A search for 'sacred' bodies:

Re-visioning and re-valuing women's bodies.

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'The will to change begins in the body,
not in the mind.
My politics is in my body,
accruing and expanding
with every act of resistance
and each of my failures.'[1]

[1] Adrienne Rich 'Tear Gas' *Poems Selected and New 1950 –1974,* Norton, New York 1974 :140.

Abstract

This study details a quest. It is a quest to uncover what bodies signify in contemporary society, and especially what women's bodies signify in a world where they are vulnerable to gender-specific violence. It is a quest that seeks to find what informs the relationship of one body to another and the interaction between them. It is a quest to discover if it is possible, or helpful, in this situation for women's bodies to be re-visioned as 'sacred'. In this study, seeking to discover these things leads to engagement with some leading theorists on the 'body'. It involves addressing the issues that surround speaking of 'women' or 'women's experience' in a postmodern world. Ultimately, it leads to engagement with the lived experience of a group of women who are life-long church members. In this research, creative methods, group work, and life-history interviews allow participants to share their own experiences of embodiment, and to reflect on them and the interface between their everyday lives and their worship experience.

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Contents

Introduction

My starting-point – why search at all?

This search for 'sacred' bodies[2] began for me in March 2001 when I attended a conference in Geneva. The conference brought together women who live in situations of war and conflict across the world. They gave first-hand accounts of what happens to women in such situations. They also told of the endemic violence that women in their societies suffer. Hearing their stories, sharpened for me, an existing concern for the bodies of women and girls and what is done to them. Over the last five years, such interaction with individual women, work with the World Council of Churches on a gender violence project, and broadening the scope of my reading, has led me to 'hear' (mostly through written accounts), of the experiences of many women of different, races, classes, nationalities, and religions, who have suffered abuse at the hands of husbands and male partners. Evidence from these personal encounters, supports the contention of those who work in this field, that such violence against women is no respecter of class, racial or other boundaries. A study by Lesley Orr has ably demonstrated that such 'domestic abuse' affects women who belong to Christian communities in Scotland (Orr 2000). As a minister in the Church of Scotland this is an issue that is, for me, literally close to home.

Such testimony as I have encountered, has stirred empathy and questioning. I find myself asking if this is particularly intense because I also have a body of a woman, which leads me

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[2] My initial understanding of the word 'sacred' is drawn from the work of Emile Durkheim. He writes of it as that which is set apart (Durkheim t1953b:70 in Pickering 1984: 126), that which society holds in its highest esteem which is not to be challenged or desecrated. I also draw from Durkheim the understanding that the sacred is created and held in place by society. In his classic work *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* t1915(1912), Durkheim spoke of the sacred character of something being superadded or superimposed upon it (t1915d:229, in Pickering 1984:131). Durkheim writes in an article on the dualism of human nature. ' Sacred things are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects' (Durkheim t1960c:335 in Pickering 1984:131). In his dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, human bodies, and everything related to the body, fell, for Durkheim into the category of the profane (Durkheim t1960c:334, in Pickering 1984:134). In this dissertation I seek the possibility of a re-visioning that could inscribe bodies, including women's bodies as sacred, in terms of one of the definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary, as sacrosanct and inviolable.
My concentration on bodies in this study, does not mean that I am unaware that emotional abuse is profoundly damaging. My concern is to focus on a re-valuing of bodies which could have implications across the whole spectrum of abuse.

to experience a shared identity with other women, beyond simply that of a shared humanity. The experience of this testimony also stirs a strong desire that this situation should change and a need to understand how such change might happen. It raises the question of what *agency* do those in such situations of oppression have to bring about change, both for themselves in their individual circumstances, and on a social/cultural level. Where such agency appears to be lacking, where it is hard for those who suffer to be heard or seen, is there role for advocacy by others on their behalf?

While I am aware that increasing provision is being made, especially here in Scotland, to help women to become survivors rather than victims of such abuse, and that ministers and church communities may offer sanctuary and pastoral support, I have begun to ask if real change in this situation might not require a re-valuing of women's bodies within culture. I have provisionally used the term 'sacred' bodies to describe the 'horizon'[3] that I would seek in this respect, although part of my task in this study will be to explore the appropriateness of this term.

As a woman brought up in the Christian faith, trained in Christian ministry who belongs to a worshipping Christian congregation, I also have a strong interest in the relationship of religion - religious beliefs, practice and religious symbols - to culture and to issues of power, and agency. Working, principally, as I do, within Christian faith communities I would want to question the role of religious symbolism as itself part of a discourse, or a number of discourses, which either underpin or challenge the status quo. A key question for me is what part can religious symbol systems play in social transformation? Do women have a different relationship to such symbol systems from men, and if so is this difference linked to their different embodiment? Do women, as has been claimed, (hooks 1984: in Taylor 1990) have a double perspective, able to inhabit the 'given' dominant position and simultaneously have a view from the margins? [4]

[3] My use of 'horizon' is drawn from Grace Jantzen's book *Becoming Divine*, 1998.
[4] This point will be expanded on in the discussion of standpoint epistemology on pp. 35-41.

In her book *Transgressive Corporeality* (1995), Prosser MacDonald, claims that for Nietzsche, ' the form of the will-to-truth which seeks a truth that is constant, unitary and universal attains this truth only through a violation of that which changes, is non-unitary and particular'(1995:22). She goes on to say, 'Traditional metaphysics is both a violator of the body and a covering over or mystification of this violation'(1995:23). As I have indicated, I am concerned with the fate of bodies, bodies which, whatever else they are, are changing, non unitary and always particular. This work is informed by an understanding that, historically, in the Christian church (as in the secular world), such violence to, and violation of bodies, inherent in the traditional metaphysics, has been written in a particular way on the bodies of women. I suggest this has been so, in part, because women have been constructed as the body side of a body /spirit dualism that has held sway (Graham 1995:11-16). It is my contention that the embodied experience of women has, in the past, often been suppressed and devalued or co-opted into economies of domination to serve as the 'other' over against which the normative 'male' is constructed. One question that I pursue is 'What is the relationship of this embodied experience to religious practice and contemporary understanding of the sacred?' As feminist theology continues to raise awareness of these issues, can previously suppressed or ignored, lived experience of women become increasingly visible or audible within the church, in the realms of theology and liturgy, and offer its own revelation of the sacred? If this is possible could it lead, in a reflexive, chiasmic action, to a greater sacralisation of bodies and a challenge to economies of domination dependant on violence, without creating a dominant and dominating hegemony of its own?

Pursuing answers to these questions, in **Chapter 1,** I will explore the work of a number of writers who place bodies at the centre of their theories, to see what understandings and interpretations they might offer of bodies, particularly those of women. I wish to discover if their theories shed any light on how the experiences of women, especially those who suffer abuse, might be heard, and how social change that could lessen or prevent such abuse, might be brought about.

In this study I intend to talk to and listen to 'ordinary women' to hear something of their experiences of their bodies in everyday life and in their religious context. In **Chapter 2,** therefore, alert to the problems of describing an area of human experience as the 'experiences of women', especially in the light of recent thinking on identity and epistemology, I will address some of the current debates concerning claims for experiential knowledge.

Chapter 3 offers an account of my research strategy. Having a concern that this be conducted according to the developing principles of feminist research, at the beginning of the chapter I outline some key characteristics of feminist research methodology and go on to show how these are present in the methods that I employ.

Chapter 4 is an account of the findings of this research, and this is followed by a conclusion, which includes suggestions for future directions in which such a project might develop.

Although motivated by a concern for the bodies of women damaged by violence, it is apparent that in a study of this scale it is not possible to explore in depth any relationship between how women's bodies are perceived by themselves and others, and the existence of widespread and endemic violence against women. This study will be limited to hearing some women's expression of their own understanding of their bodies, within daily life and in their worship experience, to attempting to uncover what has shaped and continues to shape such understandings, and to seeking their response to the suggestion that bodies might be re-visioned as sacred.

Chapter 1

In search of real bodies

'(T)he body has a way of bleeding through even the thickest of conceptual overlays' (O'Donovan-Anderson 1996:3)

Michael O'Donovan-Anderson's statement highlights one of the main issues at the heart of contemporary studies of 'the body'. A central question is, is there an essential 'body' of any sort that becomes overlaid with theories or concepts, but still makes itself known to us by 'bleeding through'. If there is how do we recognise it? Or, is the body only visible, comprehensible, describable, because it has been constructed, layered, sedimented, or cast by discourse, into a certain form?

It has been rightly claimed that 'there is no consensus on what the body is and what constitutes it'(Cream 1994:32 in Holliday and Hassard 2001:2). Views on this matter range between those that claim that knowledge of the body is entirely created through discourse, and on the other hand, those who hold to the body as a pre-discursive given. Many writers hold quite a nuanced view, allowing for the body's materiality, while seeing it as acting as an interface with culture. As Lois McNay, in her discussion of gender and agency would have it, 'As a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological, the body is a dynamic mutable frontier' (McNay 2000:32). Or again, as expressed by Meleau-Ponty, 'Everything is both manufactured and natural in man (sic)'(Merleau-Ponty 1962:189). Given this range of theoretical approach, and trying to fix 'real' bodies as objects of thought, other questions may be: which theoretical approach to understanding the body proves most enlightening or indeed emancipatory for those whose bodies are suffering, and which offers most hope of a different future, with greater agency for the individual subject?

My interest here, in terms of my search for 'sacred' bodies, lies in the possibility that if bodies are socially constructed then there may be scope for them to be re-constructed as

more sacred and less vulnerable to abuse.[5] Can there be a re-visioning of women's bodies in their materiality or their cultural construction which establishes them as precious, rather than frightening and in need of control and containment?

Exploring this question I will look briefly at some aspects of the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler who have stressed a representational (i.e. social constructionist) understanding of the body. I will ask if these writers, in fact, offer insights *about* the body rather than *from* the body. In an attempt to engage with the lived body, I will explore an experiential (existential/phenomenological) perspective, engaging with the work of Merleau-Ponty. Even in the work of such an existentialist writer, real bodies may still evade us, therefore, I intend to explore the contribution of John D Caputo as he wrestles with a 'post-ethical' response to the suffering 'Other', and will examine his distinction between the body and flesh. His work points also to the work of Elaine Scarry on the body in pain, which has relevance for this exploration. Finally, I wish to look to the writing of Julia Kristeva particularly her work on 'abjection' and her model for ethical behaviour drawn from the maternal body.

As already acknowledged, this is a slippery subject, and in order to have some 'real' human bodies at the centre of my thinking, I will bring the theories I encounter into dialogue with the documented experiences of a specific group of women, the so-called Korean 'comfort women'.

The 'comfort women'

In December 1991, three elderly South Korean women filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government, claiming systematic enslavement and abuse as a result of their treatment at the hands of the Imperial Army during World War Two. As their case unfolded, and women's groups took up their cause, the full scale of their story emerged. It was revealed that as many as 200,000 young women (mostly 14-18 year olds) from South–East Asia, especially Korea, were forcibly conscripted by the Japanese forces and drafted to work as sex-slaves

[5] ' What is socially constructed can be deconstructed and reconstructed through deconstruction and reconstruction of language itself' (Cooey 1994:26).

throughout South-East Asia and the Pacific during the 1930s and up to 1945. This was a deliberate Imperial Army policy, aimed at preventing the spread of venereal disease among the troops (hence the young age of the girls), and at preventing the soldiers from committing sexual crimes in the areas where they were fighting. Corralled in small cubicles, the women were required to have sex with as many as thirty men a day. At the end of the war some of these women overwhelmed by shame, took their own lives, others found it impossible to return home, while yet others lived for years in poverty, suffering physically and mentally from their ordeal. The plight of these so called 'comfort women' was subsequently suppressed for nearly fifty years, preventing the women from making public their experience. A key factor in the eventual surfacing of the 'comfort women's' story was the involvement of Korean and other campaigning feminists, originally concerned with the issue of sex tourism in Korea.

As well as the abuse and damage done to these young women, the aspect of their story that stands out, is the time that it took for their experiences to surface, which raises questions as to why this should be so. Elaine Graham claims that in the case of the 'comfort women', 'strong structural factors were at work which created a culture of silence...cultural factors predisposed the 'comfort women' to a life of "abjection", because their experiences inscribed on their suffering bodies transgressed too many cultural taboos' (Graham unpub:15). She points out that theirs was a culture built on elaborate observations of honour, shame and social status, which were carried and embodied in women's bodies. The passage into speech of the stories of the surviving comfort women was always, already circumscribed by the concealed dynamics of gender and race. They could not be heard until major cultural shifts began to take place in South East Asia (Graham unpub:18).

Michel Foucault

With the story of the comfort women as a 'conversation partner', I turn to the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault has described his work as constituting a 'history of bodies' and the manner in which what is most vital in them has been invested (Foucault 1981:152). The body has been central to Foucault's account of the relation between power and

knowledge, with his focus being on the body as discursively ordered. His interest has lain in the way bodies are disciplined, and in mapping the relation between the "body" and the effects of power. He claims that 'The body is moulded by a great many distinct regimes' (Foucault 1971:153 in Hancock et al [eds.] 2000). Also that it is an outcome of the play of power and power 'reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault 1978:39 in Hancock et al [eds.] 2000).

In his 1979 [1975] work *Discipline and Punish*; Foucault examined the transition in the 18th and 19th centuries from control by punishments and torture of the body, to control by incarceration and discipline by surveillance. Under such penal practice the body was, according to Foucault rendered 'docile'. In this analysis it is suggested that the body was transformed by a whole machinery of power, and the emphasis is put on the body's malleability. Prison was just one part of a caceral net spread throughout social institutions and disciplinary mechanisms.

In his later work Foucault refined his understanding of the operation of power. He moved beyond his understanding of disciplined bodies as simply 'docile bodies'. Extrapolating from his work on ethics as practised in classical Greece and Rome he suggested that technologies of domination may be balanced by 'technologies of self'.

> 'Technologies of self which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts and conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality' (Foucault 1988:18).

This gives the sense that virtuous existence may be accomplished by an exquisite life performance. He implies that the self is not given to us but that 'we have to create ourselves as a work of art' (Foucault 1986:351, in McNay 1994:146). When such aesthetic

practices are advocated as a form of contemporary ethics, McNay points out that this is seen by some critics as a project for privileged minorities, liberated from all functions in the material reproduction of society – little more than a celebration of 'public school virtues' (McNay 1994:146-147). McNay allows that Foucault's concern is with grounding notions of creativity and aesthetics, removing them from the sphere of 'high art' (McNay 1994:147). It is a reclaiming of aesthetics designed to reactivate a kind of imaginative utopianism.

Glancing again at the bodies of the 'comfort women' it is possible to see them, to some degree, in terms of Foucault's initial 'docile body' paradigm, both in their original kidnap and abuse and in their silenced post-war existence when shame immobilised them and left them unable to speak or seek justice. The 'comfort women' could be seen to have been shaped by discourses of power, by surveillance, both external and internal to themselves, into 'docile bodies'. The expectations of their own culture and cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity, which I will elaborate on, served to leave them little scope for resistance or self-determination. Having been abused, they were silenced by their shame, illustrating Foucault's understanding of the normalising nature of internalised disciplinary power.

One aspect of Foucault's later thinking is his understanding of the impersonal, all pervading, nature of power that by its very nature implies resistance. He proposed that resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power, rather it is more like the opposite: states of power are continually engendered or incited on account of the potential counter powers which co-exist with them. He claims that power can only be exercised over 'free subjects and only in so far as they are free' (Foucault 1982:221 in Sawicki 1991:25). For Foucault resistance is more effective when it is directed at a technique of power rather than at power in general. Resistance consists in refusing the techniques that allow for the exercise of power.

Set against Foucault's later work, and an understanding of resistance being present where techniques of power are in operation, it would seem that the 'comfort women' once

installed by the Japanese army in comfort stations had little scope for developing such resistance, the situation being rather one of the creation of 'docile bodies' as in Foucault's earlier understanding.

Nonetheless, it is the case, that there was the possibility of resistance to a limited degree for some of the 'comfort women'. It was possible for some to overcome their conditioning to regard them selves as worthless damaged goods. One who resisted in this way was Soo-Bock. We read of her, ' After many days of despair and crying, Soo-Bock determined that she would survive. She could not die like a dog in a strange land. She started to eat as much as she could, and she also became very obedient'(Hyun Kyung 1996: 132). For many of the women, however, the experience was too damaging and their cultural conditioning was too strong. At the end of the war they took their own lives or lived in shamed obscurity. For the most part, it was only when an alternative reading of their experience was offered by outside agencies that some could take some limited control over their lives, and begin to practice what might be identified as 'technologies of self'. Again we hear of Soo-Bock. When trying to rebuild her life after the war, she 'was determined to bring her own beautiful lotus flower of life to bloom out of her muddy past'(Hyun Kyung 1996:132).

Foucault, whose work over time, thus offers a range of understandings of the operation of power and resistance, has been taken to task for his extreme reluctance to attribute explicit agency to subjects in his early account of power, portraying individuals as passive bodies, constituted by power and immobilised in a discourse of discipline (McNay 1994:100-104, 2000:8). However, his description of the creation of docile bodies does seem in many ways an accurate one for the state that the 'comfort women' found themselves in, one in which their own agency was very limited.

Foucault's work on the creation of 'docile bodies' has been amended and employed, not without some questioning, by some feminist writers. For example Sandra Bartky has used Foucault's concept of the operation of power in her analyses of the fashion and beauty regimes in contemporary USA. Bartky describes the internalization by women, of practices and understandings of femininity that reinforce the very power relations that oppress them

(in Allen 1996 in Hekman (ed.) 1996:275). This will be a theme that emerges in the conversations of women who participated in this research.

Judith Butler

Judith Butler is influenced strongly by Foucault and in her work emphasises the constituted nature of corporeality. Butler is aware of the problems that post-structural analyses, such as her own, pose for those who would see the importance of agency for gendered bodies. She has said 'One hears warnings like the following: If everything is discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is text, what about violence and bodily injury'? (Butler 1993:28)

Focusing on understandings of sex and gender, Butler claims that while sexual difference is often evoked as an issue of material differences, it is 'never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices' (Butler 1993:1). She makes clear that this is not to say that discourses cause sexual difference. Butler claims that the category of 'sex' is normative, what Foucault has called a 'regulatory ideal'. This has the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls (Butler 1993:1). However Butler would also claim that the materialization of this ideal construct of 'sex' is never quite complete 'bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled'(Butler 1993:2). This can then open possibilities for a process of rematerialization, whereby 'the force of the regulatory law, turned against itself can spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law'(Butler 1993:2). 'Techniques' by which such rematerializations might be achieved, involve performance and parody. Butler does not, as some have accused her of doing deny the materiality of the body 'what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power...'(Butler 1993:2).

When considering the application of Butler's work to bodies experiencing suffering, it may be her understanding of those who fall outside the sexed identifications that the hetero-

sexual imperative enables via discursive means, that is significant. She would claim that the establishment of this exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects' but who form the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject. ' The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'unihabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject' (Butler 1993:3). Butler would claim that the task of feminist theory is ' to refigure this necessary outside as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome' (Butler 1993:53).

Under this analysis the 'comfort women' would appear to have been placed outside the domain of the subject, the construction of masculinity within their own culture requiring a double construction of unmarried women as either virgin or whore, with neither category being the subjects of their own lives; leaving men the only true subjects with their own agency in that culture. After the war, the'comfort women' were truly in an abject realm, no longer sex slaves, but unable to return home as respectable women. We might ask whether their experience challenged their society's existing discourse on gender. Did their outside position (neither virgin, unsullied wife or whore), become a 'future horizon' as Butler suggests? Perhaps the work done in campaigning on their behalf could be seen as a beginning of that process.

Soh (Soh:2000:4-5) claims that masculinist sexual culture permeated the traditional cultures of Japan and Korea. She uses this term masculinist to refer to those men and women who believe in the Confucian principle of male superiority and in male 'sex rights', that is, for men to have access to the female body both inside and outside marriage. This led to what Soh calls a masculinist double standard for sexual conduct, wherein women were/are socialised to regard loss of virginity as a shameful condition deserving social ostracism. Raised in this culture the 'comfort women' were conditioned to regard the preservation of sexual purity being as important as life itself. Thus they carefully hid their ordeal as 'comfort women' for fear of social stigma and ostracisation. Within this masculinist

culture women were classified into two types according to the main functions of their sexuality: women to marry for procreation and women to hire for recreation. While men could engage in sexual recreation under the state-run system of *kisaeng*, traditionally women's sexuality was rigidly controlled by means of the cult of virginity/chastity. Regardless of the individual circumstances, women who lost their virginity outside marriage, or who were not chaste within it, were considered sullied, and made to feel ashamed. Following their ordeal, the 'comfort women' could no longer embody the acceptable face of female gender in their society, that of virgin or respectable wife and there seems to have been little space to subvert or re-articulate their place as women in that society. They had performed their gender as whores, albeit forced ones and they were left with this construction of their gendered identity. They could not re-enter respectable society because of immobilising, silencing shame.

Engaging with Butler's understanding of bodies, and with a concern for the bodies of abused women, I note McNay's insight that in many ways Butler replicates what McNay sees as Foucault's failure to integrate a theory of agency with an understanding of the disciplinary inscription of the body. McNay would claim that Butler fails to connect the symbolic construction of the body to other material relations in which the process takes place (McNay 2000:35).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

For an existential approach to the body, I turn now to the work of French phenomenologist philosopher Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenology is a 20th century philosophical movement dedicated to describing the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences. The phenomenological method is one of description, designed to reawaken the primordial experience underlying all our reconstructions of the world. One question with regard this quest to hear and validate the experience of women, particularly those who suffer abuse, is whether such phenomenology, such description, can meaningfully portray *women's* experience.

For Merleau-Ponty all knowledge takes place within horizons opened up by perception. He took phenomenology's concern to be with the pre-reflective world, which is the background of all reflection. Merleau-Ponty stressed the role of the active, involved body in all human knowledge. He wanted to pursue a genuinely concrete philosophy and saw a focus on the actual human situation as the starting point for any authentic philosophy. He questioned the value of scientific thinking, ' a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the 'there is' which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body....that actual body I call mine....Further *associated bodies* must be brought forward along with my body...'(Merleau-Ponty 1964:160-161 in Langer 1989:xi).

In the place of traditional approaches to the body, Langer in her commentary on Merleau-Ponty's major work *Phenomenology of Perception* 1962 [1945], suggests that he proposes that the body is ' a dynamic synthesis of intentionalities which by responding to the world's solicitations, brings perceptual structures into being in a ceaseless dialectic whereby both body and objects are constituted as such' (Langer 1989:149). What would this mean for the culturally immobilised, kidnapped and raped 'comfort women'? Does this express the possibility of some kind of agency and choice for the lived body? Is this another version of Foucault's 'technologies of self' or Butler's performance and parody?

Merleau-Ponty appears to have a rather attractive but utopian understanding of the relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other'. For him other people are not inaccessible minds incomprehensibly inhabiting impenetrable mechanisms whose functioning induces us to infer the existence of subjectivities confronting our own, rather for Merleau-Ponty, there is a direct pre-reflective communication of body subjects sharing a perceptual field. Again, as interpreted by Langer, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we are, 'primordially *of* the natural world and therefore fundamentally *at home* in it: that we similarly share a pre-reflective *bond* with others and the human world; that by our daily lives we participate in shaping our world and determining the course of our joint history; that our commitments are never completely unsupported since our freedom is always interwoven with that of

other people' (Langer 1989:152-153). She goes on to claim that for Merleau-Ponty ' A fundamental mutual comprehension thus subtends any subsequent misunderstandings, so that our basic relations with others are not ones of confrontation but of co-operation. Prior to any refusal of others, our bodily being establishes a pre-personal unity with them; and it is in virtue of this unity that selfhood can develop at all' (Langer 1989:151-154). In a close reading of *The Visible and the Invisible* Langer suggest that Merleau-Ponty saw the encounter between 'us' and 'what is' as one of presence in which our very openness upon what is, testifies to our primordial bond with it and brings to light a common 'flesh'

> '....my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived) and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world, *reflects* it encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [*senti*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or overlapping....This also means: my body is not only one perceived among others, it is the measurant of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world'(Merleau-Ponty 1968 (1964):248-249).

In his later work *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty saw the divergence of 'my body' from 'the other's' as a difference that is discovered rather than projected. As he understands the link with 'the other'.

> 'My body is not given to me as a sum of sensations but as a whole. A form, which is both common to both visual and tactile perceptions, is the link between the other person's body and my own. The two bodies can therefore communicate through the different perceptions. Everything transpires as if the other person's intuitions and motor realizations existed in a sort of relation of internal encroachment, as if my body and the body of the other person together formed a system'(Merleau-Ponty 1982:52 in Dillon 1990:21).

and again, '... there is already a kind of presence of other people in me' (Merleau-Ponty 1982: 56 in Dillon 1990:21). He drew an analogy between the system that unifies an

individual body and that which joins individual bodies in the world. 'The hiatus between the hand that touches and the hand touched is spanned by the total being of my body as the separation of my body and the other's is spanned by the total being of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1968 (1964):148). However, at the same time, he can be interpreted as saying, ' there is a perceptual presentation of the other that includes his opacity, his recalcitrance, the recesses of his being that I am finally unable to penetrate, in short his ineffable transcendence'(Dillon 1990:23).

For Merleau-Ponty, when regarding the 'Other' there are original differentiations but they are of a unitary world that functions as a common domain to allow the exchanges and transgressions of reversibility to take place. As paraphrased by (Dillon 1990:23-24) he says, 'I can take up the space occupied by the other and see the world from that vantage because we dwell in the same world. This reversibility of position allows us to move toward a common ground, but ultimately because I cannot live in his (sic) body, I can only approximate his experience.'

The question of whether we discover the otherness of 'the Other' or project our own difference onto them will, of course, have a bearing on how we respond to others, and is relevant to a consideration of what understandings of our common bodily life are helpful to those who suffer. With regard to the work of Merleau-Ponty, he does suggest ways in which one body might be linked to and respond to another, but the critique of his understanding by Caputo that follows raises some relevant questions. As has been the case with many before and since, the Japanese Imperial Army, in their abuse of the 'comfort women' did not appear to perceive this unity of existence claimed by Merleau-Ponty, which allows us to see the world from the vantage point of the other, or if they did their behaviour was not shaped by such a perception.

John D Caputo

As we come to the work of John Caputo, who is concerned with 'disasters', where bodies are reduced to abject 'flesh', and remembering again the 'comfort women', we might reflect sombrely on Merleau-Ponty's assertion that we share one flesh and what that might

mean to us. In his book fluent and fascinating book, *Against Ethics* (1993), Caputo sets a 'Greek' rational philosophical way of thinking and being, over against what he calls 'jewgreek' engagement with the world. He takes Merleau-Ponty to task over the appropriateness of his phenomenological observations. While finding much that is appealing in phenomenology, he contends that Philosophy's 'body' is 'an active, athletic, healthy, erect, white male body, sexually able and unambiguously gendered, well-born, well-bred and well buried' (Caputo1993:194). Over against this, Caputo's concern is to engage with the bodies which he says have always fallen before phenomenology's epoche, that is the disfigured, diseased, unburied, sacrificial and ashen bodies, and with responding to them with what he calls a poetics of obligation [6]. 'For the poetics of obligation sides with disastrous, disfigured, ill-formed, ill-fated, star-crossed, damaged bodies –everything that the discourses call flesh' (Caputo 1993: 194-195). Even as phenomenology professes to deal with the stuff of everyday life, for Caputo it favours 'a proper body, a body with propriety and decorum, dignity and grace (with just a touch of tan)'(Caputo 1993:194).

It might be argued in his defence, that Merleau-Ponty has a damaged body at the heart of his major work *Phenomenology of Perception* in the case study of Schneider, suffering as he is from a head injury, but Caputo claims that the unfortunate Schneider is treated with a distancing eye by the phenomenological 'we'. 'Peering through the unidirectional glass of a philosophical reduction, we find that Schneider is he who is not like us but tells us who 'we' are' (Caputo 1993:195).There are echoes here of construction of the subject through one who is not like us, as in the realm of Butler's 'abject'[7].

Caputo goes on to outline what for him is the distinction between body, the agent body of philosophy, and the antiphlosophical category of 'flesh', which is a sphere of disfigured bodies, bodies in pain or laid low. As we understood from the writing of Merleau-Ponty, the 'body' is the transitive operation of intentional life, an active well organized agent that is borne into the world by the organization of its intentional operations. (Caputo 1993:203).

[6] For Caputo ' Obligation is a feeling, the feeling of being bound.....Something that demands my response...All that I know about... obligation is that I am taken hold of from without, seized by something else, something other' (Caputo 1993:7-8).
[7] See pp.16-17.

Merleau-Ponty's body-subject, this transitive agent body is carried beyond itself and buries itself in the world of its concerns - very Greek and very philosophic. In contrast, jewgreek bodies are disasters –lacking transcendence and transitivity, their intentional lines are jammed, their transcendence blunted, clogged, shut down – reduced to flesh (Caputo 1993:203). Caputo goes on to detail how flesh is not the site of being and sense as found in the work of Merleau-Ponty but rather it is the scene of a tearing asunder. Flesh is what happens to a body that is stripped of being and sense, that suffers the violent loss of its world. [8]

What Caputo (1993:201) calls the poetics of obligation turns on this ineradicable exposure, this quasi-transcendental vulnerability, the exposure to wounding, destruction and consumption that for him defines the figure of flesh. Caputo points out that Merleau-Ponty has a philosophy of flesh, and a beautiful philosophy of reversibility. Flesh for Merleau-Ponty is the chiasm, the intertwining of the visible and the invisible, the place where Being folds back upon itself, invaginates, turns itself inside out and thus allows itself to appear as visible (Caputo 1993:201). The 'invisible' life of seeing, hearing, touching, the whole ensemble of sentient life, cannot be deployed except from the site of a being which is itself visible, audible, sensible. Caputo recognises that for Merleau-Ponty, the visible world and the eye share a common flesh; the flesh is their common being and belonging together (Caputo 1993:201).

For Caputo this will not do, it is too devoted to seeing and perception, visibility and invisibility - too much an ocular phenomena that moves within the range of light (Caputo 1993:202). It is too taken up with an encompassing intertwining that ties everything together into an ontological totality. Caputo sees Merleau-Ponty's view as a form of idealism, (we noted its utopian quality), that takes the measure of the flesh in terms of light and opening. Post-holocaust, Caputo is remembering human ashes, cinders that for him make for obligation. For him, Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic intertwining has too little to do with flesh/*Fleisch* and ashen hair (Caputo 1993:202). Caputo's 'flesh' is not the body of Merleau-Ponty's reversibilities, seeing and being seen, touching and being touched, but

[8] See discussion of Scarry below.

rather it is involved in the more visceral reversibility of eating and being eaten. It is this disastrous and disordered flesh that Caputo sees as the site of *obligation.*

Elaine Scarry

I pause to expand on a point that Caputo makes in his work with the use Elaine Scarry's analysis of the operation of pain on the agency of the body. She does appear to work from an understanding of a material, sentient body. She speaks of 'the sheer material factualness of the human body' (Scarry 1985:14). In her classic exploration of *The Body in Pain* (1985), Scarry points to the fact that 'pain comes unshareably into our midst, as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed' (Scarry 1985:4). She points out that the person in pain has certainty regarding that pain and the intensity of it, another person hearing of that pain, has doubt. Even when the felt attributes of pain are able to be lifted into the visible world, only if the referent for these now objectified attributes remains the human body, does the sentient fact of a person's suffering become knowable to a second person (Scarry 1985:13). It is possible according to Scarry, for the felt-characteristics of pain, its 'incontestable reality to the sufferer, its certainty, to be appropriated away from the body and presented as the attributes of something else' (Scarry 1985:13).

Scarry writes of 'the way we make ourselves (and the originally interior facts of sentience) available to one another through verbal and material artefacts.' (Scarry 1985:22). She claims 'What is quite literally at stake in the body in pain is the making and unmaking of the world' (Scarry 1985:23). For Scarry, physical pain not only resists language but destroys it, in fact it destroys the world of the victim. It narrows that world to just the body. If severe enough it plunges the sufferer into a state anterior to language, where they can only utter pre-linguistic sounds and cries (Scarry 1985:4). This is demonstrated most clearly in Scarry's discussion of torture. She claims that torture destroys the world of the victim, that under such treatment the victims world becomes merely his or her body, as indeed she says it does for those near death. She says, ' the created world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one's self and one's

world, and that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist' (Scarry 1985:30).

Scarry sees a link between this difficulty in verbally representing pain and political agency, claiming, 'The problem of pain is bound up with the problem of power' (Scarry 1985: 12). Infliction of pain can be described in such a way as to deflect understanding and communication. For instance torture can be called 'intelligence gathering'. The word 'injuring' is usually absent from strategic and political descriptions of war (Scarry 1985:12-13). Giving victims of a system of mass forced sexual slavery and rape the title 'comfort women' would seem to be a use of language which offers a similar deflection.

While those in acute pain have little or no voice or agency according to Scarry, 'an act of human contact and concern, ... provides the hurt person with worldly self-extension: in acknowledging and expressing another person's pain, or in articulating one of his non bodily concerns while he is unable to, one human being who is well and freely willing turns himself into an image of the others psychic or sentient claims, an image existing in the space outside the sufferer's body, projected out into the world and held there intact by that persons powers, until the sufferer himself regains his own powers of self extension. By holding that world in place, or by giving the pain a place in the world, sympathy lessens the power of sickness and pain' (Scarry 1985:50). Ultimately, Scarry would say that restoration of voice can lessen the power of pain, and we might hope that this proved to be the case for some of the 'comfort women'.

Recalling after this flow of words, the bodies, or would we say, following Caputo, the abused 'flesh', of the young 'comfort women', we might ask if a poetics of obligation is the only response we might make to their suffering. Caputo does not assure us that even a poetics of obligation is necessarily the outcome of an engagement with such suffering bodies. While asserting that flesh, the body in dissolution and pain, is the site of such obligation he offers no certainties.

Caputo's vivid raising up of flesh before our mind's eye makes us look where we would perhaps rather not. His poetics of obligation traces a connection to the other that he claims originates from flesh itself. While this poetics of obligation may be a response drawn from us by a body reduced to flesh, Caputo cannot give us assurances that this might be a strategy to prevent further 'disasters'. He states that, 'such claims as afflicted flesh make upon us are frail and finite and my supplementary poetic strategy is to lend these claims an ear, to provide them with an idiom, to magnify their voice, to let them ring like bells across the surface of our lives, and *to discourage cruelty*. After that I do not know what else to do' (*my emphasis*) (Caputo 1993:209). There appear to be no guarantees 'We have to do with competing poetics, poetics of obligation and poetics of phallo-aggressive machismo, with the persuasive power of competing poetics' `(Caputo 1993:209). Indeed, Caputo admits, disturbingly, that 'the flesh of the Other is no less what triggers my blow,...The flesh of the Other is never neutral...The irreducibility of flesh, of the signals that it sends forth is why obligation keeps happening, why it cannot be put out of action.'(Caputo 1993:215)

The question this raises on behalf of those whose bodies might potentially suffer violence and endure pain at the hands of another, is what prompts either the caress or the blow? What is there about our understanding and construction of bodies that shapes the response between one body and another? Could bodies, all bodies, be understood and constructed within cultures as more sacred and thus less vulnerable to abuse?

Julia Kristeva

As I continue this search for sacred bodies among those who theorise about the body, I review some aspects of the work of Julia Kristeva, one of the so-called 'French feminists' and especially her thinking on 'abjection' and her offering of a model for ethical behaviour, drawn from the maternal body.

Looking to the violent treatment of the 'comfort women' who one might say were treated like dirt, Kristeva offers an interpretation for such interpersonal violence, in her exploration

of 'abjection'. For Kristeva it seems that abjection is the founding moment for all of us as subjects. This moment marks the beginnings of separation from the undifferentiated relationship previously experienced with the mother. She gives expression to this in *Powers of Horror* – ' I expel *myself,* I spit *myself* out'(Kristeva 1982:3). As Anna Smith expresses it, for Kristeva, 'Abjection unchecked recalls a state *prior* to signification, where there are destructive self seeking drives, but no symbolic system in a firm enough position to repress or displace these drives into speech'. She quotes Burgin who claims that it is 'not woman as such who is abjected but rather woman as privileged signifier of that which man both fears and desires: the extinction of identity itself' (Smith 1996:152). Similarly, in her book *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-Bind,* Kelly Oliver points out that Kristeva suggests that in western culture, discourses on maternity do not separate the maternal function from that of women generally. Thus Oliver reads Kristeva as saying that women's oppression generally can be partly attributed to discourses on motherhood and misplaced abjection (Oliver 1993a: 6)

Was the treatment of the 'comfort women' by Japanese soldiers and by the Imperial war machine, an inevitable aspect of the formation of the subject, of the fear and loathing/desiring of the mother (and by extension all women) that is part and parcel of that process. If this is so, as Anna Smith says ' how can we read *Powers of Horror* without being overwhelmed with loathing for the female body? How can we recognise abjection, without gouging out our eyes?' (Smith1996:152). Kristeva's thinking on abjection may then provide a useful potential insight into the cause of women's oppression that could be explored further.

Questions of our empathy with and relationship to the 'Other' have continued to surface in this study. Kristeva has suggested a model for ethical behaviour. She argues that ethics requires a bodily driving force, and would claim that the logic and law of ethics is already operating within the desiring body. She identifies three spheres in which the subject can become aware of and access alterity and otherness, poetry, psychoanalysis and maternity. Poetry points to the heterogeneity of language, it is open-ended and points to signification in process and subject in process. For Kristeva 'the ethical cannot be stated, instead it is

practiced to the point of loss, and the text is one of the most accomplished examples of such practice' (Kristeva 1974:234, in Oliver 1993a:182).

In psychoanalysis the alterity within is identified with the unconscious, which makes any fixed, stable, unified subject, truth or meaning impossible. According to Kristeva, psychoanalysis is therefore a space where an analysand can embrace the Other in herself, that alien Other that is both her unconscious and her cultural heritage, in order to live with her crisis in value (Kristeva 1987.55 in Oliver 1993a: 184).

However for Kristeva, it is maternity that is the very embodiment of alterity within, of that which cannot be neatly divided into subject and object (Oliver 1993a:183). It is the supreme example of identity containing alterity as a heterogeneous other, without completely losing its integrity. It is in the maternal body that the dividing line between identity and difference breaks down. In her book *Tales of Love* (1987b), Kristeva uses maternity as a model for what she calls an outlaw ethic, 'herethics'. In her understanding, herethics sets up one's obligations to the other as obligations to the self and to the species. This is thus an ethics of love and not of law, predicated on love of self. The model of herethics is the mother's love for her child, which is also a love for herself and her own mother. The mother's love is also the willingness to give herself up, to embrace the strangeness within herself (Oliver 1993b:6).

Thus Kristeva's models for ethics, being poetry, psychoanalysis and maternity, are alternatives to judicial models of ethics that presuppose autonomous subjects who relate to each other through the force of law. Kristeva's models operate from a basis in which the law or obligation is already internal to the subject. As Oliver comments, for Kristeva ' the law is turned inside out, it is within the body....there is no need for an external law that ensures the social relation. The social relation is inherent in the subject' (Oliver 1993a:186).

Summary

In their work regarding the body, Foucault, Butler, and even Merleau-Ponty seem to talk somewhat generally and at a distance, speaking objective truths *about* bodies, rather than truth *from* 'the body' [9] Merleau-Ponty sees an inter-twining of bodies, made of one flesh, but he deals with, as Caputo has said, bodies that are 'agent' bodies 'which always seem to be in excellent health, quite well rested and fresh from a trip to the islands.'(Caputo 1993:195). They are bodies that have choice, intentionality and agency, unlike 'flesh', which results from 'disasters' such as the enslavement of the 'comfort' women.

Caputo's own engagement with 'flesh' is powerful, as an engagement with the reality of damaged bodies, but it comes after the events that have caused their suffering. However his hope that 'to lend these claims an ear, to provide them with an idiom, to magnify their voice, to let them ring like bells across the surface of our lives' to ' discourage cruelty', looks to the possibility of a re-visioned future. Nonetheless, his perspective is from the viewpoint of one with power and self-determination rather than that of a victim, which brings with it dangers of paternalism and misunderstanding. It is important in this quest for a re-visioned future that the perspective and witness of the victim or potential victim of violence or abuse should be foregrounded.

Perhaps Scarry, whose work on torture details what happens to bodies in extreme situations, comes closest to allowing the witness of such suffering bodies. She also affirms the value of advocacy and support for those in suffering

Kristeva's, 'herethics', offers a model for establishing positive connections and understandings between lived bodies. Using Kristeva's terms, a compelling question for those vulnerable to abuse might be, can the embrace of difference either within or outwith ourselves allow the return of the repressed, the abjected, and enable the caress rather than

[9] Turner has criticised Foucault in this respect, '...he ignores the phenomenology of embodiment, the immediacy of personal sensuous experience of embodiment which is involved in the notion of my body. My authority, possession and occupation of a personalised body through sensuous experience are minimalised in favour of an emphasis on the regulatory controls which are exercised from outside' (Turner 1984 :245)

the blow. What tips the balance between Caputo's competing poetics, and what can alter that balance?

Having reviewed some theoretical approaches, I will now approach a group of women, to explore what they feel about their gendered embodiment, and to see if describing their own bodies as sacred has meaning for them. Before proceeding to this, however, it is necessary to examine the possibilities and pitfalls of speaking of 'women's experience', and to outline methodology and methods that are appropriate to use to best hear women into speech.

Chapter Two

Women's experience - in search of 'women's' bodies

Keeping in mind the testimonies of women who are survivors of abuse and having found in theories of the body that I have explored some pointers towards a possible re-visioning bodies, I seek to understand what process of social change might open the way for greater individual agency for women. How does social change happen? To what extent do movements for change require accurate description of existing conditions and the meeting of some kind of criteria of objectivity in that description? What value is individual narrative and what extent can it meet such objective criteria for knowledge. Is a requirement of objectivity in study, related to our Enlightenment heritage, which presupposes the possibility of a 'neutral' unbiased, unsituated researcher? Is there knowledge that is only accessible to certain subjects? If so, what is the value of such 'situated knowledge'? Are all such knowledges equally valid, particularly in the pursuit of emancipatory social change? If all knowledges are 'situated' what possibilities are there for political alliance to pursue social change?

I want to approach such questions from a feminist perspective, but it has become apparent that in the twenty-first century the business of advocating strategies for social transformation from a feminist perspective is fraught with difficulties. Many of these centre on whether we can legitimately speak of 'woman' or 'women' at all.

The problem with 'women', and 'women's experience'

From an emancipatory perspective there seems to be a need to be able to talk of women /woman as a category, but there is much concern as to what delineates that category. If this is taken to be some kind of 'essence', we revert to cultural feminism, where the ideology of a female nature or female essence, a stick to beat us with under patriarchy, is re-appropriated by feminists themselves in a effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes. Such moves have been challenged on the grounds that they are as essentialising as any

androcentric perspective, and do not take account of differences between individual women with respect to other markers of identity such as race and class. Principally they leave women still defined by patriarchal power struggles - trying to use the masters tools to dismantle the master's house (Lorde [1984] 1986: 158ff).

Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland in their article 'Still telling it like it is?'(in Ahmed et al [eds.] 2000:207-220), acknowledge the tension that exists for feminists between the political necessity of looking at existing power relations, establishing what does and does not happen, and the need to acknowledge the strength of poststructural, postmodern and deconstructionist critiques whereby feminist claims to knowledge of women's lives are questioned on a number of grounds. Many such critics (Benhabib et al.1995; Braidotti 1991; Hekman 1997; Scott 1992.inRamazanoglu and Holland 2000:209) have claimed that the category of 'women' or 'woman' cannot be taken for granted as a natural category. They would assert that there is no pre-culturally constructed and interpreted 'essence of 'woman'. Any category of 'feminist knowledge' is contested both by recent deconstruction of the feminist subject from postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives and the problematising of 'women's experience' with the recognition of the diversity of women's lives (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2000:208).

The issue of the subject of feminist enquiry is addressed by Judith Butler who does not negate or repudiate the subject 'woman' but sees her neither as ground or a product but rather as an accomplishment and a possibility (Butler 1992:9). For Butler there is no way in which we can speak of women as if 'woman' were a fixed category (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2000:209). Thus as Ramazanoglu and Holland say (2000:209), 'Questioning what it means to know like a feminist produces intractable problems; feminists are not authorised to tell general truths about gender simply because they live as women....there are no unproblematic ways of making knowledge claims' It can, however, still be claimed that knowing like a feminist produces valid knowledge of social life, especially if it is recognised that this is not just knowing as a feminist among non-feminists but knowing as one feminist among other feminists, who are different from each other in many ways.

Ramazanoglu and Holland stress that if feminists are going to go on producing knowledge, they will, in the current intellectual climate, have to answer for how knowledge is produced and what might make it in any way authoritative. Their suggestion is that a turn to lived experience offers a way forward in this impasse. They assert that it is still vital to produce knowledge of social existence and to question how knowledge and knowing selves are produced and made authoritative. 'Defining what (materially, politically, discursively) a woman (or a man) is, requires empirical investigation of what people have in common, in terms of both their constitution as gendered subjects and the material conditions of their social existence. A politics of difference has emerged alongside knowledge of both common interests and social divisions between women. The question of who is a woman remains then empirical, but also normative, contingent and contested' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2000: 211). They continue 'political expediency demands that as feminists we go on investigating and accounting for people's gendered social existence and explaining how we justify the knowledge we produce' (Holland et al 1998 cited in Ramazanoglu and Holland 2000 :205) They stress the need to 'make our epistemic communities and our criteria of validity explicit and show how we are accountable for the knowledge we produce and our judgements between knowledge claims' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2000:217). This is something that I address in this study.

The authority of such knowledge is then based on a category of woman or women shaped by shared material conditions not a universality of essence or meanings. [10] As Kate Soper argues, there is a 'sex-specific but universal quality of certain conditions of general experience which justifies and gives meaning to collective gender categories'(Soper1990:243 in Ramazanoglu and Holland 2000:211).The fact that women in different social positions may experience sexism differently does not entail that they have nothing in common, they still suffer from sexism. Bearing out these observations, my own experience of world wide gatherings of women certainly confirms that there is something commonly recognised as domestic abuse, principally of women by men, across cultures, even though this may take culturally specific forms.

[10] See discussion on 'strategic essentialism' p. 43 of this study

At one end of the range of forms of legitimation of feminist knowledge are those who would see it as potentially scientific and would seek some legitimacy for it in terms of objectivity, as traditionally understood. 'Feminist epistemologies must identify grounds for feminist knowledge claims that do not altogether abandon criteria of scientific validity (in the sense of some connection to the material world of people and events), (Haraway 1991; Smith 1997; Soper 1990) but are also self-conscious, questioning, reasonable open and just'(Ramazanoglu and Holland 2000:215). At the other pole, are those who embrace relativism and diversity and the value of localised knowledge but deny the generalisability of feminist knowledge. 'Radical feminist theory tends to relate cultural practices directly to the reproduction of global patriarchal power making direct links between practices constituting gender and the violence of patriarchal power. Postmodern interventions focus on specific areas of concern and do not assume that they are necessarily part of a spectrum of oppression, though they may well be' (Weedon 1999: 125).

The relativism inherent in a postmodern analysis is seen as troubling by many feminists who would still assert the need to be able to distinguish what can truly or falsely said of women [11]. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2000:212), take this position claiming, 'To value and validate feminist knowledge of social existence, means taking a stand against relativism on the grounds that there really are material conditions of gendered power.' They add 'If feminism is to have transformative power, we cannot evade the difficulty of justifying what we know by collapsing knowledge either into language or into instability, uncertainty and diversity. Transformation requires both theories of power that can name real power relations (which are always conceptualised) and judgements (which are always normative) of which power relations are oppressive' (Ramazanoglu and Holland 200212-213).

Finally, Ramazanoglu and Holland claim that the validity of feminist knowledge will depend on the power of feminist theory to make sense of people's experience at a level at which it can be acted upon. In these terms justification of this knowledge is related to what

[11] See Harding 1993:61 cited below pp. 39-40.

such knowledge changes.[12] Although exercising minds in the academy, this is not simply an intellectual exercise, but one which touches lives.

The experience of the 'comfort women' reveals the importance of the question of the acceptance and validation of testimony. The women's own accounts of what had happened to them, even when they began to surface, carried little authority, especially since there was no official documentation of their experience in records of the war. Their experiences only began to have some power to challenge the official account once alliances were formed with other women who could campaign on their behalf. The question of justification and validity of knowledge is a crucial one, which will be pursued throughout this chapter.

Feminist standpoint epistemology - A better view from somewhere

Exploring then the question of whose knowledge it is important to consider, and what criteria we might use to validate knowledge, I turn to recent theories of feminist epistemology. One area of feminist theory that engages with the question of objectivity is feminist standpoint epistemology. Recognition of recent debates in this area is important for this study which is also concerned with women's religious experience, since the centrality of 'women's experience' as a basis for knowledge, has also been at the heart of the development of religious feminism. In the light of recent critiques, noted above, the question remains as to whether it can still legitimately be so.

Feminist standpoint theory has been significantly shaped by work done in the 1980s by American feminists Nancy Hartsock (1983,1987) and Sandra Harding (1986,1991) and also in the work of Donna Haraway (1991 [1988]).

Nancy Hartsock

Hartsock (1987) adopted an historical materialist approach to understanding 'phallocratic' domination and took as her starting point a methodological base provided by Marxian

[12] See section on Sharon Welch pp. 48-51.

theory, which she saw as an important epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination (Hartsock 1987:216). This in turn had its beginnings in Hegel's understanding that knowledge gained from the slave's point of view in a master/slave relationship would be of a different order from that gained from the master's perspective.

Hartsock, embraced the distinction made by Marx between 'appearance' and 'essence', which she employed to explore what she saw as dual levels of reality in Western society. As Marx had privileged the knowledge gained from the standpoint of the proletariat so Hartsock saw the value of knowledge generated from a specifically feminist standpoint (Hartsock 1987:217). She suggested that women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, and could allow an understanding of patriarchal institutions and ideologies, making it possible to see them for what they are: perverse inversions of more humane social relations (Hartsock 1987:218).

For Hartsock 'A standpoint is not simply an interested position ...but it is interested in the sense of being engaged' (Hartsock 1987:218). She also stressed that not all standpoints within society produced equally valuable knowledge. She contended that 'there are some perspectives on society from which however well intentioned one may be, the real relations with each other and with the natural world are not visible' (Hartsock 1987:218). In 'The Feminist Standpoint' Hartsock made a number of claims for standpoint positions in general and went on to find these criteria applicable to a feminist standpoint. A standpoint for Hartsock is predicated on the understanding that material life not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations. She claimed that if material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent the inversion of the other, and that in systems of domination the vision available to the dominant group will be both partial and perverse. Furthermore, the vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore it cannot be dismissed as false (Hartsock 1987:218).

Significantly, Hartsock makes clear, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for, and requires both the input of science and education for it to surface.[13]

Again, looking at the situation of the 'comfort women', only when their experiences were seen from their standpoint by others as well as themselves was the behaviour of the Japanese Imperial Army exposed to the world for what it truly was, kidnap and rape. It had been concealed from many by the distortion of language, with the use of such expressions as 'comfort women' and comfort stations' implying voluntary involvement of the women in a caring service.

The question of how such expression of specifically embodied experience, seeing from women's position, can be known and how knowledge from such a standpoint finds a voice, is central to this present study. Is there always even language available for it to be thought and expressed in?

Hartsock also affirms that as an engaged vision, seeing from the standpoint of the oppressed, exposes real relations among human beings as inhuman, pointing beyond the present, carrying a historically liberatory role.

Touching on the issue of differences between women, feminist standpoint epistemology operates on the assumption that there are some things common to women's lives, and for Hartsock these commonalities are rooted in all that stems from a sexual division of labour, in women's involvement in creating the means of subsistence and in childbearing and rearing. While she would recognise differences between women she would claim to be basing standpoint theory on ideal types (Hartsock 1987:221)

Hartsock also brings to her analysis the understandings of 'object relations' theory concerning the development of male and female children. She claims that 'The female construction of self in relation to others leads ... toward opposition to dualisms of any sort,

[13] see Graham unpub: 18, for reference to the need for major cultural shifts before the story of the 'comfort women' could surface.

valuation of concrete, everyday life, sense of a variety of connectednesses and continuities both with other persons and with the natural world. If material life structures consciousness, women's relationally defined existence, bodily experience of boundary challenges (such as menstruation and pregnancy) and activity of transforming both physical objects and human beings, must be expected to result in a world view to which dichotomies are foreign' (Hartsock 1987:229).

Two decades on, sexual division of labour and child rearing practices are evolving into different patterns in the Western World, and perhaps it is now too simplistic to use such a concept as the sexual division of labour as the marker of commonality between women, or claim for all women specific characteristics shaped by their own child development. It also has been recognised that it is not straightforward to make a clear distinction between the marginalised and the dominant, nor regard the oppression of women as mono-causal. If, however, we do not adopt Hartsock's categories (sexual division of labour and gender difference due to differential child development) as a basis for commonalities between women we are left with the question of what commonalities form that basis (see Woodhead 1997:198-199).

Sandra Harding

In her more recent work Sandra Harding (1993) elaborates on her understanding of the feminist standpoint position. Originally, in her book *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986), Harding included feminist standpoint epistemology in her discussion of feminist epistemological frameworks. Principally referring to the fields of research in biology and the social sciences, she contrasted feminist standpoint theory with the insistence of feminist empirists that sexism and androcentism could be eliminated from the results of research if scientists would follow more rigorously and carefully the existing methods and norms of scientific research. Such feminist empiricists would argue that the sciences have been blind to their own sexist and androcentric biases.

Harding noted feminist empiricism as being designed to make science better by producing less biased accounts, but she sees this as far too weak a strategy to maximise objectivity and claims that feminist standpoint epistemologies offer what she characterizes as strong objectivity. This is achieved through their questioning of both the methods and goals of research in order to eliminate sex/gender bias. As the 'subject' is always embodied, it is impossible to achieve a gender-neutral perspective, although historically the male perspective has usually been taken as such. Feminists question this 'God's eye-view' which excludes all perspective, everything subjective and the very social nature of knowledge. The feminist contention is that this privileged perspective narrows and distorts the subject's knowledge not only of social life but also of scientific facts. The 'God's eye view', supposedly objective and neutral, reinforces male privilege, the marginalistion of women and excludes all non-privileged others. For Harding strong objectivity is present when one thinks from the perspective of the oppressed other. It is rooted in the understanding that the one who lives on the margins is forced to possess knowledge of both the privileged and the marginalised. hooks expresses this in relation to African American women

> 'Living as we did -on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and centre'
> (hooks1984:v in Kline Taylor 1990:65).

Harding asserts that strong objectivity is achieved by deliberately putting oneself in another's position. This rejection of universalism does not imply an embrace of relativism or an abandonment of realism, for there is still a need for criteria for objectivity –not everything or anything goes. As Harding points out,

> 'It is not equally true as its denial that women's uteruses wander around in their bodies when they take math courses, that only Man the Hunter made important

> contributions to distinctively human history, that women are biologically programmed to succeed at mothering and fail at equal participation in governing society, that women's preferred modes of moral reasoning are inferior to men's, that targets of rape and battery must bear the responsibility for what happens to them....and so on – as various sexist and androcentric scientific theories have claimed'(Harding 1993:61).

Donna Haraway

Donna Haraway explicitly explores the issue of objectivity because 'we could use some enforceable, reliable accounts of things not reducible to power moves and agonistic, high status games of rhetoric, or scientific, positivist arrogance' (Haraway1991b:188). For her, feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges.* Objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and possibilities. The moral is simple: only partial perspective (of the marginalised) promises objective vision. As has been noted, in the work of Harding, for feminist standpoint epistemology all knowledge is partial, there is no God's eye view. As Haraway has it 'the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed, situated together imperfectly and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (Haraway 1991b:193).

For Haraway 'subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, indeed, objective, transforming accounts of the world. They resist both relativism and totalization. Haraway says 'it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained rational objective enquiry rests' (Haraway 1991b:191).

Haraway (1991b:193) makes clear that 'The only position from which objectivity could not possibly be practised and honoured is the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One god, whose Eye produces appropriates and orders all difference' For her *positioning* is therefore,

the key practice, grounding knowledge organized around the imagery of vision - what is seen from where we are. Feminist embodiment, then is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations and responsibility for difference in material semiotic fields of meaning. Haraway says (1991b:195), 'I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational claims.'[14]

Critiques of Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

Criticisms that have been directed towards feminist standpoint epistemology are such as those levelled by Jane Flax who questions it on a number of counts. Firstly she says that it uncritically appropriates the Enlightenment worship of perfect reason. She says ' the notion of *a* feminist standpoint that is truer than previous (male) ones, seems to rest upon many problematic and unexamined assumptions. These include an optimist belief....that reality has a structure that perfect reason (once perfected) can discover' (Flax 1989 in Harding 1990: 84). She goes on to claim (Flax 1989 in Harding 1990: 84), that the notion of such a standpoint assumes that the oppressed are not in fundamental ways damaged by their social experience. This is an important point. First hand accounts of women who have suffered domestic abuse, especially those from Christian communities, reveal how difficult it is for such women to even name and give expression to their experience in cultures and climates where such things are thought not to happen (see Orr 2000). In such a context they may come to think that they are in the wrong. However given the appropriate support (as in the case of the 'comfort' women) this problem can be addressed.

Flax (in Harding 1990:84), also raises the spectre of essentialism stating that a feminist standpoint position presupposes gendered social relations in which there is a category of beings who are fundamentally like each other by virtue of their sex – that is it assumes the otherness men assign to women. Finally Flax says that such a standpoint position assumes that women, unlike men can be free of determination from their own participation in

[14] See discussion on strategies pp 43-45 below.

relations of domination such as those rooted in social relations of race, class or homophobia (Flax 1989: 56 in Harding 1990:84)

As has been pointed out, other writers are wary of anti-Enlightenment critiques, being concerned that the adoption of post-modern perspectives leaves the feminist project ungrounded and adrift. Such caution is found, for example, in the work of Christine Di Stefano. In spite of the issues raised by the postmodern approach she sees contemporary Western feminism firmly located in the modernist ethos and sees this as important since, 'The concept of gender has made it possible for feminists to simultaneously explain and delegitimize the presumed homology between biological and social sex differences' (Di Stefano 1987:64 in Harding 1990: 85). Her understanding of the feminist case against postmodernism succinctly sums up the issues that are at the heart of this discussion. She claims that; 'First, postmodernism expresses the claim and needs of a constituency (white, privileged men of the industrialized West) that has already had an Enlightenment for itself and that is now ready and willing to subject that legacy to critical scrutiny. Secondly.... the objects of postmodernism's various critical and deconstructive efforts have been creations of a similarly specific and partial constituency (beginning with Plato). Third, mainstream postmodernist theory (Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault) has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender in its own purportedly politicized rereading of history, politics and culture. And finally....the post modern project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or 'subject' namely, women, the postmodern prohibition against subject centred enquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency' (Di Stefano 1987:30-31 in Harding 1990:86).

The postmodern critique of standpoint theory, along with the recognition of many other defining criteria for women's standpoints such as Black, Latina, lesbian etc, has highlighted the question of differences between women and the sometimes marked differences between their social contexts. This has led to a recognition that there cannot be one single feminist

standpoint that can claim epistemic superiority. There has come to be an acknowledgement of a multiplicity of situated standpoints and knowledges. As we have seen there are those who take issue with such a critique, claiming that it undermines the basic emancipatory nature of the feminist project. Others have offered strategies for alliances and positioning in a postmodern world to address this problem.

Strategies for feminist research and action in a postmodern world.

Given this recognition, in a postmodern world of the multiplicity of standpoints and knowledges, coupled with the need still to explore the lived experience of women as advocated by Ramazanoglu and Holland, there remains the question of what form such exploration of experience might take if it is not to lead the way back to 'essentialism or collapse into relativism'. Addressing these issues, Ngai-Ling Sum (Sum 2000, in Ahmed et al [eds.] 2000:131-144) explores Hilary Clinton's construction of a 'rights-based' female subject at the Forth World conference on Women: a subject located within the Enlightenment time-space envelope. In response to this construction Sum turns to an understanding of human identities as embedded in time-space envelopes which reveals their great diversity and heterogeneity.

Sum sees feminist politics across time and space therefore as a complex interactive social field. This understanding was apparent in the Women's Movements in the USA in the 1980s as they for the most part rejected the image of a united sisterhood and put more emphasis on the multiplicity of organisations and structures (Sum: 2000:134). There was then a proliferation of identity politics, some responding to specific crises and policy issues relating to women's lives, while others were more cultural. Indeed critical feminists foreground the issue of 'difference' and diverse identities (eg Haraway 1988; Ong 1988; Trinh T 1989; hook 1990; Goetz 1991; Mohanty 1991, in Sum 2000:136). Sum claims that the awareness of multiple female subjects embedded in different time-space envelopes is at the heart of the question of 'difference' The challenge as she sees it is for feminist scholarship is to realize women's multiple voices without losing all the analytical power of 'women'.

As has been noted, some feminists seem reluctant to abandon a core common identity as an important political foundation for empowerment strategies and as a basis for coalition building. Various strategies have been deployed by feminist writers to overcome this problem. For example Spivak (1988 in Sum 2000: 137), would retain the concept of 'essentialism' to serve as such a provisional interventionist strategy. She suggests that 'female identity' is produced and regulated in relation to particular contexts and axes of power. This makes it possible to 'deal with several identities according to the axis of oppression at issue in particular situations without necessarily tying individuals to a specific all purpose identity' (Sum 2000:137). Such an approach views the female subject as being scripted by structural contexts and social relations. In this way the female subject may be seen as ' a conceptual migrant whose identity is constituted by external conditions and moves strategically from one form of essentialism to another. Sum (2000:137) appears to suggest that such strategic essentialism can be deployed *self-consciously* to deconstruct categories and identities, thus offering a level of agency and self-determination. It offers oppressed groups strategic anchor points at which they can claim identity, but enables subjects to travel from one anchor point to another. This concept assumes the possibility of a subjectivity that is unitary but serialised. Sum however claims that this may be a concept that simplifies a more complex reality which often ' involves the tangled, shifting and highly mediated consciousness and subjectivities ...as well as the interpersonal and/or inter-group communications among feminists embedded in diverse time-space envelopes' (Sum 2000:137). Alcoff (1988 cited in Sum 2000:137) likewise proposes employing the concept of positionality, understanding identity not as an immutable internal property of the person but as relative to constantly shifting external contexts.[15]

[15] A similar kind of positionality is found in the work of Donna Haraway who embraces the concept of 'situated knowledges' which rely on critical positioning. She has introduced a politics of engagement in which situated subjects need not rely on a shared 'essence' to act together. For Haraway it is possible for subjectivities to merge into a collective subject position (see Sum 2000:137).

In her own work (Sum 2000:139) combines Baktinian-inspired work on 'dialogism' and recent work on 'governance' as (the complex art of steering multiple agencies institutions and systems) in an attempt to answer such questions as:

> 'What kinds self-other relations are constructed in the inter-personal dialogues among multiple female subjects and how they are hybridized? Do they involve the building of new loosely coupled networks that enable multiple female subjects and groups to communicate? Do they span together individual groups embedded in multiple time and space and cross cut by diverse social relations? Do these groups act as carriers of different sub-goals and attendant conflicts? Are they entering into dialogues that are as yet uncharted by norms and if so, what are the new identities that are being constructed?' (Sum 2000:141)

Such questions, the exploration of which are beyond the scope of this study, point up the complexity of issues of identity, and the difficulties of speaking of 'women, in any straight-forward fashion, and yet still seem to point towards a future of possibilities for the oppression of women to be contested.

Women's bodies and beliefs.

One reason why I would wish to justify speaking of and researching 'women's experience' in this study is that I want to explore women's experience as it is shaped by, and interpreted in religious symbolism. The concept of 'women's experience' played a crucial role in the development of feminist theology. In the early work of Saiving, Christ and Plaskow (Christ and Plascow 1979), it offered, what we might call an epistemic break. With the publication of Rosemary Reuther's *Sexism and God Talk,* (1983) it came to form the source and norm of feminist theological thinking.

The following use of the work of Grace Jantzen, a leading feminist philosopher of religion, and Sharon Welch, an influential feminist liberation theologian, reflects this centrality of

women's experience in feminist theology, and will be used to address principally, the issue of validation of knowledge gained from feminist standpoint positions.

Grace Jantzen

In her influential book *Becoming Divine* Jantzen asserts that 'obsession with beliefs, truth claims and epistemic justification is part of modernity's quest for mastery'(Jantzen 1998:204). She is concerned with transformation strategies and she shifts the debate way from fixation on epistemic justification of truth claims, rather seeking the development and testing of a new feminist symbolic. Like Ramazanoglu and Holland, not wanting to see a slide into relativism, she asserts the need to evaluate such strategies. This is not as in the past, to discover the validity of religious truth claims but rather to discover that which will effectively enable humanity's full flourishing, what Jantzen terms 'becoming divine'. For such evaluation she turns to criteria of justice, accountability and trustworthiness.

Jantzen would recognise at the heart of the alleged epistemic foundation of the philosophy of religion are the things it denies, that is, values, embodied situatedness and community. These she wants to bring to consciousness. She says ' In this move the old absolute/relative binary which dogs many discussions of truth claims (including feminist discussions) gives way to criteria of justice and trustworthiness, looking rather for new growth of flourishing than for assurance of salvation'(Jantzen 1998:205). Rejecting the possibility of the practice of neutrality and objectivity (the adoption of a view from nowhere) in any discipline including philosophy of religion, she questions the supposed neutrality of science, and engages with standpoint epistemology as outlined by Harding, Hartsock and Haraway.

In this context she employs the work of Helen Longino (1987, 1990 in Jantzen,1998:207-209). She distinguishes between contextual values in science, which flow from the social and cultural commitments of the participants and affect what studies are undertaken, and constitutive values which are intrinsic to the practice of science itself, such as clear reasoning. Jantzen points out that Harding has argued that even in terms of constitutive values there is no such thing as neutrality in science, ' at every level science will bear the

fingerprints of the social group from which it comes' (Harding 1986:22 in Jantzen 1998:209).

Jantzen applies these insights to the study of philosophy of religion and contends that in this discipline as in science there can be slippage from contextual to constitutive values. In matters of faith 'the emphasis on the omnipotent, detached 'God out there' is....not unrelated to the ideal of neutral detached reasoning ....and this ideal of what reason is ...is permeated with values derived from its social context in a masculinist capitalist economy' (Jantzen 1998: 209) She says that philosophy of religion therefore is founded on the very elements it tries to suppress, values, embodiment, situatedness in a particular community which shape its discursive foundations. ' the recognition that we are embodied, gendered selves and therefore socially situated means that it is within that social nexus, not as disembodied solitary thinkers, that we must become divine' (Jantzen 1998:209). Jantzen's project requires the acceptance of partial perspectives, but she stresses that this is a partiality not without standards of discrimination.

In reflecting on the criteria of accountability and trustworthiness which she would employ, Jantzen notes the highly ambiguous position that feminist philosophers of religion (along with those who work in other academic disciplines), find themselves in. Even while seeking to be accountable to communities of women and to thinking from women's lives, she recognises that 'There is no pure place for a woman to stand, no unambiguous subject position already available'(1998: 211). However she claims that creative moves can be made from such an ambiguous position and that it is from this position that some symbols, myths and practices will be seen to be more nourishing than others (1998:212). Exploring which religious symbols, and practices do nourish women is one of the aspects of this study.

Jantzen emphasises that it's not just being in a certain marginal position that brings knowledge but it is the struggle for knowledge from that position. As noted in the foregoing discussion of feminist epistemology, such struggle exposes the 'god–trick' of supposedly value free objectivity. Jantzen quotes Donna Haraway (1991:191)

> 'the standpoints of the subjugated are not innocent positions. On the contrary they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the modes of denial through repression, forgetting and disappearing acts – ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively. The subjugated have a decent chance to be in on the god-trick and all its dazzling – and therefore blinding illuminations' (in Jantzen 1998:216).

Looking to the evaluation of knowledge from subjugated standpoints, Jantzen says that even if these positions are not innocent, we *can do* know what makes for justice, and can avoid sliding into relativism. She says (1998:216), 'We do not know everything. Certainly there are ambiguities. But we know enough to join the struggle and if we joined it more we would know more.'

For Jantzen, from the perspective of the margin and the marginalised, while recognising the ambiguity of any position we adopt, it is necessary to do more than name the pain of experience. We need to generate creative alternatives, we need new creativity, new imaginary expressed in new symbolic and social order rather than turning the present system on its head(1998:217). In words she quotes from Haraway (1991:196),

> ' We seek not the knowledge ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word) and disembodied vision, but those ruled by partial sight and limited voice. We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible...the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promised a means of ongoing finite achievement, of living within limits and contradictions i.e.of views from somewhere' (in Jantzen 1998:218).

Sharon D Welch

In looking to a theologically constructive approach to criteria for evaluating truth claims, Jantzen reviews the work of feminist theologian Sharon D Welch. Influenced by writers in

liberation theology, Welch's criteria for evaluating truth claims is praxis (Welch:1985). She critiques Christianity not in terms of the adequacy of its doctrines but on the basis of its praxis. Following Mary Daly's challenge that Christian faith itself is an expression of patriarchy and necrophillia, (Daly 1978:39) she reminds us that the history of Christianity and its impact on society has often been damaging. She draws on Johnson's (1979) *History of Christianity* to make the point, 'The atrocities of the Inquisition, the witchburnings, the Crusades, the justification of imperialism and colonialism, the perpetuation of sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism, the silence of most churches in the face of the horrors of war and the Nazi holocaust should cause even the most committed Christian to question the truth of Christianity's claims' (Welch 1985:4).

Christianity has failed morally from the point of view of those who have suffered because of its practices, and therefore according to Welch it has failed intellectually too. In *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity* Welch quotes Dorothee Soelle 'From a Christian point of view, theory and praxis can be understood today only in their unity, which means truth is not something that we find or by which we are found, but something that we make true' (Soelle 1974:77 in Welch 1985:24). Soelle also claims, with regard to theological truth, 'The truth of Christ exists only as concrete realization, which means: the verification principle of every theological statement is the praxis that it enables for the future. Theological statements contain as much truth as they deliver practically in transforming reality'(Soelle 1974:26 in Welch 1985: 25).

Welch also claims that the truth of God-language and of all theological claims is measured not by their correspondence to something eternal, but by fulfilment of its claims in history, by the actual creation of communities of peace justice and equality (Welch 1985:7). This links to her understanding of the divine being able to be known only in relationship. She says 'the divine is that relational power, and...it is neither necessary nor liberating to posit a ground that exists outside of relational power' (Welch 1990:173). As Jantzen interprets it, this divine is in no straightforward sense a person but rather ' the divine that is encountered is immanent in the beauty and pain and struggle of this world'(Jantzen 1998:222). Where Welch goes beyond most liberation theologians is in her approach to the scriptures and the

person of Jesus, refusing to ground a feminist theology of liberation in either scripture or in the person and work of Jesus (Welch 1985:25). She contends rather, that Feminist Theology is grounded in the liberating experience of sisterhood and in the process of liberation from sexism.

Rejecting a God's eye view, and any truth that is above and beyond human experience, inevitably raises the issue of relativism, which as we have seen, feminist standpoint epistemologists have addressed and struggled with. Where as other feminist thinkers have seen relativism as something to be avoided, Welch would claim that it is not possible to avoid engaging in relativism. She would claim that the tension between relativism or nihilism and universal normative claims is what is constitutive of a feminist theology of liberation. She says 'This theology is the life and death struggle, both practical and conceptual, between nihilism and commitment between despair and hope' (Welch 1985:14). Jantzen believes that Welch does not have to go so far, and that it is possible to admit to a partiality of truth without allowing equal value to these partial truth claims.

Welch derives from Foucault the insight that the powerful have an enormous effect in defining what shall count as reality, (see Jantzen 1998:224). However, as we have seen, Jantzen argues that it does not follow from this that truth is relative or that there can be no criteria by which the religious symbolic can be measured, and that feminists concerned with justice, there is a strong reason to resist such a conclusion.

Through Foucault, Welch explores what she calls the power and peril of discourse. She understands that discourse does in some complex sense shape our world and that the same is true of theology. She claims that 'The ways in which we understand the nature of faith and ecclesia are not irrelevant. These understandings have life and death consequences; they determine the type of response the church makes to particular social and political crises; they shape the nature of human community and human belonging in the world' (Welch 1985:29).

Welch however takes scepticism to be part and parcel of her particular chosen position. For her even a feeling of certainty is contingent; it is only a sign of participation in a particular episteme. (Welch 1985:30-31). She defines the true as only that which liberates and furthers specific processes of liberation. Her emphasis is always on the quality of lived experience. For her, practice is the hermeneutic key and a means of verification. 'Responsible action ...is participation in communal work, laying the groundwork for creative response of people in the present and the future ...Responsible action provides for partial resolutions and the inspirations and conditions of further partial resolutions by others. It is sustained and enabled by participation in a community of resistance'(Welch 1985:75). For Welch, 'beloved community' 'names the matrix within which life is celebrated, love is worshipped and partial victories over injustice lay the ground-work for further acts of criticism and courageous defiance (Welch 1985:160).

The key point that I want to take from the work of Welch is her understanding of the importance of a practical concept of truth. She would say that above all liberation theology is the formation of a political understanding of truth and theory. It is the operation of a practical, not speculative concept of truth (Welch 1985:25).

Summary

Having addressed the vexed issue of speaking of 'women's experience' in a postmodern context, I agree with Ramazanoglu and Holland, that from an emancipatory perspective, it is still important to speak of women's experience, and to try to ascertain what that might be, even while being aware of the complexities involved in such a project. In this search, a situated view of society, a view from the perspective of women, and the distinctive knowledge gained from such a perspective, is essential. The theories and ideas that I have engaged with, so far, in this exploration offer some vision for social change. The pursuit of the flourishing of those at the margins, women and others, (Jantzen 1998) and the measurement of the truth of beliefs by what they make happen in the world (Welch 1985) point towards a 'new imaginary expressed in a new symbolic and social order' that Jantzen

advocates. This carries echoes of the hope Caputo offers in his poetics of obligation and the possibilities inherent in Kristeva's 'herethics'.

I proceed in Chapter 3 to describe my research project, which has involved speaking to women who inhabit very much the same context and locality as myself, and I highlight the strategies for feminist research that I have employed, and my reasons for doing so.

Chapter 3

The 'turn to experience'

I come to the point, in this search for 'sacred' bodies, to engage with the 'turn to experience' advocated by Ramazanoglu and Holland, even while acknowledging the political and conceptual difficulties involved this task. To do so will I hear from a number of women from Christian faith communities about their everyday lives, their feelings about their bodies and how their bodily awareness intersects with their religious life and practice.

One problem that has confronted me in setting up this research has been what research methods to use in order to generate experiential data. There are certain pitfalls in traditional research practice that I wished to avoid. I did not want the women I would use as participants to be simply passive objects of research, and extract knowledge and experience from them while offering nothing in return. While clearly having an area of interest and concern, I wanted the research to be open-ended, and to be led by what I might discover in the process of research to further understanding and analysis. I did not want to use solely predetermined categories that might silence women's own voices. I also intend that this research should contribute to the emancipatory goals of feminism.

Before engaging in this research project, therefore, I explored literature on feminist research methods to draw out some principles by which to proceed. Much comment on methodology in feminist research does set it over against a traditional research paradigm in the social sciences whereby the researcher is expected to display neutrality, a degree of distance and objectivity and not to 'contaminate' or influence results by revealing his or her own life experience or personal standpoint. This renders the researcher a kind of data generating and gathering machine. Feminist methodology, or rather methodologies, since there is not one univocal approach that can be categorised in this way, offer a different paradigm, and practice.

In her book *Feminism and Methodology*, (1987) Sandra Harding explores the question of whether there is a 'feminist method' for undertaking research. She proposes that there is something distinctive about the best feminist social inquiry, but that this difference is best not described as a distinctive method. For her, it is both more and less than that. She says, 'It is new methodologies and new epistemologies that are requiring new uses of familiar research techniques'(Harding 1987:2). Instead of delineating a feminist method, she suggests three features that for her distinguish the most illuminating examples of feminist research.

The first of these is that the questions and problems that such research addresses should come from the perspective of women's experience (Harding 1987:7). Avoiding essentialism, Harding stresses that these women's experiences are plural and diverse, since 'women' come from different classes, races and cultures (1987:7).

Addressing this requirement of Harding, that problems for research should be generated from women's experience, I wish to explore the difficulty of accurate expression of experience for women using existing language.[16] I also suggest that there is a similar 'lack of fit' for some women, between their lived experience and much of traditional church life. I base this understanding on my own sense of frustration with some aspects of church life, anecdotal expressions of the feelings of other women, the worldwide growth of women-church and women identified alternative worship groups, which would appear to speak of some specific discomfort for women within traditional church structures.

Secondly for Harding, what makes feminist research distinctive is its goal, which is to provide for women explanations of social phenomena that they want and need. 'Traditional research has been *for men*. In the best of feminist research, the purposes of research and analysis are not separable from the origins of research problems' (Harding 1987:8). This is echoed by Cook and Fonow (1986:13 in Brayton 1997) 'Feminist research is, thus, not research about women but research for women to be used in transforming their sexist society'. A key point made by Harding is that the motivation for feminist research is

[16] This problem is highlighted in the work of DeVault discussed below, pp 58-62.

related to feminist beliefs and concerns and deliberately begins with standpoints and experiences of women. It is of course not just feminist research that is motivated by certain political beliefs and concerns, but the political nature of all research in this respect often goes unacknowledged.

Engaging with this second characteristic identified by Harding, this study seeks to help both participants and the researcher to reflect on what affirms them in both in daily life and in religious life. It seeks to raise the question of whether women's embodied selves, frequently denigrated in the past, both in patriarchal society and patriarchal expressions of religion, might not be comprehended as 'sacred', and therefore be understood to have a different status than has traditionally been granted to the bodies of women.

The final characteristic that Harding identifies as belonging to the best feminist research is the insistence that ' the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter' that is to say that 'the class, race, culture and gender assumptions, beliefs and behaviours of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that he/she attempts to paint' (Harding 1987:9). This is to avoid the fiction of an objectivist stance and to recognise that the cultural beliefs and behaviours of feminist researchers shape the results of their analyses no less than do those of sexist and androcentric researchers.

Expanding Harding's point with regard to researcher and researched being on the same critical plane, to remove the power imbalance between researcher and subject means as far as possible involving participants at every level of the research and regarding them as the experts and authorities on their own experiences. It is allowing that participants are part of the social world and capable of thinking critically about it, that they can be conscious and aware of the patterns of social relationships and structures of power that can impact on their own lived realities. As Ralph (1988:139 in Brayton 1997) suggests, it is important to recognise that the women engaged as participants are 'often actively working to change the conditions of their oppression'. In the context of feminist research, the research and the researcher become part of a process of consciousness raising and can have a significant

effect on the lives of the interviewees. It is important to acknowledge that knowledge thus gained is not owned solely by the researcher as has been the tradition. Maintaining the originality and authenticity of how participants give meaning to their experiences is also part of what constitutes changing the power imbalance in feminist research. This issue of language will be addressed in greater detail below.

Recognizing the researcher as part of the research process is also important when addressing the balance-of-power between the researcher and the participant. As Stanley and Wise (1990: 23) point out 'researchers' understandings are necessarily temporally, intellectually, politically and emotionally grounded and are thus as contextually specific as those of the 'researched'.' The emphasis in feminist research is thus on it being a collaborative process between the researcher and the participant. As Patricia Maguire notes 'Participatory research proposes returning to the ordinary people the power to participate in knowledge creation, the power that results from such creation, and the power to utilize knowledge' (Maguire1987:39 in Brayton 1997).

A feminist researcher, interviewing women, is by definition both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which she is observing. The same insider/outsider experience is true with regard to other identities, such as (in this research project) being a researcher interviewing women from faith communities while also being part of that faith community. Oakley asserts that it is important for a feminist methodology of social science that 'the mythology of 'hygienic research' with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.'(Oakley 1981).

Addressing Harding's final characteristic of feminist research, I conducted this pilot project aware of the power differential that can exist between researcher and participants. Attempting to minimise this has played a key part in my choice of sample and methods.

Ethical issues

Research, especially into subject matter that might be regarded as private and personal, naturally raises ethical issues concerning research methods and use of data. One important question raised for feminist researchers is the nature of their relationship with, and commitment to, the participants. Some women interviewing other women (especially in situations where interviews are repeated) claim that the relationship that develops may be one of friendship, and one where the participants seek to establish common ground with the researcher. It may also be one where the researcher is offered hospitality as to a friend/guest. The researcher may also find herself being asked for advice, which is important to the participant. As Janet Finch observes from her own research, 'It seems to me that there are grounds for expecting that where a woman researcher is interviewing other women, this is a situation with special characteristics conducive to the easy flow of information'. She adds ' in the setting of the interviewee's home, an interview conducted in an informal way by another woman can easily take on the character of an intimate conversation. The interviewee feels quite comfortable with this precisely because the interviewer is acting as a friendly guest, not an official inquisitor; and the model is in effect, an easy, intimate relationship between two women.'(Finch 1984:70). In such a situation the researcher finds it unproductive and very difficult to remain neutral and detached as advocated for a traditional researchers role. As Ann Oakley concludes 'it becomes clear that, in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship' (Oakley: 1981:51).

Oakley reviews the issue of power and ethics in interviewing, and explains her decision to follow other than traditional practice. Firstly she did not regard it as reasonable to adopt a purely exploitative attitude to interviewees as sources of data. Secondly she regarded sociological research as an essential way of giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility than it traditionally had had. She also found that personal involvement

(answering questions etc) was much more likely to create a rapport with the interviewees (Oakley1981:57).

Such ethical considerations have also been important in shaping my approach to this research in the choice of participants and the choice of research methods.

Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint

The case of the Korean 'comfort' women, referred to earlier in this study, demonstrates the difficulty many women who have suffered abuse find in articulating their experiences, and being heard. This difficulty in breaking the culturally enforced silence that surrounds such issues is demonstrated in other studies of violence against women (see Orr 2000). Although more apparent in the case of abused women, this difficulty for women in expressing experience in the language available to us appears to be a general phenomenon related to the nature of language itself.

Therefore, another aspect of feminist motivated and conducted research to which I pay close attention is the subject of language, and its adequacy for representing women's perspectives and realities. Because the problem of hearing women's experience is central to this study, I turn to an influential article by Marjorie L DeVault (1990), who suggests strategies for distinctive feminist research. She claims that language itself reflects male experiences and that its categories are often incongruent with women's lives (DeVault 1990:87), which leaves women with the problem of accurately articulating our experiences. If we also accept that 'language to some extent shapes or constructs our notions of reality rather than labelling that reality in any transparent and straightforward way' (Ehrlich 1995:45 in Brayton 1997), there is a danger that that reality is constructed in such a way that is difficult for and damaging to women.

Given this situation, while using relatively conventional methods for conducting interviews DeVault argues for a process of subversion, listening 'as women'. She suggests that feminism gives us distinctive ways of extending the methods of the qualitative research

tradition. She notes that language was an early topic for feminist researchers who demonstrated the way in which traditional linguistic forms exclude women (see Thorne and Henley 1975; Lakoff 1975; Spender [1980] 1985 in DeVault 1990:87). She points to a lack of fit between women's lives and words available for talking about experience, and to the fact that for women there is often a need to 'translate' their experiences into available words, either saying things that are not quite right, or working at using language in non standard ways.[17] When they do this, some of it tends to disappear from the record. Accuracy and nuance is lost.

This applies even to the process of defining topics to be studied, in that there are not always accurate words with which to class women's experience. A category like 'housework' for example is too narrow and limiting a label for the range of activities undertaken and does not encompass the complex motivations involved (DeVault 1990 89-91). DeVault quotes a study by Paget (1981 DeVault 1990: 91), of women artists that recognises the existence of a sort of 'problem with no name', which in their case was a commitment to the creation of high art, that existed alongside a learned sense that as women they were not supposed to participate in the making of culture. This 'barrier' to creativity was experienced in various ways by the artists in Paget's study and talked about indirectly but had not previously been given a label. Such experiences tend to get left out of dominant interpretative frames shaped around male concerns.

DeVault suggests that researchers need to interview in ways that allow exploration of incompletely articulated aspects of women's experience. She suggests that researchers should not bring to the interaction preconceived categories but that rather find that categories to structure data that emerge in the talk. 'This kind of interviewing, which does not begin from topics established in the discipline, will be more like everyday 'woman talk' than like survey research' (DeVault1990:92).

[17] E&S Ardener 1975 have described women in society as a muted group. DeVault 1990: 90.
Spender (1980) demonstrates how language is 'man-made' and within it significant aspects of women's lives have been hidden and ignored (in Cotterill 1992 : 257).

DeVault goes on to discuss the lack of fit of language for women and disappearance of experiences. She suggests (1990:92) that researchers can recover these experiences by the way they listen. They need to listen around and beyond the words used. If, as has been claimed, women interviewing women bring to their interaction a tradition of 'woman talk', this can mean that both participants help one another to use the interview as a 'search procedure' (Paget 1983 in DeVault 1990:93), co-operating in the construction of meanings together. This resonates with Harding's goal of researcher and participant being at the same level in terms of power.

To enable the recovery of previously unarticulated experience, an interviewer can be aware of and listen for the process of 'translation' De Vault claims that this process involves women in trying to deal with the incongruence of language in their everyday speech. To do this, women can use words that are 'close enough', responding fully to questions even if they are not quite appropriate. A woman interviewer can listen as a woman, and fill gaps from her own experience, (even if that experience is not an exact match). DeVault (1990:93-94) claims that it is the researchers job to listen for such points of translation and analyse the disjunctions that give rise to them. The interesting moments in such interviews are when respondents get stuck '... this halting hesitant, tentative talk signals the realm of not-quite-articulated experience where standard vocabulary is inadequate, and where the respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting' (DeVault 1990:95). De Vault found that such disjunctions were often signalled by the use of 'you know', which she interprets as a request for understanding between women of something that is hard to articulate.

In line with this thinking, conducting this research with a group of women with whom I have shared life and worship experiences over a number of years, means that we have a base of shared experience which may enable me to fill gaps and understand more readily what is expressed by hesitations and 'you knows' when I listen to these women. Although, obviously, as DeVault goes on to point out, there are areas of experience that are not shared simply because women listen to women.

DeVault goes on to discuss the best methods by which to undertake such listening and recording of data in order to preserve the unique characteristics of women's speech. She advocates that feminist researchers might do well to adopt a reasoned suspicion of standard solutions such as editing into pre-existing categories or the practice of 'smoothing out' respondents talk, changing dialect, removing repetition and so on, since these lead to distortion of women's words and meaning (DeVault 1990:101). Again, in my listening and recording for this project I have avoided smoothing out talk and limiting analysis to pre-determined categories.

De Vault alerts us to the politics involved in labelling women's experiences, in collecting and analysing data. She quotes Frye: 'Feminists have long been aware that naming is political- the labels attached to activities establish and justify their social worth – and that women's activities have often been labelled in ways that serve the project of controlling and subordinating women'(Frye 1983 in DeVault 1990:105). Much of the language traditionally used in religious discourse would appear to have had such an effect. My contention is that expressing religious experience, already a struggle to name the un-nameable, is further hampered for women, by the dominance of traditional language which may not 'fit' with experience.

In reasearch with women, DeVault argues for the employment of a strategic imprecision, and claims that instead of pre-existing categories, researchers would do better to use several different labels, sometimes more or less interchangeably, to refer to subtle shadings of meaning. She says that this strategy recognizes that different labels will capture different parts of the reality we are working to construct (DeVault 1990:105-106). Further, if the language is 'man made', it is not likely to provide ready made the words that feminist researchers need to tell what they learn from other women. She advocates that feminist texts should describe women's lives in ways that move beyond standard vocabularies, commenting on the vocabularies themselves along the way (see for example Reinharz 1988 in DeVault 1990). One consequence of using such strategies, is that readers as well as researchers will have to learn to understand and interpret such new ways with language.

DeVault (1990:107) concludes that 'part of the task of feminist writing should be to instruct a newly forming audience about how to read and hear our words.'

In this study as I detail below, I experimented with using drawing and writing to provide such a 'new language', in the hope that it might overcome some of the difficulties hypothesised in the access to and use of language for expressing women's experience.

Having established some principles to guide this research, with the above discussion in mind, I have undertaken a small pilot study to explore whether there is indeed a lack of fit between language and women's experience, in both what might be called everyday experience and religious/worship experience. To do this I have chosen to use a range of research techniques, taking account of the main principles for feminist research discussed earlier, particularly of the issues of equality and of the problems with language that DeVault highlights.

Researcher's position and bias

In line with the preceding discussion, I offer an account of what I understand to be my own bias, positioning and expectations from this research.

Over recent years I have become increasingly aware of the realities of domestic abuse and violence against women. This has feed a passionate concern for a change in what Elizabeth Fiorenza (1996 39-55) has called a global epidemic of violence against women. Studying Feminist Theology has heightened my awareness of the patriarchal nature of much church tradition and practice and has given me a way of understanding when and why I have not always felt at home in worship, as a woman. Of particular significance in this process was the work undertaken on my undergraduate dissertation, in which I reviewed language used in worship, the use and authority of bible texts, traditional theologies, the power of ritual and body language in worship. Women's bodies appear to have born the brunt of the out-working of patriarchy in the church and my understanding has been that worship practices do not always include or give expression to women's particular experience. I judge from

interaction and conversation with other women, that I might not be alone in this. I come, to this study, with the acknowledged bias of looking for, and in some ways expecting to find, this 'lack of fit' to be true for other women who are part of Christian faith communities.

Choosing participants

The emphasis on the possible power differential between researcher and participants, raised by Harding among others, is one of the key considerations that has influenced the construction of this study. In this situation I took cognisance of the concern raised by feminist researchers, concerning the power of the researcher [18] 'Feminists emphasise the way in which the subordination of women can be reproduced in the research relationship. Women's accounts can be constrained by the power of the interviewer and analysis taken out of their hands, thus producing outcomes against their interests. Consequently, feminists have stressed the importance of achieving symmetry in the social identities of the interview pair'(Holloway and Jefferson 2000:30). This was one reason why I have used existing friends in this study. Being small scale and exploratory this was never intended to be a study representative across age, class, race categories. Therefore I approached women who were well known to me to participate in this pilot study. All belonged, or had until recently belonged, to one of two neighbouring churches. This was also a loosely knit social group who, in different groupings, engaged in a number of social activities with one another. On the positive side I hoped that these would be people who would enjoy the workshop interaction, and with whom I already had a degree of rapport and trust that would enable effective communication in both group and individual interview settings. My decision to do this has meant that I was working with women of very similar backgrounds to myself. They too were white, middle class Protestant women, mostly of a similar age, with a longstanding church involvement. I therefore regarded that any perceived difference in power and status between myself and the participants would be reduced.

In choosing a group of women to work with who I would call friends, I was aware that this choice would shape the outcome of the study in certain ways. While established trust might lead to an openness in some areas, my ongoing relationship to the participants, which

[18] eg. see Oakley (1981)

would continue after the study, might mean that they would be to a degree 'defended' in what they might share with me, in a way that they might not be with an interviewer who was, and would probably remain, a stranger.

I acknowledge that as the 'researcher' I have guided and lead this process and therefore have exercised a degree of power and control. I also have to acknowledge that, in a study which asks questions regarding worship experience, my having completed training for the ordained ministry may have granted me some perceived higher status. However, partly because I am not practising as a minister at present, I believe these women see me more readily as friend, wife, mother, fellow church member than in any way set apart by ministry. I know that they also have all contributed regularly and confidently in different ways to the construction and leading of worship themselves, and that this is part of the past experience that we share.

Validity and generalisability.

An area of concern already explored in Chapter 2 is the validity of knowledge gained in the exploration of women's experience. Ann Gray discusses the issues of validity, representativeness and generalisability of small-scale qualitative studies in her book *Research Practice for Cultural Studies* (2003:71-74). She claims that they tend to be strong on 'validity' but weak on 'generalisability', with validity being taken to refer to the accuracy of the picture presented of the subject and the context of study. She states 'if what you are after, is data of subjective accounts of what people are doing, how they account for their lives, their passions, their sense of self, then the most valid research method is that which will enable the researcher to listen to those accounts, those narratives, those stories of the everyday'(Gray 2003:71). While this kind of validity may be guaranteed by small scale studies such as this, it must be allowed that questions remain over the validation of *interpretations* of such data. One way of addressing this problem is to employ some method of 'technique triangulation', contrasting data gathered by different methods, which will confront threats to the validity of the analysis and allow differences and contradictions to

emerge. By employing different methods of data generation I have attempted to do this, albeit on a small scale.

The question of the generalisabilty of conclusions drawn from such a small scale study is a valid one. Gray (2003:73) refers to the understanding of Richard Johnson that such small scale studies are not, as we might think, simply about 'individual' attitudes, but about shared (or not shared) formations, and that taken from this perspective, these small studies are ' likely to have a wider range of occurrence than the single example suggests'(Johnson 1997:467 in Gray 2003 :73). They may also bring into the overall picture, the perspectives of those who tend to be on the margins and can as Johnson claims 'reorder a taken for granted landscape'(Johnson 1997:470 in Gray 2003:74).

Methods employed in this study

Taking account of both Harding's emphasis on the issue of equality in the research situation and DeVault's concern for women's experience to find a voice within such a situation, I have employed three different methods in this pilot study, in order to address these areas of concern, and move beyond the traditional interview approach to gathering data. In using these particular methods, I wanted to employ a process that was as open-ended and exploratory as possible, which would allow for a breadth of response, and for the participants to lead the exploration into unexpected areas, not foreseen by the researcher.

* The first method was to encourage creative responses from participants in the form of pictures and writing.
* The second was to work with participants in groups engaged in a common task to stimulate discussion and interaction, taking advantage of the different dynamics created in a group setting.
* The third involved interviewing participants to encourage them to construct life- history narratives focussing on their church/worship history.

I outline the way in which I used these three models and my reasons for doing so below.

Creative response – the 'draw and write' technique

With concern for the problem of language and the issue of hearing women, my first concern was to find a way in which women could express their thoughts and feelings other than in a traditional interview situation.

I wanted to use a technique that allowed for a combination of verbal and non-verbal response, asking participants to illustrate their feelings about their bodies, as they felt comfortable, in drawings and by writing. I searched research literature to discover other studies employing such techniques. I found one set of techniques similar to that I proposed to use, in market research literature, in descriptions of 'projective techniques'. These were originally developed by clinical psychologists and may be classified as a structured, indirect way to investigate underlying beliefs, attitudes, feelings or motivations that respondents may find it hard to articulate otherwise (Donoghue 2000:47). 'Projective techniques help the researcher enter the private worlds of subjects to uncover their inner perspectives in a way they feel comfortable with'(Donoghue 2000:47). They are also claimed to be of use in discovering 'the person's characteristic modes of perceiving his or her world and how to behave in it' (Donoghue 2000:48). These techniques are regarded as useful in situations where it might be difficult to find out what people think and feel by direct questioning, hence my interest in using something similar to help the participants to formulate and give accounts of experience that they might not have thought about in these terms before.

Projective techniques [19] involve the use of prompts or some kind of stimulus which may be more or less structured to which participants are encouraged to respond, they involve such things as word-association, sentence completion, story completion, role-playing, writing dialogue for cartoon characters. In the initial workshop section of my research I proposed using something akin to what has been described as an *expressive* projective technique.

[19] See David Fetterman 1998: 55-56 for a brief outline of the use of projective techniques in ethnographical research.

'A subject is asked to role-play, act, draw or paint a specific concept or situation. Expressive techniques focus on the manner in which the subject constructs something, rather than on what it represents' (Donoghue 2000:49). I anticipated that I would be interested both in the manner of construction of responses and what they might represent. It has also been claimed that projective techniques are of use in the exploratory stage of a research project, when hypotheses are being sought, and that when they have brought otherwise 'hidden' attitudes and feelings into the open, other research techniques may be employed. This confirmed that this was an appropriate technique for my purposes.

One possible draw back of such a technique would be that it might be regarded as in some way under- hand, eliciting information by stealth that a participant is not consciously and willingly sharing. If however the intention of the project is to aid the communication of feelings that it might be difficult for women to express in standard language, and if participants are involved in reflecting on and interpreting data then such a criticism loses some of its force.

It is also claimed that one draw-back of projective techniques is the considerable degree of subjectivity that is inherent in the interpretation of data thus generated. It must be admitted that such data could lend itself to being shaped to fit a particular hypothesis, an eventuality to be wary of in analysis and the drawing of conclusions.

As I searched research literature, the other use of a similar technique, I found to be the 'draw and write' process used in studies with children, concerning their understanding of health and safety issues (Wetton and McWhirter 1998). The researchers in these studies used this method because they felt it gave them insights into the experiences and understandings of participants whose language skills were limited. In the context of this research I was proposing their use in a situation where it is hypothesised that language might not readily be available to give *accurate* representation of feelings and experience. One aspect of this technique that I employed was to use the drawings to provide a personal, relevant, starting point to focus discussion in a subsequent interview. Whetton and

MacWhirter in reporting this study do note that the meaning of drawings can be ambiguous and that analysis is always subjective (Wetton and McWhirter 1998: 269-273).

Finally, in formulating this creative response method, I drew on a paper dealing with 'Creativity within Qualitative Research on Families: New Ideas for Old Methods (Deacon 2000), which advocated the use of a number of creative methods, including sculpting, photography, and videography, art and drawing, role-playing, writing exercises, metaphors and timelines, in research concerned to uncover perceptions, feelings and life events of participants. In this paper Deacon suggests that use of such methods, while rare in both qualitative and quantitative research literature may be a better fit for those studying dynamic living systems than those traditionally used. She also picks up the point already raised that such methods may be of use to those seeking to engage in a participatory research. 'The methods attempt to reduce the level of researcher participant hierarchy and create partnerships between all those involved in the research' (Deacon 2000:1).

Group work

Another research technique that has been used for many years in market research, is the employment of the focus group or group interview. It is now widely used in qualitative research principally to examine the ways in which people, in conjunction with one another, understand the topics that the researcher is interested in. Such group work offers a dynamic that is different from that of one-to-one interviewing. It allows participants to challenge and/or affirm one another's views, and for different perspectives to be shared. The focus group allows the researcher to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon. They may encourage some participants to express themselves in ways they would not in an individual interview situation, although equally there may be those who would say less in a group setting.

Alongside the other methods I employed, I chose to generate data in two group settings, because such group work has some characteristics that make it valuable as a method for feminist research. The group setting (especially as in this case a group of existing friends

meeting together for an evening) is less artificial than other methods because such group interaction is itself part of everyday life and discussion proceeds in a natural way. As a result, it has been claimed 'there is a greater opportunity to derive understandings that chime with the 'lived experience' of women' (Bryman 2001:348).

Such a method means that the individual is studied as a social being, rather than as a separate entity devoid of a social context, although an all-women group is obviously only part of the individuals social context. Working with participants in a group setting also affects the power dynamic between the researcher and respondents. In a group respondents have power to shape the interaction in a way that they might not in a traditional one-to-one interview setting.

Madriz (2000) says in her paper 'Focus groups in Feminist Research' that, for the reasons cited above, 'focus groups can be an important element in the advancement of an agenda of social justice for women, because they can serve to expose and validate women's everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective survival strategies'. This is a key theme of this study.

Life-history interviews.

Another tool available to the qualitative researcher is the 'narrative' interview, or what is sometimes called a 'life-history' interview. Having elicited creative responses and group conversation from the participants, I felt I would need to put this material into the context of their on going lives, to know more of what one of the respondents called her 'journey'. With an interest in the process of social change, I wanted to hear from these seven women who ranged in age from thirty two to sixty five, of the development of their understandings about themselves, about where they felt they fitted in religious and worship terms and how their patterns of conformity and resistance to cultural pressures had changed over time. I decided, therefore, to conduct one-to-one interviews, in which I began by asking the participants to tell the story of their church life to date.

Once again in line with a concern for conducting research according to feminist principles, this form gives a greater degree of power to the participant who has an open canvas (in this case,'your church life from when you were wee') to construct and select the parts to tell that are of greatest significance to them. This process might be viewed as the construction of a 'self' but it also reveals much about society. As Gray points out in her discussion of narrative research methods, '..the potential for putting together our identity and subjectivity is always shaped and constrained , or enabled by our position within the social structure' (Gray 2003:111).

In using the participants narration of their own histories, I am aware that as Holloway and Jefferson caution,' Neither selves nor accounts are transparent in our view. Treating people's own accounts as unproblematic flies in the face of what is known about people's less clear-cut more confused and contradictory relationship to knowing and telling about themselves' (Holloway and Jefferson 2000:3). However my interest lies more in accessing the feelings about themselves and what they think is important in their stories, than that such narration should reveal historical truths.

Conduct of research

Having contacted participants and before embarking on the study, I outlined the nature of the study, gave participants a written outline of what it would involve for them, covering issues of confidentiality, the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any point, and their ownership of data and obtained their written permission to proceed.

As indicated, the first part of this study consisted of employing a creative method to generate data from the participants. Since I was also planning to work with respondents in groups to take advantage of group dynamics, I decided to ask them to complete individual creative tasks as part of a workshop session in which they would also undertake a group exercise. I therefore ran two workshop sessions, one with four participants and one with three, during which individual creative exercises and the group tasks were completed. By

doing this I was able to shorten the time scale of the study and administer the individual creative tasks in a controlled situation.

Individual creative tasks

For the first creative exercise, I gave participants a prompt sheet which suggested that they draw and write responses on a blank A4 sheet (see instructions to participants in Appendix 1). They were to imagine themselves in an every-day situation of well-being. I provided a range of artistic materials, so that they could if they wished make their pictures colourful, sparkly etc. Only on completion of the first sheet were they given the second in which they were asked to complete a similar task, but this time projecting themselves into their usual worship situation.

With the issue of power in the research situation in mind. I also completed the individual tasks alongside the participants, both to experience for myself what might be involved in doing what I had asked others to do, and for that part of the evening at least, to put myself on something of a level plane with the other participants.

The data that resulted from this first, creative method of investigation was two pictures (with words written on them) per participant.

A positive outcome from doing the individual creative work, before moving to the group interaction was that participants were oriented to the topic and had had time to think about it individually, which enriched the interaction and response for the group work. It also provided a non-threatening beginning to the workshop evening. As the participants were assured, their individual responses were confidential and only seen by the researcher.

Group work

The second part of each workshop evening involved a joint exercise when we drew, on a large piece of frieze paper, a life sized woman (who came to be known as 'the big

woman'). Picking up on the starting point of the first exercise, this was to be an imaginary woman who was in a situation where she felt comfortable. I guided the drawing of this woman, beginning at her head, asking the participants prompting questions such as 'what would her hair be like' and so on. This process led to input and interaction by the participants, covering areas such as body shape, clothes, comfort, and conformity.

Life-history interviews

Having generated data in creative form and by group work, as soon as possible after the workshop sessions, I conducted individual interviews with the participants, each lasting about an hour. Having checked my knowledge of their basic biographical details to be correct, I proceeded to ask the participants to sketch out their religious/church experience to date.

The one-to-one interview situation also gave me the opportunity to see if they had anything else to add or say about the pictures they had made (which I showed them again), to ask some prompting questions about what they might consider sacred in their everyday lives and whether or not they might consider their bodies sacred, and finally to ask for their feelings about the methods we had used, particularly the creative work.

By using the three methods outlined, I acquired a rich pool of data in the form of pictures, recorded and transcribed group interaction and recorded and transcribed individual interviews with a strong life history component. In the following chapter I review the data and highlight the results of most relevance for my ongoing search.

Chapter 4

Research results – women's bodies in image and story

The methods that I employed in this study meant that my participants provided three types of material. Firstly there were the pictures that they had drawn (two apiece) and the writing they had done on the pictures. Secondly I had taped conversations from the two workshop sessions when we were engaged in drawing the 'big woman'. Finally I had autobiographical (taped and transcribed) accounts of their church/worship history from individual interviews, along with other comments on sacredness and bodies also from individual interviews.

It is possible to think of a research process such as I have engaged in as being witness to the production of 'subjectivities'(Gray 2003:184). Gray describes such research as 'revealing some of the conditions of social becoming'(2003:184). She goes on to cite Rose, who follows the later thinking of Foucault in understanding that 'people are subjected to a complex mixture of technologies, in shaping the self, but are at one and the same time active subjects engaging in deploying the tactics of the self when inhabiting different sites and concomitant identities'(Rose 1996 in Gray 2003:184). Questions of subjectivity, technologies of self and agency have been woven through this dissertation and I am seeking to discover if these women have in some way shaped the selves they have become. It is with such questions in mind that I approach this data. I would want to describe this process of social becoming over time as producing what Kristeva has called 'subjects-in-process'.

In her discussion of the production of subjectivities, Gray also speaks of 'repertoires' of behaviours that are available to subjects in process, which she describes as 'currently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating, actions, events and other phenomena'(Potter and Wetherall 1987:149 in Gray 2003:165). I am interested in whether such repertoires can be identified in the material that I have collected.

Finally Gray (2003: 184) speaks of institutions inviting certain subjectivities and another underlying question in any analysis of this material would be to ask if our churches invite identifiable subjectivities, in this case from women who are long-term members.

In my presentation and analysis of data, then, I will be seeking to identify discourses of shaping whether conformed to or resisted in society, and ask whether such discourses also operate in church life.

The 'selves' in the pictures

I begin reviewing the data with a close examination of the pictures produced with the 'draw and write' technique. To safeguard their identity, I have given the participants names other than their own.

These pictures (Appendix 2) are unique personal documents – personal in style as well as content .They are therefore difficult to analyse and compare. I also take cognisance of the comment of one of the participants with regard to interpretation of such creative work, which she made in the individual interview, when we were discussing the value of doing the drawings.

Dawn .....as soon as you have a drawing there's lots of levels of interpretation. Again one of the things with art therapy is that the art therapist is actually not supposed to interpret someone else's drawing cos its up to the someone else to bring that out for themselves.

Obviously such documents are open to many levels of interpretation. As I look at the pictures to identify presentations of selves, I will be making deductions that are simply that, and other interprctations of the material are of course possible. Since these pictures provide

data that is open to multiple interpretations the employment of two other methods in this project, means that I can confirm impressions and investigate further the clues to particular subjectivities that I see presented in them.

I have known all the women taking part in the study for at least five years . It is inevitable that some of what I deduce from all the forms of data will be shaped by this knowledge of them and their lives. Such a close relationship can be a positive situation for hearing from experience, in line with DeVault's suggestion that women interviewing women can fill in information from shared experience, where there are gaps and hesitations.

To reiterate on the process, each participant produced two pictures. For Picture 1 they imagined themselves in an everyday setting that gave them a sense of well-being. For Picture 2 worship they imagined themselves in their usual worship setting. (See Appendix 1 for sheets that outlined each task and Appendix 2 for the pictures themselves.)

Ellie

Picture 1

The self in this picture is slightly sketchily drawn, perhaps showing some uncertainty but she is in bold black, and the statements written on the picture are confident. There are touches of colour, and sense of the importance of the sensual, **'hot water, candles, nice music'.** The image of a woman luxuriating in a hot bath, enjoying wine, music and candle light, is one that can be found in contemporary media and advertising, signalling a taking care of oneself. It is thus, for Ellie, an image of well being, but at the same time it is one from a cultural repertoire that is familiar and easily read.

Picture 2

The figure in this picture is larger than that in the first picture, but much more lightly sketched. The words however are confident, **'I would feel at ease with myself'** . This self is also one who appreciates what comes to her through her senses and being in relationship to others. This second picture has no colour.

Sarah

Picture 1

The self of Sarah's first picture is bright and at the centre of a network of lines that connect her to other things that she enjoys or that are important to her. Family '**matter most**', although they don't always bring a sense of well being . There is an appreciation of the sensual, '**I like fabrics that feel silky**' and the joy of dancing '**country dancing makes me feel very alive**'.

Picture 2

The self Sarah presents here is smaller and seems further away, somehow dwarfed by the big seat and surrounding space. The written comments present someone who looks for intellectual engagement in the worship situation, '**like to feel stretched in my thinking and questioning**' and '**good sermon makes me feel alive**'. Once again this second picture is solely in black and white, and less bold than the first.

Lizzie

Picture 1

Lizzie wanted to present two different aspects of herself in her first picture. One offers a beautiful image of her naked and with child and the comment '**I feel gorgeous and very sexy. I feel complete.**'

The other is of her drawing at Art School with again a strong sense of contentment. '**I am absorbed and happy. I could do this without stopping, forever.**' The self she presents in both these images is creative and totally absorbed, essentially herself and free from outside pressure. Such pressures to conformity are still however 'in the picture'. There is still a concern for body size and image, '**I like to wear comfy clothes and not look too fat,** and **I like swimming....I am not heavy.**' This picture has no colour, but is confidently drawn.

Picture 2

The self in Lizzie's second picture is slightly more hazy than in her first and blends in to a degree with the surroundings and those who are around her in a circle. This 'diffusion' is also expressed in some of the words she has written: **'chanting involves feeling of 'otherness', 'extension'.'** Lizzie is the one participant in the study who no longer worships regularly in a mainstream congregation, and the worship setting she depicts herself in, is obviously not a standard Sunday morning service in one of the mainstream churches. She shows herself as having chosen a different form for her spiritual expression.

Alison

Picture 1

In this picture Alison presents herself as actively engaging with the natural world, which she has depicted as bright and colourful. She has a physical appreciation of the world around, confirmed by her writing **'awareness of senses'**. She has not included anyone else in this picture as she had the option to do but has written on it, **'solitude and companionship'**. She also has written on the picture, **'away from problems –yet time to reflect on issues at a distance'.** The pose of the figure is one who is travelling. The drawing, writing and illustrating of this picture are all firmly and boldly done and it conveys a confident 'self', content and at ease.

Picture 2

In her regular worship setting, Alison is here more hemmed in than in her first picture, though she is a similar size to the figure in the other picture and equally boldly drawn. She is face on to the 'viewer', available and more passive in stance than in her first picture. There are other people in this picture shown by the backs of heads, and a minister. There is mention of **'children'** and **'asylum seekers.'** Other comments on this picture reinforce the impression that the self here is more under pressure and having to try harder to 'fit' with a situation that is not quite natural to her (in a church with a different theological stance than her own in which she serves as a deacon.)She displays a little ambiguity about the worship, **'singing, *when* I can relate to the music and words makes me feel alive.'** and **'sermons**

sometimes **inspiring and encouraging'.** As in all but two of the second pictures, there is no colour in this picture.

Dawn

Picture 1

In her first picture, Dawn presents herself walking off into the hills, she is active, not just presented to the gaze of the other. She stresses her love of, and affinity with, the natural world. She writes **'Not really a city girl.'** She presents herself and someone who enjoys freedom and being able to decide for herself. **'happy that I can come out to walk, climb, wander – no restrictions....being able to choose where to go, where to drive or walk.'** She also presents a self that is both happy to be solitary and curl up with a book, and who enjoys the company of others (and the cat!)

Picture 2

Dawn's second picture is softer and more sketchy than the first and has no colour. The figure is planted in the centre of the page, and is relaxed and receptive. This is again a situation in which she feels she can make choices and decide how to dress to feel comfortable. She is aware that this has not always been the case in other worship settings. She writes ' **feel that this church is a place without judgements on body or what to wear and how to look. I have been to different churches in the past.'**

Felicity

Picture 1

The figure in both of Felicity's drawings is in a very similar pose. The pose may be one of welcome, or dancing, but it is a very open pose and could have a vulnerability about it. It presents her wholly straight on to another's gaze. The first picture, the everyday picture, has a colour and softness and sense of light that is not in the second picture. The words written about the figure in this first picture are all positive evocations of nature, friends and family and things of the senses.

Picture 2

This picture is not coloured and the colours mentioned in writing are more sombre than in the first. While there are still positive things mentioned in the words written around the figure, the self presented here has a church past that was obviously not what she would have chosen, which is still conjured up by the present church experience.' **Prayer book service-childhood memories - endless services boredom, stifling Sunday atmosphere-no fun, no TV, only Christian books! !'**

Jean

Picture 1

Jean presents two aspects of herself in her first picture, both of which face the world with a smile of contentment. There is great movement and style in the dancing figure and an obvious sense of joy and confidence in what the body is doing. She describes the seated figure as **Alone and at ease.**

Picture 2

While the drawing is confident and bold, the self in Jean's second picture appears in a quieter more reflective mode, but again with a sense of being at ease with herself. There is colour but it is muted

Looking at the pictures in their pairs it is possible to see if there are any obvious differences between them and to check if these differences are common to all or most of them. One thing that was apparent when comparing the first ('everyday' picture), with the second ('worship experience' picture), was that in all the pairs except two, the first picture had some colour and the second had none. The exceptions were the drawings of Lizzie both of which were done in soft pencil, and those of Jean who put sombre colour in her second picture. Whether this lack of colour in the second picture indicates anything significant I am not sure. A bigger sample would be needed to show if this was a general trend, then it

would be interesting to explore why the church setting would be one not associated with bright colours of dress or setting.

Another occurrence in both workshop sessions which was particularly noticeable in the first, was the difference in the levels of conversation and silence as the participants completed the first picture and then the second. In both workshops there was virtual silence during the completion of the second task (illustrating the participant in a worship situation) as opposed to the first task (illustrating a more everyday) situation, during which there was more chat and banter. I asked participants in subsequent interviews why they thought this might be.

Ellie ...the complete change around in the atmosphere when we had the first one and then the second one. The second one was totally, it was dead quiet wasn't it? We were all having a banter the first one, but the second one we all kind of umm...

P.S. Why do you think that was? Have you any ideas?

Ellie I don't know, don't know
Maybe we thought, "Oh right. Oh we've to think about this!"
I don't know.

It was just a change from us being flippant, not even flippant but you know what I mean. Yeh to this... but it wasn't a bad change. We just kind of thought about it a wee bit.

Sarah ... again I wonder if....in our minds not necessarily perhaps, that this was the kind of more important maybe. And a more sort of, I don't know, yes I think maybe more important where you felt you'd to sort of...Whereas this was was more I mean everybody was kind of laughing about what was going to be on it..the glass of wine, the candles and it was more a kind of relaxed thing, I think, and just your family and the sort of things you, I mean I say, things you were going to enjoy. I don't mean that I don't enjoy church, but it's a more serious form and its not maybe so relaxed...

It would seem from this study that when given the invitation to put themselves at the centre of the picture in a situation in which they feel good, women acknowledged those who share their lives, husbands, children, friends, but these others did not, literally, loom too large in the pictures. All expressed pleasure in solitary activities as well as in companionship

I note at this point that although given the opportunity and prompted to illustrate in someway feelings about their bodies, there was little direct reference to bodies in the writing on the pictures.

The 'selves' projected on to the 'big woman'

In the two workshop sessions that I set up, the participants completed their individual creative tasks and also a group task, guiding the drawing of what we came to call the 'big woman'. I was more concerned in this instance with this exercise being a vehicle to enable discussion than with the actual picture that resulted. Comments and contributions of the participants while we drew the 'big woman' in each workshop were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The selves that were presented in the conversations that took place while we drew the 'big woman' appeared to have been shaped by two major discourses or repertoires, that interwove and sometimes competed with one another. These I will characterise as 'I'm worth it' and 'comfortable woman'. One appears to buy into body shaping regimes, such as are driven by advertising, " Because I'm worth it", being a current slogan for selling shampoo. This discourse validates the spending of some money and time, to 'adjust' body image, while still claiming that this is done by choice and for the woman herself rather than to please others . Is this due to some internalised ideal image driven by the media or is this what women would freely chose to do to feel good. It is hard, bearing in mind the foregoing discussion of the work of Foucault, to separate choice from cultural shaping in this respect.

Alongside this and sometimes in opposition to it there is expressed the attraction of being 'natural' and comfortable, and the wish not to feel constrained to spend too much money and time on the body.

The interweaving of these discourses is illustrated by the following extracts from the first workshop. We notice, for instance, Sarah championing a little enhancement of the natural self:

> Some of us only feel good about ourselves if we do something.

while it is Lizzie who questions the need for make-up, and who most fervently champions a more natural self.

> Does she wear make up?
>
> I can't bear the feel of that stuff on my skin.

The word 'comfortable' is used nineteen times in the conversations in the two workshops, and the women who say they want a little enhancement of nature still agree on the need for comfort and practicability.

Excerpts from the first group session

This conversation takes place as I draw the 'big woman', guided by the group.

P.S.	So she doesn't mind spending a wee bit on her....
Alison	No she thinks she deserves...
Lizzie	She's worth it
Alison	She's good to herself
P.S.	Ok
Ellie	Her make up would be perfect
Lizzie	Does she wear make up?
Ellie	Well not a lot ...just enough to make her feel... good
Sarah	To enhance her

Ellie Uh hu to enhance her features

Lizzie I just put on that stuff that takes the shadows out...makes you look less like a panda and a bit of lippy and that's me ..sorted

Ellie Aye, lippy and eye shadow

Sarah I must admit I use make up

Ellie Yeh it makes you feel good when you get up and put your make up on..
but not too much- just enough to enhance your appearance

Lizzie I just can't bear the feel of stuff on my skin

(PS drawing big picture)

Alison She's got nice long eyelashes

Ellie Her eyebrows are plucked to perfection

P.S. She might though.. if she were feel good woman.. she might just let her self go and be natural

Several voices ... Yes 'au natural'

Alison Yes that's what I was thinking, they're natural long eyelashes she doesn't need mascara

Lizzie Armpits a la grequel

(general laughter)

Alison Hairy legs

Lizzie I've got my winter legs ladies, (showing ankles under trousers)

Ellie Ah no!

Lizzie Its too cold to go and get yer legs waxed

Sarah I don't think she would let herself go if she was going to feel good

Lizzie Is it letting yourself go though?

Alison It's a question of feeling good about yourself

Lizzie Priorities

Sarah Some of us only feel good about ourselves if we do something

Alison It's about feeling yourself worthy of a nice hair do without being over the top

P.S. For yourself rather than....

Ellie everybody else

Alison ...to please yer man

Sarah Because if you feel good then... it doesn't matter so much how other people think about you

P.S. So she's um...there she is

She's ...is she

Lizzie She's got a really comfy bra on

(laughter)

Lizzie ...fits well, and enhances and is comfortable

****

Ellie But she would need to be for herself...do you know...

Alison It's comfortable for her

Ellie Ah ha

Alison What she's comfortable with

P.S. Uh ha, so she wears what she's comfortable with

Sarah Yeh what she feels is right

****

Sarah I think you want shoes that are comfortable no matter how fashionable they are they've got to be comfortable

Lizzie You want to be able to run for the bus

Ellie Yeh they have to be comfortable

****

P.S. So she sometimes has hairy legs

Lizzie No no she doesn't, not with a short skirt, even I even I wax my legs in the summer I have to say, I've only got them like this because it's a bit cold. When you get them waxed you feel you've lost a layer of skin.. ugh

(PS drawing)

Lizzie I have to say that I object in principle to the fact that she feels she has to do that in order to be comfortable but there you go.

P.S. What, what the waxed and the shaved?

Lizzie the waxed and the shaved uh hu

When I was a student I used to go with...I never used to shave my legs or wax my legs or anything like that. I was walking up Sauchiehall St one day and there were these two wee boys walking along behind me, and I could hear the conversation " Do you think she's got a hairy chest as well, go and ask her"! (general laughter)

I went home and shaved my legs

They walked past me and they turned round and had a look

P.S. Sooo the key thing...she likes to look like she likes to look and she likes to be decorative, but she really likes to be comfortable

Ellie Do you think that says something about us?

The second workshop session was different in a number of ways from the first. In the second workshop, there was one less person and the participants did not know each other so well. The second session was therefore quieter and more restrained. When we came to draw the 'big woman', nonetheless there were also comments which revealed the pressures to conformity that touched the women, and how they responded.

Excerpts from the second group session

P.S. What kind of shoes then do you think she would have? We've already talked a bit about shoes Really comfortable?

Dawn I mean I have to say, I've always liked, if not flat shoes, almost flat shoes. I've just never got into wearing heels. I mean its like people I work with they love wearing heels and I just, I think I just never, because I never got into it when I was younger. They just feel so uncomfortable. And also I like being able to walk into work or walk around, and you just can't walk.

Felicity That was the thing with the September 11th, after that the sale of high heel shoes went right down in New York, because they were all thinking, "If I have to get out of a high building quickly, these are completely useless". So all comfortable shoes were really popular. And tight skirts, that was another thing went down ...suddenly you think..

P.S. You can imagine that can't you? In any kind of dangerous difficult situation you just want to be able to move

Dawn Yes its funny how all the, you know, fashionable are really actually completely impractical. All sort of 'going for a night out' clothes especially in the winter and its like the shops at the moment, lots of sandals and things. And I suppose once you get where its really hot its quite nice to have open-toed sandals, but it's the getting there.

Jean I put my boots on and carry the sandals in a bag

Dawn I have contemplated them.(high heels) I think partly its that whole wardrobe change thing as well. All the things I've got, like trousers, all the trousers I've got would just look daft if I had high heels.

The skirts I've got might be OK. I think I haven't got that much money to spend on getting everything, but if I change my shoes and get something different, I'd have to buy stuff to go with it.

P.S. This is the 'feeling good' woman, do you think she dresses like this and so on for somebody else or is this for her own?

Jean I think she would dress like that for herself

Dawn I mean usually the dressing for someone else tends to be the more impractical, doesn't it. Whether its dressing for an interview or something like that, its clothes that make you feel more uptight.

P.S. That's an interesting thought

Felicity Becomes a prison I think.

****

Dawn Yeh I think its one of those things that you probably learn, as you kind of get more used to the shape you are and how to make the most of it, is what sort of things you buy to make the most of it

Dawn Cos I do remember a time when I was young, skin tight jeans were in and I remember going to this shop in Brighton and trying on these skin tight jeans, and I was a wee bit on the podgy side, puppy fat I suppose, but maybe not. And I remember there were male shop assistants, and that they were making comments about me and I felt awful, but I still wanted the jeans cos I was a real tom boy.Didn't want to wear skirts or anything and no-one had sort of said " maybe you could try wearing a different type of jeans" That's just what I wore cos that's what I did wear. So whereas I think when you get to be more aware of your body shape and sort of think "Oh OK maybe you know not the tight fitting jeans...avoid those and get some looser fitting things".

Again, it is possible here to trace two strands of influence on the way these women (and women in general, if we accept the Sept 11th story) regard themselves as they go about in the world. Firstly they are aware of the constraints of fashion, especially in situations such as dressing for a night out or dressing for a situation where you are judged by what you wear, but equally they appreciate the need to be safe and comfortable, and not have to spend too much money on how you look.

There seems here to be an acceptance of the need to sometimes conform to society's expectations, but also a desire to work around them in the interests of bodily comfort. As Jean says '**I put my boots on and carry the sandals in a bag**'. They recognise that conformity has its price and is restricting As Felicity expresses it, '**Becomes a prison, I think**'.

The 'selves' presented in individual life-history interviews

The interviews produced some very rich accounts and stories out of which I am choosing to focus on themes of coercion and resistance, partly because these emerged strongly in the group work. All of these women told of points in their lives where although subject to certain pressures to be or act or look in a certain way, they resisted and made a choice to 'be themselves.' The pressures on them to conform to some ideal came from parents or spouses, cultural and media pressure, religious and moral codes. These pressures are not always altogether resisted but are sometimes accommodated and subverted with humour. Hearing these accounts makes clear to what extent we are all subjects in process over time.

Ellie's life-history interview

Ellie recalled the drawing of the 'big woman' and this led her to tell of resisting her ex-husband's definition of her as **'nothing but a frump'** and her redefinition of herself after their divorce symbolised by clearing out her wardrobe and starting afresh.

Ellie And what we said about the woman. How we pictured this lady and it has been, I suppose, its drummed into you that I suppose, you're supposed to have a nice figure. Na what you are is more important

P.S. Yeh, it was interesting doing that with the big figure cos there was a lot coming out about her doing stuff for herself, rather than trying to fit into an image

Ellie Yeh

P.S. But its quite hard

Ellie Yeh, especially, I suppose in this day and age, I don't know about years ago. Well I do because saying that when I think about it. When (ex husband) and I split up, I cleared my wardrobe out completely, and gave everything to the charity shop, and started afresh.

P.S. Right, so this was you for you

Ellie Uh hu yes. Because he said " You're nothing but a frump", and I thought, "Right!"

P.S. Uh ha

Ellie And I just totally wiped the wardrobe clean. And started again. And what I wanted to wear, not what, you know, what I thought a 'mother' should wear. Or a 'mother' should be, you know.

P.S. Ah ha, yes.

Ellie But again I suppose, I wouldn't have done that. No I wouldn't have..probably if I'd still been married I wouldn't have done half the things I've done.

Ellie But um no I said to (twin sister) " I cleared my wardrobe out" she says "What?" I said " Its not me - I'm going to be me from now on"

Ellie goes on to make clear that she recognises the fact that with children, there are still responsibilities and constraints, but when she has the chance she values making choices and being 'me'.

Sarah's life-history interview

In her individual interview, Sarah, at different points expresses a lack of confidence in herself as an interesting person. It not clear what has led Sarah to feel like this. She says that she does not really like to talk about herself and how she feels.

Sarah I think I'm better now, but I think before I really, I um didn't kind of like to talk about anything like that, you know, I found it difficult just to kind of say that's what I felt

.....but I think it is quite difficult or at least I personally find it difficult to talk about me if you like, you know. Sadly I don't think I'm very interesting (laughs) I really feel people are not that interested in what I might have to say.

It is clear both from what she wrote on her pictures and from other parts of her interview that she also projects a self who is very interested in gaining knowledge, an interest she has pursued successfully in various ways. It is then possible to see Sarah engaging in what

Foucault has called 'technologies of self' over the course of her life and following paths that are rewarding for her, in spite of the less-than-confident self that she reveals at times.

Lizzie's life history interview

Lizzie told a number of stories during her interview, some of which centred on how she has come to deal with issues to do with weight and body image. While obviously touched by some of the current cultural pressures to conform to a certain size and shape,she addresses such issues with self awareness, assurance and humour. She speaks about her regular visits to the swimming baths, and then tells a story which shows how she reacts to such pressures.

Lizzie Erm so I'm getting more laid back about being seen without a towel wrapped round me and stuff. I still prefer to walk around with something wrapped round me but it doesn't bother me as much as it used to. You know, you go through a phase of thinking " Everybody's looking at me" And then you think "Well actually everybody isn't" You know and other people aren't worrying about you looking at them either.

Do you know what I decided to do recently? I got all dressed up. I got myself, I was discussing, I was at a school reunion a couple of weeks ago and a friend and I, in our cups, were bemoaning the fact that we'd discovered our cleavages about twenty-five years too late. And how when we were in the eighties it was all these high necks. You'd Laura Ashley up to your chin.

I had this, I've got this marvellous top that I love, that I got in the Shelter shop, and it's a tight black Lycra top with a V neck and it has little diamante things stuck on it round the neck of it, and I love this thing and its quite, I mean its very tight, it just fits where it touches sort of thing.

I've got a pair of stretch black jeans that I got cheap and I've got a silvery jacket that I got also in a charity shop. The entire outfit cost less than twenty pounds, which is very pleasing. Erm, and I put this lot on and in order to convince myself that I'm drop dead gorgeous I say to myself...

Instead of saying " I'm really fat, I never used to be this fat, I'm so fat you know, its horrible", I say to myself, or I pretend I'm going to say to other people, "Actually, I've just lost three stone in weight. I used to be enormous. I feel fantastic now!" (laughing) And I go away out, sort of with a spring in my step, thinking about my imaginary three stone that I've shed, you know. Feeling wonderful

Alison's life-history interview.

The constraints and coercions to meet other's expectations, seem to come for Alison from the expectations placed on her in her role as a deacon in the Church of Scotland and the

expectation of, for example, her dressing in a certain way. This also reflects the expectations she grew up with about dressing in a certain way for church

Alison I would never, I've never worn trousers to church on a Sunday. I have this thing
that about being smart.

P.S. Smartly dressed?

Alison Wearing a skirt and that's been, not just because I work for the church but even before then, I would have always have this...

P.S. Do you think that is other people's expectations or something you do for yourself?

Alison I think it probably is other, I think I would be "Oh I might offend." The old ladies might think that's terrible, and some of them'll be wearing trousers....smart trousers but I don't have particularly smart trousers anyway. And I suppose the way I was brought up, because my Mum she never wore trousers anyway and she would certainly say if I was home, "Oh Alison, you'd better not go to church like that" But its, its offending, I don't think God would bother but its about offending people. What people might think.

However this appears to be a constraint that does not weigh too heavily. More significantly, there is a strong thread running through Alison's account of her church life as it developed, of concern for issues of justice and a growing involvement with those at the margins of society. Her resistance appears to be more directed against situations of injustice and violence. She reveals this part of herself in her passionate involvement in a protest against nuclear weapons at Faslane. This is one of the moments in her life that she would describe as sacred.

Alison Certainly, I always remember at Faslane, having communion out at the ....and that was a really sacred spiritual ...but it was awwe really spiritual doing it in that.. outwith a church building..in certainly what wasn't a sacred...you wouldn't call it holy ground standing outside Faslane but it was very, became a very holy moment. Incredibly, incredibly, powerful, moving.

PS Can you say any more about why that would be?

Alison I think the setting and the context ah ha, ah ha

P.S. Would it be to do with the value of life?

Alison Ah ha, protesting about something that you felt wasn't valuing life, but within the sacrament the real valuing of life and the love of God, and the sacrifice of God for us in his son.

I mean it was really really powerful . I don't know if I can really express it very well.
And saying, I remember saying the Lord's prayer as well, like " Thy Kingdom come" when you were thinking about working for the kingdom of God and peace in the world and it just it just, sometimes you're just saying that in church. It became much more powerful
Uh hu

Felicity's life-history interview

One person strongly affected by what she would now see as a restricting religious up-bring was Felicity. Much of Felicity's subsequent life, to her present age of 53, appears to have involved resisting and finding freedom from this. She talks about her efforts to carve out space to be herself as she grew up, finding relief from restricting pressure when she went abroad and met different kinds of Christians

She is able to see that her near anorexia was her struggling to find some space and exert some control over her situation. As well as the usual controlling discourses that young women experience she experienced specific constraints because her family belonged to a sub-set of society, evangelical Christianity. The battleground, the area where the struggle for control was fought out seems to have centred on her appearance, and her emergence as a social and sexual being.

Felicity So its very much part of my up-bringing. Sometimes good and sometimes not so good.

Um er...It was only really when I went abroad err to Nigeria and I worked with er um and I worked with a mixture of people from different countries, a lot of Americans actually, that I realised that everybody wasn't the same in terms of how they were as a Christian.

I think um there was a lot of kind of pressure sort of and guilt around the whole kind of thing about what you should and oughtn't "should" and "oughtn't" were so often used. That was quite a..I found that quite a negative aspect and you know things like "Well if you don't go to the prayer meeting and you're the ministers daughter then who will...kind of that's....I found that quite heavy.

Yeh yeh well I think as um a young child, urm I divided the congregation in my mind into two, the people who smiled at you and the people who glared at you. (laughs) And I mean a lot of people were really nice, but there were some who were...

But um, urmmm as a teenager it was much more difficult, cos Dad was still around at the youth club.

So that wasn't any getting away and I really didn't have any social life much apart from them being, him being running around.
Which um wasn't that I didn't want him there, that I didn't like him or anything, it just meant that I didn't have any room to grow.

Felicity's adult choice of church has led her now to a congregation of tolerance and openness. She spoke of her feeling of ease in her present congregation, in contrast to her early life experience.

Felicity Um. I think the music has a big pull for me.
And the fact that there's not really pressure on you to be or to do anything in particular. erum. and so you've got across the spectrum, there isn't a kind of a coat that you have to put on to be a member, you know whereas there are in sort of evangelical, and there isn't a kind 'in' language, you know that sort of speak, where you speak...that was a relief. And its very creative. I like that really, yeh.

> Yeh yeh yes. So many before sort of "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts". And its sort of inappropriate, and its like, it just sort of weighs on you all the time this kind of expectation. Yeh. I don't feel that.

Felicity also told a long story from her childhood, about the harsh treatment of a homosexual curate by the church her family belonged to. She spoke of her relief at finding different attitudes to sexual orientation in the church which she now attends.

Dawn's life-history interview

In her interview Dawn showed an awareness of the pressures that women are subjected to to have the perfect body, as she had done in the group work with her story of buying jeans, but she seems able to resist such pressure.

Dawn Erm but equally I think there can be a thing in society where it's a battle of the body and the mind, and the sort of mind thing of wanting to get your body perfect and wonderful and sometimes you need to say "Well its my body, it does what it's supposed to do and that's really the best thing (laughing) you know.

P.S. Yes, yes

Dawn Erm rather than thinking, " I wish I had a body like so and so" or whatever.

Sometimes pressures to conformity have come from the religious context. Dawn described in her interview how the first church that she went to when she left home was, almost by

chance, a Pentecostal Church, and she describes their attitude to what should be worn to church

Dawn Erm but it was also a church...it was quite funny when I was doing that thing about what you wear in church. My home church when I went to it growing up it was absolutely.. you know you just wore what you wore. Erm there were people who dressed up, I think it was more, you know an older generation wearing Sunday best. But I'd never really encountered that myself. And it was funny cos when I went to this church it was, I wasn't aware of it at first but I remember some people making comments about this guy who was there. And the trend was for ripped jeans at that time, and they were scandalised, and I thought "Of all the things you could be scandalised about!" (laughing)

And equally erm there was a couple of lads that came in one day and goodness knows why they came in, but I think , I don't know if it was partly that they were dressed in stuff that were not of the normal but also

partly this slightly predatory thing of, "Oh good people we can corner afterwards and speak to them about Jesus!" (laughing)
They made a very quick getaway before the service ended!

She also describes however the way in which in company with other **'very good strong women friends'** it was possible to resist some of the more sexist views which she saw as partly stemming from the religious context and partly from the more general cultural context of the North East of England.

Dawn ..... again I had some very good friends, very good strong women friends at the church and I think there was a group of us would just kind of go "Well there's a lot of it that's actually nonsense" The women doing the tea and the men moving the chairs and its like "For goodness sake you know we're not that weak! We can move chairs you know"!

It just seemed very much more delineated between sexes. And whether that was also more of a thing of it being Newcastle as well. Cos I think Newcastle was a little bit more traditional in the way of the roles of what people did, as much as it being that particular church. I don't know. But um yeh it was quite interesting erm .

Dawn has not continued to belong to a congregation with such rigid sexual stereotyping thus choosing a different religious context for herself. She speaks of how much she now values less rigid more open forms of worship which she finds in her present congregation

> ....it is that slightly poetic language that encompasses sort of the depth of different responses and things like that . And the way that (minister) usually talks is in that way. The Iona or the Celtic hymns and even you know the older hymns that we have many of them have a sort of depth to them that I really like.
>
> I think it allows interpretation. And its like er, its like art work in a way. I mean if you you've got a simplistic bit of art work ...it just sort of says " this is it boom boom". Well you can appreciate it but maybe you don't get so involved because you don't have to put the input in.
> Whereas if its something that's a little bit more, not necessarily abstract, but a little bit more, you know got different layers to it then, you can engage with whichever layer is appropriate to you at that time.

> And I think that's why it works well because you know if you've got a variety of people sitting in the church, some of them having a great time at that precise moment, someone having an awful time then its its perhaps a way of reaching out to everyone. ..that everyone can get something from it. Whatever's appropriate to them at that time.

Jean's life-history interview

Jean, the oldest of the participants at 65, made clear early in her interview, just how contented she is with her present life. Looking at the figures in her first picture she says,

> I've put "alone and at ease". That is amongst people (the dancing figure) and that (the seated figure) is alone. But I'm really very content in my life which a lot of people aren't. I mean I know an awful lot of people who are unhappy for various reasons.
> I mean I'm no happy all the time nobody is but erm there's usually a reason for it. And I've just met so many people who I feel they'll never be really content whatever they've got there's always something wrong. So I really feel that I'm a very lucky person.

It was not always so for her. In her childhood she was often made to feel awkward and clumsy.

Jean I was the most awkward child,

P.S. Ah ah

Jean Definitely, I was always breaking stuff. If there was a puddle I fell in it

P.S. Ah ah

Jean And awh . My father didnae help much mind you, he used to shout, the mair he shouted the mair I broke.

P.S. You just felt awkward?

Jean So it was quite good to discover that I could dance.

P.S. The way people talk to you when you're younger really affects...

Jean My father was, he was like that with us all. But especially me cos I was the oldest

P.S. Uh hu

Jean I would go to do the dishes and he would start shouting and the mair mair he shouted the mair I broke

P.S. And sometimes it needs somebody outside that to see you...

Jean Ah ha

P.S. ..differently

Jean As I say, I really always felt awkward, and I was a person who always tripped and everything else and I got this chance at school. I left school at fifteen. There was a chance came up in school to go for a months course. A months thing up to Aviemore (talk about this course) ..and we all got on and mucked in and there was a wee click here (indicates her head) something I did and I went "Now wait a minute". I was only fifteen and I thought " None of these people know me, they don't know I'm stupid and they don't know I trip over everything and they don't know that I break things", and that was it and the first time I tripped I made a joke of it and it was past.

P.S. Ah ha

Jean And that gave me all the confidence in the world.

I don't know it was just something that clicked, and I thought, "Wait a wee minute. They're not expecting me to be stupid."

> We were all taking one another as we were. So that really did give me a big boost.

With Jean's account of her childhood we again encounter an oppressive parental expectation, the expectation of clumsiness and failure. Jean is later able to resist and overcome this through being seen differently by others. Also finding that she was good at dancing and could be co-ordinated and graceful in her body greatly increased her confidence.

Sacred bodies?

While for the bulk of the individual interviews I wanted the participants to shape their story and tell me in their own way of their 'journey', I was also seeking their response to the question of whether or not they understood their bodies as sacred (whatever might be meant by that). When they had finished telling me of their church history, this was one question that I asked quite directly

When asked if they regarded their bodies as sacred I encountered some fairly emphatic denials from a number of participants.
Ellie said,

> Ummmm I don't know, I think your body, the way you treat yourself is important and I don't know if I would say I was sacred.

Sarah and Jean were definite in their responses:

P.S. Would you ever think of yourself as being a kind of sacred.....

Sarah No.

P.S. ..being?

Sarah No, No.

P.S. You've a different kind of....

Sarah Yuh ha

P.S. Yourself comes into the kind of 'other' compartment ?

Sarah Oh definitely...low down as well (laughs)

Let's be absolutely honest, no I don't see myself as ..as sacred special anything like that

No, no.

Jean's response was also very decided

Jean I couldna think of myself as sacred.

P.S. So you wouldn't think of yourself as sacred. That wouldn't be a term you would..

Jean Definitely not a term....

I try to be good that's the best I can do.

Felicity also revealed a struggle for bodily affirmation, which she recognised as rooted in an upbringing that had been controlling and negative about the physical.

Felicity I think, I mean that was another aspect of upbringing, that um I think I've a very, had a very poor image self esteem and in body.

I think as a teenager and into adult I had a very low sense of body and that wasn't encouraged at all. I think that was not a good idea. Or anything to do with...No no it was just really not helpful.

P.S. Do you feel you've moved on from there?

Felicity A bit but I mean I would have a long way to go

Err body awareness and happiness in one's own body, I think that took a long time. And I was quite, I was sort of bordering on anorexic for quite a while...as a teenager and that was partly to do with the control. And I know, they say quite often it's to do with that and it absolutely was to do with that. Umm having some space.

P.S. Yes yes.

Felicity And, err, and the whole thing of boy friends and so on you know cos I didn't have a social life really there was nothing really possible, so that was very bad.

Alison and Lizzie were not so emphatic in their denials that their bodies could be regarded as sacred they rather deflected the question, to some extent, away from bodies.
Alison responded,

> I think at times when you feel you've been used by God maybe in a special way.
> Or when you're really feeling...there are times when you really feel especially that you have a sense of being loved.
> I think that can be a sacred moment.

Lizzie offered an understanding of what she called the 'vital force' which she saw as permeating all life.

P.S. So for you really life is permeated by, life in all its forms really is permeated by this whatever we call it, energy or spirit?

Lizzie Energy, spirit, vital force. I tend to think of it in terms of the Holy Spirit as much as anything else. Um your alternative therapists will call it a vital force.

P.S. Uh ha.

Lizzie But its the same thing. It's what gives life to everything, you know.

P.S. And so presumably you would say that's present in each of us?

Lizzie Yeh.

P.S. So if that was what we were meaning by sacred, then that would be within, you would be able to say your body was sacred?

Lizzie Sacred's a funny term, it depends how you define sacred. But I think the difficulty is only one of syntax...of vocabulary. I think the vocabulary limits what the thing is. You know, because sacred has been attributed to specifics, and this is is bigger than that, or its minute, it doesn't matter really.

It was Dawn, in her response, who came closest among the participants, to embracing an understanding of the body as sacred. She stressed that for her care and respect for the body were very important especially in more 'permissive' society.

Dawn Erm, at times yes, I do think, I think one of the things that isn't necessarily recognised and spoken about in society because it is quite a, a not permissive society

> exactly, is this thing of saying,"Look if you do stuff it does affect you. You can't just sort of say, "It won't", you know "I can walk away from this". You know, things...if, you know, I just sort of think there is this sort of thing, say if you, erm, even if you eat too much, you know, you have a sickly feel, that sort of "Ooph, I've eaten too much", and it can just make you feel heavy. So yes, I think erm, it is quite important to sort of recognise the fact that your body has an impact on the way you feel both emotionally, spiritually as well I think.

While it seemed to be difficult for the women I spoke to use the word 'sacred' to refer to their bodies and themselves, they readily identified moments in their lives that had a quality they were prepared to call sacred or numinous. Noticeably for a number of respondents these included moments of birth of their children and/or the death of parents. They also saw other life experiences and events as having this quality, some moments of interaction with nature and with others, especially those seen to be in need. What emerged was a sense of the sacred interwoven with life and not something set apart. This discovery has led me to reconsider the value of suggesting that women's bodies might be re-configured as 'sacred', and to consider the greater importance of celebrating and affirming women's creativity and choices in our everyday lives, and supporting one another by alliances and advocacy.

Conclusion

This study was fired by a passionate concern over the violence that happens to the bodies of women, through out the world simply because they are women (see Schussler Fiorenza 1996 39-55). While realising the causes of this situation are many and complex, my concern has led me to wonder why the bodies of women in particular, are so vulnerable to abuse in many societies. It has led me on a journey, to try to discover how bodies might be understood, how they come to carry the meanings that they do and how and why they summon up the responses that they do. As I began this search I thought that there might be a way to re-value bodies in society. I wanted to explore the possibility of society re-valuing bodies, to inscribe them as 'sacred', (understood as held in the highest esteem and inviolable) and so offer them some protection.

Seeking to know why the current situation exists and how it might change, I reviewed some theoretical understandings of the 'body'. My search led me to some of the work of major theorists, Foucault and Butler. I drew on Foucault's earlier work on disciplined and 'docile' bodies, and his later thinking on resistance to the techniques of power. Importantly for this quest, Butler's work offered the concept that ' bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialisation is impelled', opening the possibility of change in the construction of bodies in society.

I then engaged with the work of Merleau-Ponty, Caputo and Scarry, which raised the issue of what might shape our relationships one to another, what might summon an empathic rather than a violent response and what might assist those who suffer. Our mutually inhabiting the same flesh, a 'poetics of obligation' summoned by flesh, and advocacy were all offered as responses to the 'Other', especially the other reduced to inarticulate suffering 'flesh'.

In my search however I was more concerned to find a way in which social change might lead to a prevention of violence rather than with responses after the event. In the work of

Kristeva I was led to a possible way to understand the roots of violence and a new model for ethical response grounded in the maternal body.

Sympathetic to the claims of feminist standpoint epistemology, I believed it was important to view this question from the standpoint of women, who while different in many ways are all shaped by regimes of power and in our contemporary society vulnerable to, if not victims of, violence. I was interested in how women resist techniques of power, and in the scope for agency and making-of-self that we have in our lives in contemporary society.

Underlying this search was also an interest in the part played by religion in women's oppression/liberation. I agree with Margaret Miles that 'Not only can religion make available tools with which women may create a degree of spiritual, political and personal autonomy, not provided by secular culture, but it also inevitably forms part of women's cultural conditioning' (Miles 1985 :2).The seven women I chose to as research participants were all life long church members.

Alerted to the fact that traditional structured interviewing is not always the most effective way to access feelings and motivations, especially of women, I experimented with a creative method to explore experience as well as employing group and life-history interviewing techniques which are valued as methods in feminist research. These methods combined to produce some rich and enlightening data.

What I discovered by these methods, from these women, was that the 'body' is indeed the site of operation of discourses of power. These women had been affected in different ways by these various 'shaping' discourses, some of which are cultural and some religious or moral. The women I interviewed were aware of, and had been touched in their own lives by such things as:

- Moral imperatives, concerning behaviour, sometimes embedded in a particular church- teaching and ethos.

- Sexist culture, closely defining gender roles, again sometimes also very much part of church culture.
- The 'shaping' discourses in contemporary culture related to body size and image and what is considered ideal for women.
- Having confidence undermined by negative comments on the body, with regard to clumsiness, weight, clothes etc.
- Issues of fashion and style, and the question of dressing to meet others expectations, and the appropriate clothes for church.
- Issues of sexuality and the response of the church to homosexuality.

Bodies as sites of resistance.

Conducting the life-history interviews meant that I was able to see, to some degree, the impact that these 'shaping' discourses had had on these women. For some, impacting on their lives as they grew up, they had left a lasting and difficult legacy. I was also able to see how these women resisted and responded to these discourses. It became clear as I shared in this research process that if bodies are potentially 'moulded by a great many distinct regimes'(Foucault 1978:39), they are also sites of resistance and self- determination (Graham 1995:139) for the women in this study.

As mature women, these respondents made it clear that they found pleasure in and though their bodies. They enjoyed the sensual; touch, warm baths, candles, silky and soft fabrics and colours, the sights, sounds and smells of the natural world. They took pleasure in what they did with their bodies; swimming, walking, jogging, dancing, painting and drawing, and healing, and gestating babies.

With regard to fashion, makeup and clothes, they were aware that there were times when they would have to dress in a certain way for certain occasions. While they were aware of such constraints, the impression they gave was that they would respond to them, or not, on their own terms, sometimes subversively with wit and humour. They would chose, or not, to spend time and money on their appearance. Mostly they thought they should dress to

please themselves and comfort was an important consideration in the matter of clothes. Just how free such choices are however, from conditioning and influence, in the face of advertising and the influence of the media in this respect, remains a contentious issue.

Overall, for these women what emerges is a sense of them enjoying the life of their bodies. For some it has obviously been a difficult journey to get to this point and to resist some of the more damaging effects of controlling, shaping discourses that have impacted on them. For some this impact was heightened by the discourses being embedded in a particular religious culture.

Bodies as sites of religious imagination [20]

It has been more difficult to get a clear picture in this study of the relationship between the participants' embodied selves and their religious lives. The creative exercise appeared to show that the worship context was a more sombre, less bright, less sensual, more serious one than that of their everyday lives. There was a sense of a more passive, serene, inward-looking mode in the worship context, in which the body was not so actively engaged.

However the services and rituals that they spoke of as having most meaning for them, were those that involve particular bodily/sensual engagement; communion, baptism, healing, alternative worship with video screens, symbolic use of natural objects, and candles; with music and singing also being mentioned as important. It would be good in a future study to explore this aspect more fully to discover why these are particularly meaningful.

The women that I spoke to were not in the congregations, and sometimes not in the denominations and religious traditions, in which they had grown up. They had, as they grew older, made distinctive choices about where and how they wished to worship. This may be why they had positive rather than negative things to say about their current worship context. It may also be why they did not express the frustration or 'lack of fit' with their worship context that I have heard from other women, and had thought I might discover.

[20] See Cooey 1994: 41-62

Only one raised the question of non-inclusive language herself, and when I explored this issue with others, it did not appear to be a major concern, possibly because it is addressed to an extent in the churches in which they worship.

This study was undertaken with women who have chosen to belong to and worship in a particular religious context which might be described as theologically and morally liberal, creative, open, allowing for a range of self expression. This will undoubtedly have shaped their feelings about themselves and their church life.
It would be enlightening to undertake a similar study with other groups of women, for example:

- those who are in more 'conservative' evangelical charismatic churches
- those who have moved outwith main-stream churches and are part of alternative/women identified worship communities
- women who have no religious practice or community.

Sacred bodies re-visioned

My question as to whether they regard their bodies as 'sacred' did not resonate with these women. I suggest that this was because 'sacred' for them meant something set apart and untouchable, and also something too holy for them to aspire to. This of course maybe because they have been conditioned into thinking in this way by a culture that has not valued women's bodies highly.

This is not to say that they were unaware of a sacred or numinous quality to some of the things that happened to them in their lives, relating to birth and death, nature and interaction with others. Interestingly also, the numinous moments that they reported occurred outside any worship context and as part of the ongoing course of their lives.

Having conducted this study I now understand that if the word 'sacred' is to be used of bodies, and particularly of women's bodies, then it needs take on a different meaning and imply rather than something set apart and special, a greater engagement, a more sensual

involvement with the world. It needs to conjure up the creativity and resistance to damaging discourses with which women, on the evidence of this study, deal with their lives.

It could also indicate a collective as well as an individual way of being. These women do not shape their lives in isolation from one another. One aspect of church life that did come across as being important to the women in this study was the community aspect, the friendships and mutual support

Having undertaken this study, I have discovered women's resilience and creativity in the face of discourses, religious and cultural, that would shape their bodies and their lives. I would suggest that one response that could be made in the face of violence that threatens women's bodies and spirits, is to nurture this spirit of resistance in one another, to offer alternative readings of the value of bodies, to affirm sensuality and sexuality, in everyday life and religious life.

As Margaret Miles says

> '...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... 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 or detract from their lives' (Miles 1985:3).

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Appendix 1

Instructions for creative exercises

Outline of 1st activity

Please imagine your body in a situation in which you feel good, in which you feel most 'yourself'...it might be a particular time or place you are thinking of.

Please draw your body, just a simple outline, in the middle of the blank sheet of paper, in whatever way you think best conveys this feeling. It can be in any posture, and as big or small as you like, but with some space around it.

As you imagine yourself, feeling good, do you have any sense of what you might be wearing, (if anything)? Can you write, draw, stick things on, on or around the body to indicate this? What do you most like to wear? What colours do you enjoy wearing? What fabrics? Do you have any favourite jewellery? Can you write or illustrate these on the picture?

Is there anything you want to express about your body as a whole or about any part of it in this situation–good feelings, sad feelings, angry feelings, questions? Again, can you express these feelings on or around the body, in words, symbols or pictures?

What things and people are important to you to have around you, make you feel alive, give a sense of well-being? Can you add them to this picture with words, symbols, or pictures ?

Can you think about what, of what you do with your body, makes you feel most alive? Can you write that somewhere on the sheet ?

Is there a story, incident, memory, you could tell about feeling good in/about your body, that you could tell me when we meet later?

Outline of 2nd activity

I would like you now to think of yourself in your normal worship situation, or if you don't have one at present, in one that is familiar to you from the past. You could think of a particular place and time. It should be a reality you know rather than an ideal worship situation.

On the next blank sheet (Response sheet 2) please draw your body in a simple outline to convey how you feel about being there. This may be different from the first body you drew, in size, or shape or posture. Please allow some space around it.

What about clothes for this situation? Are there ones you feel you should wear, or would choose to wear? Can you indicate what they are on the picture? What about colours? What about jewellery?

Are there any feelings that you would have about your body as a whole or about any part of it in this situation – good feelings, sad feelings, angry feelings, questions? Can you express these feelings on or around the body you have drawn? Again this can be in any way you wish words, symbols or pictures.

What people or objects are significant to you in this setting? Can you indicate them on your picture?

What, if anything, of what happens in this worship situation makes you feel alive and good in/about your body ? What, if anything, deadens feeling? What, if anything, is frustrating, upsetting, maddening? Can you note or indicate this on the sheet?

Is there a story about your body and a worship situation that you could tell me when I meet with you later?

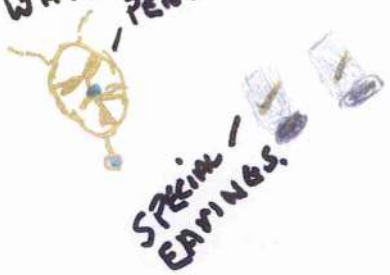
Appendix 2

Drawings from creative exercises

Picture 1
Ellie

A2 - i

LONG DRESSES.
BLACK
WHITE SHIRTS
PENDANT



I LOVE TO RELAX IN THE BATH AND LET MY BODY RELAX IN THE HOT WATER.

THE BOYS.
ANN - DOGGIE
FRIENDS.

LONG WALKS.

MAKING CARDS.

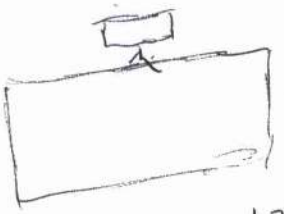
I LOVE WEARING HATS IN THE WINTER.

Picture 2
Ellie

I would wear what I was comfy in.

It doesn't matter what you wear.

I would feel at ease with my self.



I like to look at the freeze in the church and love to see the sun come through the windows

- Singing

I like to have communion in the church makes me be one with God.

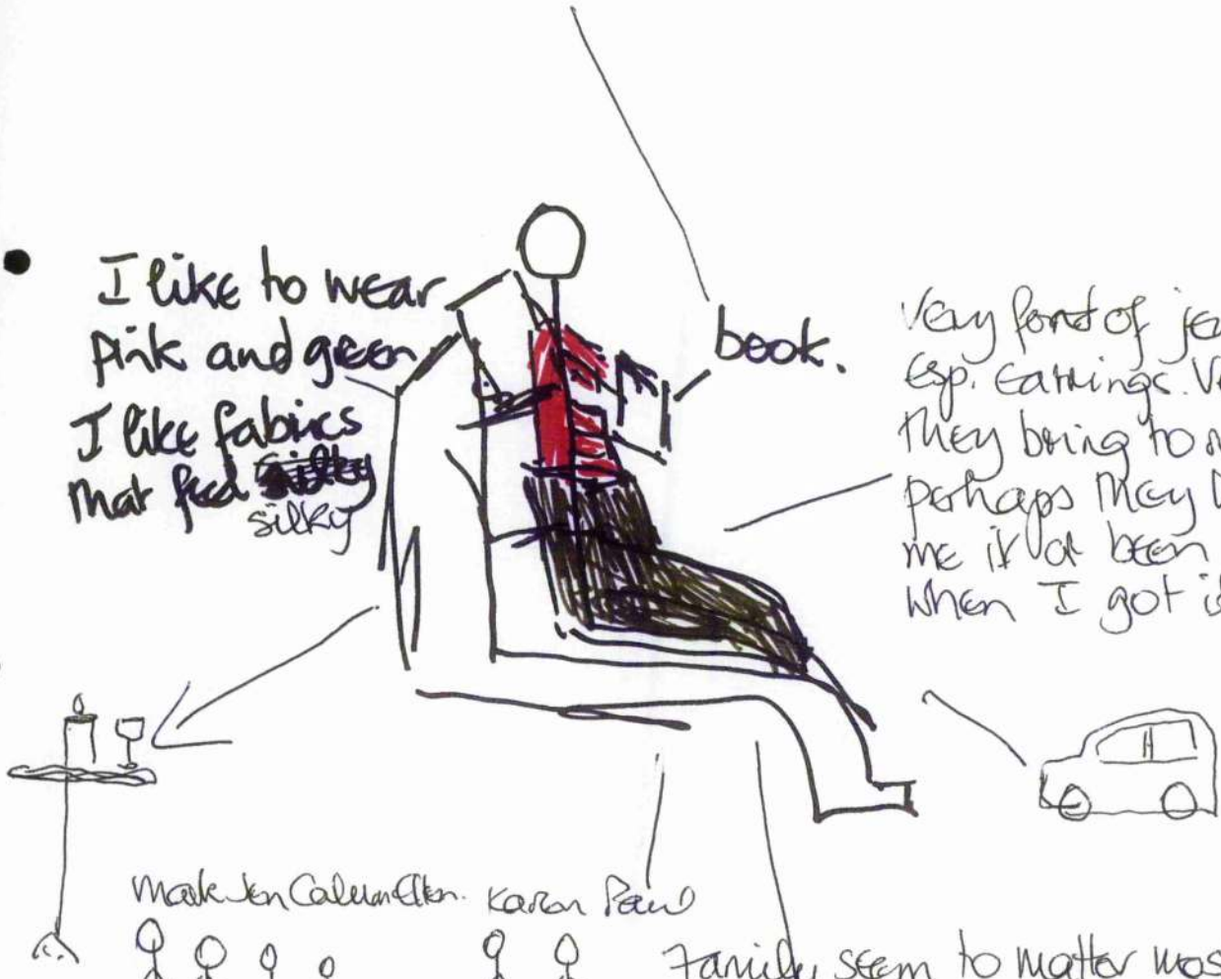
The music sometime makes me sad.

It is frustrating when there are fewer people coming to church.

- candles

Friends

Reading gives lots of feelings
not all enjoyable but worth experiencing.

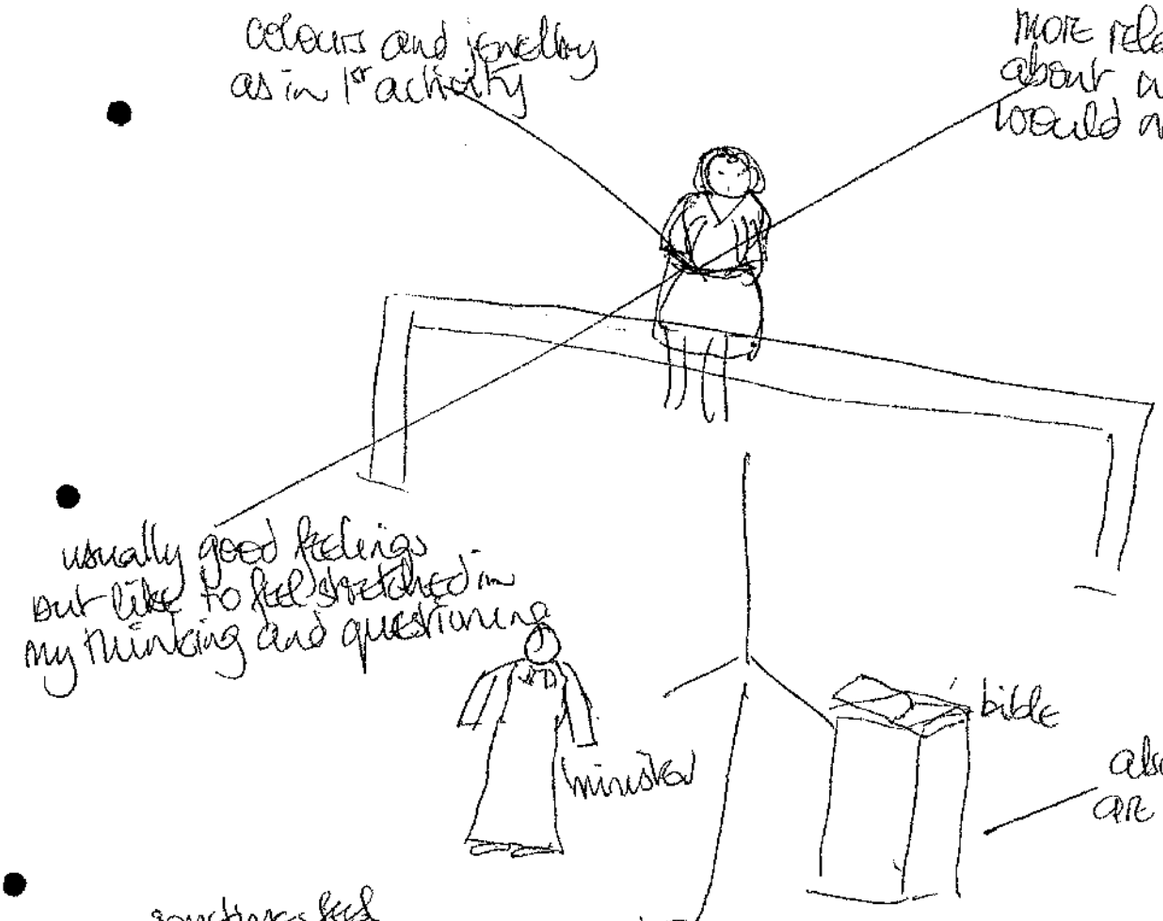


Family seem to matter most.
Like to have them around although
perhaps not always a sense of well-being

Country dancing makes me
feel very alive.

Picture 1
Sarah

Picture 2
Sarah



sometimes feel I would like to ask questions and being unable to can be frustrating.

good sermon makes me feel alive. nothing deadens feeling but sometimes can lose interest a bit

I like

comfy

+ no

colours +

vary

greens,

red

This is me in bed, naked + with child. I feel gorgeous + very sexy. I feel complete.

my childr

mu

c

paper + pencils

books

sewing + knitting

things to do.

I

su

I can

I can

A2 – vi

Picture 1
Lizzie

> wear
clothes

• look
it.
ite
alarics
. season

blues / purples
/ pinks

•

I had a nice
ring once. It
was my granny's
wedding ring, but
I lost it.
(sad)

•

friends

•

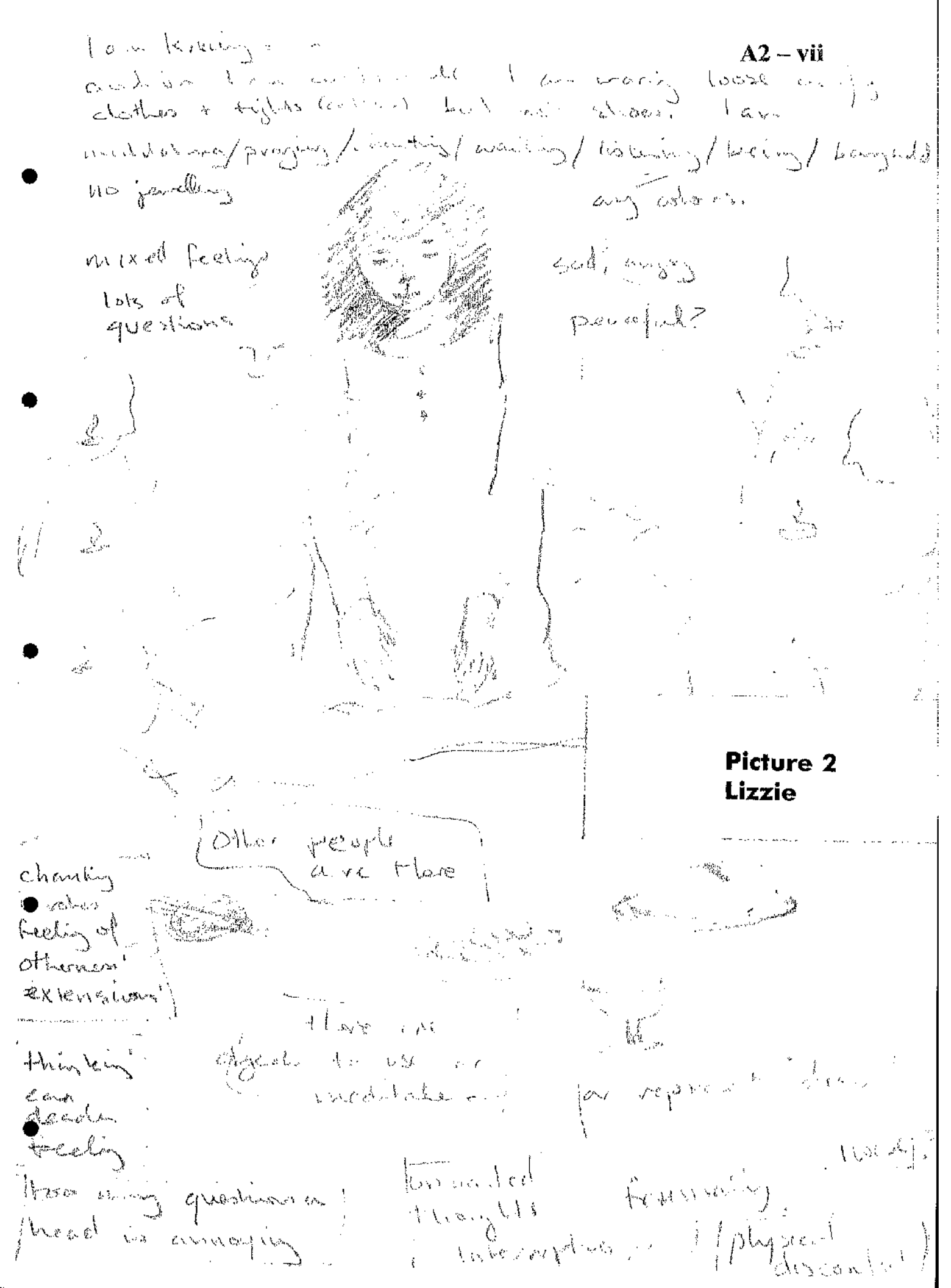
e
nming

•
> fast
not heavy

I am
wearing any
old clothes.

I am
absorbed
and happy
I
could do
this
without
stopping
forever.

massage
is nice.



Picture 2
Lizzie

Picture 1
Alison

peace relaxation whiteness

well-being. awareness of senses. prayer.

communication with God

solitude and companionship. away from others - get time to reflect on issues at a distance.

Picture 2
Alison

asylum seekers

children

sometimes a bit
tired, bored -

happy to see people

concerned about suffering.
pulled in work - sadness.

good to bring things to
God in worship
with others.

never have time to speak to
anybody I would like
to speak to. always
seems a bit busy
& rushed.

many stress gets over,
sometimes people give compliment
- appreciate - makes
you feel good -

sight, when I complete to
the walls & music makes me
feel alive.

common sometimes crying & encouraging

A2 – ix

A2
Picture 1
Dawn

in the hills in spring or autumn, air fresh, windy day

no jewellery – not in the habit of wearing it except necklace/earrings which I never remove

this is a place I can feel exhilerated, breath freely, or cry if sad

I like the cycles of nature, find it reassuring.

Not really a city girl

feel most alive when a bit tired + a bit out of breath, looking at a great view – being at the top, or somewhere beautiful (like near Dungyne, or on Iona)

husband – he's funny, but sometimes can be a bit of a pain in the arse

Books certain books are comfort books – I read when I want to curl up

too many people who give me sense of well being to draw!

happy that I can come out to walk, climb, wander – no restrictions. Not just being in the countryside, but being able to choose where to go, where to drive or walk

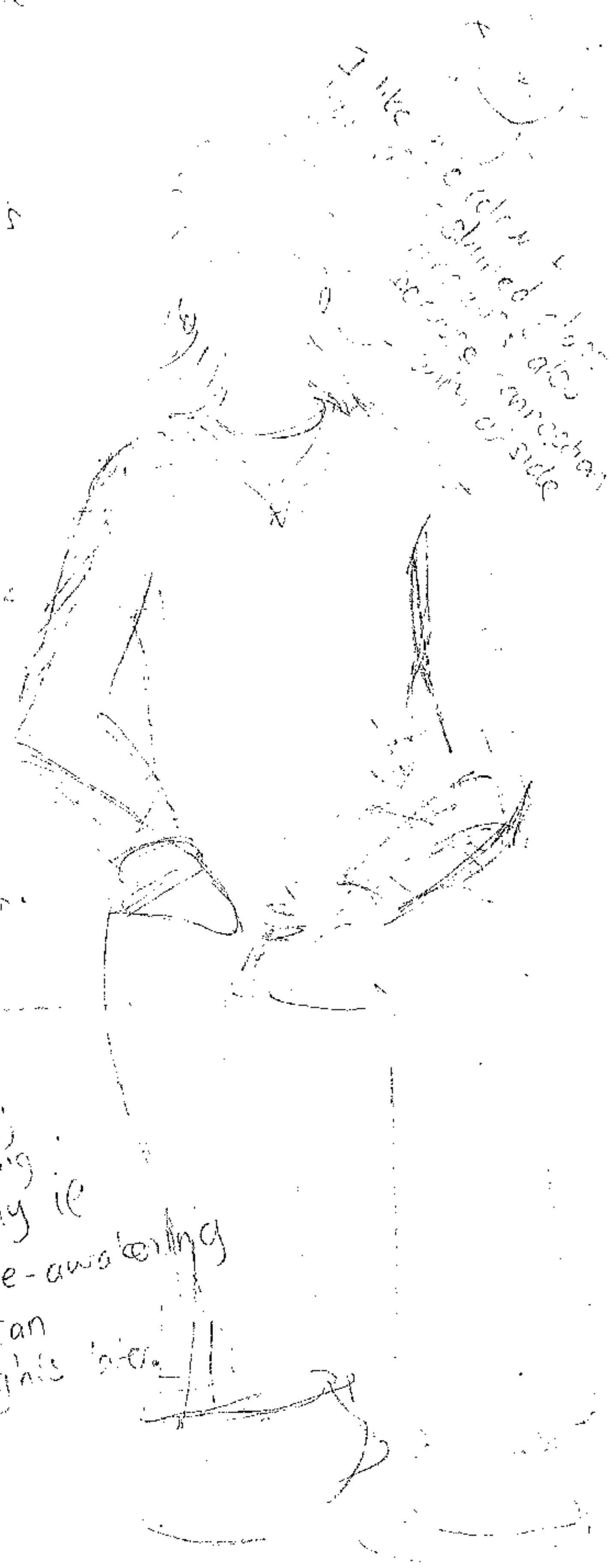
– cats – I like the way they act, the way they feel

- No particular clothes – just what I wear to [illegible]. Want to relax, feel comfortable. Would feel more uncomfortable dressing up!

- Feel [illegible] this Church is a place without judgements on body or what to wear + how to look: I have been to different churches in the past.

- The names on the war memorial. If my mind wanders, I think about them.

- I quite enjoy sitting + receiving input, particularly if challenging or re-awakening creativity. Then can consider my thoughts later.



For [illegible] of body [illegible] uncomfortable [illegible] sometimes feel a bit [illegible] because of [illegible] – don't really see the other people around (feels a bit school-ish?) but on the other hand, can feel [illegible] + private, can think.

Can [illegible] share [illegible] Nice to have [illegible] thoughts [illegible]

Picture 2
Dawn

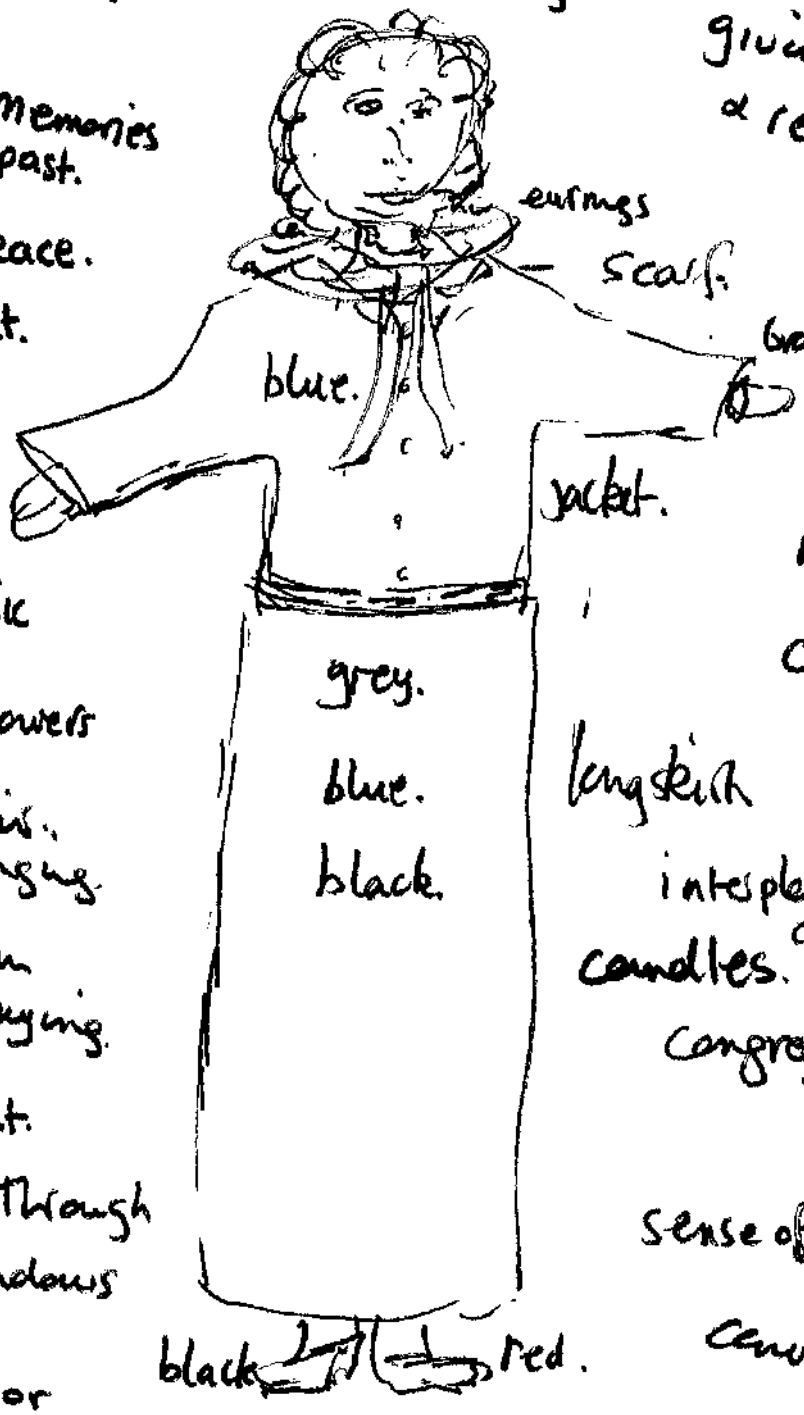
Picture 1
Felicity

giving birth.
smile.
photos. & films
The sea / sand.
space.
light
memories of past friends relatives
waves
rolling crashing
music live & recorded
piano.
candles
silver earrings.
sense of belonging
laughter
bracelet
wind outside.
black top
radio.
partner.
children's stories & jokes.
happy
mountains
family.
looking forward
muted colours soft.
Christmas.
birdsong.
long skirt.
cold
acceptance.
seasons
friends
jogging.
children.
rivers
understanding
flowers
trees
love.
opera.
warmth
company.
soft shoes.
embrace.
love.
garden.
time to think.
sunshine
peace but not absolute silence

Time to share with others limited - frustration.
Children not involved in the service as much as could? A2 - xiii)
Prayers that ramble or are "ding dong" in delivery.
Loud speaker not clear.

- Prayer book service. - childhood memories - endless services boredom. stifling sunday atmosphere. - no fun no TV only Christian books !!

Picture 2
Felicity



bread &.
wine
kneeling
giving & receiving
memories of past.
earrings
scarf.
embrace.
peace.
thought.
bracelet.
place & time shared.
blue.
smiles.
jacket.
reflection
sharing joys & sorrows.
music
ceremony.
grey.
flowers
private thoughts.
blue.
long skirt
support.
choir. singing.
black.
interplay. minister & congregation.
belonging.
organ playing.
candles.
congregation.
light.
response.
sun. through windows
sense of order.
black
red.
conversation.
stained or clear glass.
space
movement.
children. & babies.
piano.
old & young.
brass players

Picture 1
Jean

AMONG FRIENDS

DANCING

JEWELLERY

FANCY TOP

FULL SKIRT

CHIFFON OR SIMILAR

DANCE SHOES

LEARNING NEW THINGS

TRAVELLING, MEETING NEW PEOPLE.

ALONE AND AT EASE

WOOLIE JUMPER(S)

BOOKS — CROSSWORDS

TELEVISION.

TROUSERS

SLIPPERS

HAVING PEOPLE TO DINNER

FAMILY OR FRIENDS

Picture 2
Jean

FEEL GOOD WITH FRIENDS AROUND YOU.

IT'S NICE WHEN VISITORS COME TO CHURCH AND TELL YOU THAT THEY HAVE FELT VERY WELCOME.

ITS LOVELY TO SEE NEW BABIES CHRISTENED

CLOTHES WARM AND COMFORTABLE (IN WINTER)

WHAT I WOULD CHOOSE TO WEAR.

EARINGS AS I WEAR THEM ALL THE TIME.

SOMETIMES FEELING SAD PARTICULARLY DURING PRAYERS FOR OTHERS WHICH BRING FORTH PICTURES WHICH UPSET YOU BECAUSE YOU FEEL SO HELPLESS.