

**Women's Experience, Spirituality and Theology for Liberation and Life
in Contemporary South Africa as Expressed through Visual Arts
with a Focus on the Lives and Work of Two Women Artists -
Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali**

By

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Abstract

Art as an expression of spirituality and theology has the artist as a potential visionary and mediator of the spiritual. All over the world and in South Africa, the visual has been used to illustrate thought patterns, religious themes, religiosity, and to draw people closer to God. However, questions arise about how the visual images depicted by visionaries/artists express social movements, and more deeply, spiritual longings of God for liberation and life.

This dissertation explores the question of representation of women's spirituality and theology for liberation and life in contemporary South Africa through visual arts. With a particular look at the lives and work of two women artists of KwaZulu Natal - Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali, I map the interface between religion, art, spirituality and theology, and expressions of reality of those who are dominated people. I look at women's spirituality in South Africa, art as theology, creative expressions as ways to hide and reveal, and at the specific artists in whose lives and work these questions intersect. I argue that visual art is a powerful means of both shaping and expressing spirituality and theology, and if 'read' with attention and discipline, reveals incipient movements of the Spirit.

Declaration

This dissertation is original work by Karen Elizabeth Buckenham. Where use was made of the work of others it has been acknowledged in the text.

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Introduction

I can never romanticize language again,
never deny its power for disguise, for mystification
but the same could be said for music or any form created
painted ceilings, beaten gold worm-worn pietas
re-organising victimization
translating violence into patterns so powerful and pure
we continually fail to ask
are they true for us?

Adrienne Rich "*The Images*"

...much more investigation into the many cultures of Africa, from women's perspective, is needed. Women's reconstruction of theological symbols, as well as religio-cultural practices, is still largely in the future.

Rosemary Radford Reuther in *Women and Redemption* (1998: 259)

During the apartheid struggle in South Africa, many people of faith were seeking and searching for an authentic engagement of their faith with the reality they were living in. In some of the churches, there was little engagement with the political realities the country was immersed in. But others were grappling with the meaning of the Gospel, and trying to live its transforming power in a context that was both traumatic and continually changing.

It was necessary to begin to reconstruct theological symbols and religio-cultural practices from the perspective of the people who struggle for liberation. Contextual theology and spirituality for liberation and life took root.

However, whilst there was a prophetic liberation movement within some churches, the awareness of women and the voices, longing and pain of women's oppression and invisibility, especially within the faith tradition, was very marginal to this movement. Liberation theology focused on class and race liberation, and was largely articulated by males within the church.

But there were movements afoot, and whilst developing separately along racial lines, women

were, and had been meeting to find their voices.¹

In this context, I remember seeing on the walls of many homes, paintings of *Miriam, Mother Sophia*, and *Creata God Most Beautiful* done by Dina Cormick² (Figs. 1,2+3). The paintings were simple and expressive, but it was the content, and what the paintings represented that was so striking.

These paintings offered alternate representations of biblical women and God, representations that were like life-giving cool clear water in the midst of the desert of a profoundly patriarchal society and faith tradition. The institutions of the Christian faith, through ritual, symbol, history, education, structure, and practice, have given expression to spirituality and theology through patriarchal tradition. For Christian women, and women-identified men, the church is a current site of struggle. At the time of the creation of Cormick's series of paintings *In Praise of Heroic Women of the Scriptures*, the Church of the Province of South Africa, was dealing with the question of ordination of women - an agonising process which symbolized the struggles of women with the church and Christian tradition.³ But the Spirit was moving, and these paintings began to touch something, something that seemed to be a longing and a yearning in the hearts of men and women. Many people looked at these pictures and said affirmed what was represented. This was an affirmation that resounded deeply because these visual representations, the images and symbols gave form to incipient spiritual longings of a people.

Alongside the birth of potentially new religious practices, these paintings began to reconstruct theological symbols from women's perspectives.

¹See Haddad, B. (ed). "En-gendering Theology: South African Voices" *Bulletin for Contextual Theology* Vo. 4, No. 2. July 1997 for an overview of the development of women's theology in South Africa, with contributions from women's groups and theologians.

²Three paintings in her series *In Praise of Heroic Women of the Scriptures* created for the Movement for Ordination of Women (MOW) in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa.

³See Ackermann D et al (eds) (1991) for a compilation of articles written on women, the church and South Africa, many referring to exclusion and inclusion of women in priestly ministry.

A few years later, I came upon the work of Bonnie Ntshalintshali, through a silkscreen print displayed at the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg. It depicted an African Mary and infant Jesus riding on the backs of lions, warthogs, flamingos and cheetahs⁴ (Fig. 4).

Much of Ntshalintshali's work - most of it in ceramics - draws from biblical stories which she reinterpreted and contextualised to African life. Her work was not created for the church, as Cormick's is. The main 'consumers' of her work are those in the art world. But she chose to express biblical imagery, and to do so reconstructing it through the experience of her culture. In this and other pieces, her imagery is clearly contextual to Africa and to her culture. As with the work of Cormick, questions arose for me: As a black woman artist not working as a so-called religious artist, but depicting biblical imagery, what was her motivation? I wondered, theologically and spiritually, what was she trying to say and do? What does her work say and do beyond the aesthetic discourse, rather in a theological interpretation? Do the images touch something spiritual in the viewer? Was her gaze contextual in terms of gender as well as culture?

Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali are two women artists of Africa reinterpreting and representing their Christian faith through the context of their experience and culture. They are reconstructing theological symbols from women's perspective.

There are many things happening here which I will tease out, explore and question in this dissertation.

Chapter One looks at experiences, spirituality and theology of women and Christianity in Africa, particularly South Africa. This history and contemporary spiritual and theological questions will be identified because the significance of images, and visual representation occurs within a particular context.

Chapter Two will look at artists and art through a spiritual and theological lens. Here, I explore

⁴Although images of lions and other African animals were just as foreign to her as grizzly bears or kangaroos - she had never seen them and derived the images from pictures in magazines (Mentis, 1997: 50).

✓ questions relating to the power of the artist as a person to hear God and to play a prophetic role
✓ to communicate this. Art, through the sensitivity and attunement of the artist, can express the
✓ movements of the Spirit, collective yearnings and longings of a people - a collective
✓ consciousness. The artist can have a role as visionary. The listening artist can use this creative gift
✓ to express peoples' hearts, including his or her own and a society's spirituality, longings, and
✓ emerging issues. Questions of who God is, what God is feeling and saying about who we are,
how we live, and where we are called to grow and change - individually and as a society - can be
touched by the artist. Located within a context of time and place, this is always changing.

Then, I look past the artist to the artist's work. There are questions of the role and power of
imagery, signs and symbols to shape reality. They particularly have the power to touch the
✓ deepest places of our being. Artistic representations of biblical imagery or religious themes can be
✓ didactic. They can educate, teach, shape and challenge. They can call us to deeper experiences of
✓ God, even call us to worship. Art has a role in expressing and shaping both theology and
✓ spirituality. A brief history of art and theology is presented. The problem of imaging for women is
presented. This relates gender issues in the creation of images, women as represented by men,
and women representing themselves.

Chapter Two concludes with a look at re-imaging. Not only does visual art play a role in
✓ expressing and shaping theology and spirituality, it is profoundly important to the task of re-
✓ imaging. Visual imagery is central to the task of reconstructing theological symbols from
✓ women's perspectives - of imagining, and creating a new reality.

In Chapter Three, the use of non-verbal means for re-imaging by women is looked at. Artistic
representations are commonly used by women, to express their spiritual journeys, longings and
✓ beliefs. Much of women's theology and spirituality is expressed through telling their stories
✓ overtly or covertly in literature, poetry, song, dance, the rituals of everyday life. Why? Perhaps
✓ because these more fully expresses women's language and experience. Or perhaps because
✓ women, and other marginalised people have not had a voice or legitimacy in the public realm and
✓ this is a way of speaking openly and powerfully in tension with the dominant in ways that are
powerful and rooted, with a potential to be subversive. Maybe it is because women have only

begun to penetrate the traditional arenas of theological discourse and to speak the language of this arena (also to change the language that is spoken).

But the story becomes more complex. While the focus of this thesis is to explore women's theology and spirituality breaking through the patriarchal hegemony, the gender struggle - worldwide - is racially linked. Our context in South Africa has been shaped by racially-based division in all spheres of life. In the struggle to be oneself as created by God, power to have control over one's own life and effect change in society is not equal.

Twenty years ago, while questions around imagery of God, and gender issues were emerging, the discourse, though agonising, was largely amongst those in South African society who could use their voice to articulate their thoughts and experiences. This is still the case. Though difficult, for some it is more safe and more possible than for others to begin to raise issues of women's experience, experiences of God, imagery of God, oppression, longings, spiritualities, and theologies of liberation in an open way and in a public forum.

Depending on one's positioning in these structures, the power and spirits undergirding patriarchy, classism and racism have to be challenged in different ways. While to speak is important for liberation, for some it is simply too dangerous, a matter of life and death. Speaking is done in other ways, in ways that both hide and reveal. I will look at theories of ideological hegemony and the concept of "the hidden transcript" formulated by Scott (1990) as applied to women expressing their reality, spirituality and theology.

Chapter Four brings these streams together in a look at two women artists of South Africa - Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali.

As an artist and feminist theologian who is white and educated, Dina Cormick allows her work to be openly spiritually prophetic and theologically didactic. As a person expressing socio-political challenges, and deeper movements of the Spirit for justice - in this case on gender - Dina Cormick is in a position to 'speak' through her work. She has the power to be able to raise these challenges openly, controversially, consciously, and with an awareness that their purpose is to

nurture, teach, and provoke the viewer, depending on where one sits theologically.

Bonnie Ntshalintshali was one of the few black woman artists in South Africa.⁵ As an African woman, with a basic level of education, from a rural area, disabled and a single mother, Bonnie Ntshalintshali was coming from a place of enormous marginalisation in South African society. From this place, how do we 'read' her work? In terms of theology and spirituality, what does her work say, question, challenge - overtly or covertly - about God, power, race, class, gender and herself as a woman?

✓ These two women of Africa are reconstructing theological symbols from women's perspective, from their different contexts. There is something happening here. What exactly is happening here? And how do we 'read' these visual representations of biblical imagery, in contemporary South Africa created by two women artists from different backgrounds, as indicators of, pointers toward, and creators of symbols illustrating the liberating and life-giving movements of God, from women's perspective, spoken to women, but for all of society to read?

This dissertation provides a background for further research. The study of the lives and art of Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali are only examples at this stage. In this research, I am looking at the nexus where many disciplines intersect. I am attempting to make connections, to present an interdisciplinary survey, to ask questions, to begin to probe and explore, without going too far down any of the tempting tributaries.⁶ As a survey, the research has both possibilities and limits. My aim is to begin to name many questions and make connections. Though unsatisfying, I leave them standing open for future exploration.

⁵ Bonnie Ntshalintshali died in 2000 of HIV/AIDS related illness.

⁶ These tributaries include themes such as ritual, symbol, reception, representation, theology in art history, gender and art in South Africa, religious art in South Africa, feminist theology and spirituality in South Africa, in-depth study of the lives and body of artwork by Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali.

Chapter One

Straining for full life: Some aspects of experience, spirituality and theology in the Christian tradition and expression of this for women's liberation and life in South Africa.

Introduction

Christianity and its expression in South Africa is a contested area. Brought by missionaries, the Gospel message of Christ came to South Africa packaged in western cultural baggage. To some, missionaries and converts alike, to become a Christian meant to make a total break with the traditions of African culture as well.

Over the past twenty years, the landscape of women's experiences in the Christian tradition in South Africa has changed enormously. For many decades, identified with the apartheid divisions along race, class and ethnicity, Christian women's spiritual lives have been shaped by these divisions and experiences, in addition to patriarchy. In this Chapter, I will look at women's spirituality for liberation and life in South Africa, situating it within a broader discussion of feminist spirituality, liberation spirituality, and African women's spirituality.

Womens' Spirituality for Liberation and Life

I would like to open this discussion of women's spirituality for liberation and life with several poems. These poems illustrate poignantly the questions and struggles of women in South Africa, and their spiritual longings.

It was then that I felt the feeling I was not supposed to feel.
That's the time I doubted the person I was not supposed to doubt.
That's the time I felt that God was not meant for us,
That's the time I felt that God does not love the poor. (Govinden 1994: 3)

"Where is God in our time and place? Where is God for those mourning the deaths of loved ones, those enduring hardship caused through violence that rips families apart, those battered by husbands or fighting the police against forced removal, at Crossroads? Where is God when a mother, in her loneliness, cries...

Here I stand

with no child in sight
did I conceive to throw away?
My children have gone to the towns
to seek bread
They never returned
they went to the mines
to dig gold
They died in shaft 14.
They went to the mills
they died in the grinding stones.
They went to the towers that belched fire
their hands were guillotined.
My children
Children of my blood, blood of my children. (Govinden 1994: 3)

The pain of Apartheid acts like glue
which stops me moving forward
or not moving at all
the sermons and my school lessons
were instruments of apartheid
killing my will to resist
to be in tune with God
to know myself and
what I want

Now the time has come
for that to change
Three years have passed
since FREEDOM DAY
I have to disembark
from Cloud Nine
And root my feet
in my past
And walk through the valley of the shadow of death
with those who have gone before
and those who still walk with me
It is only as I do that
will I find my true self
and dignity in my freedom. (Prenzee 1997: 19)

Because the time has come for women to get together as men do.
Because I'm hoping to meet someone who can discuss issues with me
that affect women particularly: like the abortion issue,
who God is,
what women should do - in South Africa, in the Church, in marriage and career.
Instead of leaving these things up to men to decide and to do the thinking for us.

And then there is God's relationship with us.
How can God relate to a person when there is no-one there?
When the only reason for that creature's existence is as a convenience for others?
How can there be a One to one relationship?
Self-denial or self-realization. Where should the self be?
Achiever or nurturer? Are they compatible?

What is God's plan for us?
 Everyone's servant?
 The suffering servant.
 Christ.
 How blasphemous!
 Christ as a woman!
 Running around washing dishes
 - and everybody's feet.
 And healing,
 and feeding,
 and sacrificing self for others
 - instead of the other way round.
 Christ, who gave up his glory for the sake of the weak
 and helpless.
 So what's God got to do with it?
 Or is it all just our own construct?
 I can only discuss these things with women.
 Because we are on the same side.
 Not opposite,
 defending against and keeping out, saying,
 Get back, get back, get back to where you once belonged. (Speight 1996: 4)

Violence, despair, oppression, exploitation, murder and mutilation, absence and abandonment; freedom, confusion, grief and remembrance, growth and reaching; desire for answers, communion, respect, self-esteem, affirmation; experience. Women, in their profound diversity, express deep longings and questioning, past present and future. The poems express their search for God, for meaning out of struggle. The poems are firmly rooted in these women's experiences.

Women's spirituality in Africa, from the hearts of women in South Africa ask questions. The questions come from a particular context, and reflect that context. The meaning of these poems may be most poignant and relevant to others with similar experiences. Yet the questions, struggles, longings for freedom, justice, full personhood and life, by women and for women resonate more widely. These poems demonstrate aspects of spirituality for liberation and liberation for women.

To discuss feminist spirituality in Africa, with a particular focus on Christian feminist spirituality, is to delve into several enormous areas of experience, history, scholarship, thought and tradition. It is to grapple with the diversity of peoples, economic class, daily struggles and priorities, cultures and worldviews. It is to grapple with the encounter of a diversity of religions and cultures with Western Christianity and missionary endeavours in Africa - including African culture and African traditional religion, Indian culture and Hinduism and Islam, Asian culture and Buddhism.

To discuss Christian feminist spirituality in Africa exhaustively would require naming and analysing the varying levels of patriarchy extant in every culture in this country, and their overlap with religion, specifically Christianity, and women's longings and searchings arising from these contexts. In South Africa, it is additionally to reflect on a reality and spirituality shaped by colonialism, indentured labour, mining, rural life, urban life, and the struggles between the different groups. It is to refer to migration and uprooting, extreme oppression, violence and suffering, and their opposites - privilege based on colour and culture. It must be in reference to the liberation struggle, the still-fresh legacy of apartheid, liberation, freedom, a miracle, truth-telling, justice, uncertainty, fear and hope.

The following discussion is a survey, in that it touches on several areas that could each be discussed at great length. But my aim is to overlap them and find something new. First, I will look at how different people define spirituality, specifically Christian spirituality. Second, I will look at spirituality, struggle and liberation. Third, I will present an overview of feminist spirituality and Christian feminist spirituality from a Western perspective. Fourth, I will look at African spirituality and women, African women and liberation, and feminism in Africa in the context of survival. With these discussions as the main part of the journey, they will then point to commonalities, uniqueness and particularities of Christian feminist spirituality that are crystalised in contemporary South Africa - a post-apartheid transforming and struggling third world/first world context, where spirituality, faith in God and parts of the Church have played a pivotal role in liberation, where struggle for liberation is well understood, where women of many cultures mix, struggle and live their experiences of God and hopes for life, where survival is the main concern for most women, and where patriarchy in church and society is part of the air we breath and yet is not breathed without challenge and visions and actions for something different. I can best describe feminist spirituality in South Africa as a tapestry woven together using some of the fabrics, colours and textures represented by different sections in this chapter. This discussion is part of my own searching and grappling. I am trying to put words to what I see, and to articulate ideas, observations, and experiences that are still in formation.

✓ There are limits to this Chapter. My discussion focuses on Western and African women. Although I would like to, I will not speak in great detail about specific liturgical and theological changes

happening in the institution of the church, or outside of the church, nor include examples. And I have left out my own story. In this sense, the Chapter is theoretical and broad.

I. Spirituality

What is spirituality?

There are as many definitions of spirituality as there are writers about spirituality and the spiritual life. What definition is painted by the diversity of experience and differences defined and explained under the term spirituality?

Sandra Schneiders, an American theologian writes that spirituality is

the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolations and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives. (Schneiders 1996: 30)

She says this can apply not only to religious experience but to non-religious and anti-religious movements as well.

In a religious context, the term is easily associated with religious whose calling is to live a monastic life. In much of the writing on spirituality - both on 'how to' and critiques of the seeming exclusivity of the spiritual life, it immediately brings to mind retreats and silence, a deep personal prayer life, contemplation and meditation on the scriptures, fasting and other disciplines. It may bring to mind a certain 'specialness' of the 'spiritual' person. In terms of the Christian religion, it may bring to mind various great spiritual traditions, such as Ignatian spirituality, Benedictine liturgical spirituality or Teresian contemplative spirituality.

In their book "Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church" Mass and O'Donnell (1990) look at some of the many aspects of Western Christian spirituality, including a selected number of distinctive Western Christian spiritual traditions. These spiritual traditions include practices and exercises that have developed to aid people in their spiritual searching, in their relationship with God. Monastic spiritualities are included there, but are not the only kinds. Indeed, the meaning of these traditions to any individual or community depends on their own experience of life, beliefs, formation, and even temperament, to name a few influences. These are ways to be before God. They are some of many, many ways.

Below are some definitions of religious spirituality from several different contexts around the world. Ursula King, editor of *Feminist Theology from the Third World* writes

The notion of the Spirit is linked with that of power, with a life-giving dynamic - an experience of empowerment, strength and vital energy. It is also connected with the idea of healing, of being made whole and healthy. In many religions, such experiences of healing and wholeness are seen as a divine gift bestowed on humans by a superhuman power or Supreme Spirit that is referred to by many names (King 1994: 361).

From Ghana, and bearing in mind both traditional African spirituality and Christian spirituality, Mercy Amba Oduyoye defines spirituality as “the energy by which one lives and which links one’s worldview to one’s style of life” (Oduyoye 1994: 362).

Ilse Ahrends from South Africa defines spirituality first in terms of its negative connotations - what spirituality *is not*

An otherness - this is what spirituality seems to mean: worshipping a God who is totally Other; being, or trying to be, holy, apart from the world, different. Being spiritual in this way means living “up there”, in some high-minded and holy sphere that isn’t at all rooted in the earth.

Seen in this way, spirituality emphasizes the dualism so prevalent in our western way of thinking - the spiritual is split off from the material, the mind from the body. Even God is split off - a power outside of us - creating a divide which must be bridged (Ahrends 1991: 169).

She continues then to speak of what spirituality *is*

Spirituality for me means a seeking after wholeness, a bringing together/integration of opposites, finding the God who is within me and so finding the “me” within me (Ahrends 1991: 169).

✓ From Latin America, Ivone Gebara says that “spirituality is the meaning of life”(Gebara 1994: 112). It is an encounter with the Spirit of God, in the struggles of daily life, which gives life meaning. God is in these struggles, and supports us in them.

Mvume Dandala describes the centrality of spirituality in shaping our lives, in that it holds “...a satisfying explanation of who we are, where we come from, where we are going and how we can get there.”(Dandala 1997: 17) The consequences of not having ones deepest identity

defined from within and celebrated point to an imprisonment - both internal - within a person, community and society - and external - in the person's, community's, society's interactions with others. In his words,

In Africa today we have a very real crisis of spirituality, and genuine liberation will not come until Africa is able to define itself and find joy in itself without seeking the approval of big brother (Dandala 1997: 17).

II. Spirituality, Struggle and Liberation

The poor will hear good news.
Those who are depressed will feel the comfort that stimulates action;
Those who are oppressed will be encouraged and enabled to free themselves.

Abilities rather than disabilities will be what counts.
All who are blind to their own and others' oppression will come to new insights.

And God will pardon all at the jubilee.
It will be a new beginning for all.
That is liberation (Oduyoye 1995: 4).

From the few definitions above, several concepts can be highlighted - energy, power, transcendence, imagination, identity, direction, struggle, presence, affirmation, wholeness, self-definition, God, and God in me/you/us. "Spirituality is the meaning of life" Ivone Gebara cries.

Spirituality is the inner life of a person, a group, a community, a society. In religious terms, that inner life longs for authenticity and nurture, and it longs and grows toward 'becoming who I am' - in the image of God and who God made me/you/us to be. It shapes and is shaped by the outer life. I would say that spirituality - the life of the Spirit of God within us - is a longing. This longing, this heartcry for life also enables life, affirms life, directs life, sustains life. It is a constant orientation toward life in its abundance, and an empowerment to act to realize that life, for ourselves and others. It cannot be comfortable with that which is life-denying. This is manifested in different ways in different contexts.

The Spirit of God is not exclusively to be found amongst the religious and in stereotyped views of holiness. Nor does an authentic spirituality allow us to sit back and be comfortable and at peace in a world of injustice and pain. Spirituality is amidst the struggles of daily life, the struggles for survival, the struggles for justice in this world. Where life is denied - in personal relationships; in religion or tradition; in structural injustice such as apartheid, racism, poverty, exploitation, usury and slavery, and patriarchy, for example - authentic spirituality enables and empowers us to struggle against the life-denying powers.

Speaking specifically about struggles for life amongst the poor in Latin America, Ivone Gebara contrasts concepts and experiences of spirituality of the poor with traditional concepts of spirituality that she says are primarily the privilege of the 'non-poor' and emphasize removal from the struggles of the world. She insists that it is in the struggle for survival, the noise and joys and relationships of daily life where the spirit is manifest, because these are the things that have meaning to people.

...taking into consideration the lives of the poor and the challenges of our historical era, I would dare to say that the Spirit, Creator of life, is very much active among certain types of garbage and from within cries for life, for life in fullness. Our traditions have locked up the Spirit in the "pure and clean"...I suspect that by this attitude we have missed much of that which is beautiful; we the so-called professionals in religion, a caste set apart as it were, rooted to and conditioned by our rigid religious traditions!

✓ We need to realize that the Spirit's creative and re-creative power manifests itself in joy, peace, justice, solidarity, mercy, and is found and felt in so many different ways and places we never dreamt of (Gebara 1994: 114).

...is the Spirit present among [the poor] as an invisible support in their daily struggles for life? Either the Transcendent One has abandoned them or she is there present among them according to their own way, a way of being that we fail to grasp. Is she not vibrantly present in their strivings for a better life and happiness? (Gebara 1994: 114-115).

Not only is the Spirit manifest in the struggles and rituals of daily life particularly of the poor (as she describes 'the poor'), but in the uncertainty, precariousness, and insecurity which a life in poverty often means.

I find it ...important to situate oneself fully in the reality of daily life with its

uncertainties and precariousness if one is to touch at the very heartstrings of the meaning of existence (Gebara 1994 116).

Spirituality in that which is provisional, that which is fleeting, is an expression of faith in life. It is a search for confidence and hope, so necessary to live today so as to achieve a better tomorrow for all. And this hope lived within passing reality is the spirituality of large masses of people who hardly have any certitude of survival. There is a day-to-day spirituality with no long terms, for it is experienced in the constant struggle for life (Gebara 1994: 116).

Whilst Gebara speaks of the Spirit in the lives of the struggles of the poor, others speak of the Spirit in the lives of those struggling to escape from poverty, struggling to name their oppression, struggling for liberation. Indeed spirituality cannot be separated from struggle or liberation. This world, in its neediness and brokenness, will also mean that God's Spirit will direct us toward seeing and acting on what we see. Yet this has been and is a tension within the Church, as if spirituality and liberation were somehow in opposition. Catholic priest Anthony Bellagamba answers thus,

To accept a notion of spirituality as totally separated from, or with no connection with liberation/justice is to risk to reduce religion to a cult, salvation to rescuing the souls from hell, theology to an abstraction, mission to the propagation of the Church, and the gospel message stripped of its prophetic challenge. Conversely to accept a notion of liberation apart from spirituality risks to reduce religion to a mere human endeavour, salvation to physical wellbeing, theology to a social science, mission to socio-political involvement, the gospel values to a response to human needs for a better social, political and economic life (Bellagamba 1990: 52).

Spirituality is a way of being, of relating, and consequent action with God and creatures, in keeping with the signs of the times, and inspired by the teaching and examples of Jesus (Bellagamba 1990: 53).

Liberation is a way of acting out one's spirituality in situations of oppression, poverty and any other injustice (personal, communal, societal), and bringing holiness and wholeness to all of life (Bellagamba 1990: 53).

Practically, and in the context of Africa, he is not alone in this opinion. How can one live under, or even look at life-denying injustice and oppression from whatever source, and not agonise and organise to change this?

Takatso Mofokeng describes the reality and implications of oppression and injustice to the deepest places of the identity, life and spirituality of a black South African Christian.

[Black spirituality involves]...our whole being and our whole life, that is, the way we walk, talk, laugh, cry, struggle and celebrate, the way we worship and pray, the way we sing and do theology, the way we work and rest as well as the way we do theology and create culture...

...we black South Africans are a colonized and subjugated people whose land has been conquered. Our culture is also colonized and subjugated. The same goes for our religion. Ironically, we live in a painful paradox of having been Christianized by our colonizers and dispossessors. In other words, we have been coerced, albeit partially, into the ideological universe of our subjugators. In cases where that insertion into the world of ideas, thought forms and spiritual experience of our conquerors has succeeded, our absorption has only given us the status of being perpetual junior partners in the perception, definition, development and articulation of that universe of ideas and emotionality. In other words, those of us who have succumbed to that coercion exist and operate as junior Christians in the Christian community that is dominated by their oppressors.

Subjectively...we black South African Christians are Africans who are presently engaged in an all-encompassing struggle for liberation that will hopefully culminate in our regaining the material basis of our existence, our land, our identity and the uncontested right for self-definition and articulation even in Christian terms. This comprehensive struggle that I have referred to forms and informs our spirituality (Mofokeng 1994: 136).

✓ Frank Chikane also refers to the spirituality of struggle in the face of oppression that converts the inner and self-identity of a subjugated people. Living under such oppression, the racism was internalised so that a black person doubted his or her own humanity. First, the consciousness had to be raised. Once that awareness took hold, there was no turning back. A new vision was formed and activities put into place to make that happen.

✓ Changing (converting) a subjugated people who had been so psychologically deformed that they themselves doubted their own humanity became an absolutely necessary stage to be able to challenge the whole system of apartheid. Black people had to be converted themselves to develop a new consciousness which made it imperative to eliminate the system of apartheid. This conversion event happened in the course of a struggle to resist apartheid. It is this new consciousness which became the basis for the new vision, the vision of eradicating the system of apartheid to replace it with a just, non-racial South Africa where Blacks and Whites would live together as human beings (Chikane 1994: 179).

Spirituality of liberation, and the Church

Everything in the Church must be analysed in terms of a sociological, political and economic perspective - including notions of spirituality (Worsnip 1991: 34).

All of the preceding has practical criticisms and challenges to lay before the church. These struggles must be acted upon practically, which means profound self-examination of the theology, structures, rituals and activities of the Church. All assumptions must be open to criticism. The Church itself is a site of struggle.

The Church operates largely, though not exclusively, in the ideological terrain. It tries to provide its adherents with a comprehensive set of symbols and practices which attempt to make sense of the total life process (Worsnip 1991: 36).

If the Church has such power to shape and interpret life and spirituality, then it must engage with the issues and questions people have arising from their struggles in life. These include questions about the Church, and calls for the Church to change. Frank Chikane wrote of the changes for church activities, liturgies, structures insisted upon in accordance to a spirituality of struggle - changes that would deeply feed the conversion of the church and society, rather than maintain the status quo.

This commitment to the struggle for liberation occasioned the development of a spirituality of struggle. According to the Kairos Document, church activities had to be transformed to be "fully consistent with a prophetic faith which is related to the Kairos." (Chikane 1994: 180) This amounted to a call for the revision and writing of liturgy and church structures so as to convert them into instruments for the total conversion of the Christian church and the society at large (Chikane 1994: 180).

This call was heard - though more by individuals and certain parts of the Christian church than by the mainstream of the tradition. In the liberation struggle, the power of ritual and liturgy is apparent in the liberation songs, funerals and mass gatherings that fed the spirituality of liberation. Where the institutional Churches did not take this seriously, people formed their own 'church' community.

There are several main points I would like to carry into the next discussion. First, the identification of struggle for liberation as of the Spirit and an authentic living out of one's spirituality. Second, that through the activity of struggling, the oppressed person or peoples grow profoundly. In the struggle, a continuously flowing and changing identity of the oppressed individual/group/community/people is found, formed, affirmed and celebrated. Third, a vision for a new reality is formed, which entails a new reality which is life-giving for oppressed and oppressor. Fourth, this struggle has practical outworkings for the institutions whose business is the things of the Spirit - in our discussion, this means the Church, its theology, structures, activities and rituals.

The struggle for liberation in South Africa parallels in many ways the struggle for liberation of women throughout the world. So long hidden and protected within the realm of the 'private', women's struggles and the effects of patriarchy are terrifying territory to walk into. For women's awareness raising and conscientisation, a big part of the struggle is to recognize that 'the personal is political.'

As women share stories of their own lives, a common experience of oppression and of resistance is recognised. This politicization gives women the courage to persist in resistance, recognizing that their difficulties have not only an individual basis, but a social and political basis as well (Welch 1985: 41).

III. Feminist Spirituality and Christian Feminist Spirituality

I found god in myself
and I loved her/I loved her fiercely.

- NTOZAKE SHANGE
(Proctor-Smith 1990:
430)

1. Feminist Spirituality

The essence of feminist spirituality...is a reclaiming of female power beginning with the likeness of women to the divine, the rehabilitation of the body as the very locus of the divine likeness, and the right of women to participate in the shaping of religion and culture, i.e. of the realm of 'spirit' (Schneiders 1996: 36).

Feminist spirituality...is involved in freeing and expanding our imaginations about what is real and what is possible (Proctor-Smith 1990: 430).

Feminist spirituality...is spirituality defined by women for our own purposes, which must include our own emancipation (Proctor-Smith 1990: 432).

Feminist spirituality, which Proctor-Smith describes as a movement, is a global phenomenon, with origins in the struggles of women for political, intellectual, and religious recognition and autonomy. Its origins do not lie in any particular religious tradition, but in the feminist critique of political, intellectual, and religious structures. These struggles and critiques shape the history and character of feminist spirituality.

Before coming to a point of critique is a coming to feminist awareness. Many women come to this awareness through personal and painful experiences of abuse and oppression by individuals, institutions or structures they trusted. They may realize, looking at patterns in their own life, that something is not working and is terribly wrong. Myths that were believed are questioned, a woman's own belief in her own identity may be shaken and everything called into question. Other women come to this awareness through consciousness raising, where they begin to recognize that what they thought were personal and individual problems are structural and social. The grief and anger - a deep existential anger that doesn't go away - that this recognition produces in women leads to questions - a reexamination of the past, in search of origins of women's oppression. It also leads to a determination to change things for future generations. There are consequences arising from these questions, searching and aspirations for the future. Proctor Smith writes of some of the religious conflict that arises

The recognition of the depth of women's oppression raises questions such as, Why do women suffer? Where is God? Does God care about women's sufferings?...How did the oppression of women come to be accepted? Was there ever a time when women were free? What would the world look like if women were free?

However, when women have asked these religious questions of traditional forms of Christianity or Judaism, they have been forced to recognize that their religion, far from being a source of comfort or power to women, has in fact contributed to women's suffering and oppression. Indeed, according to the prevailing interpretation of Christianity and Judaism, women's oppression seems to be part of the divine plan from the beginning of creation, and therefore women can have no hope of bringing about

change, either in the present or in the future (Proctor-Smith 1990: 431).

Feminist spirituality has tended to develop outside the institutional context of either church or academy. This is both because these institutions have been owned and controlled in a way to exclude women, women's experience and exercise of female power, and because the traditions of these institutions - androcentric and patriarchal - are at odds with the movement toward emancipation desired by conscientised women. While I will not go into depth with these, I will mention some feminist spirituality movements which have formed outside of traditional religion. These include the discovery of the Goddess, theology and Wicca. Related to Judeo-Christianity is the God/dess movements. And there are therapeutic or psychological approach to the Goddesses, which draw on Jungian analysis revised by feminist psychotherapists.

There are several important characteristics of feminist spirituality (Schneiders 1996: 41-43). *First*, it is rooted in and oriented toward women's experience. Through storytelling, narrating and sharing experiences of disempowerment and empowerment, consciousness and mutual support is raised. Women's stories are largely excluded from mainline religion, and women are taught - explicitly or implicitly - that their stories are trivial. But by telling stories, and listening to others' stories, women come to see the commonalities and larger picture of events they have been taught to believe are purely personal and private. *Second*, feminist spirituality seeks to reintegrate all that has been dichotomized by patriarchal religion, "rehabilitating what has been regarded as inferior and reappropriating that which has been alienated"(Schneiders 1996: 42). This, most fundamentally, concerns reintegrating body and spirit, articulating and celebrating those aspects of being creatures with bodies, which religion treats with shame and silence. Especially female experiences such as menstruation, child-birth and breastfeeding - life-giving experiences which have been regarded as unclean. *Third*, feminist spirituality sees the intimate connection between male possessiveness and rape of nature. "As men have raped women for their own pleasure and utility, so have they raped the environment for the same purposes..."(Schneiders 1996: 42). There is a concern for non-human nature. *Fourth*, religious ritual, and liturgy should not be cerebral and abstract, rigid and unemotional, overly verbal, hierarchical and dominative, but participative, incarnate, life-enhancing, joyful, circular, pleasing to the senses - a celebration. "Feminists involved in the spirituality movement are committed to a reenvisioning of ministry, liturgy, theology, teaching, community building and

ecclesiastical organization” (Schneiders 1996: 42). *Lastly*, it has involved, from the beginning, a “...commitment to the intimate and intrinsic relationship between personal growth and transformation and a politics of social justice”(Schneiders 1996: 43).

...unlike the traditional spiritualities of the churches which constantly (and often unsuccessfully) seek a point of intersection between a process of personal spiritual growth and a commitment to social justice, feminist spirituality starts with a commitment which faces simultaneously inward and outward. The changes and growth which must happen in women if they are to be and to experience themselves as fully human, daughters of divinity and its bearers in this world, are the same changes that must occur in society, namely, the reintegration of what has been dichotomized, the empowerment of that which has been marginalized and abused, the liberation of that which has been enslaved (Schneiders 1996: 43).

Feminist spirituality rejects hierarchies, domination, competition and such concepts. Other concepts are envisioned for the way society can function - in networks, webs, weavings, circles and mosaics, with cooperation and dialogue, empowerment and persuasion. It is an alternative vision and commitment to bring this about in oneself and in the world.

2. Christian Feminist Spirituality

In light of the previous discussion, it is apparent that whether expressed in prayers and contemplation, or struggle, protest and prophesy, Christian spirituality has been problematic for women. The patriarchy of the history of the Christian faith tradition, the hierarchy, clericalism and maleness in the structures, the maleness of the trinitarian God, the spiritual significance of exclusion of women on the basis of sex, the maleness and exclusiveness of the theology and liturgy, are profound obstacles to women conscientised to awareness of these in the Christian tradition. “As long as tradition is understood to be patriarchal and androcentric, within which women are at best marginal and at worst inherently heretical or evil, feminist spirituality is at odds with tradition” (Proctor-Smith 1990: 432). Sandra Schneiders writes particularly of the problem in the Catholic Church (but it is applicable more widely).

For the Christian, the horizon of ultimate concern is the holy mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through the gift of the Holy Spirit within the life of the church. Thus, Christian spirituality, as Christian, is essentially trinitarian, christocentric, and ecclesial (Schneiders 1996: 31).

Given the way in which the tradition has presented the trinitarian God, viz as three male “persons,” the recent presentation of the theological significance of the maleness of Jesus by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the church as hierarchical (i.e. sacralized patriarchal) structure within which women, on the basis of their sex, are excluded from full participation, it is not surprising that women, once their consciousness has been raised, have problems with the living of their faith in terms of the principal coordinates of traditional Christian spirituality (Schneiders 1996: 31).

In other words, Christian spirituality will become problematic for any woman who becomes a feminist...(Schneiders 1996: 31).

The patriarchy of the Church is a structural and political issue, and it is a spiritual issue affecting the deepest places of the identity of a woman, her relationship with God, and her relationship with others. Traditional religion has been inadequate in responding to women’s most fundamental religious questions.

Indeed, the patriarchy of the Christian faith and the Church is not an innocent overlooking of women, nor an ignorant oversight entailing blind following of traditional patriarchal power relations. There is fear of women and active misogyny behind the theology and traditions. The effects of this misogyny penetrate deeply into women, to the extent that, using Chikane’s phrase ‘they doubt their own humanity’. Libuseng Lebaka-Ketshabile writes

The God we were introduced to by Christian preachers is a God who does not like women. It is a God who does not want them to be in positions of leadership because they menstruate and become pregnant, and because they are inferior. It is a God who created them to be like Eve, tempter, the devil’s gateway and unredeemable beasts. It is a God who actually hates them for being who they are (Lebaka-Ketshabile 1997: 10).

These beliefs, she says, make it difficult for women to love God and themselves at the same time. How can women connect with such a God? Or if they want to, how can they love themselves?

Women have been socialised into treating themselves as inferior, neglecting themselves, suppressing what is in them and accepting things that conflict with their own experience - to the point of hating themselves and all other women (Lebaka-Ketshabile 1997: 10).

Christian feminist spirituality is a spirituality for liberation that affirms the God-image in women, and the feminine image in God. It is a spirituality which says that being a woman is good. It is not abstract telling women how they should experience God and live, but rather starts from women's experiences, reality, bodiliness, and experiences of God as the measures of what is real. It affirms women and frees women from the life-denying teachings of patriarchal society and Christianity. In contrast to negative messages women hear about their humanness and divineness, Christian feminist spirituality involves the search by women to meet the God of love, the God who made and loves women, the God in whose image women are made, and to be at home there with that love and acceptance. Christian feminist spirituality involves a discovery and love of self as a woman. The traditional messages of inferiority, corruption, self-denial and sacrifice, accepted by women are critiqued and questioned.

Devout Christian women from all over the world are saying the same thing. They are looking at Christianity and Christian scriptures with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' - with eyes that look behind what is told to be true, and measuring against the gospel message of life, love and freedom.

For women to have a healthy spirituality they must critique any understanding of Christianity that destroys or denies life. Jesus came that we might have life and have it in abundance. Women today are defining for themselves who they are in defiance of the negative images given them by the early fathers of the church and by some contemporary fathers too. That is a life-giving and spiritual experience (Lebaka Ketshabile 1997: 10).

Women have different ways of responding to the understandings and questions they have. Some women leave traditional religion and form "feminist religions" or "feminist spirituality groups" some of which are mentioned above. Other women refuse to leave their traditions, and are instead challenging them to respond to them and their issues. The implications for these women, and their traditions are profound. Let me note, however, that although the 'categories' seem clear cut and discrete, they are not, and women may find themselves in each of these at different times, or even resonate with several simultaneously.

One response is abandonment of the Christian tradition. Others do not leave, although it is a daily painful choice to stay. Schneiders - speaking specifically about Catholic women, but with

experiences applicable to Christian women of all traditions - names two general groups of women who are both Christian and feminist, and describes their internal struggle and responses to the effect of feminism on their spirituality: 1) Those who are within the mainstream of the Christian tradition and whose spirituality remains recognizable as Christian but who are involved in continuous and radical criticism of the tradition; and 2) those who are still within the institutional church but who have, to a large extent, relocated their spirituality into what has been named "womanchurch" (Schneiders 1996: 52-57).

In the first group, she describes Christian women whose spirituality is mature and has been shaped by the Catholic tradition. Their Catholicism and a deep Christ-consciousness formed by meditation and prayer is part of their deepest identity. Their Christianity is not an institutional affiliation, but their lived experience of the faith. It is not possible to 'de-Catholicise' their spirituality because their being Catholic constitutes their spirituality in a fundamental way.

The anger raised in response to the awareness and daily onslaught of patriarchy is justified and unquenchable. What does such a woman do? How to both affirm the anger and use it without becoming paralysed by it? Two fora for feminist Catholics to share their experiences of alienation and search for a way out include spiritual direction with a feminist woman director, and support groups in which women come together to strengthen each other in suffering, to strategies for change, and to celebrate both traditional liturgies and alternative rituals.

Their experience is not unlike that of the earliest Jewish Christians who, while continuing to participate in temple and synagogue, also met together in their homes to share and celebrate their Christian identity and faith which could not find expression in the Jewish assembly (Schneiders 1996: 52-53).

The outward expression of their feminist Christian spirituality may take the form of active commitment to church reform, including calling for ordination of women, serving on diocesan pastoral councils, associations of religious and lay women, and advisory groups. If they are involved in academia, they are involved in criticism of the Catholic tradition. Women scholars in church history, pastoral theology, biblical studies, systematic theology, sacramental theology, and moral theology are creating an alternative body of theological reflection which cannot be ignored by serious theologians. If they are involved with grassroots communities of

the church, they pour energy into changing liturgy, refusing to tolerate exclusive language, challenging clericalism and the arbitrary use of hierarchical power, they are changing dominating ways of relating to ways that are more cooperative and participative. As teachers, they are committed to raising the next generation differently - for boys and girls to see themselves as equals and for neither of them to tolerate anything that would teach them otherwise. All of these are activities to transform the church from the inside.

In the second group, Schneiders describes Womenchurch and Catholic feminists.

Womenchurch defines itself as church - a community of religiously engaged and motivated people who are women identified. Their starting point is the experiences of women, not any particular institutional religious tradition. They see themselves as a community of church in exodus from patriarchy. The goal is the full personhood of women. The criterion is "is it life-giving for women?"

Characteristic of Catholic (Christian) feminists is their primary self-location in the church of women, although they may have other institutional religious affiliations. Their spirituality is essentially feminist rather than Christian, although it usually includes and is enriched by those elements of the Christian tradition they find meaningful. It also includes those aspects discussed under feminist spirituality - rooted in women's experience, concerned with rehabilitating the bodily while reclaiming the spirit for women, ecological sensitivity, a deep commitment to social transformation as integral to personal transformation, and a concern that all of their interaction be characterized by interconnectedness expressed in full participation, circularity of organization and shared leadership, artistic beauty, inclusiveness and joy. Schneiders writes "...they are busy being church rather than trying to reform the male establishment which is usually regarded as church" (Schneiders 1996: 57). Thirsty, these women have gone where they would find water.

IV. African Women's Spirituality for Life and Liberation

In this section, I will look at some aspects of African women's spirituality in the context of the African worldview and culture. How is the personhood of African women defined? What is

their role in society? How does this reflect and fit into an African religio-cultural universe, and in the institutions of religion - both traditional and Christian? How is this spirituality impacted on by Western feminism and how does it shape feminism in a new way?

1. Women's Role and Identity and Spirituality in African Society

The role of women in African society is to serve life - in all its physical, moral and spiritual dimensions. Women are seen, and see themselves, as those who nurture and sustain life. This role of servant - and a spirituality of self-giving, a sense of justice and fairplay - is a source of honour and dignity to a woman (Mbuy-Beya 1994: 74). All women work actively to promote life, most of whom do so quietly and discreetly. Most common is the nurturing mother role - women who give birth and nurture children; who care for the needs of their husbands and others; who till the fields and grow food; who mediate in family and community conflicts in an attempt to ward off death, and who try to preserve the social order by respecting traditions which favour life (Mbuy-Beya 1994: 74). Traditional African womanness embodies a concern for wholeness.

African women's lives are deeply sacramental. Fasting, ritual meals and objects, symbols and signs, are practised and have meaning. Little is common; all occurrences may be seen as portents. This deep sense of the spirit-dimension of life is a source of strength for women. Commitment to community well-being, beginning with the immediate family, including ancestors, and expanding to the wider community, gives women a sense of participation in life-giving and life-protecting processes. But much of what empowers African women may be described as a spirituality of sacrifice (Oduyoye 1995: 375).

In their arduous duties of mothering the people, women draw on strength from the spirit dimension. Women are energized by prayer, songs, and rituals of their traditions. The poetry and rhythm in song become an effective carrier of deep spiritual affirmations, making affirmations of God for which there is no vocabulary (Oduyoye 1995: 371).

African women believe in prayer as a kind of 'potent-speech' which once uttered releases power into the human community and reverberates throughout the cosmos.

(Oduyoye 1995: 375).

- ✓ This access to, and dependence upon spiritual power gives African women strength to nurture
- ✓ and strength to bear up under unjust circumstances of great struggle and oppression. This strength is needed to feed when there is no food, to make a home amidst conflict, to struggle for justice and equality under patriarchal norms and activities in family, church, legal, political and economic life. It is needed to hold together life for the family, circle, community and society under enormous global pressures in which they have little say. It is this same strength
- ✓ that supports women when they challenge the ethos which says a woman's life is expendable if it is for the benefit of the community's well-being.

In the spiritual dimension of life there is justice, for all are accounted and treated as the children of God. No human being has a God-given power to exploit or oppress others, for none of these things are hidden from God. God is the protector of the handicapped. God drives flies off the tailless animal. With the assurance of God as the final arbiter, African women do not hesitate to say what they see as inimical to the good of the community. African women are not bashful in resorting to the spirit-world for protection, comfort, strength in times of stress, and healing in times of sickness. They do not hesitate to call down the wrath of the spirit-world on all who would trample on their humanity and on the sense of community (Oduyoye 1995: 376).

African women believe in and operate in the context of human links to the spiritual world, and it is this that empowers them to cope with, combat, and control the harshly oppressive physical, economic, psychological, and political conditions of the continent (Oduyoye 1995: 376).

2. *African Spirituality*

Spirituality is what permits us to make sense of life. Applied to the reality of Africa, this concept implies an idea which is rooted in the socio-cultural universe of the person...[Spirituality] is at the very centre of the life and culture of the individual and of the community. It is life's motor in every aspect, be it technical, psychological, sociological, political, or artistic. Spirituality is a basic dimension of life, the soul of all culture, its essential element (Mbuy-Beya 1994: 65).

Few persons in Africa, male or female, would call themselves non-religious, agnostic or atheist. People in Africa take religion very seriously, it influences their worldview, and impacts

on their way of life. Life in Africa is very difficult, it is concerned primarily with survival and the promotion of life over death. African spirituality seeks fullness of life here and now, even as it hopes people will have it after death as well.

The entire structure of traditional society battles to ensure this victory of life over death, through cult, appropriate liturgy, rites and the political, economic, and social organizations.

All of these strategies are aimed at freeing humankind from everything that promotes death in order to secure immortality. Thus the special importance given to the rites, music and dances associated with birth, initiation (circumcision and excision), marriage, burial and all sorts of reparations (purifications). They are intended to create harmony between the individual and the community thereby guaranteeing the integration of the individual into the traditional society, which is itself connected to the world of the ancestors (Mbuy-Beya 1994: 65).

Religion, ritual, spirituality - a God-centredness - are central to the African worldview and culture. Mercy Amba Oduyoye calls it 'religio-culture', such is the indivisibility of religion and culture in African life.

With colonization in Africa, Western European civilization and the indigenous civilizations came into contact. Although Africans never saw the God of the Christian religion as different from the God they had known in their pre-Christian religions (Oduyoye 1994: 375), this encounter meant a culture shock for Africans, and led to a restructuring of their spirituality.

The encounter with Jesus Christ went hand in hand with the process of colonization, dispossession and domination. The faith was transmitted with foreign cultural values, which also required the indiscriminate abandonment or rejection of African values. This situation has caused spiritual crisis and turmoil for African people. Many African people who call themselves Christian practice both Christian and traditional rites - they adopted the former and are deeply infused by the latter - their own traditions which have deep meaning. Contemporary religious rites, worship, practices and beliefs by African people are very diverse - from African Traditional Religion, to mainline Western-style Christian churches and liturgies. In between, there are African Independent Churches, Charismatic groups and home churches. People seek what satisfies the thirst, for that which has meaning to their personhood, reality and soul. We

will look at this in reference specifically to women's lives.

3. *Women's Spirituality in Africa*

✓ The Christianity of the rank and file is not necessarily that of the priestly class, though it is the face of the Church that the world sees. People of the Church who are ordinarily in daily conversation with one another are the carriers of religion. How they live and what they live by is what constitutes Christianity for the observer...It is the popular beliefs and practices passed on from mothers to their children that build up a person's spirituality (Oduyoye 1994: 361-362).

- ✓ Women in Africa have a boldness and initiative in matters of religion. They appeal to God, ✓ Jesus and to the ancestors, knowing they will be heard by powers that are greater than the ✓ oppressive powers they are under in daily life. Women - usually the first or the most directly ✓ affected by catastrophe - directly appeal to spiritual powers and praise of God. Although ✓ women are very religious, and are the first to be moved by the Spirit, in formal liturgy they are ✓ pushed to the margins, usually by all-male performers of religious ritual (Oduyoye 1994: 363). In African religions the formal incantations that accompany sacrifice, and in Christianity the ✓ recitation of prayers in sacramental rites, are usually denied to women. The leaders of ✓ organized religion, like their brothers in politics, hesitate to empower women to perform (Oduyoye 1994: 363). Indeed, women who demonstrate initiative and gifts of healing, ✓ leadership and pastoral ministry may be 'demonised' by those in the institutions who hold ✓ power. Female power cannot be exercised without attempts to control it, whether this comes ✓ from the hierarchy of the church, the political leaders, the press, or peers.
- ✓ Yet, marginalised, hungry, searching, hurting, hoping people recognise in women the gifts and ✓ ministry of the Spirit of God, as they recognised this in Jesus when he walked the earth, ✓ despite the protestations of the powerful.

Women's cults and women-founded Christian congregations are common developments. It is from this active involvement that we can observe the spirituality of African women (Oduyoye 1994: 375).

Here I will look at two movements in the churches in Africa where women are recognized

leaders in ministry. These are the charismatic renewal movement, and African Independent Churches.

Both of these movements are often criticised by adherents to mainline Christian theology and tradition, as being unorthodox, or even 'demonic'. On top of this, in contrast to hierarchical norms of patriarchy, women are often the spiritual leaders of these groups and churches. In answer to suspicion and criticism of these popular movements, Mbuy-Beya compares what she calls emerging traditions in Africa with established Catholic mystical tradition, and the unpredictable yet life-giving way God's Holy Spirit moves and creates.

From this experience of life in the Spirit have been born various spiritual families which live out a particular charism received from God as a gift to his people. In the Catholic Church one can speak of the spiritualities of Ignatius, Merici, Augustine and others. The persons behind these spiritual families are considered as fathers and mothers who have initiated new life. They serve as role models for their followers (Mbuy-Beya 1994: 67).

She describes the charismatic movement in Lubumbashi, and the emergence of Charismatic groups led by women leaders called shepherdesses. These shepherdesses are endowed with specific charisms, such as discernment of spirits and freeing others from malefic forces, and healing. These shepherdesses have been chosen by the Spirit of God, and their gifts are recognized by both community and church alike. These are places where hungry, thirsty, and many marginalised people gather to find life.

African Independent Churches are founded and led by African women and men. Mercy Oduyoye describes the African Independent Churches as a response to the clash of colonization, Western culture and Christianity. These churches emerged in reaction to the thirst, racism and exclusion African Christians experienced in mainline Christian worship. Referring, as an example, to the Christ Army Church in Nigeria founded by Elijah Garrick Braide in 1915 as a movement away from the Anglican Church of Bakan in Nigeria, Oduyoye writes "Like several new Christian movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries elsewhere in Africa, it was born out of opposition to the racism and ethnocentrism of Euro-Americans on the continent"(Oduyoye 1994: 364).

In the AIC, women are on par with men in the matter of singing and praying. In practice, in these churches Acts 2.17 is taken very seriously. It has freed women from the imposed understandings of themselves as clients of a male priesthood. And they have appropriated the role of diviners by prophesying in the context of worship. Again, the gifts are often undermined because of their being female. But they answer without compromise, and keep on working.

In this church the healing ministry is in the hands of a prophetess called "Mother," and it is her ministry that draws members to the church...The system of healing she practices lends itself to the suspicion that "powers not altogether Christian" are being used. But then I ask, who can fathom the deep roots of human spirituality amid a religiously pluralist people? The fact is that prayer-healing is a central aspect of the life of AIC, resorted to by both women and men. It has established itself as a gift of the Holy Spirit, given to women and men alike (Oduyoye 1994: 364).

Writing on women in the AIC-designated "Spiritual Churches," [Elizabeth] Amoah says: "Women in these churches are very much convinced that true spirituality can be attained and sustained through vigorous fasting, praying and reflecting on the word of God. This they claim is the true way by which God grants them the Spirit and the power to do the tasks ahead of them." They rely on God for the Spirit that empowers them. That women's spiritual powers are often calumnized as of the devil is nothing new. But women survive, strengthened by the sayings of Jesus: "By their fruits you shall know them"; "How can Satan cast out Satan?" These women add, "And by what spirit do men perform comparable deeds (Oduyoye 1994: 364)?"

One shepherdess described by Mercy Oduyoye is Afua Kuma - called mother - a charismatic leader in the AIC. In addition to her ministerial, leadership and pastoral gifts, her prayers and ✓ liturgies feed deeply because they are completely contextualized to African life.

Afua does not have to resort to a collected version of an African corpus. She lives in the midst of it and can tap directly into it. She uses the language of African customs and proverbs, and African traditions of worship and chieftancy to praise the name of Jesus. Her prayers are distinguished by the fact that even petitions are made implicit in praise. Her appellations for Jesus range from human titles of royalty and warriors to that of friend and mother, the highest praise a woman gives a man. She calls on Jesus as a strong presence in nature, mountains, rocks, pythons, or in dependable human creations like unsinkable boats. Even modern professionals like doctors, lawyers, teachers, police, and soldiers become image-bearers of the Christ figure. Jesus is The Big Tree which enables the vine to see the heavens while shedding drops of water from its leaves to nurture the undergrowth. It is Jesus, the saviour of the poor, who supports

the poor, and makes them into respected persons. Creepers and climbers all enjoy the mothering care of Jesus (Oduyoye 1994: 365-366).

✓ African women's spirituality, whether expressed in a priestly or shepherdess role, or in a more common and expected role of nurturer and mother, is rooted in the struggles of life, and the struggles to maintain, sustain, protect and give life to others.

4. African Women, liberation and feminism

Indeed, women are expressing their spirituality and ministerial gifts within the charismatic churches and African Independent churches in a new way and with a freedom seldom accorded under traditional roles. Does this have any bearing on the place of women in African society?

It is often argued that traditional African religions and cultures afford adequate and requisite participation for women. This ignores the fact of women's common experience in Africa, that by the time a woman has spent her energies struggling to be heard, she has barely the energy left to say what she wanted to say (Oduyoye 1994: 12-13).

African women's spirituality and roles of nurturer and life-giver to the community are a source of dignity and self-worth to her, but who nurtures the nurturer? Is spiritual power enough, especially as she tries to live and move under the triple burdens of racism, classism and sexism? Is spiritual power a 'last resort' because power in other ways and in other spheres is inaccessible and the oppression so limiting? For African women, what is the significance of feminism - liberation from sexism and a new way of visioning society without hierarchy and domination, but interconnected and life-giving for all?

For an African woman...her stance vis-a-vis the external world (meaning the West) is that sexism is less important than classism and racism. "Classism, embedded in economic exploitation, creates a situation in which the poor of Africa can never win against the rich of the West. As the proverb says, 'If the stone falls on the pot, woe to the pot; if the pot falls on the stone, woe to the pot.'" The interwoven issues of racism and classism (having taken on demonic proportions in apartheid) are unquestionably the African oppression *par excellence*; indeed, given the human misery in Africa, they make sexism look like a pet peeve. That is the position *ad extra*. *Ad intra*, on the other hand, African women who can speak out show clearly how the life of a black African woman can be described as that of a slave of slaves (Oduyoye 1994: 88).

These are hard and painful words. Being on the receiving end of classism, racism and sexism leaves African women gasping for air, and with energy to keep standing strong from day to day. To pour what precious energy there is left into an inward and outward conflict with ones own socialisation, family and society takes enormous courage, organising and strategy. Sexism is the oppression that hits closest to home, and threatens to divide when, for the sake of survival against hostile external forces (racism, classism) cohesiveness is desired. This belief in a priority list for struggle against oppression has kept women in Africa silent about their burdens for a long time. Women accepted sexism and the demands of patriarchy - include being considered possessions and servants - shouldering the yoke put upon them, trying to live up to expectations, and sacrificing their own lives for the life of the community. But many are beginning to articulate other dreams and hopes, and some are believing it is not just possible, but right that they should also be able to have life in its fullness, as human beings made in the image of God. Their femaleness is a gift, and does not need to connote slavery. Freedom for women is desired by many, seen as right and just. It is also feared by many, and not easily accepted.

Mercy Oduyoye writes

In Africa, the very idea of a “free woman” conjures up negative images. We have been brought up to believe that a woman should always have a suzerain, that she should be “owned” by a man, be he father, uncle, or husband. A “free woman” spells disaster. An adult woman, if unmarried, is immediately reckoned to be available for the pleasure of all males and is treated as such. The single woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity of men who want to “possess” her. Some women are struggling to be free from this compulsory attachment to the male. Women want the right to be fully human, whether or not they choose to be attached to men (Oduyoye 1994: 4).

African men have regarded women as their possessions, with no need for liberation or autonomy. Movements for liberation for women happening throughout the world were labelled as Western imports, and products of Western decadence that bore no relevance to the lives of African women. Speaking for African women, they said Western women should not speak for African women.

In Africa, the move by women to seek more humane conditions for themselves was simply denied. When it was detected, it was assigned to the cracked pot of Western decadence, unbecoming to Young Africa. The deriding voices were mostly those of men (Oduyoye 1994: 3).

- ✓ Challenges and changes to the status quo, which favours and ensures the well-being of male
- ✓ privilege is seen as profoundly threatening, and thus unwanted. Particularly if the impetus for those changes are perceived to come from elsewhere. Or is this perception convenient? And what is it about Western feminism that is inapplicable and undesirable to African society? Who is saying what is desirable and undesirable? Mercy Oduyoye writes of the fear engendered by the implications of feminism for the ordering of African life.

Western feminism has stirred fears in Africa of a disruption in the family. Dependent as family life is at present on the good will and life-loving nature of women as wives and mothers, any move, however small, to tamper with the nature of women (or men) is too radical to ignore. (Oduyoye 1994: 87).

- When talking about their own lives and dreams, is it African women who are saying that
- ✓ freedom for women is undesirable and a Western import? African women's silence on the
 - ✓ oppression they experience does not mean acceptance or docility, but is more a way of coping
 - ✓ and to ensure survival.

- Over time, African women had learned to know their oppressors, but had held their peace: "When your hand is in someone's mouth, you do not hit that person on the
- ✓ head." So African women used traditional coping devices: they smiled at the insensitivity of husbands and brothers and sons and bosses; with equanimity, they went
 - ✓ about their self-assigned jobs of ensuring life. As long as the pot boiled, men remained blissfully innocent of whose life-breath kept the firewood burning. African men preened themselves on how well-behaved and docile and content their African women were. They crowed loudly to the world: "See! We told you, our women are different. Of course there are a few bad eggs under the influence of decadent women of the West, but these deviants we can ignore." Before and during the Nairobi women's meeting, African men insisted that liberation as applied to African women was a
 - ✓ foreign importation. Some even called it an imperialist trap that would do Africa no good (Oduyoye 1994: 3).

When women from all over the world met in Nairobi with the World Council of Churches in 1985, this was a pivotal meeting for African women. Mercy Oduyoye writes.

While the Nairobi meeting was in session, African men were still snickering. But something new had touched the women of Africa, and they began to voice their presence. Women were standing up, abandoning the crouched positions from which their life-breath stimulated the wood fires that burned under the earthenware pots of vegetables they had grown and harvested. The pots too were their handiwork. Standing up straight, women of Africa stretched their hands to the global sisterhood of life-loving women. In no uncertain terms, African women announced their position on the liberation struggle and their solidarity with other women (Oduyoye 1994: 2-3).

- ✓ African women desire freedom from oppression. They wish to keep the life-giving aspects embodied in concepts of African womanhood, without being a sacrifice. They are questioning why full life should not be for them too as well as their brothers.
- ✓ African women turn to God for strength and courage. They manifest the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in care, compassion, nurture and patience. They lead and heal. Their response to external threats in the form of poverty, war, racism, and classism, has been to set themselves up as a human boundary, shielding the community and family, and absorbing the pain of both the outside world and their families. But African women have also been trampled upon for the very role that they play, in their seeking to protect and sustain life. They have been told not only is this their divine role, but they deserve and should accept the pain that accompanies this. Their heroic actions have been despised. Wrong interpretations and limitations imposed by Christianity are culpable in this process. As we have seen earlier in this Chapter, patriarchy in Christianity has oppressed women throughout the ages, and instead of loosening the chains of injustice based on sex, has ordained such oppression as God's will. Again Mercy Oduyoye speaks succinctly,

As a Christian African woman...I seek the quality of life that frees African women to respond to the fullness for which God created them. It is my experience that Christianity as manifested in the Western churches in Africa does little to challenge sexism, whether in church or in society. I believe that the experience of women in the church in Africa contradicts the Christian claim to promote the worth (equal value) of every person. Rather, it shows how Christianity reinforces the cultural conditioning of compliance and submission and leads to the depersonalization of women. Isisfore Okpehwo tells the story of an African woman's retelling of the Adam and Eve story. In her version, Eve's burdens reflect her own experience: "You will weed. The rain will beat on you there. The sun will burn you there as you think of your husband's soup. For that is what you choose." Accepting the myth of the Hebrew Bible, this African woman appropriates what it means to be a woman in her own culture, and accepts it as

punishment. This internalization of the church's teaching shows its negative effects on the self-image of African women (Oduyoye 1994: 3).

As with women all over the world, African women seek to be free. Feminism in Africa is a contentious concept. But that may be more something related to terminology and context than the real meaning. 'Liberation' is a rallying cry and a heartcry for all of Africa - male and female - if it is talked about in terms of economics, culture, race. "Liberation for women" is the heartcry of African women who are on the receiving end of the triple burdens of racism, classism and sexism. Mistakenly, the term 'feminism' is taken to mean domination of women over men, when what it really means is wholeness and interconnectedness, a society built on mutuality and respect, rather than hierarchy and domination.

In my view, key characteristics envisioned by feminism are similar to the African worldview, religio-cultural universe, and spirituality. The African values of mutuality and respect, reverence for life, emphasis on personal experience as a measure for what is real and who God is, the searching for and manifesting of God's Holy Spirit in rituals, activities and structures that are related to real life and struggles in Africa, and connectedness to the land and non-human life are central feminist values. Feminist spirituality for wholeness, life and liberation resonates with many aspects of African spirituality. The main difference is that feminist spirituality insists on full life for women, on women's terms, insisting on the recognition - by oneself and others - that women's personhood is not dependent on a role or a man, but by virtue of being alive and made in the image of God.

V. Conclusion - Feminist Spirituality in South Africa

I opened this Chapter with three sections of writing - poems and questions - by South African women. These poems expressed their longing, searching, yearning, pain, struggles, hopes and dreams. These poems were heart-felt laments to God and to one another, to make sense of life in a complicated context. Each of the writers is South African. Their prayers/poems/questions demonstrate their different realities and experiences of life. Yet they all long for freedom. They all long for wholeness and life, as women.

To look at feminist spirituality in South Africa is to bring together the different threads of spirituality that I have been exploring. Life in South Africa is so complex. It is an African country that is probably one of the most Westernized on the continent. Its people have been segregated by race for so long that cultural and religious practices have been able to exist side by side without integrating too much. So there is African life, Western life, Asian life and 'coloured' life and lifestyles - with different realities, histories, struggles - sharing the same geographical space. We are both first world and third world in one country. We can go from one neighbourhood to another, a few minutes apart, and find mansions to shacks. We have top-notch schools and first world technology, hand in hand with homes without infrastructure and basic necessities. What may be called luxury and privilege - education, work, health-care, water, electricity, housing - by some, is called normal by others. In this diverse context, it is impossible to speak of a homogenous feminist spirituality in South Africa.

But there may be some commonalities. Racism, apartheid, oppression and dispossession have been central facts of life. The struggle for liberation from apartheid has shaped the reality, worldview and spirituality of over a generation of people. The concept of liberation, a ✓ spirituality of struggle and liberation and justice, are well understood by most people in this country.

✓ A desire for self-definition and recognition of full human dignity regardless of race or class ✓ was part of this struggle. 'God is on the side of the oppressed and downtrodden', people cried, in and outside of the Church. God desires full life for all, a release from the yoke and fetters, the chains that bind. Apartheid is heresy, people cried. To use the name of Jesus Christ, to use the Holy Scriptures of the Bible, to use God's name and to say it is God's will for one race to oppress another, is heresy. The spirituality of liberation called for reflection and action and rejection of much that was institutionalised as legitimate religious practice.

The spirituality of liberation allowed no comfort in the midst of injustice - it created new ways of being authentic Christian people, even if that meant celebrating, meeting, engaging in rituals and liturgies outside of the confines of what was acceptable in church and contemporary worship. Oppression hurt both oppressor and oppressed, it was insisted. Both would be free

when one was freed.

We see these same issues with regard to feminist spirituality and African spirituality. The Holy Spirit of God pushes and pulls people to new places where we would not expect or perhaps even want to go. Freedom and truth and justice do not mean comfort. So when African people begin African Instituted Churches in response to Eurocentrism and racism which exclude and denigrate, and women begin women-church in response to sexism and patriarchy which deny their personhood and full life, these are life-giving responses to extreme anguish and searching. We search for life and go where we find the water when we are thirsty.

Oppression hurts both the oppressor and oppressed. Feminist theology, feminist spirituality seeks to free women and men from patriarchy, and seeks to bring into being a new vision of relatedness amongst people and with creation. It is not about the overthrow of men, it is about full life for women, and thus full life for all.

Feminist spirituality - in Africa, in the world, in South Africa, in the Christian church - is a spirituality of liberation and life and wholeness. It is a longing, desire, energy, vision and plan of action for liberation and life and wholeness. It refuses patriarchy, hierarchy, domination and death. It is of God's own Spirit. This Spirit cannot be doused.

It has been a long road from beginning to end in this Chapter. We have come full circle, beginning with cries from South African women's souls, to definitions of spirituality, discussion of spirituality of struggle and liberation, discussion of feminist spirituality and Christian feminist spirituality from the West, African women's lives and spirituality, and finally back to South Africa. There are many issues and illustrations that would expand and demonstrate more fully what I have been talking about here. This Chapter has aimed to explicate the many issues held in tension in this country, and its spirituality - the spiritualities of its people, particularly women. There is room to look at documents of liberation and the church's theology and spirituality - such as the Kairos document, and writings of theologians and activists on the need for the rituals, symbols and imagery of the Church to reflect the spiritual reality and hunger of people longing for liberation. There is room to discuss

patriarchy in South Africa and in the Church. There is room to look at liturgies, art, prayers, stories - all creative expressions of women's spirituality in South Africa. In the following Chapter, I will begin to do this by exploring how the Spirit is expressed through artists and visual imagery. Later in this dissertation, I will begin to do this, by looking at the work of Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali - two South African women artists expressing their spirituality through art.

Chapter Two

Religion and Art

We live in a world of signs. All we know and all we feel depends on signs. All our communication is achieved through signs - words, movements of face and body, marks and sounds, lines and colours. All that we do and make has meaning and relevance through signs. Our five senses are geared to respond to signs: we see them, hear them, touch them, smell them and taste them.

+ Denis E Hurley OMI in *Spiritual Art of Natal* (1993:5)

Introduction

- ✓ Art is a powerful expression of spirituality and theology. Visual imagery can express the
- ✓ inexpressible, the deep longings and journeys of a people. In light of the spiritual quest and longings of women expressed in Chapter One, a broader look at the potential and role of the
- ✓ visual in serving and nurturing this spirituality and theology can be looked at. In this Chapter, I
- ✓ will look at the role of the artist as visionary, artwork as expressions of spirituality, specifically with a glance at religious art in the Renaissance and in iconography. Lastly, I will look at the problem of imaging for women.

The Artist as Visionary

I believe that a thought system of a people is created by the most powerful, sensitive, and imaginative minds that society has produced: these are the few men and women, the supreme artists, the imaginative creators of their time, who form the consciousness of their time. They respond deeply and intuitively to what is happening, what has happened and what will happen.

Okot p'Bitek *Artist the Ruler* (1986: 39)

- ✓ Artists, whether painters, sculptors, writers, dancers or musicians, are perceived to be attuned
- ✓ and highly sensitive people. Part of their creative gifting is a sensitivity to the unseen, to the
- ✓ inner life - their own, and their society's. Wassily Kandinsky, himself an artist, wrote about the

spiritual life and work of the artist in a seminal work on the subject in 1947¹. “What is the cry of the artist’s soul,” he asks “if the soul was involved in the creation? Responding in the words of Schumann, he answers himself, “to bring light into the darkness of men’s hearts - such is the obligation of the artist” (Kandinsky 1995: 5).

✓ Kandinsky saw art as not only an echo and mirror of contemporary feeling but “it possesses also an awakening prophetic power which can have far-reaching and profound effect” (Kandinsky 1995: 6). Art can convey a prophetic message, if the artist is listening to his or her emotion and soul.

✓ To Kandinsky, a work of art consists of two elements, the inner and the outer. The inner is the emotion in the soul of the artist. The emotion is fed and informed by what is felt through the body by the senses. The inner element - the emotion - must exist otherwise the work of art is a sham. It is this inner element that determines a work of art. The outer element is the work of art itself. Thus, the true artist must be listening to his or her deepest self, listening to the soul, ✓ and in listening, expresses what is heard in a work of art.

✓ The emotion and inner element that is expressed in the outer element - the work of art - has the capacity to evoke a similar emotion in the observer. To the extent that the two emotions of artist and viewer are alike and equivalent, the work of art is successful in Kandinsky’s view - it ✓ is touching something deep in the viewer. It is expressing something beyond itself which ✓ resonates in a particular time and place. It is prophetic by its nature of being true art, created ✓ by an artist who is listening to the soul, and expressing something that resonates with the soul of another.

Kandinsky compares the spiritual life to art-making

The spiritual life to which art belongs, and of which it is one of the mightiest agents, is

¹ A section of the book Kandinsky, W. (1947) *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, pp. 23-27, is reprinted in Apostolos-Cappadona, D. (ed) (1995). *Art Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*. New York: Continuum.

a complex but definite movement above and beyond...The causes of the necessity to move forward and upward - through sweat, suffering, evil and torments - are obscure. When a stage has been reached at which obstacles have been cleared from the way, a hidden malevolent hand scatters new obstacles. The path often seems blocked or destroyed. But someone always comes to the rescue - someone like ourselves in everything, but with a secretly implanted power of "vision." He sees and points out. This high gift (often a heavy burden) at times he would gladly relinquish. But he cannot. Scorned and disliked, he drags the heavy weight of resisting humanity forward and upward (Kandinsky 1995: 6).

While others may use different language or concepts to speak of the role of artist as visionary or having a prophetic role to play,¹ Kandinsky clearly points out the vision that an artist is endowed with, a gift that is a responsibility and is sometimes a heavy burden.

At the same time, this gift of vision and its expression pulls humanity "forward and upward". The listening artist and the work of art makes visible to wider society, the pathos of God, a hidden reality or a new vision. In this light, visual art, expressing the spiritual and theological in history is looked at briefly.

Spiritual Art as Theology

In a discussion of theology and art, Paul Tillich distinguishes between religion in the larger sense of "being ultimately concerned about one's own being, about one's own self and one's own world, about its meaning and its estrangement and its finitude" (in Adams 1995: 311), and religion in a narrower sense as "having a set of symbols...divine beings...ritual actions, and doctrinal formulations about their relationship to us" (Adams 1995: 311). With regard to visual art, the larger sense of religion is communicated through style, and the narrower sense is communicated through subject matter. In this framework, he outlines four categories of relation between religion and visual art: 1. A style expressive of no ultimate concern and a content without religious subject matter, 2. Religious in style and non-religious in subject, 3. Nonreligious in style but with religious subject matter, and 4. Both religious in style and religious in subject matter.²

² For an interesting and more detailed discussion of this framework and where he takes it in discussing priestly and prophetic expression in the church, see Adams in Apostolos-

Thus, the religious in art can be overtly represented, or covertly in style or even in intention of the artist. In the following discussion, I will focus more on religious art falling under categories three and four of Tillich - religious art that is religious in subject matter, whether religious in style or not.

✓ Visual art that illustrates religious imagery has played a role throughout history to express the faith and experiences of Christians. While in this dissertation it is impossible to document the whole history of the visual in the history of the Christian faith, it may be helpful to highlight the movement of production and meaning of religious imagery from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance - the latter a time of enormous advancement and change, and a period during which the meaning of artmaking became more spiritualised, and religious images flourished in art in the Roman world and churches. While looking at art that has religious subject matter and its importance in spirituality and theology, it is also important to look at icons and iconography coming out of the Eastern and Orthodox Christian traditions.

In the medieval period, artisans who worked communally produced artistic images, primarily narratives of Biblical stories and illustrations to accompany religious texts. Art-making was considered in a similar way to manual labour. Much of it was done anonymously, by religious women and men in convents and monasteries. The pictures decorated or illuminated sacred texts, and educated the illiterate masses on the Gospel message. A didactic function was foremost.

With the Enlightenment, Renaissance, and the rise of humanism and neoplatonism, classical Greek and Roman ideas of beauty and philosophy were explored. The function, purpose, status and 'categorising' of art and artists changed. As painting, sculpture and architecture were removed from the category of mechanical function and manual labour, and placed in the realm of 'liberal arts' alongside poetry, the fine arts were increasingly aligned with the elite. The artist might still be a 'worker', but an inspired worker, filled with a divine gift with which to reflect the beauty and potential of the human being, and to plumb the depths of the human soul. Artists, mostly male, were supported by wealthy patrons, who both paid for, and were

Cappadona (1995).

subjects portrayed in art of the time. Along with its status, the function of art making changed. The religious didactic nature of the images gave way to poses of individuals or scenes held in time, an idea expressed, a moral symbolised, a patron honoured in secular or religious imagery. As beauty was held to be a high virtue, the art was, aesthetically, very beautiful and pleasing in and of itself. Art's purpose was to touch the soul, to inspire contemplation, and draw forth the best and most sublime in the human being (Barasch 1985).

There is an enormous amount of literature on the Renaissance - the changes, the artists, the life and philosophy of the time. Art historians discuss the aesthetic properties of Renaissance work, individual lives of the artists, art theory, social and political changes occurring at the various periods. They write of wealthy patrons, the changes in the church and the role of religion. There are critiques of the dominant ideology which did not favour women, the underclass or cultures or races which were not western European. Yet I struggled to find reflections on the religious meaning of the art, particularly the meaning of the art to people meditating on the Christian images and stories presented. Theological analysis, spiritual and devotional reflections on the images seem scarce. This is a paradox. It is a paradox because not only did Renaissance artists depict religious themes in abundance, many images are profoundly moving in the manner in which they are portrayed, and the spirituality of the artist who created them. A well known example of this is Michaelangelo's painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Fig 5).

What was the meaning of these images to the artist? To people looking at them in a courtyard or in a church? How did these images reflect or challenge the theological beliefs of the time? How did they predict or prophecy what was to come, or what, in terms of justice, and spiritual growth, should come? How did an artist prepare to tackle a spiritual theme that was commissioned of them? How was the artists' own theology apparent in any of these works?

These questions have sent me on a journey. In some way, they have shed light on the difficulty I have in articulating the soul questions around spirituality and art. I have found that I have to keep looking, and leave the discipline of art history, to research the same question within the discipline of theology or religious studies.

The works of art of the Renaissance had, and have deep spiritual significance to those looking at them. Even if done unconsciously by the artist, many representations call forth devotion and contemplation on what is being depicted and the meaning of it to the life and relationship of the devotee with God.³ Such a significance is not an academic analysis of the merits of the aesthetic properties of the painting or sculpture, it is not measurable or easy to explain. It is not obvious in any way and is not dependent upon only the visual impact of the artwork. Perhaps the artwork is not pleasing to the eye, nor in perspective, nor brilliantly rendered. Yet its meaning surpasses this for those who are looking. It is a personal engagement with the painting or sculpture or rendering; a personal engagement that matters profoundly to the individual or community concerned.

The question about the theological meanings behind Renaissance artworks and how they were used arose for me because of my awareness of the significance of Christian religious images to the devotional life of the faithful. Religious depictions and the process of making them prior to the Renaissance, in medieval time, in the Orthodox church and in the Roman Catholic Church, was and is an important part of the devotional life of both the artist and the faithful, who meditate on what is in the images, behind and beyond them.

✓ **Icons and imagery - symbols as entry into the religious realm.**

✓ There has been a long tradition of visual theologising through Christian art, and icons are one of the primary forms of religious imagery. The icon is an image of Jesus Christ, the Madonna, the Godhead, or one of the Christian saints, painted on a portable wooden panel. It forms an important part in Christian worship and prayer, in the belief that it epitomizes an immediate link with the divine. The icon and the process of painting an icon are inseparable.

In the Byzantine tradition, the painting of the icon was regarded as a sacred task. The various

³In books by art historians, or social historians of the Renaissance it has been difficult to find much analysis of the theological meaning of religious narratives or images in the time of the Renaissance. It is ironic that while biblical themes dominated much of the art, the theological meaning seems to be outside the sphere of the purpose or value of the art. The discourse is about aesthetics.

parts of each painting, the head, the hands, or the clothing, were executed by different artists after extended periods of prayer (Cormick 1992: 14).

✓ Paul Evdokimov (in Limouris 1990: 209) writes “The icon painter is a charismatic who
✓ contemplates liturgical mysteries and teaches theology.” Kallistos Ware (Limouris 1990: 209) says “Because the icon is a part of the Tradition, the icon painter is not free to adapt or innovate as he pleases; for his work must reflect not his own aesthetic sentiments, but the mind of the church.” “This does not exclude his artistic inspiration,” Ambrosius writes (Limouris 1990: 209) “but it should be exercised within prescribed rules. In the Orthodox church, the painter and likewise the hymn writer transmit to us through their art a vision of the spiritual world, the common faith of the Church.”

A particular aspect of the icon is the variation in symbolic gestures of the sacred figures. The hands of Jesus Christ or of the saints are always carefully positioned to convey a particular message; either in an attitude of blessing, or teaching or of invitation. Rublev’s famous icon of The Holy Trinity (Fig. 6) is an invitation to prayer. The three angels, representing the Trinity, are sitting around an altar table. A chalice of wine is placed on top. One angel holds a scroll. The central figure blesses the chalice, and the third points towards an opening in the tablecloth. This has been interpreted by worshippers as a symbolic invitation to enter the picture, into the presence of the angelic communion table (Cormick 1992: 14).

✓ The icon is above all an object of veneration, to be used in churches, homes, cars, and processions, representing in clear terms the nature of the Christian faith, the vision and the praise of God. The Seventh Ecumenical Council declared icons as possessing “theopneystia”, that is, the breath of the living God, and to be equal in status as objects of veneration with the cross of the Lord and the Holy Gospels. The Bible, particularly the Gospels, are written icons of Christ, since both Scripture and icons are part of the same Tradition (Limouris 1990: 210).

✓ The icons serve communicative and charismatic functions, but even more, they are
✓ definite cornerstones of the contemplative nature of man [sic]. They always point beyond the visible work, even beyond the images of the invisible world, to the depth of the mystery of God (Limouris 1990: 210).

Religious paintings, whether esteemed and looked at because of their beauty and aesthetic perfection, as in the Renaissance art, or pointing to the divine through their process of execution and purpose, have powerfully served as spiritual pointers and expressions of theology.

Art, Imagery and the problem of imaging for women

In her thesis (1992) Cormick discusses the value of visual imagery to worship in the Catholic Church.

- ✓ Within a religious context, the essential purpose of the presence of sacred images is directed towards divine worship. The images placed in churches and shrines are
- ✓ intended for devotional inspiration. In the Catholic Church, the visual has traditionally been used as a vehicle through which theology is communicated. There are instructions and recommendations applied to the commissioning and approval of the artworks. Specific instructions on sacred imagery have been formulated in the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law.
- ✓ Generations of people have formed their understanding of their Christian faith primarily from the sacred imagery in the Church (Cormick 1992: 16).
- ✓ The transcendence, majesty and awesomeness of God are conveyed through experience of
- ✓ imagery. These qualities of God are primarily sensory experiences, not intellectual concepts to
- ✓ be conveyed through theological essays and pronouncements.

God's majesty is more easily and accurately expressed by the gold leaf and rich strong colours, the unapproachable gaze, the position in the heights of the dome of a Byzantine Christos Pantocrator than by verbal descriptions. God's impenetrable silence becomes an event and an experience in the contemplation of an image (Miles 1985: 32).

- ✓ One of the values of the creative arts is to fill the imagination, and to encourage an
- ✓ appreciation of new ways of seeing and understanding. In art that has a religious and Christian content, this value expands to a new visual dimension of experiencing and theologising. Theology and art have been linked from the beginning of the Christian Era (Cormick 1992:18).

...because of its power to move, to focus the senses and the mind, and to offer

a mnemonic aid that gathers the worshipper's strongest and most fundamental ideas, emotions and memories in an enriched present (Miles in Cormick pg 18)

- ✓ It is through imagery and symbolism that we can begin to imagine how to express the spiritual
- ✓ dimension of God. Visual art as theology, visual art as commentary, visual art draws us deeper
- ✓ and into places that cannot be articulated with words, only experienced.

The Problem of Imaging for Women

- As we have seen, the artist has a powerful role in listening to the inner world - of herself, of society, of humanity in a particular time and place in history, and giving outward expression of this. In integrity to him or herself, and to the Spirit he or she is listening to, the artist has to
- ✓ create. In addition, he or she is potentially a mediator, visionary, or prophet, in the ability to listen and communicate what is heard. Beyond the artist, the artwork too has life and power.
 - ✓ Symbol, ritual and imagery, including visual representation, touch deeply into people, and can
 - ✓ serve as means of communicating, resonating, shaping, and legitimising. And its power can be quite subtle, as the viewer of an artwork or participant in a ritual is not always coming at them with a critical awareness or lens. This means that some messages implicit in an image can be passively absorbed, and instead of challenging what it is saying, it can be an internalised message of what 'should be', such as images of a docile and demure Virgin Mary as the touchstone for womanhood.

- NB
- ✓ Within the Christian tradition, imagery has been a problem for many women, particularly those
 - ✓ looking through a feminist perspective. The imagery communicated was predominantly
 - ✓ exclusive, stereotyped, even misogynist, made by men of representations deemed appropriate for women. Where were freeing and affirming images for women?

Conclusion

In this section, I have looked at the artist as visionary, religious art and the use of imagery in the life of the faithful. Whether the visual imagery is deemed a sacred 'text' on par with Holy

Scripture and Tradition (as with icons in the Orthodox Church), or whether it is 'commentary' on Biblical stories through the eyes of different interpreters - reflecting the time, place, culture, political circumstances and experience of life - the visual imagery acts as an aid to

- ✓ understanding the teachings of a religious tradition, it expresses the theology and
- ✓ understanding of the artist, it allows for the experience of God rather than speaking about
- ✓ God. It can express that which is conscious, but also the inexpressible, the unconscious, the deep longings of an individual, a people, and humanity. It can be prophetic, expressing the
- ✓ longings of God for justice, truth and greater communion with us as people. The visual can be a pointer to God. Visual imagery interacts with people in their search for, experience of, and journey with God. Yet with this power and potential, imagery has been a problem for women, because representations have not reflected on them positively (women were not the artists), and they have served to oppress.

Thankfully, the story does not stop there. Just as much imagery of women, for women and about women in the Christian tradition has traditionally played a negative role for women,

- NB
- ✓ imagery and artwork also has a potentially transforming power in subverting ideology,
 - ✓ challenging ideas and beliefs, envisioning a new reality, and making that reality visible in an
 - ✓ oppressive dominant culture. It is to this I now turn in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three

Art as a way to speak - hiding and revealing

Introduction

If one wants to know about women's spirituality and theology in a particular time and place, the methodology and questioning cannot be confined to reading essays and books on the subjects because they have historically not been informed by or are congruent with the dominant ideas of the societies in which they exist¹. Much of women's spirituality and theology is expressed creatively and richly outside the mainstream, and must be discovered through exploring and sharing their experiences, stories, feelings and longings expressed through other means, overtly or covertly, such as through literature, poetry, song, dance, art, theatre, and the rituals of everyday life. These other means and spaces must be 'read', and lives and stories reconstructed. There are many reasons for this, and reasons that are not unique to women only, but to other marginalised and poor people. In this Chapter, I will explore some of these reasons, including discussion around 'hiding and revealing'. I will look at public spaces and private spaces, and how marginalised people, including women, use creative means to express themselves within a dominant cultural hegemony.

Spiritual Experience and articulation of theology

When I first looked at Dina Cormick's painting *Creata God Most Beautiful*, it evoked in me something spiritual which resonated with what I saw. I saw myself, a woman, affirmed and made in the image of God, speaking a 'language' that was consonant with who I am. I did not feel as if I was the 'other' facing a male God and needing to justify or explain myself, but in

¹ In Atkinson, C.W. et al (eds) (1985), Margaret Miles writes of methodological problems highlighted by feminist scholars when they began analysing history and theology with gender as a primary category of analysis. It was impossible to recover the stories "of those who have neither defined their cultures nor played dominant roles in them" (p 1) with traditional methodology. The volume explores the interface of religious symbols and social situations for understanding the oppression and creativity of women and accounts of their experience, and feelings about their experience.

imaging God as female, I felt I could relax and simply be with someone who understood. From many people who have seen this or other of Cormick's paintings of the *Heroic Women Series* (1990), this same experience is shared.

It is insightful to listen to such stories of spiritual experiences and attempts to articulate, make them visible, or to share them. While theology attempts to articulate these in writings and discourse, experiences of the numinous and mystical are seldom encountered through reading about God, but in the experiences of life. In writing about her own life in the preface and introduction to *Diving Deep and Surfacing* feminist theologian Carol Christ speaks of naming, affirming and articulating her spiritual experiences and her spiritual quest as one of a few female graduate students in theology many years ago. She explains that her most profound and lasting spiritual experiences came from her sense of the mystical in relationship to the rhythms and rituals around her grandmother's life, her connection to nature, and the oneness with the universe she had experienced while swimming in the ocean or hiking in the woods (Christ: xxv-xxvi).

Similarly, John Dillenberger, when writing of his interest in theology and art, comments on senses and experience in making meaning of life and human existence.

To this day I look at the sky as if to divine what it will bring; in a farming community, that act is not merely an interest in nature, but also in history, for life and death depended on it. The acceptance and cultivation of such sensibilities provided the base from which my interest in the arts developed as subsequently I was exposed to them. Hence, it never occurred to me that verbal statements, propositional or more suggestive, theological or philosophical, defined one's existence (Dillenberger 1986: x).

Perhaps one reason why much of women's spirituality and theology is expressed through creativity, ritual, arts, song and dance is because that is how it is experienced. To fully embody what is experienced, it must be lived and demonstrated in a way that can contain the range of human sensibility and feeling. Visual imagery as a means of expressing theology and spirituality is used instead of words, because what the visual arts convey cannot be translated

into other modalities.²

Interestingly, Dillenberger's continuing observation of his own experience leads us into another possible reason why women's spirituality and theology is commonly expressed by means other than verbal statements.

Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich were the current theologians to whom I was introduced. It always seemed strange to me that Barth was so vigorously verbal and restrictive in theological work but so culturally interesting as a human being, and that Niebuhr knew the poets and critics of his time but that they played no role in his thought. Tillich alone seemed to me to involve the full range of humanity's sensibilities in his theology (Dillenberger 1986: x).

The theologians mentioned by Dillenberger may have sensed the articulation of sensibilities in their theology would receive the same reception as experienced by Carol Christ. Her spiritual experiences with her grandmother and in nature were what gave rise to her interest in theology, but in the environment of theological education at the time, she was told by professors and fellow students that such experiences were "aesthetic," "poetic," "emotional," or "confused" and not worthy of theological consideration (Christ 1980: xxvii).

Christ asked herself why this was so. She felt confused because of the lack of affirmation or resonance with other theologians and yet sure that what she 'knew' was real and true. She began a search for an articulation of women's experience, spirituality and theology that did say 'yes' to the deepest parts of her being.

Arising from the dissonance she felt with knowing her spiritual experiences to be true and not

²Dillenberger seeks to uncover a "historical amnesia" that has taken place in the church regarding the powerful and living place that visual art played in the past. His concern and agenda is to reclaim and heal a split that has occurred amongst human sensibilities and verbal discourse. Verbal discourse has become dominant, to the exclusion of other experiences and senses, and causes a weakness of insight. "Each human sensibility requires a discipline, a habit of attention, because each gives us something that the others do not...I have undertaken historical and contemporary probings of the affinities and differences between the visual and the verbal...the issue is whether a verbal discourse will take into account other sensibilities (Dillenberger 1986: xi)

inferior, it seemed the gender difference was a key.

It began to seem crucially relevant to my situation that theologians had been men. If theology were written from a male perspective and my perspective was female, that might explain why my professors and student colleagues - all but one of them male - often failed to understand my perspective on theological issues (Christ xxvii).

It sent her on a search and provoked questions around whose experiences and theology has been allowed to be articulated and whose theology was legitimised.

I began to search the libraries for religious and theological texts written by women that would verify my spiritual experience...I needed to find the story of a woman of my own time whose experience was more like my own. And I also began to wonder whether the minds of the few women who had written on religious subjects in the past had been constricted by prevailing theological and philosophical ideologies. Had they been able to express the full dimension of their spiritual experience, or only those elements that fit into categories created by men? I wanted to know what women's religious experience would be like when it was articulated in women's own language, not forced into the structures of male theology (Christ xxviii).

She found such experience articulated, not in the halls of theological institutions or in the church, but in literature. When she first read *The Four-Gated City* by Doris Lessing, she sensed it was an articulation of a woman's spiritual quest (Christ 1980: xxviii). It resonated with ideas and feelings she was struggling to put into words, expressed in Lessing's story of Martha Quest. She writes of a connection so deep that she dreamt about it for weeks. Upon recommending it to her friend Judith Plaskow, who was also sharing her search for a theology reflecting women's experience, she found that this feeling was confirmed.

The Four-Gated City became a kind of touchstone for us over the next five years. It was uncanny how ideas and relationships we had not noticed in earlier readings would suddenly take on meaning as we reached new stages in our quests. Whatever we were learning in our own lives, Lessing had already put into words.

Though I sensed that *The Four-Gated City* was an articulation of a woman's spiritual quest, I did not then have the vocabulary to articulate my intuitions (Christ 1980: xxviii).

Dillenger's, Christ's and my own experiences suggest a second reason why women's

spirituality and theology find expression in creative works, including literature and visual art. There may be a need for space for the articulation of theology that does not fit with that of the dominant group or institution. In the church or in theological education, women's questions and experiences, if not articulated in a way that follows the conventions of the dominated, may not be 'admitted' into these arenas whose playing field and agenda are preset. Women, in expressing their experiences, spiritualities, longings and theologies, may simply not be able to speak, or choose not to speak, the language of the dominant, especially if in so doing, the sacred is dismissed as irrelevant, inferior, not scientific or objective, too personal, too dangerous, or too messy.

'Discourses of the dominated'³

But if women do not speak in the language of the dominant in expressing their spiritualities and theology, or if these expressions are not part of the dominant discourse, it is not as if they are silent. Like other dominated, marginalized and poor people around the world, women from different classes, cultures, ethnicities, and other groupings create spaces and ways to speak that are safe, in which they express themselves with integrity, and in which they are understood by others who seek to understand.

In exploring how dominated people speak, it is helpful to refer to Gerald West's work on contextual Bible study in South Africa. Exploring questions around methodology - particularly intellectuals reading the Bible critically with the marginalized and the poor for social transformation - he presents different theoretical frameworks for analysing the interface between poor and marginalized people and the dominant culture, and how the former affect and are affected by the latter.

Drawing on James Scott's work on "domination and the arts of resistance", West explicates frameworks of ideological hegemony and "the hidden transcript". Thick and thin versions of ideological hegemony are presented. 'Thick' refers to the roles of structures, education

³ This is a phrase used by West (1996: 21) to define poor and marginalized people who are not part of shaping the dominant ideological apparatus under which they live.

systems, institutions, state apparatuses, church, etc, in controlling the “symbolic means of production”. With the dominant group monopolizing these means, the result is similar to brainwashing - that subordinate groups actively consent to and support their own subordination. The ‘thin’ version of ideological domination may not be so overtly malefic, but in less active ways, co-opts people to passivity. It serves to

define for subordinate groups what is realistic and what is not realistic and to drive certain aspirations and grievances into the realm of the impossible, of idle dreams. By persuading underclasses that their position, their life chances, their tribulations are unalterable and inevitable, such a limited hegemony can produce the behavioral results of consent without necessarily changing people’s values. Convinced that nothing can possibly be done to improve their situation and that it will always remain so, it is even conceivable that idle criticisms and hopeless aspirations would be eventually extinguished (Scott 1990: 74 in West 1996: 29).

Subscribing to these theories of ideological hegemony, liberation of the poor and marginalised would come with the interface with intellectuals who help them to break the silence of their oppression, and create their own language (West 1996: 29).

A more nuanced framework is presented by Scott, as a result of asking the question “What if the poor and marginalised have not accommodated themselves to the logic of domination. What if they already have a language?” Scott argues that theories of thick and thin hegemony are rather broad, and he introduces something he calls “ the hidden transcript”.

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of both hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination (Scott 1990: xii in West 1996: 30).

Awareness of the likelihood of a hidden transcript then leads one to try to access and investigate other forms of expression such as “rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the poor and marginalised or the more public infrapolitics of popular culture, to reveal forms of resistance and defiance” (West 1996: 30). “Unless one can

penetrate the official transcript of both subordinates and elites, a reading of the social evidence will almost always represent a confirmation of the status quo in hegemonic terms” (Scott 1990: 90 in West 1996: 30).

Subordinate groups will safely speak in their own circles and to those who know the language they are speaking, and where they need be less constrained. To the dominant culture, in the level of political action and struggle, or even in institutions that are used by the dominant to spread the ideology, they will outwardly acquiesce because they lack power to make changes at that level and in an arena that is not their’s.

Subordinate groups have typically learned, in situations short of those rare all-or-nothing struggles, to clothe their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of a possible failure (Scott 1990: 96 in West 1996:31).

When something cannot be expressed publicly, overtly, and in safety, it does not mean it does not exist or is squashed, it is merely expressed in a way that is safe. However, there is “a tremendous desire and will to express publicly what is in the hidden transcript, even if that form of expression must use metaphors and allusions in the interest of safety” (Scott 1990: 164 in West 1996: 37). It will push and pull against what is safe, and that to which must be deferred. The boundaries are shifted. Whether through gradual change or through radical and revolutionary events the terrain shifts, the hidden transcript becomes more visible and more a part of the mainstream culture and ideology. “What has historically been whispered, controlled, choked back, stifled, and suppressed” can be shouted eagerly and boldly (Scott 1990: 227 in West 1996: 37). And that which could not be articulated but which was life-giving and liberating to the oppressed and marginalised people can then be owned and shared openly (West 1996:37).

For women in the Christian tradition, who historically have not been in positions of power to write the history books, interpret the scriptures and write them down, who have not been priests, who have not been the theologians and shapers of ideology, most of what was life-giving, meaningful and true would have to find other means of expression. Oppressed people

do speak; women have creatively worked within a dominant culture to survive, create and give life.

Resonating to some degree with Scott's ideas, Miles (1985: 3-4) conceptualises another process or strategy women use to create their lives and express themselves within a society that oppresses them, that she likens to a patchwork quilt. This is for survival and change. And so, if one is to find out about women's lives, experiences, beliefs and thoughts, these other means must be read.

As Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza demonstrated in her ...book, *In Memory of Her*, it is not sufficient simply to identify in any particular society the forms of oppression of women. An accurate sense of women's experience can come only from detecting both the ideologies and institutions that oppress and the struggle of women to create active and fulfilling lives for themselves and their daughters. If we look only for oppression we will miss the creativity with which women - never the primary shapers of their cultures - have foraged in their cultural environments for the tools with which to make their lives.

What emerges when we look for women's creativity within their cultures as well as the cultural forms of their oppression is a growing awareness of a process by which women receive and create the patterns of their lives. The process is always a blend of identifying, adapting, and rejecting fragments of the cultural fabric that contribute to, or detract from, their lives. While men have frequently envisioned and described the task of culture making as one of creation *ex nihilo*, women's creativity in predominantly male cultures has proceeded more on the model of quilt making. Women have selected and arranged in new configurations pieces of the cultural tapestry and in so doing have created strong and unique new patterns, patterns that display the vivid colours of their experience (Miles in Atkinson et al. 1985: 3-4).

Drawing on both Scott and Miles, women speak a unique and creative reality within cultures where they are oppressed, marginalised or dominated. This reality is rich and full of life, but it may not be readily apparent if one is reading the public realm for information of what is really happening.

To express the fullness of their reality, and to express it in a forum of safety, where it is accessible to those who are in a similar situation, on a similar journey; or in subversion or defiance of the dominant ideology and to envision a new reality of liberation and life, the experience and longings - including spirituality and theology - of oppressed and marginalised

people including women, often find expression in “the rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the poor and marginalized” (Scott 1990: 198 in West 1996: 30). And, I would add, in the visual imagery.

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have explored some of the possible reasons why much of women’s spirituality and theology is expressed through creative means such as song, literature, poetry, art and the rituals of everyday life. Though not exhaustive, three key ideas were identified. One is that creative means more fully express these realities. A second reason is that women are not part of the dominant culture and do not shape what is deemed as acceptable modes of expression, and are thus not constrained as they would be if in these institutions. And thirdly, not being in, or easily having access to these arenas, women create means that express themselves safely and with integrity, along the lines of Scott’s hidden transcript. These means can express creative, subversive and bold ideas that envision a new reality. They may be threatening to the dominant ideology, but they also give life and liberation to those who seek them out and know how to read them.

With these ideas in mind, it is now to the religious visual imagery of two South African women artists - Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali - that we now turn.

Chapter Four

Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali: Expressions of women's theology and spirituality in South Africa through biblical imagery

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I looked at visual art as an expression of spirituality and theology. The artist plays a role as visionary, and the art can be prophetic if the artist is listening to the soul. Religious art in the Renaissance and religious icons were briefly looked at as means expressing and gaining entry to the sacred. The power of visual imagery to shape spirituality and theological belief were problematised in the context of women's experience of religious imagery in the Christian tradition - imagery that has not reflected their identity. But its potential to do so was also named. In Chapter Three, the use of artistic means by women to express their spirituality and theology was investigated, with a probing into possible reasons why much of women's spirituality and theology is not written down in theological books or represented in academia, or in the practices of the church. These reasons included the possibility that the fullness of women's experience is best expressed in creative means, that the institutions of religion cannot accommodate that which is 'other', and that women use artistic means to express openly and safely a "hidden transcript" of their experience. The arguments presented in Chapters Two and Three are illustrated in examples of artwork by two interesting women.

Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali are two South African women artists. They come from contrasting backgrounds, but backgrounds that are representative of two perspectives on heterogeneous reality of South Africa. They represent white and black, urban and rural, literate and oral culture, highly educated and basically educated, Western and African culture.

To locate the discussion of their artwork, I present a brief background of each of the artists. This is because the meaning and interpretation of their contribution as artists are related to who they are as people, as women coming from particular contexts.

Though with different emphases and intention, both have reinterpreted the traditional teaching and representation of Christian religion through their own subjectivity, experience and vision. In different ways, their artworks express aspects of women's experience, theology and spirituality for liberation and life in contemporary South Africa.

Dina Cormick

Dina Cormick is a Zambian-born South African woman artist and feminist theologian. She is a single woman and a foster mother to one son, Washington. She is a formally trained artist who studied at Rhodes University and later the Natal Technical College. In 1992, she completed a Master's degree in Theological Ethics from the University of South Africa on "The Visual Portrayal of Mary Magdalene: A Case Study in Theological Ethics." She lives in Durban and works from a studio at home.

Cormick primarily produces religious artworks, both self-motivated and for commission, and her works are found throughout the country and the world. Her theology is consciously depicted in her artworks, and it is a theology that reflects her own culture, education, questions, vision and varied experience. She is particularly concerned with and interested in the importance and power of religious art in teaching through telling stories, and is committed to a reclaiming and awakening of the spiritual resources of women through a visual theology (Cormick 1992).

From childhood, she says she was always interested in, and skilled in producing visual art. However, like many artists, she was not encouraged to pursue this as a viable career. Thus, the road to 'becoming' an artist was a winding one, which incorporated detours to professions and lifestyles more accepted and ideas that she held about what is appropriate for a Catholic woman of South Africa. Her art studies at university were interrupted when she chose to follow the footsteps of an older relative who was a nurse. She was offered, and accepted, the opportunity to become a nurse, going overseas to England to be trained at Guy's hospital. But she was thrown out of the programme because she was, she says, "... a bit of a rebel." She then returned to South Africa, and finished her art training at the Technikon, and received a

teaching diploma (Lewis 1991:61).

Her career in art did not take off immediately. When she returned to South Africa, she became a nun. This choice, although discouraged by her family, also reflected social and religious pressures about what was appropriate for a female.

Convent schools make quite an issue of a vocations drive as part of the religious education. I used to feel a bit uncomfortable...I didn't particularly want to be called by God. When I went overseas I spent a lot of time at jazz clubs and became more and more alienated from the church. When I came back to South Africa, my nun friends played on my emotions and I began to feel quite drawn and went to retreats. I had turned my back on God and I felt terribly guilty and so for me it had to be the strictest order because I had done all the wrong things. I chose to join the Carmelite order very much on that kind of denial and I knew I was never going to do art again.

My family were actually quite upset that I joined. There is the idea that a girl should get married and that girls who wanted to become religious were so unattractive that no man would marry them and they were given to God. Black families are not pleased when their daughters become nuns. It's artificial and unnatural to have this spiritual thing that doesn't include sexuality (Lewis 1991: 61).

Lewis (1991: 61) writes that becoming a Carmelite nun, for Cormick, meant repressing what would have been expressed through sexuality and art. She learned selflessness, self-discipline and control, in an austere and demanding environment. She also learned to understand and empathize with the suffering of the people who came to the convent to ask for prayers.

Within the convent, her art skills were discovered, and she began doing unsigned illustrations for magazines. Privately, she began to do works that were expressions of her own thoughts and feelings (personal communication: 1997).

The convent was an enlightening environment in that, indirectly, it answered many of her spiritual questions. She found some people who entered the convent with a genuine spiritual calling and desire to serve God and others, and many who sought to escape the demands and paradoxes of ordinary life by self imprisonment within the convent walls. The ambiguity and trusting of her own inner life, questions and experiences eventually led her out of the 'religious' life (although she is still a devout, if not church-going, Catholic) (personal

communication 1997).

Cormick said that when she left the convent, the only thing she knew how to do to earn a living was art, so she took on religious commissions. Her work is in demand, and includes sculpture in wood, paintings, batiks, mosaics, ceramic panels and book illustrations and posters. She uses most media to increase her versatility, so that she can accept as many requests as possible (personal communication: 1997).

The demand for religious art is adequate for her to make a living, although the remuneration is not as high as it would be for secular artists. Another consequence of doing 'religious' art is the art world's perception of her.

I get excluded from the art world. Critics like to classify people and the most I've said is that I'm an expressionist, but people say, 'but then you do a lot of mission work', in a derogatory way. I feel they might be saying that religious art is not creative (Lewis 1991: 62).

But her work is highly creative. Her religious commissions are accessible. In this sphere of religious art, she has found no discrimination as a woman artist (Lewis 1991: 62). Her feminist world view and spirituality infuses them as much as possible, even for traditionalist commissions within a conservative church.

Her theology and her work

In 1992, Cormick wrote her Master's thesis in Theological Ethics on the subject of Mary Magdalene, and in the Roman Catholic Church specifically. It reveals much of her own spirituality, and what she believes as a theologian and as an artist.

Cormick is particularly conscious of the power and importance of visual imagery in expressing a religious concept and presenting a theological doctrine. In introducing her thesis, she wrote

Religion has been used to interpret experience, and to understand the connectedness between an externalised world and an internalised world.[The] articulation and

formulation of an effective imagery of the sacred unknown will also function as one of the ways in which believers come to appreciate the significance of their existence (Cormick 1992:1).

She explores this, looking at the teachings of Jesus and his use of illustration, the signs and symbols (including colour) used in the Christian tradition, and the importance of ritual and imagery in the Roman Catholic tradition especially. Through a comprehensive discussion of these in the history of the church, she writes “Of all attempts to conceptualise the unfathomable divinity, the most successful have been through imagery and symbolism” (Cormick 1992:19). Through sustained exposure to these sacred images, the believer herself or himself is being formed and changed by this use. “Through a passive acceptance of all that the image represents, the believer allows that conception to penetrate and transform her vision...this can be an enriching perspective but it might also be a stultifying process if the image presents a restrictive or subversive concept” (Cormick 1992:20).

Visual art is used to give substance to an idea and communicate a message on the cognitive and emotive levels. However, this can also manipulate. Cormick contends that the religious depiction of women has been distorted by artistic representations. In sacred art, as in secular art, representation of women has been problematic. Feminist analysis of art history and theology have both pointed out that these disciplines have been shaped by male agendas and experiences. This has served to uphold a status quo of patriarchy. If male artists, drawing on male philosophy, theology and traditions are depicting women and femaleness, the result is bound to be skewed.

She asserts that the misogyny and distortion of Mary Magdalene’s importance and story is outrageous, that this distortion is representative of the Roman Catholic Church’s attitude toward women, and a basic underlying misogyny. As Lewis (1991:64) has written “Her identification with Mary Magdalene as the subject of her enquiry signifies a quest for the reconciliation of the virgin/whore dichotomy which has shaped western society’s notion of womanhood from biblical times.”

In her thesis, she reviewed hundreds of images of Mary Magdalene, in story and art, which

depict her as the archetype of all women and send the message that women, if not contained and controlled, are dangerous, sexually promiscuous, and easily seduced by the devil.

Representations of Mary Magdalene, Cormick discovered, commonly portray her as penitent, ashamed, cowering at the feet of Jesus, often half naked, beautiful, passive, sensuous, with long flowing hair and wearing red (in this context, as sign of passion and lustful dangerous sexuality). Few representations show her as strong, courageous, a disciple and close loving friend to Jesus, teaching others and blessed by God. Cormick stresses the deliberate distortion by the Roman Catholic church and patriarchal interpretations of female sexuality. She explores the lies it has perpetuated and the damage done to women through these lies.

For example, in attempts to 'frame' and contain women's form and sexuality, patriarchal culture has represented the female form in art as a motif all its own, called 'the nude'.

It symbolizes the transformation of the base matter of nature into the elevated forms of culture and the spirit. The female nude can thus be understood as a means of containing femininity and female sexuality. If...the female body has been regarded as unformed, undifferentiated matter, then the procedures and conventions of high art are one way of controlling this unruly body and placing it within the securing boundaries of aesthetic discourse (Nead 1992:2).

The forms, conventions and poses of art have worked metaphorically to shore up the female body - to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the 'other' (Nead 1992: 2).

We need representations of the female body that express women's identities, desires and needs. We need self definitions by women, including in religious imagery.

We must...investigate the diverse ways in which women's bodies are represented and to promote a new bodily images and identities (Nead 1992: 16).

If the context is one that is oppressive to women, and even misogynist, the imagery will reflect and perpetuate this (Berger 1972; Nead 1992; Nochlin 1988).

New symbols and representations about women by women

Cormick's Master's thesis explores the meaning that has been communicated by the church in its artistic symbols of women. Her artwork, then and now, seeks to create new symbols. In speaking about her thesis to Lewis (1991:63), Cormick said,

I'm focussing specifically on Mary Magdalene because she has been a prototype of the opposite of the Virgin Mary. She is the sinner, the prostitute, everything as opposed to Mary. And I'm making a case because I think it's a total lie that they have deliberately tried to present this. Mary Magdalene was used in art as a kind of opportunity to present a bit of sensuality. As part of my research I did a series of postcards of Biblical women, and that was a kind of reclaiming of women again. I named a lot of women and I've put in women who hadn't much significance, illustrating them, putting them in heroic positions. Like Judy Chicago: her whole thing too, is naming all the women and the unseen art things that women do. In my religious commissions I've introduced more and more women or made women more obvious in these scenes. I would hope that I can try and change people's thinking, because what we believe in religion is often based on what is visually seen. If artists can change that, maybe the whole thing of Christianity can change.

As part of a body of work created by Cormick over her career, in 1990, Cormick created an important series of paintings *In Praise of Heroic Women of the Scriptures*. It touched a deep chord in women and men who long for a fuller representation of the female in the Christian church.

The series came about through a commission by the Anglican Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW). Cormick was asked to create artworks MOW could use at the pre-synod workshop where the question of ordination of women in the Anglican church was to come up for a vote. For the event, Cormick decided to do a series reclaiming women in the Bible - women rarely heard about, women with no names, well-known women, invisible women - and to re-image them. Cormick writes (1992: 167) quoting Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "I was moved to begin 'reclaiming our religious imagination and our sacred powers of naming...new dreams and see[ing] new visions.'" She chose women from the Hebrew and Christian heritage, and created 50 paintings of them. She wanted to present a visual celebration of some of the biblical women, whose stories have touched her. In honour of the celebration, all the heroines are dressed in gold, done in a decorative, bright 'feminine' way (her words). "I wanted the pictures to sparkle like jewels" (1992: 167).

At the pre-synod workshop, the pictures were in high demand, and someone suggested she reproduce them for sale as postcards. This she did. At the subsequent synod, postcards of 16 of the paintings were for sale. The content of some of them angered some people, who thought the nudity and explicitness of certain images was too provocative, perhaps forgetting the biblical narrative of the stories is terrible and terrifying (Trible 1984). Cormick names these and other women with biblical names, names that give a message that they had overcome the adversity set before them, the invisibility and the degradation experienced in the narratives. She writes (1992: 168),

As part of the motivation for these affirmative images was to reclaim and empower Christian women, I was particularly concerned that all the 'heroines' should be named. These new names were chosen with specific concern for their didactic relevance. Thus the Samaritan woman became 'Mehtabel' meaning "whom God makes happy" (Fig. 7). The symbolic christening is appropriate where some of the titles given to the unnamed women are particularly unfortunate. For example, "a woman suffering from a haemorrhage" (Luke 8:43) became 'Johanna' meaning "Jehovah has shown me favour" (Fig. 8).

There was an overwhelming positive response of women to these paintings - to see themselves, to see women from the Bible reclaimed, named and rendered visible. Drawing on her education and thinking in feminist theological hermeneutics, Cormick articulates the importance of this (1992: 168):

This is the spirit of the hermeneutic of remembrance in which Schussler Fiorenza has asserted the importance of remembering the suffering and hopes of the oppressed women of the Scriptures. I consider that the primary task of these paintings is to keep alive the reality of the pain and injustices suffered by these women, who are our foremothers and sisters. This is not just to hold on to grievances. It becomes in the spirit of the Jewish Holocaust museums, a banner that reminds women what happens when the balance of equality is disregarded. History books are written mostly about the heroic deeds of men. I suggest there were at least as many unsung heroic women in the history of humankind.

As a feminist theologian who is an artist, Cormick quite consciously analyses imagery and points out the patriarchal perspective. In her writing, and her creation of art (as demonstrated by the Heroic Women series), she draws on the four hermeneutical tools for a feminist and liberating reading of Holy Scripture, outlined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1983). These

are 1. Apply a hermeneutic of suspicion - assume the stories are biased, only telling part of the story, and from the perspective of the one with power; 2. Search for and proclaim women-affirmative texts. She calls this the feminist key to liberation. Like the woman sweeping the house looking for the lost coin, so must feminist theology sweep the tradition and the scriptures to find what is of value and life-giving to women; 3. Remember. Make sure that no story of a biblical woman is forgotten or unclaimed; and 4. Creatively actualise - speak about the need for positive imagery of women, affirmative imagery. Create it.

In the next section, I will apply these hermeneutic principles to look at some of the paintings by Cormick.

A look at selected paintings from the Heroic Women series

Cormick believes that a feminist theological perspective is the liberating hermeneutic tool for women. She uses it in her own thinking and analysis, and it underlies the images she quite consciously chooses to depict of women.

In her paintings of *Mother Sophia* (Fig. 9) and *Creata God Most Beautiful* (Fig. 10), Cormick demonstrates Schussler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of searching for and proclaiming women-affirmative texts, and creatively actualising positive imagery of women. She images God as female in both pictures - God as Wisdom-Sophia and God as Creator. The paintings use a circular form indicating wholeness, and bright lively colours and patterns, depicting women who are full of life and joy.

Rachel (Fig. 11) illustrates Rachel as she might have been feeling - sitting demurely while the men in the distance look disturbed and anxious as they search for the hidden household gods. The illustration of *Lot's daughters* (Fig. 12) is disturbing and graphic, showing the distress of Lot's daughters, naked and pounding on the door of their father's house, as the men inside look out in fear and trembling. Outside with the women, a group of naked men are smiling and relaxed. The juxtapositioning of the three groups of people displaying different emotions is powerful and disturbing. With this painting, and others like it, Cormick remembers the stories

of terror of women in the Bible, little-known stories that resonate with women's experiences today.

In her artistic renderings of heroic women of the Bible, she stressed that the pictures must be accessible to women, not esoteric. They are strongly didactic - they tell a story of women's lives. This is part of what she is trying to achieve as a feminist theologian - to present clearly and depict strongly the experiences of women in the Bible, their stories and their strength.

Cormick's work reflects her own spiritual journeying in search of truth and God, and her own journeying as a woman. Her journey reflects her culture as a white, educated, urban, South African, Roman Catholic woman. Her ability to make a career in art reflects her culture as a formally trained single woman. Her studies in western feminist theological thought and adoption of these perspectives to her own situation and that of women within the western church also reflect her culture. The issues she is grappling with resonate with women in South Africa today.

Dina Cormick's use of biblically inspired imagery, images inspired by women in the Bible and those who were silent, presents alternatives to the imagery traditionally presented and received in the Christian church. She is giving voice to the hidden, the voiceless, the misrepresented, the violated and marginalised. To her, the moral discourse about what and who is holy or worthy, has been skewed, is infused with lies and omission, and for the most part, depicts imagery which is inaccurate. She believes that representations of the female in the church have been selective, distorted and misogynist. These have served to uphold patriarchal traditions which are life-denying and heretical. Her artwork, drawing on biblical stories and Christian tradition, reflects her own experience as a woman, a Roman Catholic, and an educated and questioning person who is free to be critical. Her art is strongly didactic, with a social and religious purpose. Her artwork both reflects her experience, theology and spirituality, and resonates with others from a similar background, sharing similar beliefs and issues.

Not only is she overtly reclaiming the stories of women, but she is one voice saying loudly in

pictures, that the feminine has been squashed in the church, and that the Holy Spirit of God is calling to be heard.

In comparison with Cormick's overtly feminist approach to her religious art as a female artist and a Roman Catholic, Bonnie Ntshalintshali's religious art similarly depicts a contextual approach that interprets biblical stories through her culture and experience.

Bonnie Ntshalintshali

Ntshalintshali can be identified as one of only a few black woman artists in South Africa...In addition, her unique interpretations of various themes has resulted in compelling, often didactic, narrative sculptures related to socio-political issues and comments on local social interaction and identity.

(Mentis 1995: 64)

Bonnie Ntshalintshali was a Zulu artist working at Ardmore Studios in Winterton KwaZulu Natal (Figs. 13-17). She made a recognized and significant contribution to the South African art world. In 2000, Ntshalintshali died of HIV/AIDS. Her community, her family and friends have spoken openly about the cause of her death, in the hopes of raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, and raising money through donations and the sale of her work, to support programmes that assist with orphans and families affected by the loss of a breadwinner.

Ntshalintshali was born in 1967, attended primary school in Winterton, and Sizathima High School in Loskop. She had one son, Senzo. She began working under her mentor Fee Halsted-Berning, who established the Ardmore Studios in the mid 1980s. To provide employment and personal growth to Zulu women, Halsted-Berning started training some of the farm workers to work with clay. Ntshalintshali, who was a farm worker, had suffered from polio and found farm work difficult, so she was employed to work in the studio. She very quickly demonstrated that she had a natural and special feeling for clay and decoration. Halsted-Berning, who was formally trained (graduated with a BA in Fine Arts in 1982 and an Advanced Diploma in ceramics in 1984 from the University of Natal), shared her skills and guided Ntshalintshali. Ntshalintshali worked primarily in ceramics, building large narrative sculptures, meticulously detailed and painted. Many of her sculptures are in collections

throughout art galleries in South Africa.

Most of the workforce of artists and those being trained in art at Ardmore studios are women, coming from the rural areas surrounding the farm. Almost all of the women do not read or write, many of them having attended only a few years of school. Most go to Ardmore Studios to learn a skill that would be useful for employment. They come from a 'traditional' rural Zulu society where women's rights, in the Western sense, are foreign. Polygamy is common. Most of the women have to support families, and the majority are unmarried mothers. The women who create art at Ardmore Studios are trying to make a living in times of high unemployment. They have a certain status in the community, as their art is acclaimed throughout the world.

Ntshalintshali was part of this community, not a 'star' or an individualistic creator. She had a definite skill and vision, and a status that was recognized, but it was one that was the product of communal participation and work together with artist and founder of Ardmore Studios, Fee Halsted-Berning (Mentis 1995).

Bonnie Ntshalintshali's work in the historical context of black art in KwaZulu Natal

Much of her work is "typical of the biblical humanism and contemporary syncretism presently found in black art in Natal"(Leeb-du Toit 1993a:19).

It would be instructive and relevant to examine Ntshalintshali's production of biblical imagery in the larger context of black Christian art, and the history of art instruction for African people in Natal. In 1993, Juliette Leeb-du Toit and the Tatham Art Gallery convened an exhibition of spiritual art of Natal. In the book accompanying the exhibition *Spiritual Art of Natal* Leeb-du Toit (1993) describes the history and training of many black Christian artists in Natal, and the links with missionary activity¹. Briefly, as the Christian religion was imported with early colonists to South Africa, the imagery brought with it represented not only biblical stories and

¹ The book provides an excellent overview and critical analysis of interplay between production of sacred imagery by African artists in Natal and the influence of missionary culture. The use of art to resist colonisation and to affirm African identity, particularly during the time of repression and resistance is outlined.

values, but western culture and European figures. Western culture and the gospel became synonymous, alienating many African people. Those believing certain aspects of the Christian religion and retaining their African culture and ways syncretised the two, forming new independent churches, and images and symbols representing their beliefs (Comaroff 1985).

Most of the formal art instruction for African people took place within Christian missions - Ndaleni Teacher Training College (Methodist Church), Marianhill (Catholic) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift. The media used tended to be gender specific - women learning weaving and ceramics, and men learning linocuts and sculpture (Mentis 1995: 114).

While those under instruction at these centres did not have to be Christian, the milieu and teaching of the schools was Christian, so whether or not the art student believed, it was what they learned. Depending on the place, and who was in charge at the time, Christian themes were often the most acceptable subject matter for the art produced. Thus, the very act of attending the art school included a process of acculturation to the Christian religion and the western way of life for African artists (though some artists were conscious of this happening and resisted and rejected this, exploring instead African mysticism - such as Rakgoathe) (Leeb-du Toit 1993a+b).

For many artists, depictions of Christian spirituality through their African culture was encouraged and developed at these art schools under the instruction of artists such as Sr. Pientia at Marianhill, and various teachers at Ndaleni. Other artists, such as Bernard Gwensa (and many people belonging to church communities), were not convinced that representations of Christianity through African culture could be valid. They believed that Jesus Christ, the Lord and One who could save, and Mary his mother, were white. To be African would mean they were just ordinary people, nothing special. Ruben Xulu, Gwensa's friend and coworker, had no problem with this, and whole-heartedly embraced the creation of African imagery of the Biblical stories, representing African life, for African people (Cormick 1993).

Some artists such as Azariah Mbatha and John Muafangejo depicted biblical stories because of

their own Christian convictions. Other artists found this sort of work acceptable within the Christian institutions in which they were working. In addition, artists who were trying to make a living from their art, would receive better patronage by white people through religious themes, than in secular themes or themes that depicted traditional African life (Leeb-du Toit 1993).

Biblical themes expressed through African culture illustrated the universality of the Christian religion, a Christ for all who identified with the people, saw them as equal, and did not require them to become European. African people who believed and followed the Christian religion were depicted as themselves, imaging, made and accepted by God (Leeb-du Toit 1993).

However, representation of Christian religious imagery by African people may, for some, be representation of a foreign tradition adopted and syncretised into African life. It represents acculturation and the acquiring of a system of beliefs that come from outside of the African tradition.² For many African people, the once foreign western Christian religion had become their own. They wanted the religion but not the European culture and denigration of Africanness that accompanied it. In this context, the significance of the use of biblical sacred themes by black artists in Natal took on added importance around 1960 as black consciousness grew (Leeb-du Toit 1993a: 19).

Black liberation theology was growing - a theology which integrated themes of liberation with African religious and cultural context. Sacred themes were very important, with Christ being identified with black suffering and the desire to be liberated from oppression. Artists such as Azariah Mbatha and Charles Nkosi chose biblical imagery to illustrate the struggle and longings of African people, but went further, using the parallels between Christ's passion and death to subvert domination and oppression. Leeb-du Toit (1993b: 102) writes that Mbatha was "convinced of the significance of biblical themes to metaphorically address the injustices of the present." His imagery,

² This is a point of contention. One can convert to Christianity and own it as one's own belief without assimilating western culture. Western Christians themselves are 'converts' to the faith, syncretising the gospel with culture. One does not have to become western to become Christian.

inspired from within a conscientised Church and theology, represents a different ideological purpose for biblically derived art. It reflects both the personal significance and potential subversiveness of a critical doctrine. (Leeb-du Toit 1993b: 102).

Similarly, Charles Nkosi's imagery spoke subversive messages through reconstructed biblical themes.

Here, themes of oppression and violence are translated in terms of the passion of Christ, who in these images becomes a fellow sufferer and brother of the oppressed. The biblical image is thus simultaneously secularised and culturally historicised. It also becomes subversive as an articulate vehicle for expressing antipathy to state injustices at a time when many other oppositional voices and sources in the media and in the arts were being suppressed or largely marginalised (e.g. protest art)(Leeb-du Toit 1993b: 103).

It is interesting to note that while these works were clearly touching something in the faithful - students, and clergy alike bought it - it was not for use in the church, but for their own personal reflection and devotion (Leeb-du Toit 1993b:102).

Explorations of the spiritual art of KwaZulu Natal, as done through the exhibition and accompanying publication are important resources and take us quite a long way in an analysis of art as theology in our context. Interestingly, while the significance of black consciousness is explored, there is no mention of a gender consciousness in these works, nor is there an analysis of whether there is a woman's liberation theology coming through the art in addition to a black liberation theology. There are unnamed or indirect indicators of some gender issues though. It seems that most of the contributors were male artists, and there was a clear distinction in the media used as training was gender specific. As mentioned above, men used linocuts and sculpture and women used clay and weaving. Some of the tapestries were not designed by women, but executed by them, based on a design of a male artist.

In this light, the work done by Bonnie Ntshalintshali gains greater significance. She was one of only a few black woman artists in South Africa. She was creating and executing sacred art, of her own designs, through her own vision and experience, using a medium traditionally designated 'female'(Mentis 1995: 114), yet creating sculptures (traditionally designated as 'male').

A look at the contextual nature of her work, especially biblically inspired themes

Women figure prominently in her work as the stories are interpreted and contextualised through Zulu culture via her own experiences and priorities as a Zulu woman. The stories (whether biblical narratives or narratives about everyday life) present images normally attended to by women in Zulu culture, such as the preparation and presentation of food. The settings and life depict Zulu culture, with the presence and importance of cattle, lots of animals, the customs of Zulu life, and African figures.

While Ntshalintshali also depicts everyday Zulu life in many of her sculptures, including *Zulu Wedding* (Fig. 18) she had no hesitancy or apology in translating traditionally western Christian imagery into Zulu culture.

Much of Bonnie Ntshalintshali's work depicts stories from the Christian Bible translated through her own world view and experience as a Catholic Zulu woman, born and raised in a traditional rural area³.

In her sculptures, she uses symbols that are well-known to the rural Zulu community. In her depiction of the biblical story of Pharaoh waking up from his dream, which he then describes to Joseph (*Pharaoh's Dream* - Fig 19), Pharaoh is surrounded by signs of royalty - zebra skins as his bedding and leopards keeping guard. There are many cattle and stalks of mielies, both healthy and sick, as in the dream. "That Joseph's head scarf is made from the same material as Pharaoh's sheets means they are friends" (NZD Calender).

Her sculpture of *The Last Supper* (1990)(Fig. 20) is similar in composition to Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*.

In it, twelve disciples and Christ, clothed in long classical biblical garments, are standing

³These descriptions simplify the complex interrelatedness between culture and religious practice for the artist as female and Zulu. While beyond the scope of this dissertation, these questions need to be explored more deeply.

around a fully laid table. Christ is depicted as white, while some of the disciples are depicted as black. Mentis writes that this implies that “everyone, no matter their skin colour, can share at the table of God” (Mentis 1997: 51). They are clothed in long classical biblical garments as occur in illustrated Bibles.

Mentis (1997: 51) notes that careful attention is paid to narrative details of the story. With Christ placed at the centre of the table, his arms are outstretched. The disciples cluster around him in four groups of three. Judas is placed on Christ’s right hand side, clenching his bag of gold and scowling at the other disciples. They gasp with horror at the mention of Christ’s immanent betrayal.

The table is laid with a feast, including some traditional Zulu foods such as a goat’s head, sour porridge, and *phutu*, as well as many contemporary western foods and beverages including bottles of Coca Cola and Castle beer. Some of the food is served on a wooden *ugqoko* or Zulu meat-platter (Mentis 1997: 51).

This was one of Ntshalintshali’s favourite pieces. “It has turned out to be just as I had imagined. I like the idea of placing a flock of winged creatures under the table. They set a heavenly character to the scene...The goat’s head on the table is a traditional dish, eaten especially by the Zulus at a funeral. No forks have been laid because we eat only with knife and fingers.” (NZD Calender 1997).

Perhaps her most powerful and significant sculpture in terms of its symbolism, narrative power and contextualisation is *God is angry because his animals are being killed (or Last Judgement)* (Fig. 21). In it, God is represented as a Zulu man, like a king would be amongst the Zulu people (in leopard skins). Standing atop a huge column, above skulls and dead animals, he is raising a finger in admonition and warning. Ntshalintshali explained “People have to respect nature and learn to deal with animal life as well. They also are created by God and adorn his heaven, too. Because man is so rapacious in his hunting and is finishing off the whole animal world, God is angry (NZD Calender).” This piece about God’s judgement was in response to the terrible violence and low-intensity conflict that ravaged KwaZulu Natal in the

late 1980's and early 1990's. The killings soaked the land in blood. The picture depicts God as angry at the destruction of human and animal life. God demands obedience to his appeal for a return to a natural-traditional order of things (Leeb-du Toiled 1993a: 19).

The figure of God that Ntshalintshali has represented is derived from her imagination. She relates the authority and supremacy of God to her own context where the chief holds this position of leadership. In an interview, she disclosed the reason for depicting God as a Zulu Chief. She felt that by depicting God as Zulu, she was indicating that God speaks to the Black people as he does to anyone else. The sculpture holds a certain moral, didactic element in that, according to Ntshalintshali, God is warning black people that the time of fighting and violence has expired and peace in South Africa is long overdue. He warns that he will be angered by the continued fighting, which will lead to the death of many of God's creatures. Thus Ntshalintshali felt that, in the light of the conflict experienced currently in KwaZulu-Natal, her message for peace would be brought across more succinctly by portraying God as black." (Mentis 1997: 55-56).

Like artists Mbatha, Muafangejo and Nkosi - those schooled in liberation theologies and who used the sacred themes to parallel the struggles of a people for life in a dark time of repression, violence and death, Ntshalintshali's piece can be interpreted many ways: Literally, as a chief admonishing his people; metaphorically, as God admonishing humanity; or behind the figures, as a challenge and a plea by Ntshalintshali to those in leadership, and to God to stop the killing.

Artists such as Bonnie Ntshalintshali...use biblically inspired themes which continue to provocatively examine the status quo. In her sculpture 'God admonishing the people because their destruction of nature' (1992), Ntshalintshali weds two moralities when she depicts God as a Zulu chieftain who alone, as male and head of the group or clan, has the authority, as does the Divinity, to dispose of or preserve animal or human life...[The image indicates] the degree to which biblical mythography continues to be an expressive vehicle for conveying socio-religious truths and an oppositional voice in contemporary art by Black South Africans.(Leeb-du Toit 1993b: 103).

Gender and 'the other' represented by Ntshalintshali and her work

When Halsted-Berning and Ntshalintshali began exhibiting their work in ceramic exhibitions, their works were not allowed because they were not within the boundaries of what was called ceramic work. They exhibited successfully at art exhibitions, with their work challenging the

paradigms of 'ceramics'. In 1990, they jointly won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award. A lot of attention became directed toward Ntshalintshali. Her work was criticized for its lack of 'concept', which to critic Kendell Geers, meant it was not art. Of her sculpture *The Last Supper*, he commented that it "entertained with 'quaint, idiosyncratic details', but 'remains nothing more than a vehicle for the artist to indulge her colouring ability'" (Arnold 1996: 16). Referring to her sculpture *Jonah and the Whale* (Fig. 22), his critique continues "The illustrative nature of the piece lacks conceptual content and therefore the only recourse is to the formal. Lacking any such training, Ntshalintshali relies on the charming quaintness of her 'ethnic licence' for applause" (Arnold 1996: 16).

Arnold challenges his criticism.

Geers, working from a critical model that elevates concept over percept, seemed unable to understand the cultural and gender references in Ntshalintshali's sculptures or grasp that these are articulated through exquisitely modeled form, rich colour and pattern, and attention to detail. Formal issues focus attention on a Last Supper realized as a Zulu feast and visualized from the perspective of a woman familiar with the ritual significance of food. As a Catholic, Ntshalintshali is conversant with the implications of the Christian story she illustrates. The Last Supper tableau, elevated on a pedestal adorned with fantastical animals, crosses ethnic divides and synthesizes personal experience, acquired knowledge and artistic skill. It is an interpretation free of the iconography and narrative devices used by Western male artists. Its aesthetic is both African and female in origin (Arnold 1996: 16).⁴

Mentis briefly examines the gender significance of Ardmore and Ntshalintshali's work in the context of changes and norms in the mainstream art world (1995: 114). She suggests it is the freedom of the feminist and post modern ethos of the contemporary society, art world, and particularly existing at Ardmore, which allowed Ntshalintshali to be free from certain restrictive conventions. These include traditional aesthetic concepts, iconography and narrative, and the strangling effect of the 'craft' label given to much of women's creative work in the past. Mentis writes,

⁴Mainstream art circles are the domain of largely white, urban, academically trained artists. Within this norm, there is a lack of inclusivity, as suggested by the name of what has been called, contentiously "contemporary black art" by the mainstream (Mentis 1997: 14).

in a post-modern climate, not only are the lesser arts more acceptable, but so is the 'other' - by definition, I mean any marginalised persons or groups (this would include women). As women have become accepted into mainstream art movements, so craft has been accepted. The combined focus of these two neglected areas has resulted in innovation taking place, with artists challenging established traditions, academia, Modernism and its hierarchies (1995: 114).

Reconstructing theological symbols through a woman's perspective - is there a feminist gaze?

Ntshalintshali's work, indigenizing and contextualizing biblical imagery through her cultural and socio-political reality is interesting. Like the work of Mbatha, Muafangejo and Nkosi, her work, particularly *God is angry because his animals are being killed or the Last Judgement*, is significant in its use of biblical themes to address the injustices of the present.

In her work, she reconstructs biblical symbols from the perspective of an African woman, and contextualises them to contemporary culture. But the question remains, to what extent does this reconstruction contain a feminist gaze, or more specifically, a reinterpretation and reconstruction of biblical symbols into liberatory expressions?

As a black woman artist in South Africa, Ntshalintshali symbolises some of the questions around gender and power in South Africa. As I attempt to 'read' Ntshalintshali's work with this question in mind, I see much that demonstrates a 'feminine aesthetic', and an indirect demonstration of the values of life of a woman. Ntshalintshali's biblical themes are literally represented, in terms of gender, however, an overt reinterpretation is not demonstrated.

Conclusion

In looking at the lives and work of Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali, in this Chapter, it is clear that their work is tempered by their own cultural background as well as gender. Cormick's work reflects a western sensibility, even in her biblical figures, and is highly aware of the process and politics of representation of the female figure. Ntshalintshali's work

contextualises Christian religion into her own Zulu culture, and whilst she is not overtly making any feminist statement, her representations are depicting that culture from a woman's point of view. Cormick has chosen, in much of her self-motivated work, themes focusing on the experience and reality of women as she interprets it through her culture (as demonstrated in her Heroic Women series). Her vision is that of a feminist theologian, exploring the didactic function of art, and seeking to reinterpret the visual theology of patriarchy and misogyny that has been part of the Christian tradition. Her aim is to reclaim, remember, make just what has been told in lies, saying 'no' to the patriarchal imagery of the Roman Catholic Church. She aims to teach - to represent women and the faith through the eyes of a 'conscious and suspicious' woman. Ntshalintshali's biblical narratives are also reinterpetive expressions of how she sees the stories. She tells biblical stories that have meaning for her, in a way that reflect life in a rural Zulu setting. She illustrates the gathering at the Last Supper or the betrayal, death and resurrection of Jesus through Zulu cultural norms. The artworks do not overtly challenge or question the patriarchal order, or the leadership of men; these are portrayed as normal. Yet the details of women's participation and importance are not overlooked. In the elaborateness of and attention to details, for example, of the communal feast, the preparation being the realm of women, women are represented. Mentis (1997) argues that the way of Ntshalintshali's work does the same, though this may be stereotyped. She says the colour and decoration, the fine patterning and decorative details of the painting and the care she takes over every piece makes women's participation present.

Women's roles and participation in the rituals of life are at the forefront. Ntshalintshali depicted daily life of a Zulu community through the biblical stories. In this respect, Cormick and Ntshalintshali's work converge - both, as female artists, succeed in conveying a hidden reality - the natural daily life, experiences, customs and responses of women with God.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have attempted to look at the intersection between women's spirituality for liberation and life in South Africa through the perspective of visual art as expressions of this. I have briefly looked at the lives and work of two women artists of KwaZulu Natal as examples of artists who are expressing the religious through imagery.

In Chapter One, I looked in detail at the meaning of spirituality, and the longings and expression of spirituality for liberation by women in South Africa. Life in South Africa is very complex, in terms of history and present realities. Despite the diversity of experiences, the struggle for liberation from apartheid has shaped the reality and spirituality of over a generation of people. Thus, the concept of liberation and a spirituality of liberation is not foreign.

It is believed and supported by many, that God is on the side of the downtrodden, oppressed and marginalised, and authentic spirituality calls for an engagement to bring about justice amidst racial and political oppression.

Women in Africa and South Africa are calling for this same ethic to be applied to their struggles. Feminist spirituality, and feminist theology seek to free women and men from patriarchy, and seek to bring into being a new vision of relatedness and justice amongst people. Women are calling for full life for themselves.

In Chapter Two, I looked at art as an expression of spirituality and theology, with the artist as a potential visionary and mediator of the spiritual. The visual has been used throughout history to illustrate religious themes, and to draw people closer to God. Questions arose, about how people use visual images of the sacred in their own devotional and spiritual lives. Works produced in the Renaissance, and icons were looked at as examples of didactic and devotional imagery. The power of images was named, and the problem of imaging for women contextualised into a history where images of women did not represent them favourably or were used as a tool by men to conform their behaviour.

In Chapter Three, the question of hiding and revealing women's spirituality and theology was looked at in the context of male cultural hegemony. Why is much of women's experience, spirituality and theology expressed not in theological history, exegesis, treatises and doctrines, but through creative means? In addition to looking at sensibilities beyond the verbal and the fullness of expression possible through art, literature, music, and other means, the concept of resistance was explored. James Scott's work on the way subordinated people find 'hidden' but effective and even subversive ways to express their reality was explored and applied to women's use of arts.

Chapter Four surveyed the lives and work of Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali, as two women artists in whom these varying categories come together. Both of these women produced religious art, from different subject positions and in different contexts, but it is possible that there are some common points regarding the expression of spirituality and theology for liberation and life, for women.

It is significant that these are women artists representing women and wider reality from their own life experience. In the work of Dina Cormick, conscious feminist and hermeneutical methods are applied that do affirm and feed women's spirituality for liberation. In her artwork, she affirms the God image in women and the feminine image in God. Experiences of bodiliness are affirmed, and through the reclamation of stories - positive and negative - of women in the Bible, women can discover and love what is presented. Traditional messages of inferiority, corruption, self-denial and sacrifice are critiqued and questioned from a conscientised woman's point of view, and alternative visions are put forward. Using a hermeneutic of suspicion, Cormick looks behind what is told to be true, measures it against the gospel of life, love and freedom, and presents new images. Together with viewers who resonate with these images, she is able to share and celebrate a Christian identity and faith which cannot easily find expression in the Church.

Similarly, Bonnie Ntshalintshali's work is significant because she is the artist, she is the one shaping the representation. Through her work, she defines for herself what the biblical stories mean to her, in her context and through her worldview. Her work implicitly demonstrates a

spirituality for life in the representation and detail she accords to illustrating contexts of daily life, family and community. Her work respects her traditions which favour life. She images too, a God who is like a leader in her community - imaging a God who is like her in culture if not in gender.

While this dissertation is a survey, I have sought to make connections between disciplines, to ask questions, and to point to a way to express and read women's spirituality and theology for liberation and life in South Africa. Further exploration of these questions, including the implications and significance of visual images to embodying a new vision for the Church, lie in the future.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

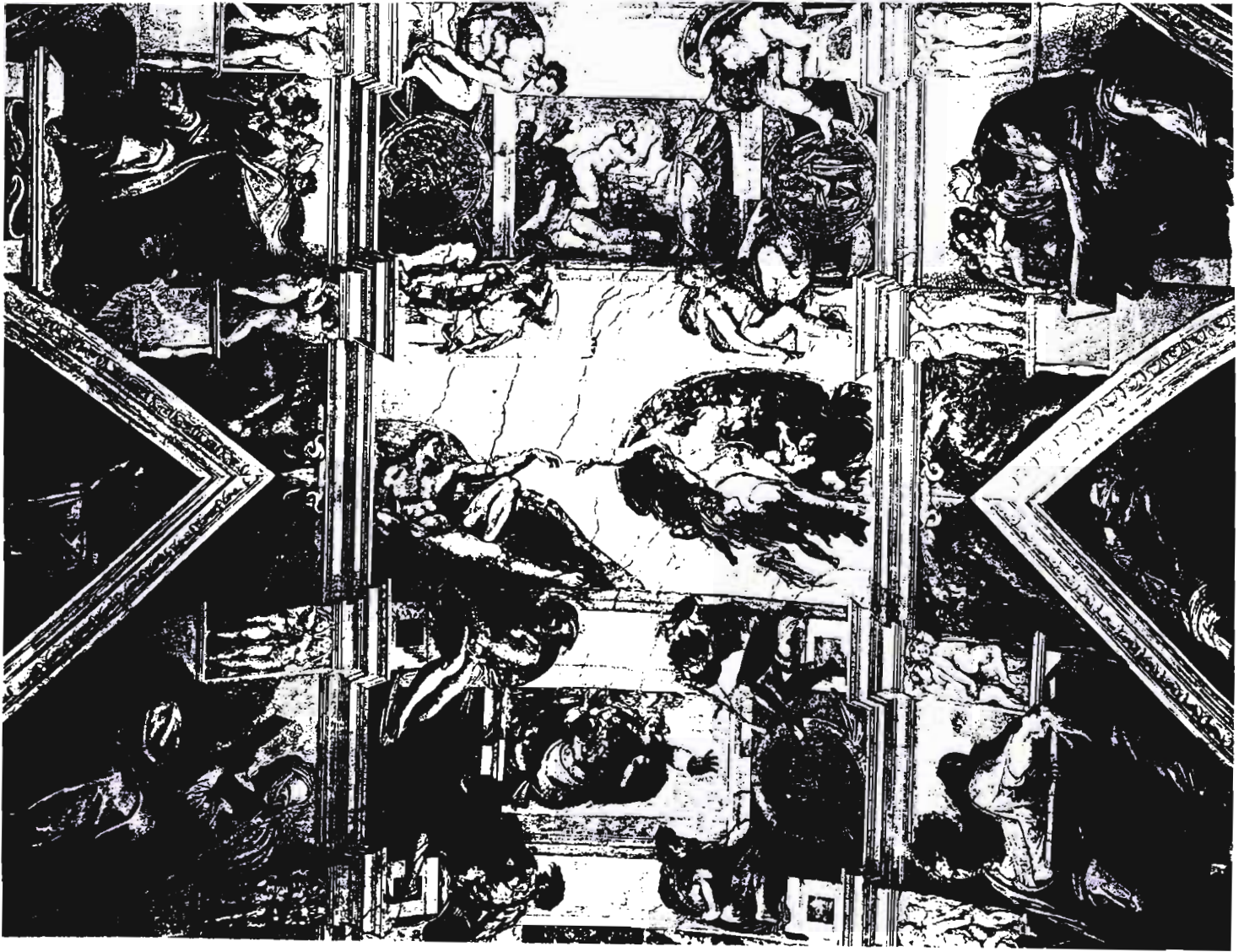


Fig.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17





Fig. 19

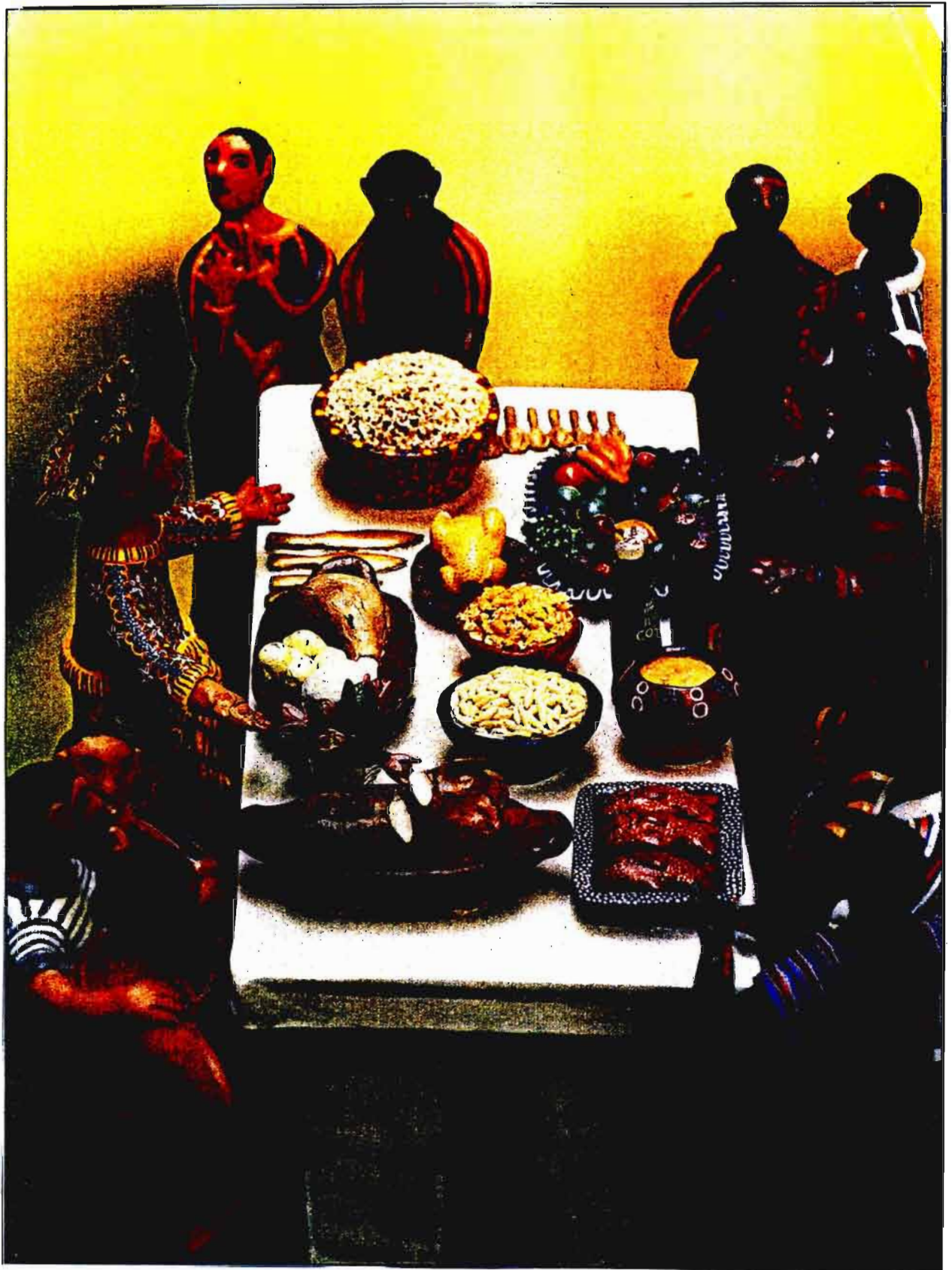
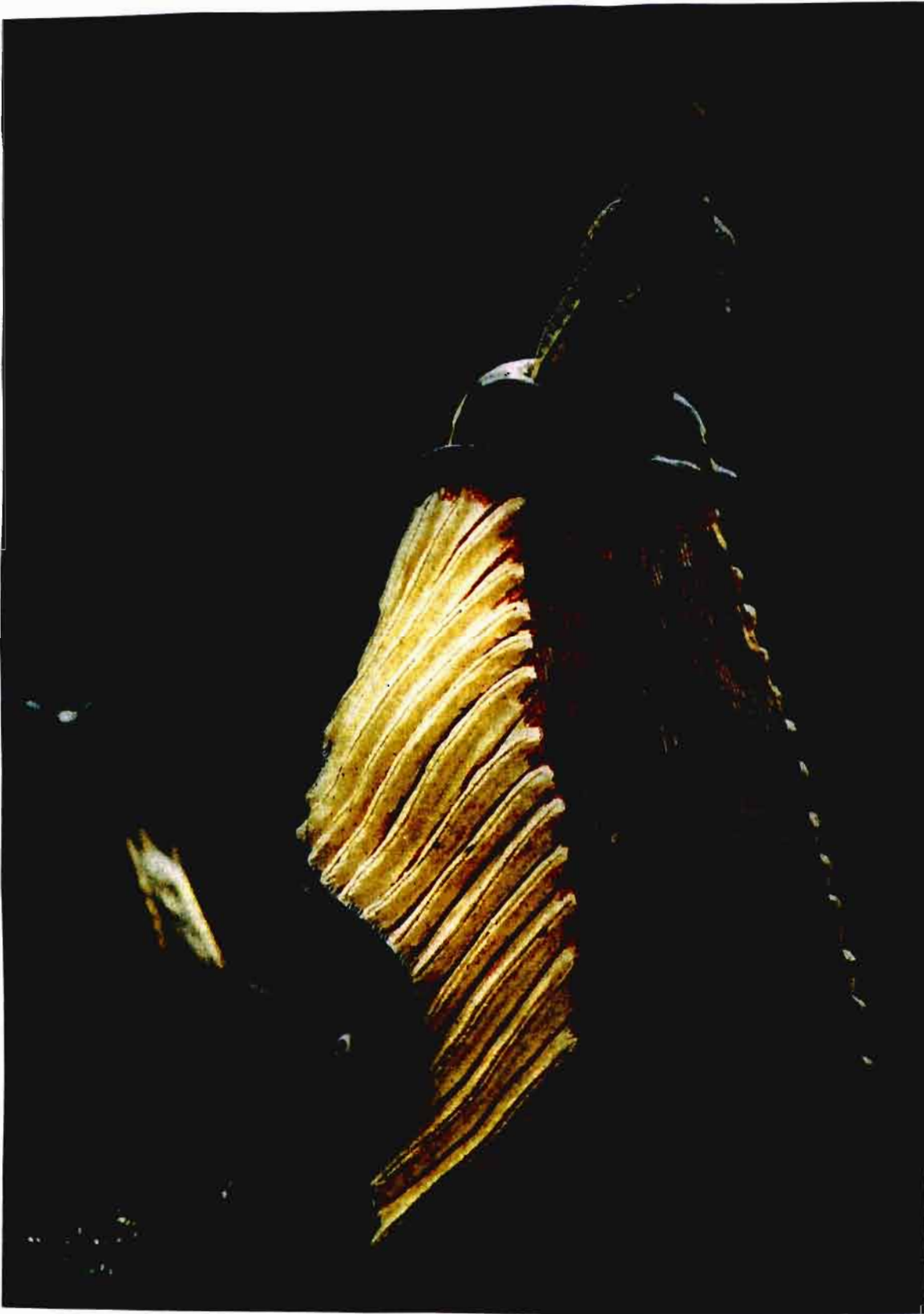


Fig. 20



Fig. 21



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