journeying: Ordinary Women-Extraordinary Lives’ *Network op cit.* Summer Issue No 83 May 2005 p.30

<sup>188</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>189</sup> Joy O’Grady, and Poxon, *op.cit.* p.85

freedom of other praise which incorporates those factors, 'forbidden, silenced, rejected, forgotten, despised, ignored, trivialised'<sup>190</sup> and negated, more readily, if not always joyously. As Merleau-Ponty believed, when we let the world's meaning come through the body acting as muse and conduit, we become open to the meaning of being. We also recognise the depths of love.

What emerges is a realism which restores the heights of wonder along with the depths of real pain arising from the 'rediscovery..of passion for life in its fullness'<sup>191</sup> and from the affective expressions of 'the tears and laughter and rage of our hearts, danced, sung, mourned, shouted and celebrated.'<sup>192</sup> Ritualizing the body this way is an essential exploration for Christian feminists for it simultaneously recognises the ambivalence of lived experience and problematises entrenched abusive concepts surrounding the body. Such explorations are in process and tentative, theology in the making, in the midst of struggling or wrestling with God.

#### D Wrestling with God

Women who feel that their work and self esteem are undervalued or their creativity coerced or exploited have wrestled a blessing from the Christian God, especially a blessing on their creative activities as worthy of being named holy. They often speak of a heightened consciousness of God's power as a source of such creativity and they take heart from the precedent set from some of the experiences of female mystics whose visions are used as grounding for reflections

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<sup>190</sup> Marjorie Proctor Smith, *Praying With Our Eyes Open Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer* (Nashville:Abingdon Press,1995), p.55

<sup>191</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* 2003 p.171

<sup>192</sup> Smith, *op.cit.*

<sup>193</sup> Madigan, *op.cit.* p.3

on God/human/ earth relations. 'Their faith stories, personal struggles and visionary writings illustrate how deeply women's intimacy with God has entailed prophetic social witness.'<sup>193</sup> Some people writing about suffering have been able to do so without falling into the trap of passivity, masochism or apathy. Distancing themselves from the dangers of seeming to placate God with virtuous suffering or penance for sins committed, these writers avoid any hint of self imposed martyrdom. They are also aware of the subtle dangers involved in seeming to be too self centred in attention seeking or looking for sympathy, (all these can be thrown at the people who articulate their suffering too forcibly) and they somehow manage to argue for a different spiritual slant on ambiguous bodily experiences.

These often renew zeal and hope and articulate the unfathomable nearness of divine presence which brings about a transformation of people's outlooks and an enduring change in lifestyle. The meeting with God, the prophetic witness and new possibilities envisaged do not come without enormous struggles, loss of orientation and pain, ones which Jean Blomquist describe as 'wrestling' in fear with the power of the unknown in the 'rawness, roughness and reality of struggle'<sup>194</sup> Experiences of wrestling with God have a biblical precedent for the writers of the psalms, like the visionary prophets, who speak out in their pain,<sup>195</sup>

they find their suffering integral to life...they resist it, petition God to remove it, question it, endure it, rebel against it, accept it. As they wrestle with their suffering they find they wrestle with their God and something happens to them-- something as radical as a new birth.

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<sup>193</sup> Madigan, *op.cit.* p.3

<sup>194</sup> Jean Blomquist, *Wrestling Till Dawn: Awakening To Life In Times Of Struggle* (Nashville:Upper Room Books,1994), pp.14-5

<sup>195</sup> See For Example *Psalms 119* 123-176



The burden of their message does not become suffering  
but change--transformation.<sup>196</sup>

Such writings testify to people's endurance in the midst of suffering, they have not particularly felt that a saving quality is attached to suffering or that God demands it, rather they have looked beyond the manipulations and pathological obsessions with pain that have often been associated with Jesus' suffering. They have experienced a wondrous creativity in feeling that they were participating in the paschal mystery, determined that suffering should be emptied of numb meaninglessness. They were able to accept their pain and the world more deeply and broadly in all its aspects and in the words of Dorothee Sölle 'ensure in mystical defiance... that nothing in creation becomes lost.'<sup>197</sup>

Women who write about wrestling with God in the midst of suffering have to do so knowing that their views must be carefully critical of any unjust and senseless suffering that can be avoided lest they once more become silenced and expected to suffer. It is a carefully picked path of travelling to the centre of one's being, of speaking about one's reality and knowing it is essential to do so or be destroyed by it.<sup>198</sup>

There is a suffering which we overcome by struggling with it and there is a suffering which we overcome by acceptance... If we are willing to experience our suffering which is what is meant by acceptance, it will in turn allow us to go to the claims of new feelings that belong to different hours.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Elizabeth O' Connor, *Our Many Selves* (New York:Harper And Row,1971), p.99

<sup>197</sup> Sölle, *op.cit.* p.70

<sup>198</sup> *Op.cit.* p.76

<sup>199</sup> O'Connor, *op.cit.*p.94

Ariel Glucklich's book on sacred pain argues clearly for pain's valuable attributes in the spiritual life.<sup>200</sup> He asks why the hundreds of narratives that exist about God's presence in the midst of the pain experience exist at all and why the ancients were much clearer about this than the modern person. To contemporary people, pain and insight are at opposite ends of the spectrum, for pain is considered obscene, an enemy, which destroys the self, the very opposite of self empowerment and wholeness. Indeed for many feminists most pain is a direct result of patriarchal oppression, of power written on the bodies of women. Once women are no longer victims of patriarchal systems all pain will disappear.<sup>201</sup>

To the modern mind too, a lively interest in pain itself is to be viewed with great suspicion veering on the dysfunctional and pathological. Yet Glucklich writes that the narratives of many suffering people speak of a new identity and a sense of expansion in the throes of pain. Rather than threatening wholeness and happiness the pain can actually set these in motion. Simone Weil experienced this clearly; 'at one moment everything is pain but at the next everything is love.'<sup>202</sup> The boundaries between extreme joy and pain blended into one for her, the experience of pain was an aesthetic, spiritual experience.

If you can hold out there without ceasing to suffer, you will finally touch something that is no longer affliction (malheur) and not joy either but the pure, supra sensual most inward essential being common to both joy and suffering.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting The Body For The Sake Of The Soul* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

<sup>201</sup> See Angela West's critique of feminist theology's valorisation of the redemptive qualities of women's struggles which do not take into account the power struggles within the women's movement. See Angela West, *Deadly Innocence: Feminism And The Mythology Of Sin* (London: Mowbray, 1995)

<sup>202</sup> Simone Weil, cited in Glucklich, *op.cit.* p.207

<sup>203</sup> Simone Weil, *Letter To A Priest* (London: Routledge And Kegan Paul), 1953), p.75

St Theresa of Avila also, could write of ‘sweet sweet pain’<sup>204</sup> and, as mentioned earlier, many mystics have sought the experience of pain by starving or seeking the ascetic life in their spiritual journey, often to create a space for themselves in restricting circumstances.<sup>205</sup> Thus, according to these testimonies, pain has the potential to be iconoclastic, it demands one’s full attention, pushes everything else, of everyday importance, into the background, forcefully breaks the order of things and causes biographical disruption. Glucklich writes that the phenomenal self is deeply affected and one’s sense of agency has to be rethought for he believes that from a neurological point of view, pain ‘weakens the individual’s sense of being a discrete agent; it makes the body self transparent.’ He suggests that pain works as ‘alchemical’<sup>206</sup> agent, mysteriously changing pain into outgoing creativity or passion. ‘The more one’s body hurts the less output the central nervous system generates from the areas that regulate the signals on which a sense of self relies.’<sup>207</sup>

One hundred and fifty years of medical psychology have challenged the testimonies of the mystics and those who tried to make sense of their pain, scepticism has won the day and the saints of old have been classified as self abusers or deranged masochists even suffering from nervous disorders and hallucinations. Yet these people were able, almost, to make friends with their pain. The rich and nuanced heritage of the meaning that they found in their pain has been lost and nothing has been put in its place except the demand that doctors

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<sup>204</sup> Theresa of Avila, cited in Glucklich *op.cit.*p. 206

<sup>205</sup> See Catherine Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (Berkeley:University Of California Press,1987) Also *Fragmentation And Redemption* (New York:Zone Books,1992)

<sup>206</sup> Glucklich, *op.cit*, p.207

<sup>207</sup> *Op.cit.*pp.190-201

eradicate pain immediately. If medical science fails there are no words of comfort to help, or well worn routes to travel, to alleviate the painful experience.

Susan Wendell also believes that there is so little in our culture that helps people face up to pain or suffering that the silence perpetuates the fear of the body's potential for pain and gives it greater power than it need have.<sup>208</sup> This fear becomes projected onto the disabled and instead of hearing them into speech they are often shunned and silenced. She writes, 'If disabled people were truly heard, an explosion of knowledge of the human body and psyche would take place.'<sup>209</sup> Thus the creativity and spirituality which emerge as by-products of pain are put forward tentatively by writers such as Glucklich and Elaine Scarry who believe there is an intrinsic expressivity in pain itself, a mysterious chemistry which drives people onto higher altruistic goals. The strength of pain to 'remake the world' is brought out in 'The Body in Pain' by Scarry who also acknowledges its obverse side, its lethal potential to be used on bodies to inscribe texts of power and oppression.<sup>210</sup>

William James, in the same manner, describes the experience of sickness as a space created for spirituality. Pain and illness cause a shock that results in the collapse of one's self security; it is

the sick soul, the incompletely unified or discordant one that has the greatest potential for religious experiences... the exhaustion of self that comes from chronic illness is a kind of consciousness altering rearrangement of shock and suggestion.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Wendell, *The Rejected Body op.cit.* p.110

<sup>209</sup> Susan Wendell, Cited In Len Davis (Ed) *The Disability Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), p.274

<sup>210</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body In Pain: The Making And Unmaking Of The World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

<sup>211</sup> James, *op.cit.* pp.140-67

Thomas Beidelman writes that such experiences have the quality of ‘incontestable reality.’ Indeed, most of human thinking takes place, he believes, in the oscillation between pain and imagination and it is pain that reminds us most of the real world. ‘Pain and imagination are the framing events within which all other perceptual, somatic and emotional events occur. Thus between the two events can be mapped the whole terrain of the human psyche.’<sup>212</sup> These wrestling experiences are catalysts for re-imagining the divine in the midst of illness, trauma and tehom. Black women have also re-imagined the divine as present in their narratives of resistance in womanist theology and make the heterogeneous perspectives of the lived body even more complex.

E-- Theological inquiries into suffering that incorporate stories and experiences in womanist theologies.

Embodiment has been viewed rather differently in womanist theologies which grew in protest to feminist theology’s focus on white, privileged, women’s experiences and also in reaction to black liberation theological movements that neglected women’s experiences. Viewing themselves in double jeopardy, suffering both sexism and racism, their more ambiguous reactions to embodiment have relevance to the experiences of women with disabilities who also have felt outsiders because they could not always celebrate their bodies. The womanist narratives of suffering and resistance to given superior notions of white beautiful bodies, their history of body bondage and slavery to colonial powers which

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<sup>212</sup> Thomas.O.Beidelman, *The Cold Knife Imagery Of Gender Sexuality and Moral Education In Kaguru Initiation Ritual* (Washington.D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press,1997), p.25

stripped them of pride in their identities and body selves, the exploitation of their bodies for breeding, for work and for sex have left a legacy of deep ambivalence about the body. Their theology has begun with such narratives which are woven into their reflection and sense of reality and understanding of God.

Like disabled people they begin their theological reflection with broken bodies, sites of pain as well as pleasure, locations of disgust, abuse and fear rather than the accepted and trusted. Long identified with nature they have not found it freeing to simply identify the divine with all aspects of their embodiedness. For many, flesh means black bodies for prostitution, their bodies for sale while the erotic means male power over their bodies. Thistlewaite writes that these women's attitudes to nature are intricate and cannot be transformed through the same processes as those that feminist theologies have used in their re-symbolisation of the divine.

Female embodiment is experienced as traumatic by non white, non western feminists in a manner that white women in the west who have experienced more freedom in their embodied spirituality cannot begin to comprehend. She writes that 'nature is fallen and evil a reality' for many.<sup>213</sup> She recognises the importance of all women sharing their experiences of sexism and bodily oppression and the need to theologically reflect on them but this is only possible if reality is faced squarely, confronted unromantically and honestly to see the 'terror of difference.'<sup>214</sup> Keller writes that to begin to uncover white terror of black difference one must also uncover heterophobic theology.

Unless Christianity unblocks the dark depths it froze in itself long before 'racism' existed, the subliminal habits

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<sup>213</sup> Susan Thistlewaite, *Sex, Race And God: Christian Feminism In Black And White* ((London:Geoffrey Chapman, 1989 ), p.71

<sup>214</sup> *Op.cit.* p.91

of whiteness- engrained in liberalism as well as in reaction- will persist.....a theohomic theology requires the deconstruction of the light supremacism of the western spirit.<sup>215</sup>

Womanist theologies are full of more resistance and characteristics which probe the fear of coloured skin and ‘in the shadows of late night we talk about the need to see darkness differently.’<sup>216</sup> Much of this narration emanates from the suffering experienced by women of the two third’s world and the historical bodily denigration of slavery, the extreme bodily degradation and humiliation of women of colour who have incorporated their stories into the tales of oppression in Scripture and into Christological understandings of the humiliation of the cross and Jesus’ suffering. Taking seriously the liberatory visions of the Bible, they look toward the healing promises of Christ and his identification with their experiences through the cross and resurrection.

The prominence given to Christology by womanist theology discloses a perspective which is congruent with and flows from its liberationist interpretation of biblical revelation. For womanist theology, it is the humanity, the wholeness of Christ, which is paramount, not the maleness of the historical person Jesus.<sup>217</sup>

Strong images of bodily suffering are remembered in ritual and liturgy and something, even deeper than resistance sought: a sense of God’s nearness in the midst of bodily indignity. It is the deep sense of ‘God’s activating presence in and through horrific events that Tamez describes as ‘almost mystical.’<sup>218</sup> Womanist theology, then, presents strong bodily images of the suffering of women but also

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<sup>215</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* p.201

<sup>216</sup> bel hooks, cited in *op.cit.* p.200

<sup>217</sup> Toinette M Eugene, ‘Womanist Theology’ In Isherwood And McEwan, *op.cit.* p.238

<sup>218</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Bible Of The Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York:Orbis Books, 1982), p.25

of the bodily response to oppression and it has provided colourful, boisterous creative images for others who wish to reflect theologically on the resisting body. 'Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.' Its larger than life, indigenous, common or garden wit and love of the resisting physical gesture and response to human and divine agency has been described in contrast to feminist theologies as different as purple is to lavender.<sup>219</sup> Chaotic as their rituals seem to the more conservative white feminist theologians, their embodied, gutsy, riproaring responses are constructive and a wonderful antidote to the emotion of disgust. More of this verve needs incorporating into an ecomystical liturgy to combat disgust.

We cannot underestimate the healing value of rituals focusing on reverencing female bodies where these have been despised throughout religious tradition.<sup>220</sup>

#### F Women's writings on chaos

Chaos theory has long been integrated into scientists' understanding and wonder of the interdependence of all life's eco/systems but it has taken far longer for theology to embrace the divine unity that might exist in the midst of turbulence and change. Feminist interest in mystical theology, however has paved the way to understanding the oneness sensed amidst all of life's exigencies and there has been a recent keenness to incorporate its dynamism.

At a genetic level, it is a story about unfolding into diversity, and diversity unfolding to reveal at its heart, unity. Embodied in cells and tissues, in biochemical

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<sup>219</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens* (London, New York: The Women's Press, 1983), p.xii

<sup>220</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, 'God Weeps With Our Pain,' *CTC Bulletin* December 1983 p.73



reactions and molecular processes, are the mystics' reports of universal oneness.<sup>221</sup>

Probing more deeply into the chaos,

mysticism wants nothing else but to love life, even where analysis has run its course and all that is left is to count the victims. To love life also where it has long been condemned to death, even from its very beginning is an old human ability to go beyond what is.<sup>222</sup>

The mystical position encompasses the paradoxes and conundrums of life, which Merleau-Ponty described as the multiplicity and opacity inherent in the natural order. He believed humans cannot clarify their own role in the act of perception and must be open to ambiguity and inherent limits.<sup>223</sup> At one moment there is isolation and pain and at another, insight and relationality. At one moment there is site of creativity, at another, there is an experience of a body alienated from others and even from oneself. Similarly as we have seen there seems no salvific value in suffering yet at this place there may be experienced the proximity of God's care. In the wake of the few resources that are available to express these contradictions one can only describe them rather than explain them. A tenuous hold on such matters must also be admitted as indeed the uncomfortable truth that one's sense of identity can be wiped away when swept into a state of chaos.

Sometimes one can only hold on for dear life.

We yearn for a sense of identity and belonging and we dread chaos its enemy. Once we have this gift of identity... we do everything we can to avoid losing it; if we do lose this identity we often deny that it has been

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<sup>221</sup> Scully, *op.cit.* p.10

<sup>222</sup> Rankka, *op.cit.* p.58

<sup>223</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The VisibleAnd The Invisible, op.cit.* p.3

destroyed.<sup>224</sup>

Ward and Wild write of the paradox, of the two inseparable elements, danger and opportunity in situations when change forcibly comes upon people. The danger is that one will be completely destroyed by the event; the opportunity is the gap that opens up to new possibilities. This ongoing dialectic in my own work, at the edge, the eschaton, evokes terror. 'What is particularly hard is the time immediately following the first stage of change.... the chaotic in between time before any new identity is established.'<sup>225</sup>

Yet the actual point of moving out of this initial stage, when it is all too easy to turn in on oneself, is akin to a revelation, a sacred moment according to Melanie May, a feminist theologian, who suffered great pain from a spinal chord inflammation and felt 'an ever-faithful presence' through her body'<sup>226</sup> as she confronted her vulnerability and her physical inability to stop her pain. Many have felt that their lowest points, the edge of the abyss, have opened up cracks in their feeling of control, fissures that have let the love and empowerment of God seep into their consciousness.

When we surrender in faith we enter into the power of God, into the realm of all possibility. We open ourselves to new perspectives, thoughts and dimensions of life and living yet to be explored. We do not give ourselves up in the sense of extinguishing ourselves but instead the little lick of light we are joins with the holy flaming that is God.<sup>227</sup>

Sölle believed that the hopelessness of certain forms of suffering can be endured

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<sup>224</sup> G Arbuckle, *Grieving For Change* ( London:Geoffrey Chapman,1991), p.68

<sup>225</sup> Ward and Wild, *op.cit.* p.19

<sup>226</sup> May, *op.cit.* p.14

<sup>227</sup> Jean Blomquist, cited in *op.cit.* p.67

where the pain can still be articulated, for oneself and on behalf of others who are unable to do this, 'a shameless self assertion over against this world.' It is a way people can 'handle their suffering differently from the way society recommends.'<sup>228</sup>

In the midst of chaos one sees how much is feared and rejected as one is discriminated against as well as having to come to terms with pain and loss of function. Only by travelling deeper into the chaos can one understand the processes by which the world categorizes and negates reality, it is a long painful journey for people who remind others of the negative world, suffer pain as 'an entire process of sensing, interpreting and modulating the nociceptive process, assigning cause, anticipating cause and determining response.'<sup>229</sup>

The idols of dominology, appropriation and annihilation are the engines by which the denigrated chaos (its people, its species) gets reduced either to raw stuff for use or simply to nothing.<sup>230</sup>

Nevertheless this expanding feminist theodicy, calling all to express such vulnerable experience, to voice pain and injustice, to embrace self empowerment, challenge and resistance, are steps in the right direction, they are loving counter measures to the paralysis, disgust and helplessness that are the first reactions to suffering.

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<sup>228</sup> Sölle, *op.cit.* pp.74-78

<sup>229</sup> Eric Cassell, 'Pain And Suffering' In Warren Thomas Reich (ed) *Encyclopedia Of Bio Ethics* rev ed (New York:Macmillan Library Reference USA Simon And Schuster: Macmillan 1995), p.1898

<sup>230</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* p.22

## Thealogy and its stronger stomach

Thealogians have developed what Ursula King describes as ‘strong stomachs,’ as seen in the rituals already discussed.<sup>231</sup> Looking back at a prepatriarchal time of worship when it is thought the divine was considered to be female and the earth thought to be revered as sacred, thealogians have invoked the image of goddess in a very creative way.<sup>232</sup> They have been able to begin to revere all life and death processes, on the grounds that the goddess was immanent, contained in all of creation and a very physical entity. Thus they have celebrated women’s bodies throughout their different cycles and in art, poetry and drama, through emotional ritual and elaborate embodied celebration, thealogians have raised awareness of the beauty of physical life. The goddess can be one or many, and sometimes realist and sometimes not. She stands as a symbol of the individual or the communal power of women and she is incorporated into all creative, cosmic and natural processes overcoming destructive dualities which split apart nature and spirit, dark and light, divine and human. Indeed she stands for what people experience around them as, ‘a manifold constellation of forms and association of all that is alive.’<sup>233</sup>

The crone is a form of the goddess that symbolises the creative power of woman, both constructive and destructive at the end of life; it ‘bestows divine

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<sup>231</sup> Ursula King, *Women And Spirituality:Voices Of Protest And Promise* (London: Macmillan,1989), p.122

<sup>232</sup> As Grey states, this is the popular mythology but historical fact is difficult to ascertain. *op.cit.*p.128

<sup>233</sup> Raphael, *op.cit.* 1999 Introduction

meaning upon the real travail of embodied life.’<sup>234</sup> King remarks, too, on the ‘devouring, merciless and irrational goddesses, ‘horrible figures’ which are able to symbolise the powers of darkness.’<sup>235</sup> Theology has not feared changing processes or exaggerated forms of the female body. Like the grotesque architecture of the Middle Ages, these goddesses are able also to speak to humanity of numinae in such things. Like Bakhtin’s figures these, too, are iconoclastic; just mentioning the word goddess is enough to send shock waves in traditional faiths for the images of cavernous wombs and enlarged vaginas, blood and birthing are too strong and too disgusting for many to theologically reflect on.

Those women who wish to reflect on a prepatriarchal or postpatriarchal spirituality have taken up theology as a safe space to begin anew and reclaim what has been neglected or derided in nature. Again there is the inherent understanding that reclaiming the worth and spiritual wisdom in female issues restores much that has been derided in creation, the flux, blood, change, and creativity emerging from the feared depths of nature. ‘Whatever problems feminist spirituality may have, clearly a lack of robust experience of the divine is not amongst them.’<sup>236</sup> They open up the feared chasms and there is an opportunity to probe the shockable and the disgusting and the decaying, regarding them as integral to parts of the embodiment of the divine which must somehow be incorporated as aspects of its very nature and mystery. Traditional theology has all too often stripped them of value or been in haste to give them ‘premature resolution.’<sup>237</sup> The theologian’s invitation to include more flux and indeterminacy into humanity’s imaging of the

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<sup>234</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>235</sup> King, *op.cit.*

<sup>236</sup> Cynthia Eller, cited in Schneiders, *op.cit.* p.113

<sup>237</sup> Mary Grey uses this expression when she argues that theology has either ignored or trivialized tragedy. *op.cit.*

divine, like the potential of art and drama, makes us more aware of biophilic connections and challenges its anthropomorphic obsessions. In this way theology is a 'creative affront to the fixities of cosmic paternalism and all of its autocratic attempts to block the open journey.'<sup>238</sup>

Thealogy was a term used first by Naomi Goldenberg to describe the method of reflecting on the divine in female terms and it has been the site of the most expressive and innovative analysis of women's bodies of any branch of feminism.<sup>239</sup> It begins its discourse without any reference to patriarchal religion, dogma or creed, working out a space for itself in women's everyday lives and dreams. 'In thealogy a woman's embodied finitude is holy in that it belongs to the intramundane processes of divine creativity.'<sup>240</sup> Many women have found wholeness and comfort in this re-evaluating, in the celebration of those processes which western religion have found so problematic.

A new form of identification has emerged and a new beauty seen in the enhanced focus on the biology of women's embodiment. It has also been seen as a reversal of the reversals, for patriarchal religion is seen as attempting to desecrate the early goddess worshippers and in so doing, commandeer female roles.<sup>241</sup>

Naomi Goldenberg, from a psychoanalytical stance, describes androcentric religious practices as 'a divine masquerade,' from male theologians in their long dresses birthing people through baptism and feeding them in the Eucharist to Adam birthing woman from his rib.' (Genesis 2) She claims these are all methods

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<sup>238</sup> Catherine Keller, 'Goddess, Ear And Metaphor: On The Journey Of Nelle Morton' *Journal Of Feminist Studies In Religion* 1998 4 p.62

<sup>239</sup> Naomi R Goldenberg, 'The Return Of The Goddess: Psychoanalytic Reflections On The Shift From Theology To Thealogy.' *Studies In Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 16:37-52

<sup>240</sup> Raphael, *op.cit.* 1996 p.23

<sup>241</sup> Theologians refer to the earliest worshippers of the female divine. See Asphodel Long, *In A Chariot Drawn By Lions* (London:The Women's Press,1992)

aiming to ‘appropriate imaginatively the female role in maternity.’ ‘They are reversals of woman’s role.’<sup>242</sup> Ruether writes on the same theme. ‘His masculinity is rooted in the overthrow of the mother who was once the all-powerful presence in his early life.’<sup>243</sup>

Mary Daly is most explicit about these reversals where the early healing roles of women have been taken over by males. She believes women’s sacred understanding of their bodies, illnesses and disabilities were taken away from them. ‘Wise women’ in the community often acted as healers, midwives and herbalists.’ Daly believes that their declining power at the time of the witch burnings in the fifteenth century owed much to the rising power of the medical sciences alongside the church’s fear of these women’s knowledge of the processes of the body, methods of easing pain, their embodied confidence and knowledge of what seemed to be power over life and death.<sup>244</sup> The many women burned because of this power and the cult of the ‘sick’ women put in its place has been a vital bone of contention in theology. ‘Medicine’s prime contribution to sexist ideology has been to describe women as sick and as potentially sickening to men.’<sup>245</sup>

Theology seeks to regain women’s confidence in their own power through an unleashing of energy. ‘Feminist profanity is the wild realm of the sacred as it was/ is before being caged into the temple of Father Time .. it transcends the

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<sup>242</sup> Naomi Goldenberg, ‘The Divine Masquerade’ in Kathleen’ O’ Grady, Ann L. Gilroy and Janette Gray, *Bodies, Lives, Voices: Gender In Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1980, pp.180-208

<sup>243</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Introducing Redemption In Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000)

<sup>244</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics Of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press; London: The Women’s Press, 1978), p.180

<sup>245</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *English Complaints And Disorders: The Sexual Politics Of Sickness* (London: The Writers And Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1973), p.9

accepted dichotomies between the sacred and the profane.’<sup>246</sup> Daly advocates that women embrace all that has been termed profane about women and nature to reclaim their natural abilities and bodily functions with great pride. ‘Reversing the reversals is at the heart of theological method.’<sup>247</sup>

Theology, in celebrating the changing nature of all matter, understanding the universe in its constant movement of reconstructing and deconstructing, has been able to incorporate more of the power and energy of the natural order into its theological reflection without flinching. The biophilic power which theologians have sought in unleashing female bodies from the chains of fear, disgust and bodily embarrassment have helped many to see their bodies and spirits in relation to the whole of creation. It has opened up a generous new attitude and joy in many women’s lives.

Refusing to recognise the very real connections that tie us to the cosmos does not make them go away. It is by feeling and intuition that we experience her creation as alive, unpredictable and spontaneous. Humans and nature, mind and matter are intimately and subtly interlinked.<sup>248</sup>

### Concluding remarks

Jesus’ life is reclaimed as the Christ of movement and community and fluidity rather than one of fixed dogma, an aspect of Christology which is brought out by many women writing in feminist theologies.<sup>249</sup> The early Christian movement was such a time of fluidity, heterogeneity, community and complexity as each new movement made sense of its revelation. Aporetic apologetics are needed, complex

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<sup>246</sup> Daly, *op.cit.* p.48

<sup>247</sup> Isherwood and Stuart, *op.cit.* p. 80

<sup>248</sup> Sjo, *op.cit.* p.125

<sup>249</sup> See Isherwood, *op.cit.* 2001 and Isherwood, *op.cit.* 1999



approaches to the hard questions of embodiment, to expand Christian approaches to tragedy and diversity. Hilary Armstrong writes that we must always be on the look out for the Christian tendency to ‘oversimplify issues, sharpen contrasts and minimize any tendencies to agnosticism, tentativeness and serious attempts to understand opposing points of view.’<sup>250</sup>

A more fluid understanding of the divine, on the other hand, conjures up complexity in the density of lived experience and focuses searches for freeing liberating strands in the Bible, the poetic psalms, doxologies, visions and gospels. which testify to a God as,

ground and figure, power and person, this creative spirit, root of our common life, and of our most intensely personal longings. As the wind blows across the ocean, stirring up the sea creatures, causing them to tumble, rearranging them, the erotic crosses among us, moving us to change the way we live in relation.<sup>251</sup>

This chapter has reflected on some of the disparate perspectives of God /goddess and Jesus Christ that emerge from attempting to incorporate more bodily experiences into theological reflection. The creativity sought has tried to hold in mind Merleau-Ponty’s insight that meaning comes from ‘an operation of the body in its temporal, spatial, habitual, expressive and intersubjective openness to the world.’ His radical reflection encourages openness to what can be changed when we are more aware of bodies in space, in changing habits, in perceptual learning, in giving freedom to expression in the arts and in Christian love. Fixed meanings of Christ are giving way to the Christ who can stand alongside and speak to even the hardest questions of

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<sup>250</sup> Hilary Armstrong, *On Not Knowing Too Much About God In Hellenistic And Christian Studies*. (London:Variorum,1990), p.130

<sup>251</sup> Heyward, *Touching Our Strength:The Erotic As Power And Love Of God* (San Francisco:Harper And Row), p.102)

existence.

The Christ that is emerging is more inclusive and challenging than possibly any other time in Christological history..the Christ who is emerging speaks deeply and challenges creatively those who can hear and act in a diverse world.<sup>252</sup>

Thus Irigaray's feminist challenge to theology that it has tried to 'dry her up',<sup>253</sup> is being challenged, but has disability phobia been challenged? Many of the writers in this chapter, certainly show a much more fluid, tehomnic perspective on lived experience. It cannot be denied that some of the more academic feminist theologians in anti- essentialist or anti biologist mode become embarrassed by the exaggerated monstrous outbursts of theology, but the vitality of goddess worship provides much needed exposure to the reality of the body. Disability issues, as the bottom line<sup>254</sup> have taken time to be included in feminist discourse despite the women's insights cited above.

Women's symbolic associations with evil and finitude have left a residue for feminist theologies, one might say a trap, for any discussion of the vulnerable body threatens to return them to the language of blame, self sacrifice and a spiralling tragic helplessness.

Rather than further a discussion that has led in the past to a self defeating passivity and masochism for women in the face of evil and suffering many writers have concentrated on areas that emphasize more positive means of developing women's place in the world.'<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Isherwood. *op.cit.* 2001 pp.69-70

<sup>253</sup> See Page One Of This Chapter *note. 4*

<sup>254</sup> So called because there still is a commonly held view that life doesn't get any worse than being caught in the throes of illness or disability.

<sup>255</sup> Rankka, *op.cit.* pp.53-56

Rankka also makes the valid point that feminist theologies recognise that disability occurs in widely ranging contexts and she is loth to make generalisations or universal statements about situations that are so diverse. The silence too, is symptomatic of the denial and avoidance tendencies of contemporary society, and she concludes overall, that it is a huge topic. Like myself she is grateful for the few writers who do engage in it. That some of these quoted in this study are the foremothers of feminist theologies suggests that they might have found the topic more relevant as they age. Angela West's critique that many early feminist theologies emerged from young, confident, ablebodied theologians, 'for whom the body had not yet demonstrated its capacity to fail its owner,' is apposite.<sup>256</sup>

Feminist theologies have opened the door to much more reflection on the lived body but there is more to do in connection with finitude, illness, and ambivalent body perspectives.<sup>257</sup> Wendy Seymour describes many of the particular difficulties that women with disabilities encounter because of the intersection of sexism and disability. She writes that these women shortfall on many of society's and feminist expectations of the strong, maternal, housekeeping woman, not able to fulfil the caring role that women are traditionally expected to fill and not the ablebodied sexual icon of man's ideal partner or even of feminist erotic lover.<sup>258</sup> Nancy Eisland writes that their experiences differ from ablebodied women in many different areas of life, in sexual affairs, at the workplace and in family life, the worst phobias often coming from their own families or in domestic circumstances. 'Women with disabilities are

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<sup>256</sup> Angela West, *Deadly Innocence: Feminism And The Mythology Of Sin* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p.6

<sup>257</sup> Bonnie Klein, 'We Are Who You Are' *Feminism And Disability* 1993 Ms 2 pp.70-74

<sup>258</sup> Wendy Seymour, *Remaking The Body*, (New York, London: Routledge, 1998), p.54

unquestionably oppressed... objectified and invisible, beaten and exploited, we are simply things not seen to most able-bodied people.’<sup>259</sup> The passivity so encouraged in women in church and society by androcentric power and religious values, is compounded in cases of disability.

Feminist theologians have often been criticised for making women’s perspectives into a new female ideology, of looking at their experience and their breaking free from patriarchy as a new kind of redemption. Optimism about the power of women’s experience has sometimes coloured their eyes to the disgust, malice, envy and thirst for power that is as present in their movement as in any other.

Furthermore, suspicion of androcentric, constructed religious concepts have left some feminists suspicious of any Christian revelations and confession. Wonderful as it has been for women to theologially reflect on their new found voices and actions, there also is a danger of a praxis orientation, a busy-ness about it that often seems to deflect discourse on the depth of divine creativity and intervention in situations of need. Schneiders draws attention to the conversation in feminist theologies between the cynicism of advocates of social constructionism and the advocates of the revelatory power of experiential confession. The scepticism of those feminists who believe that all reality is socially constructed<sup>260</sup> has served to challenge some of the more abstract theological reflections of the past, and challenged theology’s structural systemic exclusions but its reductions have also sometimes resisted the power of divine agency. For those of us committed to the mystical elements of theology ‘the scepticism of social theory

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<sup>259</sup> Nancy Eisland, ‘Things Not Seen’ in Ackermann And Bons- Storm (eds) *Liberating Practices op.cit.* p.118

<sup>260</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London:Routledge,1993)

needs life breathed into it by simple affirmation or acknowledgement of the numinous.’<sup>261</sup> The next chapter addresses ecomystical ways to express this numinous.

Experiential confession negates this ultimate denial asserting the power of the divine to be fully present to embody metaphors, to take on human constructions of temporality and spatiality and to do so in fully comprehensible and concrete, in transient and multiple ways.<sup>262</sup>

In a deconstruction of the obsession with white, the light, the pure and the able-bodied mythology that seeks to eradicate chaos, new mystical routes arise through loving attention to all of creation, including but not restricted to human constructions of thought. ‘You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears. You always resist the Holy Spirit.’ (Acts 7:51) This incensed people enough to gnash their teeth’ and stone Stephen. Prophets are never easy, writes Bishop Bill in his 2007 Lenten address to encourage people to ‘journey on.’ He writes that changes in most parishes are resisted violently, even altering the time of a service throws all into disarray. ‘God is often felt as a comfort blanket rather than as a disturber of the peace.’<sup>263</sup> An effervescent liturgy results from listening to the Holy Spirit and making its earthly presence known vibrantly and realistically through the arts, tragedy, asceticism and the different routes explored. We need to glow as people of God bearing signs of the wonder and struggle of life, emanating the kind of Christian love sought in this work; a warmth to all those who seek such an engagement as many African Christians are able to express in their communal

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<sup>261</sup> Schneiders, *op.cit.* p.136

<sup>262</sup> *Op.cit.* p.152

<sup>263</sup> Bishop Bill, Talk by the Bishop of Truro at the Diocesan Assembly Saturday March 10th 2007

worship.

Yet as Bishop Bill sadly writes, there

are many stories of people who come to church and then after a few weeks leave...often if we could spend some time with them we would discover that they are put off by little things like the church being cold; although more often they are put off because they find the people there cold and those same people do nothing to welcome them...they have never been part of things. Too often churches are nothing more than tribes, people of like minded age and opinions, instead of places where difference is delighted in and celebrated.<sup>264</sup>

The next chapter explores ways to combat such coldness and apathy, it welcomes affective responses and seeks new routes to contemplation to sift through the norms, false and superficial distractions which are the restricting disgust barriers to warm relating. It looks at old and new methods to create a Christian love for all that is. 'Contemplation builds an inner hermitage in the person's core; a holy respite from everyday antics and daily distractions; where one does not flee from the world but rather finds it anew.'<sup>265</sup>

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me says the Lord?  
Or where will my resting place be?  
Has not my hand made all these things? (Isaiah 66:1-2)

Mysticism can be expressed in the apophatic route to the divine, to the 'glowing' dark, 'the darkness so far above the light'<sup>266</sup> and also in the cataphatic way, engaging with myriad earthly routes to the divine. Though often considered incompatible through the ages of the tradition, Matthews writes that they are both sides of the same coin, recognising that both effusion and awe in the face of

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<sup>264</sup> *Op cit.*

<sup>265</sup> Lanzetta, *op.cit.* p.203

<sup>266</sup> Dionysius, cited in Keller, *op.cit.* p.202

created wonder and silence in the face of human lack of knowledge are valid ways to seek and experience the divine.

Both types of enthusiasts are overwhelmed, one by the need to speak in a constant stream of metaphor, the other by the need to be silent...the health of the church requires that these..should be rehabilitated and once again allowed to walk together.. there is a deep correspondence between those who cannot stop talking about God and those who are forced to stop talking about God because they cannot find any language that is adequate. The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.<sup>267</sup>

Mysticism can contain a binary approach, to uncover ambiguities and ambivalent attitudes to creation. It can express terror as well as rapture, be iconoclastic as well as peace mongering, be effusive and mute and it can allow for the disgusting. 'The love of God and for God resides in a gap.'<sup>268</sup> It allows little opportunity to be apathetic, complacent or insipid for awareness of both fear and hope requires a particular kind of zeal. 'Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour.'(Romans 12:11)

This chapter has explored some of the biophilic resources of feminist theologies, innovative and affirming ideas for all those who wish to reclaim the wonder of matter and the numinous within it. It has also probed the depths of chaos and the possibilities of a feminist theodicy to combat the multilayered fears of the suffering, oppressed body. These insights are offered as therapeutic approaches for new liturgy, they are all affirming routes to an ecomysticism which

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267 Melvyn Matthews, *Both Alike To Thee: The Retrieval Of The Mystical Way* (London:SPCK,2000), p.88

268 Julia Kristeva, *Tales Of Love*, Trans Leons Roudiez (New York:Columbia University Press,1987), p.261

seeks a more loving, accepting relationality with the root of all that exists and seeks out the reciprocal loving power at this root.

The last chapter continues this theme and draws the journey to a close hoping the readers will also try some of these routes to become less fearful and more hopeful in and through their own bodies and the body of the world. Merleau-Ponty wrote that it is impossible to imagine thinking or speaking without listening or experiencing marked by all the meanings that attach to skin, ears and eyes; his philosophical method endorses such a creative receptivity within an extended body schema.<sup>269</sup> This is the stance endorsed throughout this work; it has much in common with Keller's vision, as she describes her own work as an overlap between mystical discourse and the prophetic, bodily focused, iconoclasm of feminist theologies;

the viability of the apophatic gesture lies not in its power to suddenly realise from within its own dormant possibilities but in awakening affinities with movements and politics arising outside of the Western Christian discourse, indeed arising in the discourse of the outside of materiality, sign, earth and skin.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception op.cit.* pp.256-257

<sup>270</sup> *Op.cit.* p.204



# Chapter Five

## THE AFFECTIVE CHALLENGE OF THEOLOGY

I no longer call you servants.. instead I have called you friends. (John 15:15)

### BACK TO EARTH

What has been attempted? 'A readoption of the rejected, the reclamation of the discarded,' the forgiveness of the degraded'<sup>1</sup> The challenge of disgust has brought us back to the earth, but will that earth feel like home and the ground of all true knowledge? Merleau-Ponty's philosophy aids the journey to begin to create a theology of the person closely linked to the environment. It restores the influence and importance of the lived qualities of the world to human reflection and challenges tired, univocal, plainmetric perspectives. In his notion of 'flesh'<sup>2</sup> he captures the closeness we share with all that we experience in the environment and for our purposes can also capture the unity we feel in ecomystic wonder of the earth. The 'incarnate principle' appears wherever there is a 'fragment of being.'<sup>3</sup>

Of particular relevance to this work's emphasis on changing human attitudes is the importance he places on the fact that self and world are so entwined that encounters with the world are capable of encroaching upon and altering ideas and behaviours.

We are open to the possibility of being influenced and changed by the difference that they bring to bear upon our interaction with them. This is the ethics that his ontology of the flesh tacitly presupposes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Mies. *Ecofeminism* (Melbourne:Spinifix,1993), p.30

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible And The Invisible. op.cit.* pp.248- 51

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty,*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy op.cit.* accessed 3/4/11 p.10

Being ready to be influenced by nature in this way, in order to revalue it, opens up the possibility of radical change. It begins to challenge some of the worst effects of the disgust reaction so that a new ethic of love for physicality can emerge. It is no easy feat to integrate the binary remedies explored in pursuit of this goal, in both fear and hope, in both mysticism and activism, in both the web of life position and the never again stance. This is a viewpoint that can include many more aspects of physicality and fluctuations within the body using all of the mediums so far discussed. Other planets show signs of the same physicality, some have air, water and matter but there is little sign of sentient being. Why the conditions on earth were exactly conducive to life, is a finely honed mystery. We must stay with that mystery in poetics and love, for theology should be considered one huge exciting exploration of the miracle of being while liturgy should provide many opportunities to express the depth of this engagement. Encounters with all aspects of bodily life, creatures and nature turn out to be exhilarating reacquaintances with the familiar and not so familiar as Anne Dilliard discovered. After spending a year at Tinker's Creek studying nature, she wrote in praise,

it was less like seeing than being for the first time  
knocked breathless by a powerful glance. When I see in  
this way I sway transformed and emptied, litanies hum in  
my ears. I was still ringing. I had been a bell all my life  
and did not know it until I was lifted and struck.<sup>5</sup>

The deceptively homely and familiar elements of matter, the mundane and the vulnerable facts of existence are to be brought into focus once more. The table of the kingdom of God is to include the least in importance and the discarded.

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Dilliard, *Pilgrim At Tinker's Creek* (New York:Harper Collins, 1974), p.308

(Luke 9:35 Matthew 19:30) <sup>6</sup> but the word kingdom fashions itself, not with the mundane, but with very able-bodied, ‘authoritarian garb,’ as Gebara writes, and still wears a male face.<sup>7</sup> The church stresses a discontinuity between God and all of creation, writes Gebara, when in reality a continual divine presence exists in multiple relatedness and ‘the only way to grasp this reality is to express it and live it out.’<sup>8</sup>

A Christian feminist ecomysticism seeks no less than to ‘reclaim the whole of God, the whole of the church and the whole of creation.’<sup>9</sup> There is no wideness in theology, no real music in the universe without a holistic engagement with the discord, the silences and the more ominous pulsating rhythms of nature. It is like loving music without including the compositions of Mahler, Bruch or Beethoven whose music manages to fill the universe with the ongoing and combined rapture and tragedy of all existence, without having further to articulate the juxtaposition of these dramas of life.

Filling the gaps in theological reflection on the wonders of the earth should probably fill the paragraphs of this last chapter to do justice to the ecomystical task but this would need many written works of appreciation and expertise. In ‘Wildlife, The Beauty of Animals,’ Ted Smart writes that ‘there are well over one million species of animals on earth, many of them of outstanding beauty and all of them of absorbing interest.’ Between the extraordinary array of insects and the enormous elephants there is the multitude of animals, ‘each with its own charm or

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<sup>6</sup> See also Matthew 22:9-10

<sup>7</sup> Ivonne Gebara, *Longing For Running Water* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press,1999), p.103.

<sup>8</sup> *Op.cit.* p.26 p.103

<sup>9</sup> Watson, *op.cit.* p.111

majesty.’<sup>10</sup> The works on the technical skills of ethology and natural history fill libraries but not churches, there are many bookshelves at the back of churches but few of them would be full of reference books on the wonders of the earth.<sup>11</sup> The vision is that one day liturgy could be filled with the aesthetics and poetics of the knowledge gained of the extraordinary world humans share with all that lives, that the shelves would be filled with books of every kind of wonder on creation and human absorption in it.

Even books on simple wine making and on vegetable growing and healing through plants, hospitality and cooking or on simple entertaining in the way Jesus enjoyed dining with friends in their houses, would bring us closer to earth matters. These would all be recognised as part and parcel of relationality and care in community, particularly when everyone could be encouraged to share practical skills of horticulture, cooking, carpentry and crafting. These would expand aesthetic awareness of the material aspects of our lives and fulfil a Christian ecomystical transformation involving holistic, simpler, concrete symbols of the vision that is God’s will on earth as in heaven.

The shape... of God’s body, from some central motifs in the ministry of Jesus, is one that includes the rich diversity of created forms, especially in regard to their basic needs for physical well being. The body of God must be fed.<sup>12</sup>

There are, to be fair, increasingly, books on ecological sustainability and human responsibility for praxis in the community on environmental issues. The

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<sup>10</sup> Ted Smart, *Wildlife: The Beauty Of Animals* (Goldaming, Surrey: Grenville Books, 1991), Introduction

<sup>11</sup> *Op.cit.* and Rensberger, *op.cit.* David Attenborough’s *Life Trilogy* (London: Collins, BBC Books, 1990)

<sup>12</sup> Diann Neu describes such praxis as returning blessings to the earth and her book offers practical advice as well as spiritual visions of human responsibility for the future. *Return Blessings op.cit.* pp 8-9

theological task now is to link this flurry of activity with one's Christian spirituality, to inspire enthusiasm for biological diversity in theological speculation about creation, sparing little of its adversity. This is, as Peters and Hewlett write, 'to begin to experience once again a nature encountered in, but not reducible to the cultural and social.'<sup>13</sup> It is not to advocate a feral existence, but to be aware of how easy it has been to subsume nature into human concerns. People often express disgust for minor inconveniences; it is so easy to complain that the rain spoils a day's outing or that the sun dazzles one when driving, small examples but symptomatic of ongoing tendencies. Merleau-Ponty believed that the world exists for us as we view it but it also exists for itself; he searched for a harmony between what we aim for and what is given.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar way John Polkinghorne, balancing his academic life as theologian and scientist, argues for 'a proper balance between the mental and the material. An equalhandedness in recognition of the universe and the remarkable richness of human experience and unique abilities.'<sup>15</sup> An ecomystical approach begins to reverse either/or mentalities and accomplishes the expressive unity that Merleau-Ponty saw was necessary to restore human appreciation of nature. It challenges the rooted practice of keeping one account for the dynamics of human praxis and reflection and separate entries and records for the dynamics of the cosmos. In Christian love and ecomysticism all suffering becomes paramount, and there is an interlocking awareness of human 'unique abilities' and

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<sup>13</sup> Ted Peters, and Martinez Hewlett, *Evolution: From Creation To New Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p.43

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception op.cit.* p.137

<sup>15</sup> Polkinghorne, *op.cit.* p.33

interdependence with all life with loving responsibility for all that exists. It seeks to help humanity

live according to those rules that will allow as many creatures as possible, as many kinds, their best chance of living a satisfactory life according to their kind.<sup>16</sup>

Ecomystical liturgy needs to be explicit about the wonders of nature existing for themselves, not for human use alone. 'To see those things in a new light, in a discernible concord with the nature from which they came and will probably return.'<sup>17</sup>

Earth is a contained enclosure, only sunlight is already not in place; it is a recycled unit where all is returned to nature after use and where only nature has the wherewithal to create air, water, rich soil and to sustain different bodies in ecological sustainability. Fulfilling rituals of acceptance and awe start from this knowledge, as Timothy Casey advocates.

The motive and interest start here and here being that environmental space where our practical concerns are so tied to natural events as to be in many respects inseparable from them.<sup>18</sup>

Ecomysticism also begins with knowledge and enthusiasm (a Greek word meaning filled with God.) David Attenborough writes that only a concerted effort over many years brings the observer to new awareness of the actual lives and struggles of other creatures. Their

problems are the same whether the animals are spiders or squirrels, mice or monkeys, llamas or lobsters. The

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16 Stephen Clark, *Biology And Christian Ethics* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.299

17 Timothy Casey, 'The Environmental roots of Environmental Activism' in Don Marietta, *Environmental Philosophy* (London:Roman and Littlefield,1995), p.43

18 *Op.cit.*

solutions developed by different species are hugely varied and often astounding. But they are all the more comprehensible and engaging for they are the trials that we also face ourselves.<sup>19</sup>

Theological multicultural concerns need expanding in an age of ecocide, until we realise that we are only now beginning to learn about diversity.

The wonderful children's books of 'horrible' science, geography and nature based on the books by Nick Arnold and illustrated by Tony De Saulles, have won awards for their ingenuity in drawing children's interest to knowledge of the earth, 'with the gritty bits left in.' The odious, the freaky, the earth shattering and dreadful, to make one 'quiver,' 'tremble' and 'shudder,' are included to many a child's satisfaction and erudition about life.<sup>20</sup> Arnold asks, for instance, 'what stops your eyeballs from falling out and why can dead bodies make ghostly glowing lights?'<sup>21</sup> Children quickly become immersed in fascinating facts and language about the earth from a scatological angle. For them, 'nothing is too small or big or unclean as not to merit passionate interest and attentive understanding.'<sup>22</sup> It puts a new slant on Jesus' words, 'I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' (Luke 18:17)

A journey of immersion into such diversity, in order to save and protect it from further damage, calls forth not only a greater knowledge, but also compassion. Milan Kundera writes of the importance of understanding

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<sup>19</sup> David Attenborough, *The Trials Of Life* (London:Collins, BBC, 1990), p.10

<sup>20</sup> See Nick Arnold, *The Horrible Science Collection* (London:Eaglemoss Publication) and Anita Ganeri, *Horrible Geography: Odious Oceans* (London, New York:Scholastic Children's Books,1999)

<sup>21</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> David Toolan, *op.cit.*2003 p.206

compassion, not from the Latin root *passio*, but from the German ‘Mit-gefühl’ to mean feeling which brings out the idea of co-feeling with no possible residue or hint of condescension.

The secret strength of its etymology floods the world with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to live with another’s misfortune but also to feel with him, any emotion- joy, anxiety, happiness, pain.<sup>23</sup>

Co-feeling incorporates the Christian mysterious correlation of humility, respect and love shown in the washing of the feet of the disciples. (John 13:4-16) It is symbolic of a turning around of hierarchy and power and draws attention to the ground of life, where we stand to look in wonder, not in arrogance or with inattention but with active engagement with the deceptively familiar. ‘Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.’ (John 13:16)

Wonder does not deflect attention and concern away from the phenomenal world (the physical world as presented to experience) but on the contrary, values and enjoys its diversity. To respect and compassion as moral correlates of wonder we could add gentleness- a concern not to blunder into a damaging manipulation of another...from a wondering recognition of forms of value proper to other beings, and a refusal to see them in terms of one’s own utility purposes, there is only a short step to humility.<sup>24</sup>

These aesthetic and ascetic responses are aspects of ecomysticism which can develop into a more inclusive response to the earth, incorporating all that can be seen, all bodies, ablebodied and disabled, all creatures and land, in order ‘to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head...Christ.(Ephesians 1:10)

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23 Kundera, *op.cit.* p.19

24 Ronald Hepburn, ‘Wonder’ in John Benson, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction With Readings* (London:Routledge, 2000), pp.205-6



‘He is before all things...for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.’(Colossians1:17-20) The healing narratives, the promises of God’s inclusive love for the future and the joy of the apostles, point to this reconciling Christ in all and with all. ‘Because I live, you also will live.’(John 14:19) Salvation is for all creation.

If Christianity has anything to offer a world in danger of total ecological and/ nuclear destruction it is in its affirmation of sacred presence in and among physical realities, including but not limited to human persons. Creative resistance to dominating structures requires insistence upon the possibility of revelation through a multitude of diverse expressions by incarnate beings.<sup>25</sup>

The deeper the ecomystical focus on the fearsome and gruesome aspects of creation, the more one sees alongside the beauty entwined within them, and sees indeed that the grotesque and the beautiful blossom from the same root, there is no life without both aspects. Maria Rainer Rilke writes that, ‘Beauty is but the beginning of terror and we have shaded our eyes.’<sup>26</sup> Faith is about energy in the face of want, of fear and hope and making the world go on. (Matthew 25:35-45) ‘Faith could be summed up as the essential values that support life... the values that are made flesh in behaviours such as solidarity with the poor.’<sup>27</sup> Christian values become apparent from the very flesh in which they are embodied and from the encounter. This is where belief in God emanates and either develops in hope or dies through fear or apathy.

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<sup>25</sup> Ann Kirkus Wetherilt, *That They May Be Many Voices Of Women, Echoes Of God* (New York:Continuum, 1994), p.16

<sup>26</sup> Maria Rainer Rilke, cited in Matthews, *op.cit.* p.31

<sup>27</sup> Gebara, *op.cit.* p.147

Boredom and apathy are major challenges for any ecomysticism in today's urgent need to love creation once more. They are vital problems for any activist and silent causes of many of the sins of the world. Jim Hansen believes we have only ten years to save the planet if humanity does not address its attitudes and polluting practices and if nothing is done to drastically cut carbon emissions. The earth is within one degree centigrade of being its hottest for a million years and in danger of becoming just 'another planet.'<sup>28</sup> The fear of nonbeing is facing everything that we know yet the needs of the planet are always slotted in the news later than the fashionable headlines of party political squabbles and celebrity divorce settlements. A stifling satiety reigns.

It seems that to admit nature is as important as humanity is reductive, as is giving dignity and importance to disabled people. People consult me after long absences when they become ill: as if I am a personification of their own condition. I become a confessor able to hold this secret knowledge of vulnerability and illness; the always present possibility of the underlying erupting fragility of fleshly existence. I carry the weight of such corporeal abjection in my very self. 'You know how it feels,' they say, even as they know they will drop me again when they recover. Similarly, the reality of the wounded earth, becomes something to think about when it can no longer be avoided, it is the fear of the implicit having its own presence, lingering, inassimilatable, proprioceptive; the fear that such things will compel a response. 'The body is active in the quietest whisper, the most subtle enunciation and in the most aggressive and destructive of activities.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hansen, cited in *op.cit.* p.17

<sup>29</sup> Nick Crossley, 'Merleau Ponty And The Phenomenological Body' *Body And Society* vol 1 pp.43-65

It is humanity's 'anchorage'<sup>30</sup> in the world, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, and the basis of this Christian ecomystical approach which, like Polkinghorne, is eager to ground spirituality in the earthly experience of Christ and the sustaining support of the Spirit, the channels of divine energy in full Trinitarian loving expression in creation. He, like Merleau-Ponty, integrated all life experiences into his final analyses; 'it is the primacy of narrative over philosophical speculation.'<sup>31</sup> Even in the early centuries of the church, St Ignatius intuited the very human like inclination to speculate philosophically and flee visceral reality.

Be deaf then to any talk that ignores Jesus Christ of David's lineage of Mary who was really born, ate and drank, and was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was really crucified.<sup>32</sup>

A compartmentalised view of the divine enigma within creation always eludes capture, nevertheless, it is rightly believed to have been experienced sacramentally and mediated through bodily expression in liturgy by countless believers throughout the ages.

The search for innovative ecomystical liturgy, to discover the very energy from which we are made and sustained on a vibrant earth, is located not only in the positive body revaluations of the previous chapters, it is also found in the unusual encounter of honesty, feisty praise and verbose exuberance which does not shirk from the dark, where one looks for ways to avoid closure. 'Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling bands of darkness or if it comes to that choir the proper praise.'<sup>33</sup> What resources are needed for this wider search? The Christian church should make just such a resource, it should create an

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<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.*

<sup>31</sup> John Polkinghorne, *op.cit.* p.111

<sup>32</sup> M Staniforth, trans *Texts In Early Christian Writings* (London:Penguin, 1968), p.100

<sup>33</sup> Dilliard, *op.cit.* p.289

‘ecclesial spa’<sup>34</sup> of knowledge, sensorial ritual and an interdisciplinary space of questioning and affirmation about the constitutive elements of evolving matter and the true miracle of the human body, of the givenness of being itself. As Boyce Rensberger writes, ‘you’re born, you eat, you sleep, you die, it’s time you knew the hows and whys.’<sup>35</sup> The wonders of even one speck of blood the size of the letter ‘o’ contains thousands of cells; it is a sea full of the most amazing pulsating matter. Liturgy should pulsate with awe. It is a form of habituation, able to change sedimented ideas and create new directions towards action for renewal. Merleau-Ponty saw that habitual acts of the body give ‘our life the form of generality and prolong our personal acts into stable dispositions.’<sup>36</sup>

It is necessary to scout far and wide for the resources to provide such a knowledge spa and to keep alert to the tendencies to categorise experience into different disciplines of knowledge, as if only science and leisure can articulate humanity’s physical needs; as if only certain disciplines should voice an opinion on nature, or only biology and medicine on the ailing or well body. Merleau-Ponty was scathing about such an approach. ‘Science manipulates things and gives up living in them.’<sup>37</sup> Such contraction of human inquiry and wonder into compartments of expertise with the ensuing power this can entail, blunts the holism that is sought. ‘As if everything that is and has been was meant only to enter the laboratory.’<sup>38</sup> An ecomystical approach incorporates the whole person

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<sup>34</sup> My own terms for the space envisioned. A place apart to engage with awe and to learn. A healing space where one would be free to probe the wonders and facts of nature. Respect, minimalism, eagerness to understand, reciprocity and love would be encouraged: superiority and ready assumptions put to one side.

<sup>35</sup> Rensberger, *op.cit.* Back Cover Commentary

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception op.cit.* p.146

<sup>37</sup> *Op.cit.* p.252

<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* p.253

and the whole earth in affective ways that can help achieve clarity of vision and vigilance in the face of old habits of thinking and categorising, of old 'ways of knowing.'<sup>39</sup> Many fears are born of ignorance and loneliness in the face of what often seems the cruelty and aimlessness of life. Church should be one arena where these fears are addressed in a variety of ways; it should leave little to the fearful imagination but be informative and knowledgeable about bodily life and bring facts to life in vibrant rituals.

If the church could be seen as a beacon in this way; an interdisciplinary kaleidoscope of wisdom, kickstarting liturgy into a more visceral appreciation of creation, church services could be not only more exhilarating, as the full magnitude of the creativity of the creator awakens human consciousness, but also more authentic in times of need. It would avoid a sentimental perspective on nature, acknowledging and expressing the challenge it raises in the everyday world to all sentient flesh. Such perspectives would look squarely into stark reality, at the paradoxes, the extraordinary creativity and defeat, empathy and cruelty, endurance and despair, love and disgust, all that seem beyond comprehension.

Liturgies of lament and joy should hold together all ambiguities and ambivalences, they should be a common part of worship. Affective responses should be encouraged to draw out the august grandeur of the processes of evolution. The nugatory ways, both the miracles and the adversities of nature have been reduced to anthropomorphic fears and mediocrity should be brought to light. Such responses could help all to feel at the familial depths of humanity, the ensuing injury that has been meted out to the earth as a result of long absence of

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<sup>39</sup> Gebara, *op.cit.*

care, a neglect of responsibility that can be compared to that of an indifferent parent.

‘It is this family consciousness that crowns St Francis’ attitude toward nature,’ writes Stuart Causus, who points out that St Francis was so close to God in nature, he could write of brother sun and sister moon. Severance and cleavage from nature is a human design and one which can be altered through ritual, prayer and contemplation.<sup>40</sup> Such ritual can heal rupture and affirm that one is not alone in the universe. ‘And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’(Matthew 28:20) One need not face ambiguity without a loving community whose vibrancy could begin to counter some of the attacks on Christianity of recent years.

Atheism has gathered momentum and its attack on Christianity has sometimes been described as a vomiting of contempt, a very strong affective response, embodied and full of disgust. A form of abject bodily expulsion is being expressed. Atheism is being spat at Christianity, as something abject and harmful to human bodies, as Richard Dawkins continues to stress the pathological effects of Christianity.’<sup>41</sup> Positive Christian counters to such an attack need to be on the same level of bodily and visceral terms; hence the value of ecomysticism. Alister McGrath points out that despite the polemic a 2001 survey of one hundred evidence based studies on the relationship between religion and human well being showed that seventy nine found a positive correlation between them and only one

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<sup>40</sup> Stuart Causus, *Christ of the Twenty First Century* (Rockport:Mass Element,1992), pp.143-4

<sup>41</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London:Transworld Publishing Ltd, 2006)

found a negative correlation.<sup>42</sup> It is time to state the regenerative power of Christian love more forcefully in embodied ways that relate to the contemporary issues of the day, especially through the ecological crisis.

Mary Kenny writes that many have banned the word Christmas in Birmingham and elsewhere in favour of the term Winterval. The highjacking of the period in orgies of excessive eating, drinking and worship of all that glitters in idols of consumerism has led her to believe that perhaps the whole period of December should be handed back to those who do not adhere to the simpler lifestyle advocated in Christ's teachings, leaving Christians to have Christmas as a space apart.<sup>43</sup> A celebration of God taking flesh in holiness and wholeness of being, preferably in the outdoors, well apart from the 'shop till you drop routine,' in gratitude for a more ascetic, minimalist, mystical space where resources are conserved for the sake of the earth and its energies. This might create a chance to step aside to celebrate the incarnation throughout creation, without distortion from consumer products. John Parsons defines minimalism as 'the simple expression of complex thought,' not no thought at all and 'yet at its purest, its most full on, the real thing stops people in their tracks.' It is not banal but

the quality that a building or object possesses when every component, every detail and every junction has to be reduced or condensed to its essentials. This is not to be confused with pseudo- minimalism: the featureless flat, the white room, the garden of gravel and concrete, anything done on the cheap and left unfurnished.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes And The Meaning Of Life* (Oxford, MA:Blackwell Publishing, 2005)

<sup>43</sup> Mary Kenny, cited in *The Week* December 16<sup>th</sup> 2006 p.19

<sup>44</sup> John Parsons, 'Minimalism' *The Financial times* November 28th 2008

Much anti-Christian polemic seems to concentrate on the most banal of examples to combat the Christian faith; it is featureless like pseudo- minimalism, missing the heart of Christianity but content to think it knows of its faults. As a Christian disabled person, I seek some of the essentials of Christianity on a par with Parsons' descriptions of minimalism, condensed and reduced from its distortions to a faith that makes us stop in our tracks, a faith that is open to perception of the world and one where there is no fear of being subject to exclusionary practices because of one's bodily differences. Dropping the fear, one attempts to understand one's own psychic formation through embodiment despite the traditions' difficulty with different bodies and become the subject of one's own enquiry; not the object of another's fear.

Christianity has done violence to people by using fear of exclusion, fear of hell, fear of God... opposed to human desires and self-realization.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of 'a sort of basic, unchanging structure that is understood to be above and beyond the contingencies of space and time,'<sup>46</sup> which controls our thinking and action or rather lack of action, we can perhaps claim the Spirit of God as the 'counsellor' that works as catalyst, in the depth of our being, working outward towards the world. (John 14:16) 'When we make contact with the deepest level of every human being's experience we will find it is grounded in a single shared mystery that invites us all to act in ways that express communion, equality and reciprocity.'<sup>47</sup> As Christians find themselves increasingly marginalised and, as the Archbishop of York admitted, find themselves considered

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<sup>45</sup> Matthias Beur, *Violent God: An Introduction To The Work Of Eugen Drewerman* (London, New York:Continuum, 2004), p.220

<sup>46</sup> Gebara, *op.cit.* p.43

<sup>47</sup> *Op.cit.* p.156



a little 'mad,'<sup>48</sup> it is necessary to make the very concrete concerns of Christianity more visible and state them passionately, learning some tips from self assertiveness training.

Learning assertive behaviour is a process of growth, it probably never stops or achieves a point where you have arrived fearless and confident to tackle anything life can throw at you. They practice their techniques for learning to overcome their problems, to help them state their point of view and demands clearly, firmly and politely without being reduced to incoherent rage and silent acquiescence.<sup>49</sup>

When liturgy does not speak to one's bodily experience, rage or silent acquiescence has been the experience of many women and disabled, and is now increasingly felt by earth lovers. Today, many voices need to join together to understand what flourishes, to viscerally make it explicit, to see the internal workings of God within and around us.

What is the future vision for Christian ecomysticism? There is a yearning, as Mary Grey writes,

to cherish the memories of loved ones in their living and dying, in what they still mean to us and what we hand on to the next generation- we want our work to contribute to the enrichment and continuation of life in the widest sense. We seek a way to end intolerable cruelty, intolerable suffering through illness, poverty, torture, famine and drought so that everyone can live out a span with dignity.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Archbishop of York speaking on The Sunday Morning Programme with Andrew Marr *BBC One* March 2007 9am

<sup>49</sup> Sue Slipman, *Helping Ourselves To Power* (Oxford, New York:Pergamon Press, 1986), p.22

<sup>50</sup> Mary Grey, *op.cit.* 2003 p.121

Such fulfilment does not come without engagement with the most profound complexities, enigmas and vulnerabilities of fleshly life. This is a theology that is not reserved about bodily pain or needs, it will allow the integration of as large a slice of concrete knowledge as possible and take heed of the many capacities that come together in the perceptual act as Merleau-Ponty saw in his inclusive vision.

With this holistic vision we can then focus on those aspects that really matter to ecological sustainability, and vulnerable beings and those places where humanity can make a difference. Technology has been the means of gaining an early warning system to the ecological crisis, it now offers hope and healing in the form of new ideas, from biofuel to the artificial trees creating oxygen, and to innovative methods to increase the algae in the sea to consume the carbon dioxide. This needs to be accompanied by a viscerally engaged creation spirituality so that all can work with ideas in tandem towards the kind of world that Grey envisages.

Religious ideas are what is needed to rescue nature and human culture from a pathologically unguided use of scientific turned technological knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

This is creation centred spirituality with a vengeance, with vibrant representations, exposing and evoking bodily reactions. As Merleau-Ponty believed, the body is not just one object but a grouping of lived through meanings;

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51 John McCarthy, 'A Short Consideration' in Maureen Tilley, and Susan Ross, (eds) *Broken And Whole: Essays On Religion And The Body* (London, Maryland:University Press Of America, 1995), p.147

these need expressing in a variety of poetical ways.<sup>52</sup> Adrienne Rich develops such rich material imagery in her poetry, evoking and including neglected areas of life in theological reflection.

I have to react to it viscerally, with my body, I feel the power of her images, the impact of her use of temperatures, images of tearing, cutting, shattering of blood and semen, of sexual ecstasy.<sup>53</sup>

Some of these might have terrifying implications for some; it is the inclusion of multiple forms of life and embodiments. 'Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.'<sup>54</sup> This is a vision which expands the ideas of redemption to the whole scope of the empowering, dynamic numinous which is felt at the heart of nature. 'The Trinity is relationship after all: an existential experience in ourselves and in the world;'<sup>55</sup> it is openness to the Spirit, in our need for healing wisdom that recognises divine energy in the new embodied consciousness developing in the cosmos we inhabit. 'He will guide you into all things.'(John 16:13)

'Today we are called to refashion the meanings of our lives: to simplify them, democratize them, and allow them to be pluralistic'<sup>56</sup> We can begin to understand ourselves, the commonalities of humanity and the earth in a unitary and viscerally realistic way, rather than in a dualistic way separating spirit and matter. This is affirming a God who treats humanity as partners and friends in the stage of evolution that is being revealed, rather than one confined to one deposit of faith guarded closely and jealously by the institution of church and human hierarchies

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<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 962 p.153

<sup>53</sup> Mary Gentile, 'Adrienne Rich and Separatism: The Language Of Multiple Realities' *Maenad* Vol 2 No 2 Winter 1982 p.142

<sup>54</sup> Father Zossima, in Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London:Penguin Classics, 1993)

<sup>55</sup> Gebara, *op.cit.* p.153

<sup>56</sup> *Op.cit.* p.154

of power. This involves contiguity with the kernel of what brings about fecundity, dignity and flourishing in all cultures and willingness to initiate psychic renewal, to 'hear the imperatives of the world around us into a cathedral of innerness, vaster by far than the plain theatres of existence we can at present conceive.'<sup>57</sup>

Transformation of our inner landscape may transform our bodies and cure physical ailments as well as emotional pain. Facing our terror of annihilation, reintegrating our split warring parts, frees us to cherish the passionate unrepressed animal poetic body -- and by extension to cherish nature and all of life. ... reclaiming our personal power, means reclaiming our ability to engage reality not retreat from it.<sup>58</sup>

Ecomystic identification with the poor, the disabled and the suffering of creatures is a passion felt at the depth of being, one is physically shaken to the core. 'To be a mystic means to perceive the divine amidst the ordinariness of life, to pierce through the multiple veils of our experience and reach the true heart of reality.'<sup>59</sup> Physically immersed, one suffers with all that suffers at the deepest level.

The passions are a matter of fire and ice  
Of light and darkness  
Of water and drowning, of earth  
And finding or losing one's  
Footing and of breathing in the  
Deepest and most secret aspects  
of life.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Freya Matthew, *Reinhabiting Reality* (New York: New York Press, 2005), p.114

<sup>58</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming The Dark op.cit.* p.69

<sup>59</sup> Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives And Legacies Throughout The Ages* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.248

<sup>60</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Divine Women* (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1986), 6

The passions are multiple. They can be revolutionary as they react to oppression and to exploitation but they also emerge from the woundedness of disability which can trigger the depths of empathy;

Not indulgently milking your pain to consolidate yet another identity but with a gesture of moment by moment openness to the reality of your condition... the condition of us all. The tender gravity of kindness that emerges in this descent gives rise to a love that cannot die for such a love is given freely from the depths of existence and can never be taken away.<sup>61</sup>

This is the kind of resistance sought in the face of disgust. Merleau-Ponty believed that such passions were very much embodied and seen by their material effects. If so there can be a corporeal replotting of certain passions. ‘What causes wars and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?’ (James 4: 2) Members can be those places in human bodies where disgust, envy, malice, hate and fear gestate, fester and get expressed vehemently, spat out and aimed like darts into other bodies. ‘A heart at peace gives life to the body but envy rots the bones.’ (Proverbs 14:30)

Malicious emotions are often considered private or individual matters but they do have a very public and material effect. These destructive emotions should be brought out into the open in liturgy, and shame and disgust revalued as tools to bring these very material spites to light. Disgust could then be reutilised as a powerful force to combat all that dishonours the earth and the vulnerable body. Disgust at such things should become as instinctive as the instinct for survival itself.

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<sup>61</sup> Roger Housden, *Ten Poems To Open Your Heart* (London: Hodder And Stoughton, 2003) p.76

Only then can it be seen that a better acquaintanceship with nature, care and kindness will make sense, in order to understand that, ‘this is what we were looking for all along... the elemental love that is who we are!’<sup>62</sup> The depth of sorrow for all that has been damaged, and the deep love and kindness that needs to emerge, is described by Naomi Shihab Nye as akin to the depths of a mystical experience; it is often a direct result of suffering in oneself and for others. Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,

you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing  
you must wake up with sorrow  
you must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.<sup>63</sup>

Mystics have been able to unmask, probe and clarify the extremes of human emotions and never more have their insights been needed as alarm calls for the planet. ‘What characterises the mystic more than anybody else is a deep sense of the immersion in the divine energy at work in creation itself.’<sup>64</sup> Through ecstasy and through suffering, they pointed to what Sölle describes as ‘immensity.’ ‘In suffering there is always that immensity which is beyond suffering.’<sup>65</sup> Thomas Merton believed that at these depths there is total connection to the ground of love.

The reality that is present to us and in us call it being...call it pneuma ..or silence..and the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen.. we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of love for which there can be no explanation.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>63</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye, *Kindness* (London:Hodder And Stoughton, 2003), p.66

<sup>64</sup> Diamuir’O’Murchu, ‘Ecotheology’ in *Ecotheology* Col 10 1<sup>st</sup> April 2005

<sup>65</sup> Sölle, *op.cit.* 2001 p.43

<sup>66</sup> William Shannon, (ed) *Hidden Ground Of Love* (Merton Legacy Trust Reprinted By Permission Of Farra Strauss and Giroux Inc 13 April 1967), p.115

Such experiences have given us not only the value of silence, the apophaticism, but also the cataphatic exuberance of lived experience. Hildegard of Bingen was just such an ecomystic who could feel keenly the power of the green verdancy of the earth and articulate it in cataphatic fashion. 'The earth of humankind contains all moistness, all verdancy, all germinating power..it is in so many ways fruitful. All creation comes from it.'<sup>67</sup> My home in Cornwall sees an early spring, the beech tree leaves uncurling like little fat cigars and the lushness of the hedgerow is an extraordinary explosion of verdancy. The momentum gathers in May to such a peak, one can feel the embodied vigour of Hildegard's verdant visions, 'these mystic words of mine which emanate from me, living.'<sup>68</sup>

Humankind should ponder God...  
Recognise God's wonders and signs...  
The earth ..is mother of all...  
The earth should not be injured.  
The earth should not be destroyed.<sup>69</sup>

Ursula King writes that such mystics have supplied the 'treasure houses' of the human spirit; the portrayal of their varied lives draws out their assertiveness, their intimate encounter with the divine in nature which has inspired their extroversion and their loving capacities.<sup>70</sup> These qualities can be developed through more humorous and flamboyant views of embodiment in cataphatic mysticism.

#### Cataphatic mysticism and disability.

Cataphatic mysticism is an effusive expression of the divine in the world, it has the potential to defuse disgust by embracing nature and life at its most celebratory. It offers some positive steps that women, the disabled and ecologists can take to

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<sup>67</sup> Gabriele Uhlein, (ed) *Meditations Of Hildegard Of Bingen* (Sante Fe:N M Bear &Co,1982), p.58

<sup>68</sup> Hildegard Of Bingen, in Oden, *op.cit.* p.113

<sup>69</sup> Uhlein, *op.cit.* pp.45-46 58

<sup>70</sup> King, *op.cit.* Introduction

disrupt degrading representations of bodies. The cataphatic mode, rather than the apophatic mode of mysticism, has been more popular in feminist theologies and in embodied concerns; it is a relevant motif for ecofeminism as it raises consciousness to the idiosyncracies of flesh and the panentheistic God, immanent and personal to all sentient life. It can create a space capable at looking at the body in Bakhtinian manner, depicting the lower strata of the body, and at transformations of the body into monstrous shapes, completely deconstructing civilising pretentious posturing through humour and vulgarity. ‘At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities.’<sup>71</sup> Preposterous images abound where matter merges from one body to the next, never dying, but regenerating into rebirths and innovative creations. Thus terror is counteracted and transformed by creativity and indigenous folk wisdom and happy laughter. ‘A merry answer to fears and pious moods.’<sup>72</sup>

Humour and its ability to sail through the feared transitions of life where the big challenges of bodily life are to be faced, creates inurement to disgust and fear. Some medical students I have known, learning to deal with their initial disgust reactions in their profession, diffuse their new experiences, by sharing the most outrageous jokes about the body which I have always enjoyed but would not share at church, I wish that I could. Liturgy needs these cataphatic ways of looking at God in the midst of the dynamic, voluptuous, the fecund and the whimsical. One sees the primal, extraordinary depths and knows it not as other or alien, but as one’s own foundations and beginnings. This too is a chance to see anew ‘the extravagant landscape of the world given, given with pazzazz... pressed

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<sup>71</sup> Jean Houston, cited in Cameron, *op.cit.* p.18

<sup>72</sup> Morris, *op.cit.* p.339



down, shaken together and running over.’<sup>73</sup> Humanity can ignore this overflowing or choose to see it. Dilliard writes that if one chooses to see it then one ‘walks fearlessly.’<sup>74</sup> Nothing is too lowly, too fearful or too extraordinary to be praised, even if we know it causes disease and hardship for humanity.

The Aids virus looks extremely beautiful under the microscope, even as we seek to do all we can do to eradicate it. It is a master of espionage, disguising itself and attaching itself to a host and bearing all the signs of a benign presence. It causes the most horrendous suffering yet its ingenuity is a product of the extraordinary evolutionary process which has brought humanity thus far. In a similar way Housden makes the same kind of point when he writes, ‘the sow; her very existence is enough in itself to validate fully her being here. Being here just as she is in her sowness.’<sup>75</sup>

The sow however, does not kill; the Aids virus is like the rat, a tehomic feature of life which throws humanity into turmoil and must be viewed with the greatest respect and lament. Paradoxically, the ecological crisis has increased the population of rats which thrive on copious heaps of recycled matter in compost piles all around the country. Water shortage too has meant many women in Africa have to travel greater distances to fetch water and are subjected to sexual assaults on lonely roads. Many of these rapists carry HIV and the disease spreads rapidly in these circumstances. We are never far from a rat or disease and we are never far from the effects of entropy. Fear, disgust, the threat of disease and chaos are all a part of a cataphatic ecomysticism too, in its engagement with all of life, working in and through it so that trauma can be dealt with more authentically.

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<sup>73</sup> Dilliard, *op.cit.* p.204

<sup>74</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>75</sup> Housden, *op.cit.*, p.45

Only when we bring otherness home and learn to live with it, destabilizing the assumptions that have characterised our point of origin, does it enable us to think- and live- otherwise. It is a way to bring newness into the world.<sup>76</sup>

Newness like this can arise from a kind of movement that McFague describes as ‘decentering and recentering.’ This entails dropping anthropomorphic arrogance and recognising ‘we are neither the possessor nor principal tenant of planet earth but responsible adults, the only species... that knows the common creation story and can assume our roles as partners for its well being.’<sup>77</sup> There are areas of the planet dying and universities all over the world with the top brains working to improve the human condition and the plight of the planet but there must also be a love and a homecoming to the earth. Levinas believed that ‘spirit in its masculine essence’ has lived outside on an earth without inner recesses removed from its homeland, solitary and wandering.’<sup>78</sup> A cataphatic mysticism is sorely needed to increase human inner psychic awareness and draw humanity back to its roots.

Behind long disruption of Earth process is the refusal of western industrial society to accept needed restraints upon its quest for release, not simply from normal ills but release from the human condition itself... there exists in our tradition a hidden rage against those inner as well as outer forces that create limits on our activities.<sup>79</sup>

Modern psychic sensitivities do seem in danger of just such rage that comes from isolation. Instead of appreciating the excitement of living on earth as a great

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<sup>76</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Foundations Of Violence* (London, New York:Routledge, 2004), p.98

<sup>77</sup> McFague, *op.cit.* p.109

<sup>78</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Judaism And The Feminine Element’ Trans E. Wyschogrod, In *Judaism* 181 no 1 1969

<sup>79</sup> Berry, *op.cit.* p.67

adventure and gaining strength from rituals as many indigenous people are able to do, western civilisation has desensitised itself to the extent that the wonder of the world has been lost and there is no psychic strength remaining to accept life on its own terms. Now that the planet has revealed itself to be damaged and humanity reaches the critical point of being able, either to destroy, or aid and maintain creation, it is imperative to repair humanity itself to be adequate to the responsible task of sustainability.

There are still indigenous people who maintain a greater degree of acceptance and wisdom of the earth and their expertise is now in great demand, their genetic coding a vital resource for the world. After eons of seeing matter and life on its own terms, their code contains the information needed for guidance for the future. Their interpretations of the birth /death cycle, of joy, pain, suffering and healing, their intimacy with the land and other creatures and the restorative qualities of plants are needed now. Human technical skills need to be supplemented with much greater awareness of the sense of Spirit which was integral to the ritual, custom, art and music as well as the oral stories of many tribal people.

The numinous discovered in their experiences, not only puts western civilisation to shame at the way it has treated such sensitive people, but also helps it look with disgust at many of its own practices. One sees how far the civilising process has damaged God's most precious gift, life on earth. While the civilising process has drawn away, tribal people have celebrated the joyous and awesome aspects of the natural world, with greater acceptance, peace and frugality. The west is beginning to see itself in its vulnerable and immoral situation in contrast to the more cataphatic thought and action of indigenous peoples. What a contrast to

the times of colonial supremacy! The reality of this Spirit of life now becomes the common denominator across the world for ecumenical respectful dialogue. The relation of the finite to the infinite too becomes increasingly open ended and approached with less certainty, more humility and readiness to learn from others, while the secrets of the earth become incorporated into an eschatological vision, feeling the creative potential, hidden and waiting to break forth into the unknown future.

Have you entered the springs of the sea  
Or walked in the recesses of the deep?  
Have the gates of death been revealed to you;  
Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?  
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? (Job  
38:16-18a)

Jo Spence found that speaking out from the deep secrets of her own life, was an alternative to silent acquiescence, a dissolving of the frightened self in the face of oppression, in favour of a new vibrant identity but one deeply threatening to mainstream society.<sup>80</sup> All too often, ‘the victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim but a threat.’<sup>81</sup> She experienced the value of assertiveness, especially ‘for those of us who feel totally intimidated by the medical profession.’<sup>82</sup> Spence, in exuberant style, set about abandoning stereotypes and seeking knowledge about her own condition and medical matters. ‘I literally had to plunge into the abyss and find out what I could about what they were doing to me or what they wanted me to do.’<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Jo Spence, in conversation with David Hevey, in David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot* (London, New York:Routledge,1992), p.123

<sup>81</sup> James Baldwin, cited in Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping* (London:Routledge,1995), p.164

<sup>82</sup> *Op.cit.* p.122

<sup>83</sup> *Op.cit.* p.121

David Hevey calls this the 'revolt of the species,' ridding oneself of false representations and one's own difficulty with the feeling of being considered disgusting, unfit, incompetent or shameful. 'It's not just getting rid of it, it's enjoying it and sharing it. It's a mix between discourse theory and the seaside postcard...coming to terms with the negative, the so called negative, that which is hidden away, the shadow is out in the open.'<sup>84</sup> This too is a form of ecomysticism, diving deeply into one's physicality. 'We're inhabiting the images ourselves and inviting others to do that for themselves.'<sup>85</sup>

Emmanuel Levinas believed that the act of facing radical alterity, 'puts me into question, empties me of myself'<sup>86</sup> and then all there is the voice of God and the face of the other.' We are able to return to ourselves, re-evaluated, 'in order to live and acknowledge the greater Being.'<sup>87</sup> As more communicative spaces are opened up, we learn once more to put aside our assumptions. The fear of identifying God with creation has to become a misnomer, we can no longer afford to separate God from the picture, it is the key to sacralising, adoring and exploring anew the divine sustaining of the universe and our own lives. Such integration speaks aloud in this poetic encounter which also seems to sum up Merleau-Ponty's idea of flesh, the chiasm where divisions seem to melt away and we become open to nature.

Who made the swans and the black bear  
Who made the grasshopper, this grasshopper I mean  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand  
who is moving her jaws back and forth

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<sup>84</sup> *Op.cit.* p.128

<sup>85</sup> Jo Spence, *op.cit.* 1995 p.215

<sup>86</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Trace Of The Other,' Trans Alphonso Lingis, In Mark Taylor, (ed) *Deconstruction In Context* (Chicago:University Of Chicago Press,1986)

<sup>87</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps Et L'Autre* (Paris:PUF,1979)

Instead of up and down.  
I don't exactly know what prayer is  
I do know how to pay attention  
How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll  
through the fields.  
Tell me what else should I have done  
Doesn't everything die and too soon  
Tell me what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?<sup>88</sup>

Treat earth as primary, everything else is derivative, writes Berry.<sup>89</sup> The focus begins with our own receptive abilities in our environments.

Everything we see, touch, taste or smell is composed of one or more materials. Even our hearing depends on the interaction of the eardrums with the gaseous form of that familiar, though invisible material known as air.<sup>90</sup>

#### HOW CAN THIS CHALLENGE DISGUST AND DISABILISM?

'You've got to declare yourself disabled and beautiful',<sup>91</sup> for a start, writes one activist. It is not a matter of justifying one's disability so much, as to say that no-one's existence needs to be justified. 'I exist, you exist..the earth exists by the grace of God. The task is to learn to rejoice in existence without resentment',<sup>92</sup> and to incorporate assertiveness about one's unique body, ablebodied or disabled into the expanded vision of ecomysticism envisioned.

It is not enough to experience heights of mystical union;  
this experience must become the fire which burns away  
the dross of inferiority, self-loathing and doubt.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Mary Oliver, 'Excerpts From A Summer's Day,' *New And Selected Poems* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1992), p.94

<sup>89</sup> The phrase is Thomas Berry's, *The Great Work* (New York:Bell Tower, 1999)  
<sup>90</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>91</sup> J Hack, 'Dazed and Confused' in Barrett Shaw, (ed) *The Ragged Edge*. (Louisville:Avocado Press, 1994), p.21

<sup>92</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, in John Swinton, (ed) 'Critical Reflections On Stanley Hauerwas,' *A Theology Of Disability: Disabling Society. Enabling Theology* (London, New York:Hawarth Press, 2004), p.87

<sup>93</sup> Lanzetta, *op.cit.* p.151

Then may dignity be restored to all those denigrated through disgust.

It isn't privilege or pity  
that I seek  
It isn't reverence or safety  
quick happiness or purity  
but  
the power to be what I am as a woman  
charting my own future as a woman  
holding my beads in my hand.<sup>94</sup>

The gospels witness to a young man Jesus and a young group of apostles. The context includes a Greek culture which valued the sleek athletic body of its male youth, yet, included in the narratives are the experiences of the disabled who gather around Jesus. Poignantly they are the marginalized, the stories speak plainly of the loneliness and oppression they have received. One feels they have come out of the woodwork, able to be visible for the first time and the disciples are amazed by their number which overwhelmed Jesus at times.(Matthew 8:18) He often told them that their actions, their assertiveness in coming out to be counted, had been the catalyst for their healing.

It is a message of empowerment rather than overall healing for the multitude of the disabled. (Mathew 9:22) It is not charity so much as solidarity, friendship and motivation. Only on such terms can caring or theological debate on disability become reciprocal and mutually beneficial, rather than undignified, unconvincing or degrading. Caring and allowing oneself to be cared for means each person with their own boundaries and no imbalance of power, both learning mutual giving and taking. This takes the 'disabling' out of disability and replaces victimhood with agency.

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<sup>94</sup> Grace Nicholls, 'Holding My Beads,' *Waterpot* (London:Karneck Press, 1983), p.79

Stanley Hauerwas writes of the 'irony' that the neediness of the disabled, so greatly feared by the ablebodied, is also a strength for it often depends on the love and help of others which is the foundation of relationality and love, the nursery of identities. 'Our identity, far from deriving from our self-possession, or our self control, comes from being 'de-possessed' of those powers whose promise is only illusory.'<sup>95</sup> Claire Stacy reports on a survey of care workers operating at grassroots level, washing and tending those who cannot keep themselves clean who discover a rare kind of interpersonal skill and pride in the work. Many of them know their work is invisible to the wider world and at the bottom of the pile in the medical world, yet experience it as 'crafting a sense of dignity.'<sup>96</sup>

The bond that is created between carer and client is two way, both receive grace from the emotional relationship that is built up, despite the often draining nature of the work. Careworkers, Stacy interviewed, were honest about the negative and positive aspects of their daily routines but, compared to institutional care work, helping people at home and getting to know them, was very fulfilling. Kathy, a careworker nearing retirement was pleased to distinguish her work from out of touch, hurried professionals, and was exuberant about the almost spiritually satisfying nature of her task. Somehow, what has always been considered disgusting, becomes an accepted, almost aesthetic fact of life.

I come and clean it up. It doesn't seem odd to me.  
That's what older people do.. it's about knowing that for  
an old person when you cough, you wet your pants.  
Wonderful, it's wonderful.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Hauerwas, *op.cit.* p.87

<sup>96</sup> Claire Stacy, 'Finding Dignity In Dirty work' *Sociology of Health And Illness* Vol 27 No 6 September 2005 pp.845 - 850

<sup>97</sup> *Op.cit.*.



Similarly Paul's view of the wonder of the human body should grace any liturgy that seeks to honour human interdependence with each other and with the earth; it can be utilised as a microcosm of how all could be cherished. Paul uses the different parts of the body to stress the importance of honouring and cooperating with what has been given. The body is broken up into its parts which are unique but indispensable to the whole. If the foot should say, 'because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body, it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.' (1 Corinthians 12:15) 'The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you!' (v:21) As for those parts he terms less honourable, they are paradoxically to be treated with special honour. (v:23) This passage has been overspiritualised and used as context for spiritual gifts in the body of the church. However, as a model for ecological insight into the indispensability of much of what we term unrepresentable, it is a guiding lamp. We must honour our own bodies before we can save the earth. 'By definition,' writes Berry,

we are that reality in whom the entire earth comes to a special mode of reflexive consciousness. We are ourselves a mystical quality of the earth, a unifying principle, an integration of various polarities of material and spiritual, physical and psychic, natural and artistic, the intuitive and scientific. We are the unity in which all these inhere-achieve a special mode of functioning.<sup>98</sup>

There is only one issue for disability culture, the people themselves with the God given and human right to offer their values, perspectives and hard won experience and skills to the social arena. We are in danger of never knowing what insights illness brings because it is sidelined and demonised before the wisdom can get through. The bristling defence systems of the disability rights movement which stresses access and equal rights can also obstruct the lived experience of

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<sup>98</sup> Berry, *op.cit.* p.173

disability from coming through to the public. 'One might be physically derelict, old, poor, obscure and unaccomplished and yet live a life rich in eros, filled day by day with the snap, crackle, pop of synergistic participation in reality.'<sup>99</sup> Only we do not hear about it in any transforming cataphatic fashion.

Insights into disability can and do throw light on the way the ideal has postponed human perspectives of a reality other than their own self-securing experiences. Tokenism or the 'Tiny Tim' syndrome,<sup>100</sup> (grateful for any inclusion or charity from the able bodied world) and its near neighbour condescension 'the subtle prejudice of low expectation, are common manifestations of this postponement. When does one know one is considered disabled? To say that everyone is disabled in some way, is to dilute the experience of those who struggle for inclusion and recognition in society; it is often designed to take the wind out of the sails of anyone who seems to require specialised treatment. One needs to make explicit the disabled experience from the pluriform experience of embodiment which always involves a certain amount of struggle in one's environment. No you are not disabled,

if you admit disability has little impact on your life and no-one regards you as disabled...you are not in danger of the marginalisation we experience and expect on a daily basis. You know you have a disability when you know society will label you and marginalise you once your difference shows.<sup>101</sup>

This debatable line where disability becomes manifest is very like that location where theology struggles with creation as good. (Genesis 1:31) Where do we draw the line and say, we also need to lament? The liminal point is the one that

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<sup>99</sup> Matthews, *op.cit.* p.130

<sup>100</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol And Other Christmas Writings* (London: Penguin, 2003)

<sup>101</sup> Cheryl Marie Wade, In Shaw, *op.cit.* p. 46

is in most need of articulation, for the most difficult factor in disabilism is the incomprehensibility of the disabled experience to the ablebodied. 'It's as though we are making sense only within ourselves for society hears it as so much gibberish,'<sup>102</sup> writes Edward Hooper. I am sure some ecologists feel this kind of frustration too. The blank stare and utter lack of response to one's narrative is like a brick wall between us and them, writes Hooper.

How many times before even a fragment of what we know to be true will be understood by society as something more than nonsense? All this no matter how many facts we gather, no matter how much participation and no matter what our intentions for the good of all?<sup>103</sup>

This despairing note was written in 1994 and now sixteen years later, disability studies have much more of a voice in academia and have made strides in human rights issues. The emotional confirmations however take longer to address.

Ablebodiedness is all too often now seen like financial investments, something one can work towards and have control over. Internet health checks, as people monitor their own health, and new medical advances in genetic technology mean the expectations and overload of information about illness, pathologise the disabled ever more readily. Making positive remarks about illness seems anachronistic and self-neglectful to some. To push the analogy even further the disabled seem like wasters, they have not invested wisely in health and fitness. The dialectic between the disabled and ablebodied certainly throw light on dominant cultural values. To leave this situation unchallenged is to leave illness to the cold statistics and pathologising language of medicine and biology, rich experience liquified into formulae and experiment.

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<sup>102</sup> Edward Hooper, 'Thinking Differently' in *op.cit.* p. 4

<sup>103</sup> *Op.cit.*

Ecomystic, cataphatic approaches which can utilise music, art, movement, narrative and poetics, on the other hand, ‘what is edgy, authentic and provocative, can awaken the spirit and make the readers quick with consciousness,’ writes Housden.<sup>104</sup> Disability arts and culture strive to project this kind of vitality, to illuminate what seems unreal to the ablebodied, that one can be both physically challenged and spiritually whole in the midst of life’s contingencies. ‘You can’t avoid suffering in your life but you can avoid suffering about the suffering,’ writes Leonard Woolf.<sup>105</sup>

‘Only ill health, recurring, inevitable, can teach the taste of what it is to be well.’<sup>106</sup> To include all the complexities and paradoxes of disability in a theology is daunting, there must be room to reflect on feelings, emotions and cultural impact as well as the biomedical implications of impairment. How to invest it with meaning and quality of life, when the mainstream ablebodied resist it as something disgusting? Disability triggers emotions, especially disgust, in the ablebodied that clash with and often override their sense of empathy, justice and desire for inclusive relatedness.

How can one become self confident and free if one feels scorned? This depends on discovering one’s own life and learning to love it. It depends on realizing that this life is my life, this world is my world, this difficulty is my difficulty and this limitation is my limitation. One needs a great sense of interdependence and a new orientation in order to learn to love oneself complete with disabilities in a world in which one encounters only scorn and sympathy.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Housden, *op.cit.* p.77

<sup>105</sup> Leonard Woolf, cited in *The Week* January 14th 2006 Issue 545 p.19

<sup>106</sup> Lawrence Lerner, ‘A Wish’ in *Poetry Please* (London:Orien, 2005), p.60

<sup>107</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, ‘Liberate yourselves by accepting one another.’ In Eisland, and Saliers, *op.cit.* p.110

Disgust can be shown in various ways. A concept of a disabled work force immediately conjures up an image of limited productivity. The speed of life, (people now walk ten percent faster than ten years ago as they go about their business)<sup>108</sup> and expected work output and ever changing technology in society leave the disabled subject to disgust. It is the combined networks of institutions with fixed rates of productivity, high speed computers and ever increasing rates of thinking that leave them far behind in the rat race. There is impatience and little room for one who can work until midday and has to rest until about five pm and still go to bed early in order not to relapse into a painful continuity of existence.

The importance of dialogue and relationality, seen as the catalysts for consciousness and self understanding in theology, especially feminist theologies<sup>109</sup> also often leave the disabled at a disadvantage for these are slower processes in prolonged illnesses, where fatigue becomes the first hurdle to address. Few people take the time to include those who cannot keep up. Yet the timeless aspects of nature speak more clearly when one is moving at a different time and pace to the rest of humanity, hence the innocence of babes and the wisdom of the elderly who tend to work at my more leisurely/ lazy pace too.

It is the feeling for eternity that the frenetic activity and trepidation of work has destroyed in us. The lazy man has an infinitely keener perception of metaphysical reality than the active one.<sup>110</sup>

A feminist ecomysticism recognises differences in time and space. It

does not just attend to the formation of its own. It seeks practices that honour the bodies of all people. Health

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<sup>108</sup> Reported on The Today Programme *Radio Four* May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007

<sup>109</sup> See Heyward, *op.cit.* 1989

<sup>110</sup> Cioran, *op.cit.* p.105

<sup>110</sup> Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory And Christian Theology: Cartographies Of Grace.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p.173

care reform, adequate state aid..an advocate for these in the broader culture as well as in its own midst.. it has a positive vision of the kind of space human beings need to flourish...it...contests..degrading cultural representations.<sup>111</sup>

Seeing the disabled as having positive value to share, what could be termed the peculiar knowledge of the vulnerable, is of the same tenure as the subterranean knowledge that has always been discovered in the way that God has chosen to reveal divine power in the crucifixion. Its beauty is that of a determinate power, empowering those whose lives are denied the status of presence, who are unheard, forgotten almost to the point of extinction. It is a kind of beauty that emanates from true empathy, disallowing voyeurism, cavalier or reductive distortions of people's experiences and encompasses the fearful void as a scene of endless potential, rather than an empty dead end. 'The power of the risen Christ always comes hand in hand with fellowship with the sufferings of the crucified one.'<sup>112</sup> This stands in stark judgement of glossy magazine syndrome of what is beautiful.

There are so many people with disabilities, so many sick and disfigured people on whose countenance and in whose visages the beauty of divine grace is reflected. One only needs to be attentive to it and forget the unnerving beauty standards of glossy magazines.<sup>113</sup>

People with disabilities have been called to reflect the glory of God with their disabilities, not in spite of them or in anticipation of becoming able-bodied again. 'Let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned to you to which God has called you.' (1 Corinthians 7:17) This is not passive resignation as much as realistic acceptance just as Paul, having accepted his own particular thorn in the flesh, recognises the insight that he has received. (2 Corinthians 7-10) To the

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<sup>112</sup> Saliers, *op.cit.* p.121

<sup>113</sup> Moltmann, *op.cit.* p.119

weakest, God is very close. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'(v:9)

The experience of alienation which is actively appropriated, consciously owned linguistically, symbolically and ritually encoded and expressed in anger, rage, depression and abandonment in all their full fury, can become a kind of revolutionary force, a revolutionary patience, a ticking bomb.<sup>114</sup>

Mike Higgins manages to use humour as a revolutionary force, and brings out this element of 'we're here to stay' in the face of ambiguity from able bodied people, with the use of pop art which is so outrageous one can only smile. He describes his art 'as putting ourselves in the dirt,' to illustrate the highly embarrassing way charities portray disabled people as pitiful victims, while medical terms, such as 'pathological bodies,' do little to empower. His unflattering poster portraying and stating 'piss on pity,' says it all.<sup>115</sup> In the same cataphatic way, in the context of what she describes as apartheid, Annie Mullins writes,

I don't want people to think I'm beautiful in spite of my disability but because of it... It's my mission to challenge people's concept of what is and what isn't beautiful.<sup>116</sup>

Disability arts and culture confront the objectification of illness and disability and argue that corporeal malfunction is not always frustration or an encumbrance. Instead of living unreflectively about the body, disability arts bring it into lived experience more clearly. They help people learn to own the individual experience of disability and learn to share in community the personal feelings and emotions

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<sup>114</sup> Sölle, *op.cit.*

<sup>115</sup> Mike Higgins, in Shaw, *op.cit.* p.80

<sup>116</sup> Annie Mullins, in *op.cit.* p.82

about it, empowering themselves and others in political action for accessibility and justice in the workplace. This is a process of taking control of the negative aspects of disability which are so feared by the hegemony of able-bodied attitudes. This assertive behaviour is a spiritual journey out of fear and it is one also needed by all in the context of ecological interdependence. It is the sense that ‘each and every being is valuable in and for itself and that the whole forms a unity in which each being including oneself has a place.’ It involves an ethical response, for the sense of belonging

..only comes when we accept our proper place and live in a fitting, appropriate way with all other beings.<sup>117</sup>

A sense of belonging is founded on a sturdy, cataphatic, organic assertive acceptance and many Christians have found the organic element of this quite difficult. Kundera is not afraid to state the case clearly; one has to overcome the mindset of God’s distance from the organic. ‘Spontaneously, without any theological training, I, as a child, grasped the incompatibility of God and shit.’<sup>118</sup> He goes on to write that the daily movements of the human body in defecation are daily proofs of the unacceptability of creation and are a much more onerous problem for theology than the existence of evil which takes up infinitely more discussion. Much of the existence of moral evil can be attributed to human freedom and autonomy, he writes but ‘God alone, as creator is solely responsible for shit.’ Rarely is it obvious that one is called to make a choice. ‘Either/or, either shit is acceptable (in which case don’t lock yourself in the bathroom) or we are created in an unacceptable manner.’<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> McFague, *op.cit.*

<sup>118</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being* Trans Michael Henry Heim (London:Faber and Faber,1995), p.239

<sup>119</sup> *Op.cit.* p.24



Jesus said it was human ‘attitude,’ not organic waste that was unacceptable. ‘Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body. But the things that come out of the mouth comes from the heart and these make a man unclean..evil thoughts..false testimony, slander.’(Matthew 15:15) Challenges to disgust at this level are seldom expressed, it offends in today’s sensibilities though is often thought, as Marilyn French demonstrates;

washing the toilet used by three males and the floor and walls around it, is, Mira thought, coming face to face with necessity. And that is why women were saner than men, did not come up with the mad, absurd schemes men developed; they were in touch with necessity, they had to wash the toilet bowl and floor.<sup>120</sup>

Feminist theologies are created from grass roots.<sup>121</sup>but has this not been said many times? Yes, but perhaps it has not included what feeds these roots. I have often found that people look with consternation when I mention my particular penchant for the more unsavoury details of those grass roots, the slugs, worms, dung (in a field of cows) the flies, mud and all that clings to grass. It is the same stare that occurs when one tries to share one’s disability as Spence found. Yet most people would protest roundly that they acknowledge the body and physical processes and dismiss this emphatic challenge as unnecessary or something so obvious that it is not worth arguing.

What has happened is that it has all been taken for granted, and become mechanised in one’s mindset, there is very little empathy or recognition of the role of the eating, drinking, eliminating, fragile downwardly mobile, weighty body in

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<sup>120</sup> Marilyn French, *The Women’s Room* (New York:Jove, 1978), p.214

<sup>121</sup> Isherwood, and Mc Ewan, *Introducing Feminist Theology op.cit.*

one's reality or cognitive processes. This is incredible when one considers all the work that has been written about the importance of the body in recent years.

### WEIGHTINESS

A weightier bodily consideration is necessary where we can no longer 'bracket off some of creation, call it vermin and cease to care.'<sup>122</sup> Where all bodily experiences can be included in theological reflection on suffering which Simone Weil believed must be returned to the universe itself as deeply connected to ourselves and to the earth.<sup>123</sup> Beethoven's greatness has been attributed to just this kind of evocation, giving his music and suffering to the universe in equal measure, bearing the fate of his ailing body.

The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground; the heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth; the more real and truthful they become.<sup>124</sup>

Churchill had arterial difficulties resulting in a heart attack and also a stroke while in office in his crucial heroic role in World War Two. His American ally at this time, F.D.Roosevelt, was paralysed as a result of polio. A statue commemorating Roosevelt in Washington, without his wheelchair, caused a huge backlash from the disability rights movement in the late twentieth century. Quite rightly they maintained that his disability needing a wheelchair was intimately part of his person, his determination and down to earth leadership. Neither men could be accused of lacking in weightiness, unwilling to tackle ambiguity or content to live in the realms of fantasy.

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<sup>122</sup> Ruth Page, *God And The Web Of Creation* (London:SCM,1996), p.8

<sup>123</sup> Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, trans A Wills (London, New York: Kegan Paul,1956), p.115

<sup>124</sup> Kundera, *op.cit.* p.5

The absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air..to take leave of the earth and his earthly being and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. The only certainty in the opposition of lightness and weight; weight is the most mysterious and most ambiguous of all.<sup>125</sup>

Christian theology has the potential of this weightiness despite many noetic attempts to make it more 'airy.' The divine is not abstract but has a face and a soul in the person of Jesus who was made up of the same constitutive elements as all sentient beings. He was, like each plant or animal, formed from 'a community, a plethora of cells and every one of these billions of cells was a community of thousands of bacteria.' Such weightiness in Christ alone should coax an ecomystical hunger in Christians to adore creation. Like him we are all made of the stardust, blood corpuscles and subatomic material that makes up the body, and diving deep into these gravitational pulls we can

breathe free of the spiritual superiority and theological exclusion that have injured, violated and denied the inseparable and interdependent dignity of women, men and all sentient beings so vital to healing and restoring our planet.<sup>126</sup>

Jesus suffers hunger and thirst, weakness and a painful death. Even his resurrection appearance is earthen for he carries the scars of the crucifixion and breaks bread in full sight and tactile reach of his friends. (John 20:20) He describes himself during these experiences as 'flesh and bone.' (Luke 24:39) Just as importantly Jesus' promises of the future are earthen and weighty, consistent with fidelity and love as experienced in this life. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. In my father's house are many rooms, if it were not so I would have told you.' (John 14:1-2) The Christian paradigm

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<sup>126</sup> Lanzetta, *op.cit.* p.3

offers just this kind of grounding and belonging, that we are all held in an inclusive and homecoming, restoring energy. Just as many of the embodied situations that have been explored in this study are very earthly and visceral, so also is the hope that is in Christ. We are born, held in the present and forever to dwell within a very weighty love.

I rest on God who will assuredly not allow me to find the meaning of life in his love and forgiveness, to be wholly dependent on him for the gift of myself and then destroy that meaning...revoke that gift. He who holds me in existence now, can and will hold me in it still through and beyond the dissolution of my mortal frame. For this is the essence of love, to affirm the right of the beloved to exist and what God affirms, no one or nothing can take away.<sup>127</sup>

The emergence of the Holy Spirit of Christ appears in earthen terms, it is described as a mighty wind and tongues of fire alighting on all who were present.(Acts 2:3) Any doubt that this was a divine power is soon dispelled by the vibrant hope, cataphatic joy and concrete actions of all who were touched by this fire. The resurrection appearances are not succeeded by a rush of evangelism but the Pentecost experience, the receiving of the Holy Spirit, becomes the seedbed of the new burgeoning Christian movement on earth. This Spirit of Jesus, given by the Father, bespeaks a common kinship of the divine and creatures. Bodies are weighted with this divine Spirit, not as burden but as joy and connectedness.

It is the first time in the New Testament that the apostles take courage and assert the love they have been given.(Acts 4:13) These tongues of fire cement the resurrection appearances and confirm the incarnation, the Word made flesh and the wisdom of that Word for our world and for our actions. It also confirms the

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<sup>127</sup> John A Baker, *The Foolishness of God* (London:Darton, Longman And Todd, 1990), p.406

promise of a hope of renewal and reconciliation of pain and suffering. 'Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.' These promises are both earthen and heavenly, there is little distinction in the beatific vision. 'Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5:3-10)

The Spirit is also weighty in other biblical imagery; the spirit is living water (John 4:1-14, 7:37-38) and dove.(Genesis 8:11 John 1:32) Ruach and Pneuma are nouns for wind bringing insight or new life, a reality of presence making a difference to all living things. 'When you send your Spirit they are created and you renew the face of the earth.' 'Where can I go from your Spirit?'(Psalm 139:7-12) The vivifying force of the Holy Spirit has continued to be experienced down through the centuries, quickening hearts and minds to the immanence of the divine throughout creation and now beckons us again to repent of ecocide and indifference to the earthen Spirit in our midst. It is the meeting place for all religions whose creeds may clash but where material/spiritual needs could seek a common root.

Most of all the Spirit is weighty for the Christian because it is affiliated with the life and death of Christ and unites with the human response to the pain and suffering of the world at the depth of acceptance/resistance that has been advocated.<sup>128</sup> Norman Perrin writes that the gospels are 'passion stories with introductions.'<sup>129</sup> The Christian recognises this depth in the 'passion of Christ as divine participation in the travail of creation so that the crucified God is truly a fellow sufferer who understands.'<sup>130</sup> Thus Christ's life giving Spirit carries the

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<sup>128</sup> See *Chapter Four*.

<sup>129</sup> Norman Perrin, Cited In Santmire, *op.cit.* p.24

<sup>130</sup> Polkinghorne, *op.cit.* p.xv

weighty fear of all life's travail on the earth and also the concrete hope of heaven in our midst. 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' (Revelation 3:17) Such revelations of end times, writes James VanderKam, come from people sharing their weighty visions, 'not to demonstrate the education of the authors: they present their teachings as the results of extraordinary, intense and overwhelming experiences.'<sup>131</sup>

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to the purpose which he set forth in Christ, a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on the earth. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

Where best to illuminate and share this mysterious conjugation, than in the eucharist?

### THE EUCHARIST

The dynamic of matter and Spirit in the presence of God in the eucharist draws the senses away from abstraction to the material body of Christ. 'The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?' (1 Corinthians 10:16-17) Through the long tradition, touch, taste, bodies, community, materiality and contemplation of suffering all come together in the sacrament of Christ's death. It draws away from human constructs to the reality of an overriding fusion of life and death, glimpsing into a hope where everything is drawn into God's creative restoring presence at the edge where all things are possible. 'What is present is the most numinous fact in the world's history, the fact of Golgotha.'<sup>132</sup> The eucharist holds the bodily traumatic suffering of the cross in consciousness, it is a meeting place of human notions of immanence and transcendence, not either /or but both

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<sup>131</sup> James C Vander Kamm, *Apocalyptic Literature in Barton*, (ed) *op.cit.* p.318

<sup>132</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Religious Essays*, (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1931),p.50

/and. The tangible, the grotesque and the beautiful merge once more as our ideas of beauty and purity fade into insignificance in the face of God made flesh and suffering with all that lives.<sup>133</sup> Too often the eucharist focuses on individual salvation and the expiation of sins; it can be forgotten that it has traditionally also been a service where the sacredness of matter can be blessed.

The Fathers of the church remind us that present also is the whole creation and the world God loves and there we can offer the sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving not only for the fruit of the earth in the bread and wine but for all good and beautiful things created by God in the world and in human beings.<sup>134</sup>

Despite differing opinions about the extent of the real presence of Christ<sup>135</sup> many Christians celebrating the eucharist believe that Christ is really made present in his body and blood. 'This presence of Christ in his sacrificial memorial is the fruit of the living word and the power of the living Spirit.... It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.'<sup>136</sup>

Absorption of this visceral reality can challenge projections and phobias, transforming psyches until there remains the humility and unselfing needed to relate to all of life with equanimity and compassion.

Only through acceptance can we move to hope, the glimpse of divine solidarity, inextricably entwined in the eucharist with suffering in, with and for

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133 See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross Of Christ As The Foundation And Criticism Of Christian Theology*. Trans R A Wilson, and J Bowden, (London:SCM Press,1979)

134 Max Thurian, *The Mystery Of The Eucharist*(London,Oxford:Mowbray,1981), pp.20-21

135 Op.cit pp. 31-46

136 Op.cit. p.10

this world. Divine purpose does not reject the matter of this world, the communion with Jesus through the bread and wine empowers and affirms co-agency.

Swallow this, Jesus declares. I am God's promise for the elements, the exemplary inside of nature, its secret wish fulfilled... you will tap into the same spirit that moves me..you will have taken in what God imagines for matter, that it be spirited, that justice be done to all.<sup>137</sup>

Early Christianity<sup>138</sup> rejoiced in the doctrine of the incarnation and the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the eucharist, the meeting places of the divine and creation, of spirit and matter, yet somehow the potential for the synthesis of these elements have been fruitlessly wasted. 'All things come from you and of your own do we give you,' we pray in the 'Anglican Communion Service,'<sup>139</sup> yet is the fruit of the earth really celebrated or lamented? Compare this with a much more concrete image of advocacy, a more visceral engagement and incorporation of nature's fruits in Dame Julian's vision of eucharist.

Be a gardener  
dig and ditch  
toil and sweat  
and turn the earth upside down  
and seek the deepness  
and water the plants in time,  
continue this labour  
and make sweet floods to run  
and noble and abundant fruits  
to spring  
take this food and drink  
and carry it to God  
as your true worship.<sup>140</sup>

Who can revere our source of life, remember our roots and celebrate the glorious creation or lament the struggles of mutations in participation of a stale

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<sup>137</sup> Toolan, *op.cit.* p.221

<sup>138</sup> See Fiorenza, *op.cit.* 1993

<sup>139</sup> Order of *Anglican Holy Communion* for the Celebration of *The Eucharist At St Clement Church Truro Benefice, Cornwall.*

<sup>140</sup> Julian Of Norwich, 'Be A Gardener' in Brendan Doyle, (ed) *Meditations With Julian Of Norwich* (Sante Fe, N M: Bear & Co, 1983), p.84



wafer and a meagre sip of wine? No wonder many people prefer their own communion around a table at home, surrounded by loved ones who all get stuck into the food preparation and sharing of stories. A more boisterous, more loving and fulfilling eucharist is to be preferred in the everyday needs and particulars of people's lives. One has only to look at the visiting of homes and feasting at tables that Jesus and the apostles enjoyed. (Luke 7:44 Acts 2:46)

Merleau-Ponty wished to include such a fulsome sensory background in the act of human perception, calling it the phenomenal field opened out by all bodily capacities, where existence and meaning are revealed as lying in movement and the infusion of different influences informing one another during the encounter. He yearned for recognition of this more complex receptivity in the world; this most existential dimension of perception.<sup>141</sup>

One can sense these kinds of depths of meaning in the eucharist of Dame Julian for her vision is much closer to nature, the encounter and to movement. To exclusively view communion in our plain terms without these elements we lose a great deal especially when it has often been seen as a symbol of male bonding and power. The confusing arrangement of words in this poem adequately expresses such yearning for a larger picture of the encounter of the eucharist.

who baked the bread where were  
the women disciples and who set the table  
at that last and first Lord's supper  
who washed the feet then why did the men  
also serve women and why and when  
did they stop doing that why is a man's blood  
precious that of a woman impure what made  
the eucharist shallow and how can we  
begin to taste God's love anew and be satisfied through  
sharing?<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception* *op.cit.* p.296

<sup>142</sup> Carola Moosbach, 'Questions Of A Reading Christian Woman.' In Natalie and Giles Watson, *Traces Of Heaven* (London:SPCK, 2002), p.103

How sacred is matter in the tradition? It is a question seldom asked in Christianity. The eucharist is viewed as the bridge between heaven and earth where matter is brought to God, yet the fruits of the earth tend only to be seen as the means to God, a medium, rather than experienced as having unique inherent value of their own, holding promise of their own.

The work and loving attention that have gone into bringing the bread and wine to the altar need to be reclaimed as inherently linked to one's own physicality, the processes no longer ignored or taken for granted. To people who merely take these products off the shop shelf far from any relation with soil or organic decay, this will seem strange at first. This is to 'conjure the uncanny,' as Kristeva puts it.<sup>143</sup> To reorient Christianity toward radical strangeness, initiating and maintaining situations where such otherness can be loved is the very heart of the message of Jesus' mission. 'Go out into the roads and country lanes and make them come in so that my house will be full.' (Luke 14:23) Can we expand this to include the hedgerow and greenery of these lanes and the relationships we have with these neglected arenas? 'To view each relationship as unique and infinitely valuable.'<sup>144</sup> 'This is a sacred strangeness...bound by the foreignness of Jesus,'<sup>145</sup> who became a stranger in his own home town (Luke 4:24) and was always outside the boundaries. Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. (Mt 8:20)

Disabled people too have been the stranger at communion, often finding access to the altar rail a difficulty and we need to ask along with Aileen Barclay,

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<sup>143</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling The Double Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp.151-2

<sup>144</sup> Hazel Morgan, 'Thoughts On Suffering' in Swinton, *op.cit.* p.110 1990), p.406

<sup>145</sup> Reineke, *op.cit.* p.189

‘does the church listen to and acknowledge the gestures from outside the boundaries?’ She writes from her experience of observing disabled people and their families, the creative ways they manage to flourish and help others through the struggles of having little voice in society. Their gestures are multiple and a ‘prophetic witness to the church.’<sup>146</sup> It is a risky task to voice these differences for, as Keller writes, from ‘the vantage point of the colonizing episteme, the evil is always disorder rather than unjust order, anarchy rather than control.’ Keller describes this distortion as an illness which theology can continue or ‘capacitate the cure’ by embracing all the ‘Others of order.’<sup>147</sup>

Humanity will find that it is not a diversity of creeds, but the very same creed which is everywhere proposed..there cannot but be one wisdom.... Humans must therefore all agree that there be but one most simple wisdom whose power is infinite and everyone, in explaining the intensity of this beauty must discover that it is a supreme and terrible beauty. <sup>148</sup>

The wisdom of the cross has been referred to at various intervals in this study. It is time to look again at its depth of supreme and terrible beauty.

### THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST

The Roman literary sources are sparse about the details of the physical suffering event of the crucifixion of Christ and there is even a conservatism about the cross in the gospels which simply state, ‘they crucified him.’(Luke 23:32) The

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<sup>146</sup> Aileen Barclay, ‘On discovering Saints and Making A Difference.’ In Swinton, *op.cit.* p.85

<sup>147</sup> Keller, *op.cit.* pp.6-7

<sup>148</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, In James Francis Yockey, *Meditations With Nicholas Of Cusa* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co, 1987), pp.110-111

horror of the cross is just like the elements of disgust that Miller depicts, known by all and yet elusive. Yet a painting by Mathias Grunewald of the gruesomeness of the cross, sparing little of its horror, placed on an altar in a hospital dedicated to treating people suffering from the terrible and facially disfiguring disease of St Anthony's Fire, gave meaning and comfort to those who could identify with such loss of identity and subjecthood. For them it was a beautiful painting of fear and hope. As has been argued in chapter three, the potential of the grotesque is powerful and the modern propensity to neglect this is blinkered. The movement out of the body, away from thoughts of the reality of the crucifixion and pain, disassociation, is not the only traversable route to deal with the darkness of life, as we have noted: there is another route of diving deeply into the sentient body, probing the pains and possibilities of flesh itself and reconceptualising with renewed energy, human empathy for all sentient life. This too is the potential of the cross.

The medieval mindset, so pictorially recounted in the visions of Julian of Norwich, was able to focus on the roots of the suffering Christ, the constitutive elements of his flesh and blood experience, intensely visualising his agony, refusing to gloss over this in the light of the resurrection. It was a stance that did not try to situate God in relation to others or the situation, for God, in loving solidarity with all creation, was the situation. 'I saw the whole Godhead concentrated in a single point and thereby I learnt that he is in all things. I looked attentively, seeing and understanding with quiet fear.'<sup>149</sup> These experiences are the presuppositions before any verbal communications of complacency or hope and are intended to bring the faithful into active engagement, a stark pathos with the

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<sup>149</sup> Julian Of Norwich, *Revelations Of Divine Love* (Harmondsworth:Penguin, 1966), p.80

event. This leaves one in no doubt about the humanity of Jesus and his suffering; Julian refuses to subsume the cross into the promise of new life.

This is not to make suffering in itself redemptive but to increase profound depths of love and compassion as the basic transforming emotions in the world. Julian holds in tension the fear and the hope, richly assuring the reader of ultimate healing within the life of the Godhead without losing sight of the horror, teetering on the edge of life and death. She is able to do this with great passion.

I saw with my own eyes..insults and spittle and  
disfiguring and and bruising, and lingering pain...all this  
I saw physically, yet obscurely and mysteriously...So I  
saw him and sought him. It seems to me that this is and  
should be an experience common to us all.<sup>150</sup>

The cross stands as the ultimate paradox of trauma<sup>151</sup> and hope. I have argued for a deeper visceral engagement with it for it encapsulates in one symbol both the horror of disgust and the hope of Christian love that has been introduced in this theological reflection on creation. Brokenness and wholeness are held together within the narrative of the cross which retains its central importance within Christianity for this reason. It is symptomatic of life on earth for many creatures and now for the ailing earth. Holding the paradox of the ugliness of such a torturous death and the beauty of a resurrected hope, the passive and active aspects of life come together. 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.'(Romans 8:18) Yet this glory is here and now, as well as in the future for, as Fiddes writes, 'instead of finding that God negates the finite when he participates in it, we may say that God

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<sup>150</sup> *Op.cit.* pp.76-77

<sup>151</sup> Nails severing the nerve endings in the hand cause Coralgia, the worst pain known to humanity. *The Turin Shroud* Channel 4 Easter Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup> 2007

is humble enough to hide his glory within it.<sup>152</sup> This hiddenness is multiple and seen as more glorious when ecomysticism takes a more cataphatic approach to creation.

The tensions of multiple visions may hold open a space in which together we face our fears and activate our hopes.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering Of God* (Oxford:Clarendon Press,1988), p.260

<sup>153</sup> Christina Traina, 'Response to James Nash.' In Ruether, and Husserl, *op.cit.* p.148

## Conclusion

Thus we return and go forward as we began, with the Christian affirmation of love for all that is ‘seen and unseen,’ as I say each Sunday in the creed.<sup>1</sup> Immersion into the emotion of disgust has paradoxically re-affirmed human dependence on the width and depth of creation. The body has been seen in Merleau-Ponty’s terms as the muse through which the meaning of the world is expressed. He insisted that when speaking of the ‘physical, the vital and the human structures’ each should be seen not as autonomous systems but acting on one another. ‘Each of them has to be conceived as a retaking and ‘new’ structuralization of the preceding one.’<sup>2</sup>

Resisting separations of mind/body, purity/impurity, body/spirit and heaven/earth this work has searched for fusions and holistic perspectives wherever possible. ‘One could say the body and soul are no longer distinguished.’<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s work has provided the experiential grounding of this artistic and mystical approach to the physical world where we are encouraged to integrate the objective knowledge of it with the ‘other knowledge which we have of it, in virtue of its always being with us And of the fact that we are our body.’<sup>4</sup> This other knowledge; ‘a primordial acquisition, prevents my experience from being clear to itself.’<sup>5</sup>

This work has attempted to stay with this mystery in love and wonder. His use of the phenomenological reduction, akin to the insights afforded in poetry and the arts, ‘does not return us to the transcendental subject but a subject that emerges from nature.’<sup>6</sup> Poetry as potential to ‘defamiliarize language’ and painting as innocence

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Order Of Service,’ *op.cit*, p.10

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs op.cit.* p.184

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.* p. 203

<sup>4</sup> Merleau- Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception op. cit.* p.206

<sup>5</sup> *Op.cit.* 215-216

<sup>6</sup> *Op.cit.* p.206

illuminating the world in the way that the reduction attempts to do, show us ‘what profane vision overlooks (literally) in its rush to posit objects.’<sup>7</sup>

Reduction does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis: it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical.<sup>8</sup>

This has helped deconstruct some of the norms created by disgust and opened up opportunities to challenge the overriding emphasis on rationality alone to understand creation. Rationality as a concept is not denigrated by Merleau-Ponty, but he wished to integrate many more aspects and influences of the physical world to assist in the birth of rationality and not rely on the cogito alone. So vital was his belief in the interiority of nature that he believed these influences of the world had expression of their own, even feeling that artists like Paul Cezanne painted what the facts themselves wanted to express. Even ‘to express the phenomena of expressiveness itself.’<sup>9</sup> His vision has encouraged new ways of seeing the world and new theological reflection on lived perspective as the world arises in relation to the lived body without fearing that body or its surroundings.

Such ideas encourage the greater use of all the arts in theology to value the primacy of the lived qualities within the world, not only to pay more attention to density, colour, tangibility and movement but also to better understand human emotions in order to create a new wonder and Christian love for what is in danger of being lost. A creative view emerges as the earth and the body are rediscovered, not as

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<sup>7</sup> *Op.cit.* pxii

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* The Phenomenology Of Perception *op.cit* p xi

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs op.cit.* p.192



products<sup>10</sup> of artist's imaginations but as entities entwined in the whole radiance of being throughout the world. This ancient Celtic prayer finds such radiance in the whole span of heaven and earth.

I arise today through the strength of heaven, light of sun,  
radiance of moon, splendour of fire, speed of lightning,  
swiftness of wind, depth of sea, stability of earth, firmness of  
earth.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the context has been the expanded ecological self, discovered in the greater inclusivity of nature in the perceptual content arising from Merleau-Ponty's distinctive philosophical method and also discovered in the unfolding of the embodied situatedness of each experience as advocated in feminist theologies, searching for the numinous in novel and neglected sites and discovered also in the challenge to the destructive norms created in the name of disgust. It is forward thinking to say it will soon be discovered by holding the trauma of disgust and the joy of gutsy embodiment alongside in many Anglican church liturgies at present. It is more realistic to suppose the more conservative congregations of the Church of England would be disgusted with some of the issues discussed.

The grotesque, as seen in Bacon's works, is something the mother's union or harvest festivals might resist at first. Yet, like the artistic or ascetic routes probed, they hint at 'restorative activity pulsing in what is most fleshly, material and concrete.'<sup>12</sup> Small groups of like minded ecofeminist theologians might be the first target for this new approach in the hope it will blossom.

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<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> From 'The Deer Cry' attributed to St Patrick in Thomas Cahill, *How The Irish Saved Civilisation* (New York:Doubleday, 1995

<sup>12</sup> Saliers et al, *op.cit.* p. 82

Surely insights into the rising ecological need to own one's body anew cry out in the midst of consumer fascination with the perfect body, the throwaway culture where excess equals success, in cyber and medical detachment and disabilism, expressed in flight from the body. Disability, for all its pain and heartache, has opened the opportunity to break through such detachment as Merleau-Ponty saw. 'My body is the meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which, nevertheless, exists and is susceptible to disease.'<sup>13</sup>

Such ambiguities explored are seen as both spiritual and political challenges which could be lived out in community. Whereas Carol Christ writes, 'it is through symbols- including images, prayers, songs and dances, movements, meditations and rituals that the insights of the mind become part of the feelings of the body and can be shared in community,'<sup>14</sup> Merleau- Ponty might have written this in a different way to emphasize that it is also through ritual that the insights of the body become part of the mind.

It is time to 'sing to the Lord a new song.' (Psalm 96:1) Telling one's story through the bodily experience of womanhood and disability has been cathartic in an environment that still sniffs at ME as psychologically induced, rather than organically triggered and a church that still makes the female work harder to be recognised as fully worthy of humanity.

Telling our stories is a political act,  
without stories there is no articulation of experience  
without stories we don't learn the value of our struggles  
or comprehend our pain  
without stories we cannot understand ourselves  
or dance in the rain

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<sup>13</sup> The Phenomenology Of Perception. *op.cit.* p. 46

<sup>14</sup> Carol Christ, *She Who Changes* (New York:Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003), p.227

we are closed in the silence.<sup>15</sup>

If we remain closed in the silence and liturgy does not begin to delve deeper into some of the more fleshly aspects of creation discussed here, the fruits of divine handiwork, then it does not even celebrate God at all, that mystery impossible to fully pin down. Gebara writes that even Jesus on earth was the finger pointing to the moon in respect to the mystery of God. ‘We cannot exploit it, we can only consent to its unutterable mystery as the ultimate ground of all that is. Perhaps we are a single sacred body.’<sup>16</sup> Whatever the ultimate reality, we must work with what we know.

We live or die as this world lives or dies. We can say that both physically and spiritually.... The fact that the human is integral with the emerging universe is sufficient enough evidence that the universe has a spiritual dimension from the beginning.<sup>17</sup>

Disgust has been shown to be a dynamic force in human affairs, its insistent influence is akin to a strong mechanism within us producing internal currents of motivation which result in denial and repression initiating withdrawal and even violent rejection to eliminate what are experienced to be bodily threats but more often than not are symbolic. Much of the motivation behind this work has been to develop the means to inure ourselves from these strong influences, which have often been felt to be distortions of humanity’s empathic relationship with its environment, and to do this through Christian liturgy and love and the enhancement of this love which can often be reached through mysticism.

A difficulty with studying disgust and hence a weakness in the final assessment is that disgust is often expressed in silent disapproval and not always easy to decipher.

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<sup>15</sup> Carol Christ, cited in *CWN Ordinary Women: Extraordinary Lives, Twenty Years Of Spiritual Journeying*. (London: Saracen Press, 2005), p.1

<sup>16</sup> Gebara, *op.cit.* p.103

<sup>17</sup> Husserl, and Ruether, *op.cit.* p.131

Disgust too varies according to which parts of the body are involved, there seems to be ranging levels of disgust according to which part is being reviewed. Furthermore, there are different types of sensitivity to contamination, material, moral and spiritual and the latter is much harder to articulate and address. For instance even the house or clothing as well as the actions of a very evil person might be deemed disgusting, it is difficult to combat the power of contamination for disgust has such powerful suggestive powers. The sense that a part of nature, a creature or person is disgusting is a very durable sentence and it is vital to raise consciousness to its pervasive power. It is important too to remember that love is powerful but not so readily communicated as disgust, love's healing potential needs to be made more explicit.

What are the implications for future study on what has emerged to be an under researched lively force in everyday life, impinging on many theological concepts?

Such a broad subject involving a diverse range of human activities and attitudes means inevitably that one has had to cast the net wide in order to begin the unmaking of disgust. Such an eclectic approach to seek inurement in a study of this size can only touch on a few methods to change attitudes. There need to be many other ways to do this. It has become apparent that disgust is one of the biggest threats to human loving relations and a new grounded theological agenda is needed to address this huge effect on human attitudes to physicality.

What are the implications also for the worshipping community of the church? Can it begin to see itself as a source of regenerative ecological power in community; it certainly has the buildings to draw people together where they live at grass roots level where they could draw attention to human complicity in the ecological crisis. Following up the many commendations in the Bible about justice, it is time to draw attention to a social ethic of responsibility to care for the environment, manage natural

resources and reduce demand for energy and consumption. The church has the potential to begin creating a holistic view of the economic, political and spiritual components of any environmental crisis that occurs in community. As the climate changes so the world will change and the meaning of creation, ecumenism and even of Christ will have to be redefined. The redemption offered by Christ has been mostly seen in the tradition as vertical healing relations between God and humanity. It will have to be seen also in the coming decades, as horizontal healing human relations with creation, and the pain of crucifixion and joy of resurrection extended into an expanded panentheistic view of redemption. The church is capable of all this in exciting new liturgy once the inattention to justice and the disgust reaction begin to be addressed.

Even though eco/theology demands to become centre stage as its woundedness can no longer be ignored there is still the danger that the earth is seen as an object, as arguments rage on the Internet over its future, rather than seen as foundation of our very being, of interdependence, respect and mutual love. Love and wonder have been threads running throughout this work to seek passionate rather than disengaged connection with nature and our bodies, to help destroy the destructive power of disgust or at least deal less violently and more creatively with its effects. ‘When one acknowledges mutuality and interdependence, then the whole world view is shifted.’<sup>18</sup> There needs to be a new affectivity and generosity towards all that exists.

Merleau-Ponty grew more amazed at the contingency of the freedom of embodiment later in his thought as he moved even further away from intellectualism to explore the depth of lived experience and base meaning in the animate, embodied

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<sup>18</sup> Isherwood and McEwan, *op.cit.* p.139

subject in its historical, unpredictable and mutable incarnation. He felt his earlier work, ‘The Phenomenology of Perception,’ was still tied to the unity of consciousness. Like, Annie Dilliard in Tinker’s Creek,<sup>19</sup> as his focus on nature became clearer, his wonder grew to the extent that he felt the ‘interior of nature’ more and valued his own concepts less. His recognition of the broad field of engagement with all flesh led him to think of his work as an opening wherein we can explore the whole plethora of social and ecological relations into which humanity is drawn.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Husserl’s thought which looked for a reduction of natural life, Rudolf Bernet writes that Merleau-Ponty looked for a reduction to natural life. An Internet encyclopedia of philosophy states that Merleau-Ponty’s terminology ‘flesh of the world’ has no like name in the tradition of philosophy.<sup>21</sup> It is hoped it will become a well used term for the future of Christian incarnational theology.

This work also hopes to offer an opening in theology to discover more about the broad notion of disgust as a sentiment widely used in the defence of human identity and of divinity in other cultures and religions. The differences in cultures to such contamination sensitivity remains relatively unresearched and provides exciting work for the future; the history of disgust in Africa and East Asia, South Asia and Amerindian cultures remains to be explored. There is more work to be done on disgust’s closeness to other emotions, its effects on violent behaviour and various pathologies as well as the reasons why mysteriously it is sometimes suspended.

For the future of the earth it is paramount that we learn more about what it says about our relations to animals and our view of creation. As the gateway of the social

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<sup>19</sup> See *Chapter four*

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* p.205

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*  
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/Merleau-Ponty> pp 10-12 Accessed October 2009

order disgust has much more to teach us about ourselves and in its dialectical relation to love we can begin to learn more about the potentially radical power of Christian care, mutuality and reciprocity. For instance Miller writes of a powerful love that exists in intergenerational caring for babies in nappies and older incontinent relatives where disgust is suspended in the name of love. Miller writes of this as a privileging of the other, often not available for outsiders.<sup>22</sup> Jesus made it plain that we are to privilege not just family members but others too and this suspension of disgust, shown to be possible in familial caring, is to be extended as a powerful Christian ethic. ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother. (Mark 3:34-35)

My research has borne in upon me with increasing incredulity the extent and depth of the power of disgust to inhibit and blight receptivity to the beauty of the earth. In uncovering this power there has been a growing desire to revitalize wonder and love by pointing to just a few of the extraordinary elements of life to ponder anew in theology. Closely allied to love, wonder is best expressed humbly. Christina Rossetti, for instance, for the sake of all that lives, states an eternal commendation.

Hurt no living thing  
 Ladybird nor butterfly,  
 Nor moth with dusty wing,  
 Nor cricket chirping cheerily,  
 Not grasshopper so light of leap,  
 Nor dancing gnat, nor beetle fat,  
 Nor harmless worms that creep.<sup>23</sup>

It is in the movement of these creatures, their particularity, as these simple visual and moving references highlight, that stir one to their defence, not sentimentally but recognising their beauty and the extent that humans can protect them or hurt them.

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, *op cit.* p.136

<sup>23</sup> [Http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/29548-Christina- Georgina-Rosetti-Hurt –no-living-thing](http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/29548-Christina-Georgina-Rosetti-Hurt-no-living-thing). Accessed 10/2/2007

Defending the right of all creatures to flourish, as much as possible, since my own onset of disability, the ensuing growing aesthetic awareness of other life with all their struggles, one's awe grows with each new commitment to the earth, mysteriously entwined with one's own body trauma. Trauma has always been present, even some dinosaur remains have been found to be riddled with arthritis and such suffering of other life, becomes inextricably linked to one's own. One travels further into natural processes rather than away from them.

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be.<sup>24</sup>

Why should this be, when it is about pain and sorrow on such a large scale? It is in the rediscovery that one becomes transformed, in the ascetic surrender of unnecessary self-securing practices, the healing of individualism, and in the dawning realisation of how much has been idealised and pushed to one side, that the dynamic of ecomysticism begins. Love blossoms in the reacquaintance with the real and in keeping hope alive, in keeping trust with the Spirit of life in conjunction with all the contingencies of life for all beings, big and small. It is also in

the rediscovery of creation spirituality, the fidelity to the stance of resistance to injustice from the margins and in the recovery of understanding holiness as wholeness.. where the sacredness of relating to God and to each other in the goodness of bodily and sexual feeling is celebrated, in an attempt to recover from the overspiritualized approach of the centuries.<sup>25</sup>

What happens when one uncovers and begins to see? Oppressions are lifted and one feels anguish at any former lack of sensitivity and obtuseness, there is a kenosis of

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<sup>24</sup> Anne Frank, 'The Diary Of Anne Frank,' cited in Neu, *op.cit.* p.162

<sup>25</sup> Grey, *op.cit.* 1997 *op.cit.* p.29



the habitus,<sup>26</sup> a surrendering of conditioned responses and prejudices. There is also the tragic vision that knows that ‘it is possible to look at another human being and yet not see what their real need is or what their real suffering is.’<sup>27</sup> If this is doubted, one has only to think of the issue of slavery: for hundreds of years people just did not see the suffering of slaves. Even John Newman after his Christian conversion, writes Rowan Williams, took some convincing that slavery was a horrendous evil imposed on other people’s bodies. Eyes were simply not opened to the reality that it was completely unacceptable to treat others as objects or possessions. ‘These things are still with us,’<sup>28</sup> reminds Williams, for there are modern forms of slavery which thrive on capitalistic mentalities, debt slavery, economic slavery, in the form of exploited labour to make goods for the rich west and the slavery of sex trafficking: all this, even before one begins to address the enormous issue of animal slavery. Animals treated callously and unnecessarily cruelly for human capitalistic gain.

‘Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.’<sup>29</sup> Virginia Woolf wrote that disabled people cannot keep up with the ethic of capitalistic productivity; they become like ‘deserters’ while others ‘march on.’ ‘They float like

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<sup>26</sup> The habitus is the normal expected response to the world, the common sense perspective of how to behave and be in the world. The term was developed as a hermeneutical device by Pierre Bourdieu to understand socialization and internalization of learned behaviour in any society. ‘The habitus is this kind of practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation- what is called in sport- a feel for the game.’ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On The Theory Of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p.25 In the same way so many negative attitudes to illness are seen as only natural in the circumstances. The disabled have internalised this rather blase response to their condition, this almost jocular rejection. It is extremely painful at the receiving end. Hence this study!

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Epps, (ed) Quote in *The Truro Benefice Magazine* For the Church Of St Clement March/ April 2007 p.34

<sup>28</sup> Rowan Williams, cited in *op.cit.* p.35

<sup>29</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season In The Wilderness* (New York: Touchstone, Simon And Schuster, 1968), p.6

sticks on a stream,'<sup>30</sup> looking up at the sky for the first time perhaps, able to see how many fantasies have been sanctified in the pursuit of body fascism, greed or idealism. Perhaps too, they are in a position to see that the denial of our ecological selves imprisons and contracts us and distances us from the visceral reality of God. 'Idealism increases in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem.'<sup>31</sup> If the disabled often do not have the luxury of distance, ecomystics do not seek it.

Drawing nearer to the materiality of bodies and the earth, looking for new insights within them, prepares the Christian, not just for ecological sustainability, but for the vision of the new creation spliced into the old. Heaven is not rejected as much as an abstract vision of it. 'In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth.' (2 Peter 2:6) Polkinghorne writes that the unpredictabilities of some quantum events and chaos theory, 'at least leave room for a metaphysician to propose that there are further causal principles active in bringing about the future.'<sup>32</sup>

At subatomic level both probability waves and particles are present but only particles are present when observed. The waves can be measured mathematically but only particles can be seen when measured on special measuring apparatus. 'We might say that particles like photons or electrons, are posited as frozen selections from wave forms, selected because they are suitable for human perception,'<sup>33</sup> writes Keith Ward who proposes the possibility that this means that reality is veiled, humanity can only see what it is able to measure at any given time as Merlau-Ponty believed. 'The presence of the world

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<sup>30</sup> Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill, In Collected Essays 4 Vols* (New York:Harcourt Brace And World, 1975), 4:193, p.197

<sup>31</sup> John Galsworthy, cited in *The Week*. Issue. No 15 March 15<sup>th</sup> 2007 p.21

<sup>32</sup> Polkinghorne, *op.cit.* p.33

<sup>33</sup> Keith Ward, *op.cit.* p.82

is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh.’<sup>34</sup> Waves are ‘deterministic in mathematical form but they only assign probabilities to the location of observable properties.’<sup>35</sup>

Nick Herbert stresses the indefiniteness of the quantum world, before measurement; the photons do not have any known attributes, possibility waves are a mystery to humanity until one of them collapses under certain measuring conditions and a quantum jump occurs to create reality as we know it; a random occurrence, according to many physicists, unpredictable and out of human control. Some believe it is human consciousness that triggers the actuality while the majority believe it is some material random mechanism. Most agree that no-one can know for sure how possibilities are actualised. What is known is that

absolute indefiniteness is a condition of being that is hard for humans to imagine, but easy for nature to produce. Everything that is not currently being looked at is, according to quantum theory, in such a state. The apparently definite attributes of everything that we see around us arise out of this very different state of absolute indefiniteness.<sup>36</sup>

This does leave an openness to the idea that there is much more to the material universe than meets the naked eye, as Merleau-Ponty believed, when he insisted on the necessity to remember the incompleteness of all analysis of perception in the world.<sup>37</sup> It has the potential to expand human horizons of creation and the creator to even greater depths. It also highlights humanity’s inextricable cohesion with the natural order, along with its growing awareness of its particular uniqueness in being able to begin to explore this process. One cannot help but feel, along with Everett, that the

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<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* *op.cit.* pp xvi-xviii

<sup>35</sup> Ward, *op.cit.* p.92

<sup>36</sup> Nick Herbert, *Elemental Mind, Human Consciousness And The New Physics* (New York, London:Dutton,1993), p.219

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* pp.363-5

particles that have been subject to human consciousness are not the only reality that could materialize from the myriad probability waves.<sup>38</sup>

He is not the only scientist to believe in the possibility of other worlds too complex for human apparatus to measure but concomitant with Paul's vision of the future. (1 Corinthians 15:4-5) It is a matter, as Paul writes, of speculation which does not consist of wild guessing but of an intuition based on hints and promises throughout creation and the Christian narrative. 'Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully even as I am fully known.' (1 Corinthians 15:12) Earth seems to appear to Paul to be part of the weft and weave of a consummation which is full of the promise of Christ, one beyond comprehension yet one which will activate an integration with, but not a drastic evacuation from, the earth. (1 Corinthians 15:17) 'The world is not what I think but what I live through,' wrote Merleau-Ponty.<sup>39</sup>

People who try to repair and protect in the world are the physical signs of the kingdom just as Jesus was the material sign of the kingdom. Perhaps it is not the earth that will be changed, only 'all that destroys the earth.' (Revelations 11:18) Polkinghorne, imagines the new earth and heaven, not as an abandonment of the old but as a 'refashioning' of the present,' a weaving of divine thread throughout the fabric of present reality.<sup>40</sup> The signs of these fibres of divine thread are all around.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning at the brown brink eastward, springs-  
because the Holy Ghost over the bent

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<sup>38</sup> Everett, *op.cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.* ppxvi-xviii

<sup>40</sup> Polkinghorne, *op.cit.* p.163

World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.<sup>41</sup>

Susan Britten waits with bated breath and repentance for the promise of new life, holding the hope and the ecological despair in tension in her poem, 'The world waits.'  
Will the earth still grant us its beauty?

The world waits-  
The wasteland spreads  
Before our eyes  
Our home is dying  
Slow beats the struggling pulse  
We use, abuse, corrupt, destroy...  
Drained by consumption.  
The world waits-  
Death will come...  
And yet- somewhere unknown  
Sometime  
She quietly stirs  
She moves-hope is born  
The mist rises from the earth  
All damp and fertile  
Life throbs-  
Life breaks through.<sup>42</sup>

In the same way, Jesus appeared to his dispirited disciples through the mist of the early morning, unrecognisable at first, but familiarity breaks through. (John 21:4) He was able to move from one space and temporality to another with ease. (John 20:19) In the same way, many feel that their deceased loved ones are spatially near, they pray for them continually which would make little sense if there was no intuition of their inexplicable proximity. In the same way intercessionary prayer to the saints on one's behalf contains the ineffable intuition of the combined heaven and earth in one's midst.

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<sup>41</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur' in Griff Rhys Jones, Foreword *The Nation's Favourite Poems* (London:BBC Worldwide, 1996), p.169

<sup>42</sup> Susan Britten, Network, *op.cit.* Winter Issue No 89 December 2006 p.21

One of the greatest assets of the Trinity, writes Sallie McFague, is its ‘value as a way to imagine divine transcendence and immanence in a unified manner.’<sup>43</sup> The essence of the Trinity arises from the disciple’s very concrete earthly experience of Christ both in life and in the resurrection appearances and in the giving of the Spirit. Creator, incarnated love and sustaining Spirit expressed in one entwining God experienced in the world.

Such entwining occurs in the oscillation of humanity’s outward encounters into the world followed by the reflective return to itself. Merleau-Ponty stressed such movement as the basis upon which all challenges to dualisms of transcendence/ immanence, outside/ inside, world / self lie. They are at the heart of all attempts to reorientate philosophy (and theology) back to the world under our feet. The body is not simply an object and its construction as such was a ‘pivotal moment in the construction of the world ‘out there.’<sup>44</sup> In contrast a familial unity is envisaged.

Merleau-Ponty struggled to find expression of this unity encapsulated in his term flesh and died before he could answer his critics that he had not fully completed the task.<sup>45</sup> Yet he had begun to create new words and find poetical ways to express his intention with style. He wrote of being enveloped and clothed in the encounter with the world and ‘almost seems to twist concepts into an ideational sculpture...his stylistic lyricism ..prompts an aesthetic reading.’<sup>46</sup> He talked of the language of colours and the ‘mute’ word before beginning to describe the wonder of the world, ‘to source the chiasm of language and world’<sup>47</sup> His use of poetical and metaphorical language to sum up his vision could well define the purpose of this study also. ‘The

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<sup>43</sup> McFague, *op.cit.* p.161

<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology Of Perception op.cit.* p.72

<sup>45</sup> J. Derrida, *On Touching* – Jean- Luc Nancy, trans Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp.183-215

<sup>46</sup> Collins, *op.cit.* p.3

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs op.cit.* p.322

momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the world can be restored as a river unfreezes.’<sup>48</sup> It is little wonder that he was sometimes accused of writing an ‘onto- theological’ work in his last writings.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, it does not seem out of place to find poetical ways to express the unity he was trying to describe and to include these in these final theological reflections. Somehow, in a way that cannot quite be expressed, eternal life begins when we turn to feel such unity. Dennis Potter had an inkling of this and made an attempt when close to death; he advocated that religion’s first and foremost task should be to confront and incorporate all aspects of life. He then describes his awareness of some white blossom on a tree and of his ensuing greater perception of the revelations of life, of the reality, the ‘nowness’ of the present. It is, for him, surely a religious experience.

If you could only really see it- it is the whitest frothiest  
blossomest blossom that there could ever be and I can see it-  
the fact is, if you see the present tense, boy do you see it and  
boy can you celebrate it.<sup>50</sup>

What we need, as Charlene Spretnak writes, is just such a vivid material /spiritual approach to nature. ‘Even though we know... we are dying..we also know we are still here now today and Oh my, don’t those greens taste good.’<sup>51</sup> Søren Kierkegaard also feels this power of presence and writes that ‘Christ had Eternity with him in the day that is called today.’<sup>52</sup> Jean-Pierre de Caussade, in the same way, was able to describe this as ‘the sacrament of the present moment.’<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception. op.cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Derrida, *op.cit.*

<sup>50</sup> Dennis Potter, *Seeing The Blossom* (London:Faber And Faber,1994), p.5

<sup>51</sup> Charlene Spretnak, cited in Mathews, *op.cit.* p.51

<sup>52</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourse*, Trans Walter Lowrie, (New York:OUP, 1961), p.322

<sup>53</sup> Jean- Pierre de Caussade, cited in Michael Mayne, *A Year Lost And Found* (London:Darton, Longman And Todd, 1987), p.49

Michael Mayne writes, too, of the different sense of time he experienced in the throes of M.E.<sup>54</sup> for he recognised the mysticism of the present moment, given to him by enforced rest. Gerard Hughes explores those aspects of human life which can obstruct or facilitate this sacrament of presence, of unity; the complexity of our inner life, the mystery of it, the ‘layers upon layers of consciousness within us.’<sup>55</sup> Potter makes the point that once, in each of us, this was not a problem.

One of the strangest, most heartening and indeed most irritatingly exhausting things about children and therefore of what we ourselves once were, is their ability to live almost entirely in the present tense...the first thing you notice about such a mode of response is the immense degree of concentration and sustained attention that it implies. Whenever we play games, or act or sing or dance or make love, we are outside normal time, we are in the cauldron of the actual minute, and we have suspended or evaded the claims of any other moment except this one. When we are frightened, when we are in pain, when we are excited, and when we are greatly moved, the world stands still. Once again- to our delight or not-all things are as new.<sup>56</sup>

Liturgy should be full of this thrilling expectation for the present. Warm, generous, accepting anticipating ritual.

Being oriented to the real requires being released from the intense anxieties about our tragic existence which keep us turned onto ourselves and our condition...redemption is a release to otherness, a freedom toward the other and this a condition of facing up, to wondering about the real.<sup>57</sup>

The ecomystical Arcadian tradition saw every new discovery in biology and anatomy in the same way, powerfully present and spiritually vibrant, pulsating with an energy

<sup>54</sup> Mayne, *op.cit.* p.50

<sup>55</sup> Gerard Hughes, *God Of Surprises* (London:Darton, Longman And Todd, 1985), pp.17-18

<sup>56</sup> Dennis Potter, ‘The Other Side Of The Dark.’ Unpublished Talk On *BBC Radio Four*, 23 February 1977 Quoted by permission of the author.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement And Reclamation* (Pennsylvania:Valley Forge, 1996), p.70



that is beyond and above our wildest dreams.<sup>58</sup> In relation to the macabre lifestyles of insects which would disgust many, Dilliard writes,

the earth devotes an overwhelming proportion of its energy to these buzzings and leapings in the grass, to these brittle gnawings and crawlings about. Theirs is the biggest wedge of the pie. Why! I ought to keep a giant water bug in an aquarium on my dresser, exultant in a daze, dancing to the twin silver trumpets of praise.<sup>59</sup>

Fear blocks such praise, defence strategies kill wonder and paralyse the action needed to sustain magnificent systems of life that are threatened. A study of disability has been valuable for uncovering some of the fear that persistently lingers around all physicality and is implicit in experiences which arise from ambivalence about natural processes.

So long as fear encourages us to strive for ideals of health potency, achievement and beauty we will continue to develop defence mechanisms towards people who are weak, sick, ugly and have disabilities.<sup>60</sup>

How true this is for creatures and the eco-system too. The whole body of the earth depends on humanity exploring ways to combat fear and disgust, taking to heart Paul's unity of the body.

So that there should be no division in the body but that its parts should have equal respect concern for each other. If one part suffers every part suffers with it, if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. (2 Corinthians 12:25-26)

A mass of life lives just in my own body, they are the little ones who keep everything regulated. They live and die protecting it from harmful bacteria, sending messages flowing to and digesting the living food that enters and leaves only to further

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<sup>58</sup> Anne Dilliard could be described as an Arcadian, immersing herself in ecomysticism.

<sup>59</sup> Dilliard, *op. cit.* p.4

<sup>60</sup> Moltmann, in Eisland, and Saliers, *op.cit.* p.113

feed the earth. 'All the creatures are forever being sacrificed to contribute to lives beyond their own. Everywhere there is vicarious suffering... the lives of individuals are discharged into, flow into, emptied into these larger currents of life.'<sup>61</sup> Every living thing is linked by what Merleau-Ponty described as 'equiprimordial structures of being in the world'<sup>62</sup> Anne Primavesi is clear about the implications for greater inclusion of all life in future theological reflection.

When one delves deeply into the evolutionary biology, ecology or geology, the divisions between plant and animal living and non living, spirit and matter begin to dissolve, if this is the starting point for theological reflection, religion must be understood quite differently.<sup>63</sup>

Keller writes that 'creaturely width exceeds the scale of any empire.'<sup>64</sup> Yes but so does Trinitarian love. 'Multiple divergence is Trinity.'<sup>65</sup> The mode Trinitarian God, 'irreducibly diverse yet one, suggests a world community of irreducibly diverse communities, each of which is itself richly created in and through the irreducible diversity of its members.'<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Johnson envisages the model of this Trinity as a triple helix of DNA which 'connotes the unfathomable richness of holy Triune mystery, inwardly related as a unity of equal movements, each of whom is distinct and all of whom together are one source of life, new just order and quickening surprise

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<sup>61</sup> Holmes Royston, 'Kenosis And Nature' in John Polkinghorne, (ed) *The Work Of Love: Creation As Kenosis* (London:SPCK, 2001), pp 43-65 p.56

<sup>62</sup> Merleau- Ponty, *op.cit.*

<sup>63</sup> Anne Primavesi, *A Sacred Gaia: Holist theology and Earth Systems Science* (London:Routledge, 2000), p.21

<sup>64</sup> Keller, 'No More Sea' *op.cit.* p.132

<sup>65</sup> Gebara, *op.cit.* p.149

<sup>66</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, and Joseph Bracken, (eds) *Trinity In Process: A Relational Theology Of God* (New York:Continuum, 1997), pp.x-xi

in an infinite mix.’ Furthermore, other creatures are included in the ‘twirling’ around of the helix they constitute.<sup>67</sup>

Boyce Rensberger writes that ‘all life is united in DNA.’ ‘At the most basic level, all cells...from those of pond scum to those of lawyers, work exactly the same way. The genetic code is identical in all species.’<sup>68</sup> Johnson’s model of the Trinity, in its corkscrew type spiralling of divine information, leaves room for the mystery of the creator’s input, a central organizing principle which has revealed itself as love in an incarnation of this power, yet leaves no distance between God and creation and certainly little distance between humanity and creatures, bringing us down to earth again.

If we look for this power of love in creation, we will see it in myriad ways. Honing in, like indigenous people, once more to the consciousness of other beings, new frequencies will be recaptured, humans will become native to the earth again, instead of shrinking violets. A human soul will be recognised as ‘that cavern in you where all the currents of the cosmos intersect and meet... do you not hear the appeal, the request that earth makes of us...can you not read earth’s language?’<sup>69</sup> It must become theology’s language also.

And what of the tehom, the chaos or the abyss? A tehomic theology challenges a Marcion negation of matter and sees the creativity of chaos, not as evil but responsible for the freedom of the world, the primordial material from which God made all that lives and breathes. This freedom means that the earth does not always function according to human desires but is a place of wonder, creativity and

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery Of God In Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p.218

<sup>68</sup> Rensberger, *op. cit.* p.1

<sup>69</sup> Toolan, *op.cit.* p.217

unavoidable suffering. John Levinson suggests that the chaos is only circumscribed by God, not annihilated.<sup>70</sup> The presence of *tehom*, Bonting believes, solves the difficulty of theodicy; it alone is responsible for the fact that the universe is contingent, accidental and endangered.<sup>71</sup> Entropy would engulf everything without the ongoing creative activity of God, without which there would be no life or existence. I believe Freya Mathews is correct in her assessment that the Creator is One who is ‘so close, so engrained with all the beings it creates, it would not have subjected itself or creatures to such suffering if there was any alternative way of demonstrating its love for them.’<sup>72</sup> Increasing sensitization to the One, she writes, will decrease human despoiling and bring about a ‘subtle shift’ in the order of nature. As one is sensitized, so one can almost be overwhelmed by the pain, it must be held in tension with the joy of creation, of existence. Mathews agrees that vital liturgy is needed where the paradox of this ‘bitter and sweet ...piercing (come) together. One must hold the joy and pain together.’<sup>73</sup>

Does the constant conflict with the *tehom* mean that God is unable to combat some element of chaos, is this a return to dualism where some matter is evil and coexists alongside God? Bonting argues against this and affirms the absolute sovereignty of God. He describes the chaotic element as a state rather than matter, ‘simply the recognition of a characteristic of the universe in which we live;’ nevertheless he has to make room for *kenosis*; that is a divine letting be of the *tehom*. So the *tehom* is not willed by God, yet neither is there is a return to dualism for ‘chaos

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<sup>70</sup> Jon Levinson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco:Harper And Row, 1988), p.121 p.157 n.12g *op.cit.*

<sup>71</sup> Bonting, *op.cit.* p.30

<sup>72</sup> Mathews, *op.cit.* p.153

<sup>73</sup> *Op.cit.*

theology, combined with the theory of chaos events, suggests that God leaves his evolving creation a large degree of freedom, intervening only in order to keep it going towards the goal he has set.<sup>74</sup> The goal is the eradication of the tehom in the eschatologically new creation. Bonting does not explain why God did not do this for his first creation and we are still left with a God either unable to eradicate suffering or unwilling to do so in order to grant autonomy and freedom for his creatures. ‘Everyone is in danger of trying to impose too easily some form of logical grid upon an inherently mysterious matter.’<sup>75</sup>

Suffice to say the abyss and tehom will remain sources of creation to treat creatively and accept, not ignore or persistently denigrate. Chronic illness has become a way of life for me and the abyss cannot be escaped. It helps one see that the world is neither rose tinted nor hopeless but ‘wider than that in all directions, more dangerous, bitter, more extravagant and bright..Launch into the deep and you shall see.’<sup>76</sup> At this place one senses that the God, whom we want to meet, has to be at the centre of our loving heart’s yearning, inspiring the healing journey. This divine ecomystical core of all earthly life, experienced in the loving, incarnating, infusing, space within us and throughout the universe, with whom we are enthralled and connected with every breath and movement of being. This being has met us in Christ, in whom all things hold together.’(1 Colossians1:7) We will return to whence we came.

The most important truth about ourselves, our artifacts and our civilisation is that it is all borrowed...all the molecules of our body are only ours as they pass in and out back to the

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<sup>74</sup> *Op.cit.* p.86

<sup>75</sup> Polkinghorne, *op.cit.* p.97

<sup>76</sup> Henry David Thoreau cited in Dilliard, *op.cit.* p.307

environment. We take from nature and transform things into useful objects, yet ultimately everything returns to nature.<sup>77</sup>

Disgust has played a large part in many aspects of life discussed in the previous chapter. It has often been used by the Judaeo Christian patriarchal tradition to entrench misogynistic norms as instinctive; it has backed up Holy Writ in the tradition to sanctify rituals of purity in dualistic absolutism which have sometimes lain for years beyond revision or seemingly beyond discourse. Women, the disabled, creatures and much matter often fell under the arch of bodily impurity, denigrated and oppressed, labelled offensive to God. Denied inclusion by a mindset raising intellect above compassionate encounter and experience, such bodies, tainted by the fall, were silenced and secondary, disgust had stigmatised half the earth.

This thesis has argued for transformative liturgy and theology to redress centuries of rejection of the sanctity of all life as God's material love: surely the message of the cross for this time of ecological crisis. Using the insights of Merleau-Ponty: our unity with physical nature and mystical embodied knowing, we begin to see the integration of all of the earth as our grounded life and the basis for action to repair and restore. Perhaps one day in the not too distant future humanity will be disgusted with any attempted norm or religious concept that does not love or honour the miracle of life on earth and we will learn to trust the knowledge that comes through the body as Merleau-Ponty advocated.

Christian love, embracing all creation, binds us to creator God, home of peace and justice where differences are met in creative responses of openness and wonder. The work of feminist theologies and ecomysticism call for remade life affirming liturgies

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<sup>77</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *Declaration Of A Heretic* (Boston:Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1988), pp.77-78

using the arts, even the grotesque, to include the extremes of physical experience.

Then can theodicy relegate evil to lack of love and lack of embodied perception; chaos and the abyss to wells of potential life. Pain balances joy in creation. God as love is with us and in us, in both hope and fear, in all life and is the way forward. Life is the result of one long stretch of the triple helix of Trinitarian love, spiralling because it draws all the past up into the future, renewing and saving as it creates, so that nothing is lost.

The God who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
 who spread out the earths and all that comes out of it, who  
 gives life to those who walk on it. I, the Lord have called you  
 in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. (Isaiah 42:6)

How can we not respond with reciprocal love and gratitude?

Celebrate life in the midst.<sup>78</sup>  
     in the middle  
     in the muddle  
 Celebrate life in the storm  
     in the strife  
     in the struggle  
 Celebrate life in the chaos  
     in the confusion  
     in the catastrophes  
 Celebrate life in the joy  
     in the gentleness  
     and generosity  
 Celebrate life in its pain  
     in its paralysis  
     in its poverty  
 Celebrate life in its energy  
     in its exuberance  
     in its ecstasy  
 Celebrate life in its darkness  
     in its dyings  
     in its departures  
 Celebrate life in its labour  
     in its laughter  
     in its loveliness  
 Celebrate life in all its magnificence  
     multiplicity and mystery  
     unstoppable. unbiddable..unquenchable.

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<sup>78</sup> Nicola Slee, 'A Canticle Of Celebration.' In *Praying Like A Woman* (London: SPCK, 2004), p.118

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