

Embodying God's life

Women and spirituality

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SPIRITUALITY, IN MICHAEL DOWNEY'S SUCCINCT DESCRIPTION, is 'living the Christian life in and through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit'.¹ The Spirit has been present and powerful in the lives of women over the past decade, judging by the volume of works in spirituality they have produced. In this medium, at least, women have been able to reveal the depth of their experiences of God, self, others, the world – insights which have found little or no place on the churches' agendas. In an attempt to honour women's experiences as a 'privileged locus for encountering the . . . action of the Spirit',² this article, a highly selective synthesis rather than an exhaustive chronology, will examine the work of some women spiritual writers over the past decade and suggest some future directions for the field.³

In the early 1940s Sr M. Madeleva Wolff CSC, president of St Mary's College for women, Notre Dame, Indiana, broke down a wall that had kept women invisible for centuries by opening the first graduate theology programme in the United States for women. In recent years, in honour of her vision, the college initiated an annual Madeleva lecture in spirituality, featuring a prominent woman theologian. One gets a sense of the range and scope of women's spirituality during the past decade from the topics of these lectures: women at prayer; women and teaching; two medieval mystics as examples of passionate women; women and power; women and creativity; women and sexuality; women, earth and creator Spirit; the life of Sr Madeleva; womanist ways of being in the world; stories lived by Latina/Hispanic women; one woman's experience of Jewish-Christian dialogue; women, work and ordinary life.⁴

I would describe spirituality as seeking and following the trail of our deepest *desire*, till it opens out on to the Holy Mystery at the heart of all that is. It is about allowing ourselves to be drawn ever more deeply into God's flesh-and-blood love affair with life, *embodied* in the awesome and messy concreteness demanded by the logic of incarnation. Spirituality is a story of *power* unleashed, of transformed and transforming energy which affects persons, communities,

societies and even the cosmos itself. *Desire, embodiment and power* are the themes which I see emerging in much theological and spiritual writing by women, and which I wish to highlight in this article.

I do so, knowing that this may raise red flags for feminists and non-feminists alike. For centuries, women have been typecast as symbols of distorted desire, straitjacketed by identification with things bodily and carnal, accused of possessing unorthodox power while routinely excluded from using power in all its acceptable arenas. Having absorbed and internalized most cultures' projected fears and fantasies in these areas, some women may be understandably wary of reopening old wounds.

Images vibrant and organic

Yet the metaphors women use when we speak and write about things spiritual and theological are bursting with images of desire, bodiliness and power, it seems. Women are 'looking on from afar', 'standing by a river dying of thirst', 'defecting in place', feeling 'a troubling in my soul', setting out on 'journeys by heart'. We discover 'the Word made flesh in female experience' when we are 'at home in our own house' and 'caretakers of a common house'. Immersed '*en la lucha*/in the struggle', we yet know ourselves 'in the embrace of God'. Claiming a place as 'friends of God and prophets', we are 'finding our voices', 'freeing theology', 'giving flesh to God' as 'She who is'.

A Copernican shift is in process, as one comes to realize by listening to women's stories of experiencing God on directed retreats, in faith-sharing groups and in the daily struggle to make a home or a living. Along the road of life, women are meeting a God who liberates and transforms, desires and delights, disturbs and overturns. On levels which are imaginative and affective as well as intellectual, women's sense of the sacred is being profoundly reshaped, and with it the faith-community's sense as well. Women's art, music and poetry has played a major role in this shift, re-imagining God and self and prophetically pointing out where our culture has lost its spiritual moorings.⁵

Desire: the energy of eros

The author of an anthology of women's poetry states, 'The sacred is fuelled by eros, by desire'.⁶ Constance FitzGerald's articles on Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross continue to shed light on this dimension. She discovers the genius of the Carmelite tradition in the

story of human desire and its progressive re-education toward harmony with God's desires.⁷ Readers of this journal are well aware of the role desire plays in Ignatian spiritual dynamics.⁸ 'If spirituality is a hunger, then many of us are simply famished', states Mary Jo Weaver. In an intriguing twist on the topic of 'spiritual work', she ponders the ways we are both drawn to desire and seek to avoid it.⁹ Rita Nakashima Brock explores the 'erotic power' at the heart of religious faith, the 'sensuous, transformative whole-making wisdom that emerges with the engagement of the whole heart in relationships'.¹⁰

Often desire speaks the language of alienation and conflict. Anne Thurston gives to Roman Catholic women who feel left out of the conversation at the centre of their church the name of 'women looking on from afar' (Mk 15:40). How can one maintain an identity that is both Catholic and feminist, asks Weaver, who finds a middle way in her own back-and-forth movement 'between new ideas and old wellsprings of sustenance'. The spiral journey, she believes, is a healthy one, though wearying.¹¹ The movement is from leaving home (or being locked out of it) to feeling exiled and lost in the wilderness, to reaching a place of shared struggle, difficult but satisfying, where meaning is reclaimed and purpose rediscovered.

Desire can also erupt into anger, once ostracized as a 'bad-girl' emotion, now welcomed as a flare which warns of danger, injustice and broken trust. In *Finding our voices*, Patricia O'Connell Killen probes the pain and the potential of this face of desire which is 'frustrated longing'. Moved by women like the one who told her, 'I am standing by a river dying of thirst', she follows the trajectory of women's anger and alienation. Writing of the personal faith journey that has shaped her own vocation as a theologian, she tells of 'simultaneously awakening to the intensity' of hungering for God, and to disillusionment with a once-treasured religious heritage which 'should have helped satisfy that longing and so often has not'. Killen validates these experiences of 'dissonance' as important sources for theological reflection, without either getting stuck in the emotions or condoning the ecclesial and social oppressions which trigger them. Hidden in women's stories of 'intense desire and heart-breaking disillusionment' she finds an invitation to spiritual maturity, to walk the path toward 'wise faith'.¹² Her awakening to the 'death-dealing and life-giving' aspects of the tradition impels her (and us) to learn wisdom from our foremothers, who walked the same road

of ambiguity and found ways both to criticize and retrieve their Christian heritage.

This retrieval of wisdom from the past has been helped by a remarkable outpouring of historical studies, allowing access to 'women's history of holiness' that has been until now 'neither remembered nor truthfully told'.¹³ Women rooted in the Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican and French schools of spirituality are making strong contributions to this effort of reclaiming from the shadows those female ancestors who shaped their traditions as decisively as their better-known brethren. Noteworthy too is JoAnn Kay McNamara's tour de force, *Sisters in arms*, which mounts an outstanding array of foremothers of religious life, women familiar and obscure alike, mute and invisible no longer.¹⁴ Written in a popular and accessible vein, selections and anthologies like those by Lavinia Byrne, Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, Susan Cahill and Serinity Young can open windows on to the past for women of today.¹⁵

Embodiment: the incarnational dynamic

The journey of transformation charted by spirituality happens not merely on an intellectual level but also in and through our imagination, affectivity and physicality. In *A big-enough God: a feminist's search for a joyful theology*, Sara Maitland underscores the particularity of personhood as she lists all that goes with having a body, including 'a gender, a class, a time, a history, an education, a psychology, a cultural location, a genetic inheritance and a bit of blind luck'. The fact of existing as embodied spirits (emphasis on the modifier) is good news, she says, 'if you can bring yourself to like bodies as much as God clearly does'.¹⁶

Incarnation, with all its 'in-the-flesh-ness', is a concept which women intuitively understand. God can and does make a home in us even when our flesh is tired, ageing, irritable, less than responsive. Drawing on the body as 'a resource and nurturer of our deepest knowledge', women find rich sources for reflection in physical events such as menarche, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, bearing and nursing a child and menopause.¹⁷ For instance, Ellyn Sanna writes forthrightly and un sentimentally about the light-and-shadow experience of motherhood. Her descriptions of both 'the blissful radiance of communion and the black anguish of exhaustion' which accompany breast-feeding, or of housework as both 'repetitive mon-

otony' and 'holy service' have the ring of utter authenticity, the 'both-and' of real life seen without rose-coloured filters.

Historical studies by Caroline Walker Bynum and Margaret R. Miles have shown how gendered understandings of body as symbol functioned in medieval Christian theology and praxis.¹⁸ Bodiliness is a central theme as well for contemporary feminist sacramental and liturgical theologians.¹⁹ The body has its own wisdom, often keyed to the seasons of psycho-physical development, as shown in numerous works about spirituality in midlife and later years.²⁰

If we take the doctrine of incarnation seriously, embodiment is also a facet of divine life. Sallie McFague invites us 'to think and act as if bodies matter'.²¹ An organic model of the world as God's body, she contends, is a needed corrective that offers a new framework to reconceive the place of humanity (and divinity) in the scheme of things. Science demonstrates the bonds that link us to all that exists, and especially to the earth which grows more precious as it becomes more threatened and fragile. In the 1970s, feminists showed the connection between oppression of women and violence against the earth. Since then, women have been in the forefront of integrating feminist and ecological concerns. Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether and others remind us not only to savour the beauty of a universe which God delighted in creating, but also to act to preserve it for future generations.²²

With women writing spirituality, it is no accident that there has been an explosion of books about finding God in ordinary things, in simple pleasures, in home and family life, in sexuality and relationships – in the arena traditionally known as women's world.²³ One begins to question the usefulness of rigid distinctions between private and public, between personal and social spheres of life, and to pay attention instead to the place where they intersect: communal and relational life.

Embodiment: communion in relationship

Women find in relationships a source for theological reflection on our human desire for wholeness, connection and communion. One poet pictures women as 'linked by chains of fires/To every woman who has kept a hearth'.²⁴ Thurston speaks of 'the real pleasure of mutual vulnerability' which she discovers in loving and being loved in an embodied way.²⁵ Mary E. Hunt reflects on the 'fierce tenderness' of friendship, and McFague explores the model of God as friend.²⁶ Johnson finds profound relational meaning in the doctrine

of the communion of saints, which speaks of 'persons connected to one another in virtue of being connected to the sacred mystery at the heart of the world'. In Johnson's brilliant retrieval, this familiar symbol emerges with Spirit-charged power not only to link contemporaries across boundaries of culture, location, gender and class, 'all within an egalitarian community of grace', but also to transcend time and space, uniting 'the living with the dead and the yet to be born . . . in a circle around the eucharistic table, the body of Christ which encompasses the earth itself'.²⁷

The reason that women typically attend to bodiliness and to the relationships which it makes possible is not that we have internalized stereotypes by which a sexist culture has defined us for generations. Rather, as Susan Ross notes, our reflection reveals 'a critical awareness of the integrity and complexity of the embodied person'. Against patriarchy's 'objectification and denigration of women's bodiliness', we claim and celebrate both the 'ambiguity of bodily experience' and its 'uniqueness and power'.²⁸

Power: shaking the foundations

The women's movement is threatening to many, says Joan Chittister forthrightly, because 'it challenges the very foundations upon which power is based in every institution in society',²⁹ that is, the paradigm of domination and submission. In simplest terms, power is merely the capacity to act and to effect change. But we know well that it can and does take the form of coercion, and often on the battleground of women's bodies.

One out of every three women has known physical violence. In every country of the world, Johnson reminds us, 'women are bodily and sexually exploited, physically abused, raped, battered, and murdered . . . Men do this to women in a way that women do not do to men.' Beyond the level of personal behaviours, domination of the feared and hated 'other' has become embedded in 'analogously abusive' patterns and social structures: 'male over female, white over black, rich over poor, strong over weak, armed military over unarmed citizens, human beings over nature'.³⁰ Feminists believe that our concepts of God mirror and undergird such rampant 'abuse of the "other"'. Exclusively patriarchal images of the holy have severe societal as well as devotional consequences. Thurston asks, 'Has the naming of God as Father contributed to the dominant position of men in society and made it possible for many men to regard

women as inferior and for some men to abuse, rape and torture women and children?'³¹

Deep in women's collective unconscious is the memory of a history of abusive power, whether expressed as physical torture, psychological enslavement or structural exclusion. One woman's contemplation led her to draw the bent-over woman (Lk 13:10-17) as a tiny, kneeling figure, stooping over the toe of a man's oversized boot. Reflecting on the drawing, she realized that 'the only way the woman sees any reflection of herself is in the shiny toe' of the man's shoe, and, even more ominously, that in a split second 'the shoe could move to kick her without warning or provocation and she would be devastated'.³² It is no secret that physical violence against women has its structural counterpart, even within the community of Jesus' disciples. Women theologians have been silenced without a hearing; stories of countless other women, lay and religious, who have been summarily dismissed from pastoral and educational ministries are all too familiar.³³ The poet Marge Piercy seems to describe this kind of coercive power when she writes, 'Power warps because it involves joy in domination . . .'³⁴

Spiritual guides remind us that the Spirit often moves most powerfully in the place of deepest suffering, opening a space for new possibilities, unleashing freedom and creativity.³⁵ Women are probing the depths of their abusive experiences, bringing them into the light, wrestling with them until their God-meaning is revealed. Works such as the *Concilium* volume, *Violence against women*, show that stories of abuse are not simply narratives of personal pain but authentic *loci theologici*.³⁶

Power and authority: from power-over to power-with-and-for

The Christian gospel engages and overturns the world's understanding of power as domination. 'It [i.e., exercising authority by lording it over others] must not be so with you' (Mt 16:20). The God revealed in Jesus Christ models mutuality, sharing divine power in a kind of 'dance of the Spirit'.³⁷ Spirit-filled structures invite participation, release energy and awaken freedom. But such structures are far from real in a world that distorts power.

Mary Catherine Hilbert raises the thorny question of authority and discernment. Who discerns when and where God's Spirit is at work, she asks. 'Who has the authority to interpret events, persons, symbols, writings, or teachings as revelatory of the divine and therefore normative in the community?'³⁸

Leadership and authority look radically different when seen through the dual lenses of the gospel and women's experience. Women who have borne the brunt of authority exercised as power-over report that they often feel ambivalent about assuming leadership roles. The stakes are high: women leaders, especially in the churches, routinely encounter hostility, tokenism and harassment, are treated as invisible and expendable and have a higher than average rate of burnout. Victimized by 'a theology of service that reinforces our personal and social inferiority', most women have no desire to be leaders in the patriarchal mould.³⁹ Carol Lakey Hess marshals biblical, theological, developmental and educational evidence to critique the ways in which churches teach young women self-sacrifice without fostering their self-discovery and expression. She argues for a style of 'caretaking leadership' in communities of faith which is marked by 'conversational education . . . hard dialogue and deep connections'.⁴⁰

A new story is emerging, one which tells of structures that nurture and power that is shared. In corporate and ecclesial settings, in the literature of systems theory and in the concrete praxis of communal life, women are playing a significant role in shaping this new story. In 1996 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the US surveyed women's current involvement in church leadership roles and recommended fifteen ways in which the church could better align its practice with its preaching.⁴¹ Organizational consultant Margaret Wheatley contemplates living organisms in all their patterned chaos, elegantly simple complexity and self-renewing energy, and finds fresh insights which she applies to the workings of human systems. Though science, not feminism, is her starting point, her writings on leadership have much in common with works on women's spirituality.⁴²

An agenda for women and spirituality: dealing with differences

What emphases are likely to unfold in the next decade? What are some of the issues which need further fleshing out? Although only a few can be mentioned here, each has to do with diversity. One major area which deserves an article in its own right is the variety of women's spiritualities (plural). Basic to feminist theology is the premise that women from different sociocultural backgrounds experience themselves, their God and their world differently; no one culture can claim to speak normatively for all women.⁴³ The gift inherent in our diversity needs to be celebrated, not just tolerated, or

else 'the possibility of communicating in love with each other, let alone with God who is manifestly and necessarily different from us, is patently impossible'.⁴⁴

Differences can provoke tension and rivalry as well as evoke celebration. Women need to wrestle with the hard reality of one another's differences and the various choices to which they give rise.⁴⁵ At a profoundly concrete level, women, especially those who have borne, lost, given up or aborted a child, know what it means to hold in tension the often competing claims of self and others, individual and community. The witness of their experience can bring a clarity that is sorely needed in heated discussions on sexual and reproductive issues.

Another agenda item touches on different ways of interpreting the gift of embodiment at the heart of women's experience. Does listening to the wisdom of our bodies have to end up in the biological determinism which seems to be at the root of Rome's arguments against the ordination of women? The 'rich symbolism of the binary gender system', especially in the sensual and nuptial imagery used by many women mystics, needs continued exploration.⁴⁶

So does the theology of women as *imago Dei*. Human beings image God in all the particularity of their gendered selves, as women or men. But what does it mean to say that humans *as human* image God? Or does gender so define us that one kind of experience excludes the other? Do women and men experience God in the same way or in absolutely unique though complementary ways? The answers, of course, have led to painfully divergent theological and pastoral conclusions. Many on both sides of the chasm feel that the body of Christ itself is being violated. A common conversation on embodiment might well open a door to healing.

Conclusion

In these postmodern times a 'seismic shift' in experience of God seems to be taking place, one which 'supports and strengthens prophetic and contemplative consciousness'.⁴⁷ Wisdom-Sophia, a life-giving God-image for many women, gives us the ability to discern the source and terminus of our desires. She invites us to be at home in our bodies and in the body of God which is the created world. She awakens in us the power to speak freely and act boldly to help make God's dream come true. Women's spiritual writings of the past decade reveal that, subtly and insistently, God is indeed shaping us into contemplatives and prophets. And we who embody her life

'cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard' (Acts 4:20).

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NOTES

1 Downey, *Understanding Christian spirituality* (New York, 1997), p 7.

2 *Ibid.*, p 93.

3 Most of the works discussed are by US authors. I regret that I was unable to include writings by such British women theologians as Mary Grey, *Prophecy and mysticism: the heart of the postmodern Church* (Herndon, 1997), Grace Jantzen, *Power, gender and Christian mysticism* (Cambridge, 1995) and Ursula King, *Women and spirituality: voices of protest and promise* (London, 1989, 1993). Also not represented are women from cultures and contexts other than white and North American. They deserve an article in their own right; see n 43 below.

4 The lectures cited, dating from 1987 to 1998, have been published as separate volumes by Paulist Press. The authors are, respectively, Mary Collins, Maria Harris, Elizabeth Dreyer, Joan Chittister, Dolores Leckey, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Elizabeth Johnson, Gail Porter Mandell, Diana Hayes, Jeannette Rodriguez, Mary C. Boys and Kathleen Norris. In a more schematic way, Sandra Schneiders' eleven-page entry in M. Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville MN, 1993), p 400, touches on many of the same themes. Feminist spirituality, she states, is grounded in the experience of women; affirms bodiliness; pays attention to earth, cosmos and nonhuman nature; gives prominence to ritual; holds that personal spiritual transformation is closely linked with action to transform social structures.

5 See Marilyn Sewell (ed), *Cries of the spirit: a celebration of women's spirituality* (Boston, 1991), p 2. Among many others, note the work of artists Meinrad Craighead, Doris Klein CSA and Mary Southard CSJ, musicians Bernadette Farrell, Colleen Fulmer and Kathy Sherman CSJ, poets Megan McKenna, Mary Lou Sleevi and Miriam Therese Winter.

6 Sewell, p 3. The term *eros* is used in the sense given it by Audre Lorde – the assertion of the life force, the capacity for joy, the power of feeling deeply, etc. See her *Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power* (Trumansberg NY, 1978).

7 See 'Impasse and dark night' in Joann Wolski Conn (ed), *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development*, 2nd edn (New York, 1996); 'A discipleship of equals: voices from tradition – Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross' in Francis Eigo (ed), *A discipleship of equals: towards a Christian feminist spirituality* (Villanova PA, 1988); 'Desolation as dark night', *The Way Supplement* 82 (Spring 1995), pp 96–108, all by Constance FitzGerald OCD.

8 Several men who have written compellingly of desire and the Spirit are William Barry, *God's passionate desire and our response* (Notre Dame IN, 1993), David Lonsdale, *Listening to the music of the Spirit: the art of discernment* (Notre Dame IN, 1992) and Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending our desires* (Notre Dame, 1994).

9 Weaver, *Springs of water in a dry land* (Boston, 1993), p 99.

- 10 Brock, *Journeys by heart: a Christology of erotic power* (New York, 1988, 1995), p 26.
- 11 Thurston, *Because of her testimony: the word in female experience* (New York, 1997); Weaver, *op. cit.*, p 98.
- 12 Killen, *Finding our voices: women, wisdom, and faith* (New York, 1997).
- 13 The quotes are from Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and prophets: a feminist theological reading of the communion of saints* (New York, 1998). Even a summary list of recent historical studies about women is far beyond the scope of this article.
- 14 McNamara, *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia* (Cambridge MA and London, 1996).
- 15 Byrne (ed), *The hidden tradition: women's spiritual writings rediscovered: an anthology* (New York, 1991); Cahill (ed), *Wise women: over 2000 years of spiritual writing by women* (New York & London, 1996); Young (ed), *An anthology of sacred texts by and about women* (New York, 1997); Ward and Wild, *Conversations: meeting our forebears in faith* (Harrisburg PA, 1997).
- 16 (New York, 1995), p 82, 105.
- 17 See, e.g., Sanna, *Motherhood: a spiritual journey* (New York, 1997); Thurston, *op. cit.* Many books on women's spirituality include rituals for marking these life passages. For the quoted phrase, I am indebted to a manuscript by Vivienne Joyce SC.
- 18 For example, see Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption: essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York, 1990) and Miles, *Practicing Christianity: critical perspectives for an embodied Christianity* (New York, 1990).
- 19 See, e.g., Mary Collins, *Women at prayer* (New York, 1987); Leslie Northrup, *Ritualizing women: patterns of feminine spirituality* (Cleveland, 1997); Susan Ross, 'God's embodiment and women' in Catherine La Cugna (ed), *Freeing theology: the essentials of theology in feminist perspective* (San Francisco, 1993).
- 20 See, e.g., Kathleen Fischer, *Autumn gospel: women in the second half of life* (New York, 1995) and Joyce Rupp, *Dear heart, come home: the path of midlife spirituality* (New York, 1996).
- 21 McFague, *The body of God: an ecological theology* (Minneapolis, 1993).
- 22 Johnson, *Woman, earth and creator Spirit* (New York, 1993); McFague, *op. cit.*; Ruether, *New woman, new earth* (San Francisco, 1975).
- 23 See, e.g., Elizabeth Dreyer, *Earth crammed with heaven: a spirituality of everyday life* (New York, 1994) and Macrina Wiederkehr, *A tree full of angels: seeing the holy in the ordinary* (San Francisco, 1988).
- 24 Elsa Gidlow, 'Chains of fire', excerpted in Sewell, *Cries of the spirit*, p 230.
- 25 Thurston, p 20. The phrase is quoted from Beverly Wildung Harrison's essay, 'The power of anger in the work of love'.
- 26 Hunt, *Fierce tenderness: a feminist theology of friendship* (New York, 1991); McFague, *Models of God: theology for an ecological, nuclear age* (Philadelphia, 1987).
- 27 Johnson, *Friends of God and prophets*, p 262.
- 28 Ross, "'He has pulled down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly": a feminist reflection on empowerment' in M. Downey (ed), *That they might live: power, empowerment and leadership in the Church* (New York, 1991), p 153.
- 29 Chittister, *Job's daughters: women and power* (New York, 1990), p 69.
- 30 Johnson, *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* (New York, 1992), pp 26-27.
- 31 Thurston, p 80.
- 32 Personal communication.
- 33 The cases of Sisters Carmel McEnroy and Barbara Fiand in the US and Ivone Gebara in Brazil come to mind, as well as numerous male theologians. See also Schneiders in *New dictionary*, p 401, for other generic examples of abuse 'in and from the Church'.
- 34 Piercy, 'The common living dirt' (excerpt), quoted in Cahill, *Wise women*, p 254.
- 35 See Killen, p 72.

36 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (eds), *Violence against women* (Maryknoll NY, 1994); see also J. Carlson Brown and C. R. Bohn (eds), *Christianity, patriarchy, and abuse: a feminist critique* (Cleveland, 1989).

37 Maria Harris, *Dance of the spirit: the seven steps of women's spirituality* (New York, 1989). She names the steps as awakening, discovering, creating, dwelling, nourishing, traditioning and transforming.

38 Hilbert, 'Experience and tradition – can the center hold?' in LaCugna (ed), *Freeing theology*, pp 60–61.

39 Carol E. Becker, *Leading women: how church women can avoid leadership traps and negotiate the gender maze* (Nashville TN, 1996), pp 23–24.

40 Hess, *Caretakers of our common house: women's development in communities of faith* (Nashville TN, 1997), esp. ch 6 and ch 7.

41 Jeanne Merkel (ed), *Creating a home: benchmarks for church leadership roles for women* (Silver Spring MD, 1996).

42 Wheatley, *Leadership and the new science* (San Francisco, 1992, 1994) and *A simpler way* (San Francisco, 1996).

43 It is obvious, I trust, that this article reflects the limitations and gifts of my perspective as a white, middle-class North American woman of European ancestry. An adequate treatment of the rich diversity of women's spiritualities is beyond the scope of this article. M. Shawn Copeland, Diana Hayes, Emilie Townes, Renita Weems and Delores Williams write eloquently as African-American womanist theologians. *Mujerista* theologies are given voice by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Virginia Fabella, Ivone Gebara, Jeannette Rodriguez, Yolanda Tarango and Elsa Tamez, among others. See Johnson, *Friends of God*, p 271, n 30, for a sampling of feminist theologies from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Australia and Europe.

44 Maitland, *A big-enough God*, pp 8–9.

45 See Hess, ch 5, and also Linda Moody, *Women encounter God: theology across the boundaries of difference* (Maryknoll NY, 1996).

46 See, e.g., Anne Murphy, 'Theological trends: the lenses of gender', *The Way* vol 36, no 4 (October 1996), pp 323–330.

47 Elizabeth Johnson, 'Between the times: religious life and postmodern experience of God', *Review for Religious* (January–February 1994), p 21. She is writing about women's religious life, but her vision, I believe, holds true for women in general.