

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE WRITINGS
OF ST TERESA OF AVILA AND MIRABAI ON
THEIR UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE
OF THE PATH TO UNION WITH GOD.**

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ABSTRACT

This study is a comparative exploration of the mystical spirituality of two 16th century women, Mirabai of Rajasthan and Teresa of Avila. However different their contexts, these two women shared many commonalities. They were born into well-educated families, and very early felt a calling to God and a religious life. Perhaps most profoundly, their journeys toward union with God was spirituality enacted as subversion of traditional societal roles ascribed for women of their generation and their places.

To explore the mystical spirituality of these two women is to offer a lens through which to view the distinctive ways in which each and every religion has developed, precisely in a period when globalization threatens to homogenize all traditions. Moreover, to explore the spirituality of Mira and Teresa is to illumine ways in which diverse traditions may be in mutually enriching dialogue. It is also to affirm that the transformative possibilities embodied by these women in their own traditions can catalyze transformations in many generations and places.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|-----------|
| Title Page..... | |
| Declaration | |
| Abstract..... | 2 |
| Contents..... | 3 |
| Chapter 1: Introduction..... | 7 |
| 1.1 Research Problem | 7 |
| 1.2 Methodological approach | 7 |
| 1.3 Research Method and Literature Review | 9 |
| 1.4 Thesis Structure | 10 |
| Chapter 2: Nature of Mysticism and Comparative | |
| Mysticism..... | 13 |
| 2.1: Differing understandings of God and union..... | 19 |
| 2.1.1: <i>Advaitic</i> Theology..... | 19 |
| 2.1.2: <i>Dvaitic</i> Theology..... | 22 |
| 2.2: Differing ways of knowing and communicating | |
| this reality..... | 24 |
| 2.2.1: <i>Nirguna/Apophatic</i> tradition..... | 24 |
| 2.2.2: <i>Saguni/Cataphatic</i> tradition..... | 25 |
| 2.3: Comparative Issues..... | 27 |
| Chapter 3: Development of the <i>Bhakti</i> tradition in | |
| Hinduism..... | 34 |
| 3.1: Historical Development..... | 34 |
| 3.2: General characteristics of <i>Bhakti</i> | 43 |
| 3.3: Social and theological implications of | |
| <i>Bhaktimarga</i> | 45 |
| 3.3.1: Movement into the vernacular..... | 46 |
| 3.3.2: Traditional <i>varna</i> distinctions ignored..... | 46 |
| 3.3.3: Less interest in <i>Vedic</i> scriptures..... | 47 |
| 3.3.4: Rejection of <i>shruti</i> rituals and ceremonies..... | 47 |
| 3.4: Gender implications within the development | |
| of <i>Bhakti</i> | 48 |
| Chapter 4: Development of the path of devotion in the | |
| Christian tradition..... | 53 |
| 4.1: Historical Development..... | 53 |
| 4.2: The path of devotion..... | 59 |

| | | |
|--------|--|----|
| 4.3: | Social and theological implications of the devotional tradition..... | 61 |
| 4.3.1: | The shift from the cloister into the world..... | 61 |
| 4.3.2: | The shift in language from Latin to the vernacular.. | 61 |
| 4.3.3: | The shift from the intellect to affective ways of knowing..... | 62 |
| 4.3.4: | The shift to embodied spirituality..... | 63 |
| 4.4 | Gender implications..... | 63 |

Chapter 5: The similarities and importance of *bhakti* and the devotional tradition within Hinduism and Christianity respectively..... 67

| | | |
|--------|--|----|
| 5.1: | The place of incarnation and the concept of <i>avatar</i> within theism..... | 67 |
| 5.1.1: | The <i>avatar</i> assumes real physical form..... | 68 |
| 5.1.2: | The <i>avatar</i> takes worldly birth..... | 68 |
| 5.1.3: | The <i>avatar</i> is both human and divine..... | 69 |
| 5.1.4: | The <i>avatar</i> will die..... | 69 |
| 5.1.5: | There is some historicity in certain forms of <i>avatar</i> | 69 |
| 5.1.6: | <i>Avatars</i> are repeated..... | 70 |
| 5.1.7: | The example and character of the avatar is crucial.... | 70 |
| 5.1.8: | The <i>avatar</i> descends with a specific purpose..... | 70 |
| 5.1.9: | The <i>avatar</i> reveals a personal God of love and grace..... | 70 |
| 5.2: | Comparison of the figure of <i>Krishna</i> and Jesus..... | 71 |
| 5.3: | Love as mutual self giving between the devotee and God..... | 73 |
| 5.4: | Comparison of social and theological significance... | 75 |

Chapter 6: Mirabai.....78

| | | |
|--------|--|-----|
| 6.1: | A short biography..... | 78 |
| 6.2: | Mira and her understanding of God..... | 82 |
| 6.2.1: | That of the beloved..... | 84 |
| 6.2.2: | That of a saviour..... | 85 |
| 6.2.3: | <i>Krishna</i> as <i>jogi</i> | 85 |
| 6.3: | Mira's understanding of the way to union with God..... | 86 |
| 6.3.1: | The path of love..... | 87 |
| 6.3.2: | Dying to self and the world..... | 90 |
| 6.3.3: | Holiness..... | 91 |
| 6.3.4: | Grace versus human effort..... | 94 |
| 6.4: | Mirabai's experience of union with God..... | 96 |
| 6.5: | The effects of Mirabai's experience of union with God..... | 97 |
| 6.5.1: | The effects on Rajput political authority..... | 100 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 6.5.2: The effect on her marriage and patriarchal norms of marriage and widowhood..... | 102 |
| 6.5.3: The effect on the caste system..... | 104 |
| 6.5.4: The effect on those who suffer or are oppressed..... | 106 |
| 6.5.5: The effect on herself..... | 107 |
| Chapter 7: St Teresa of Avila..... | 110 |
| 7.1: A short biography..... | 110 |
| 7.2: Teresa and her understanding of God..... | 116 |
| 7.2.1: God as Divine Majesty..... | 118 |
| 7.2.2: God as friend..... | 119 |
| 7.2.2: That of her beloved spouse..... | 120 |
| 7.3: Her understanding of the way to union with God..... | 121 |
| 7.3.1: The path of love..... | 122 |
| 7.3.2: Detachment..... | 124 |
| 7.3.3: Humility and grace..... | 127 |
| 7.3.4: Holiness..... | 129 |
| 7.4: Her experience of union with God..... | 130 |
| 7.4.1: Desire and courage..... | 130 |
| 7.4.2: Recognition of her own powerlessness..... | 132 |
| 7.4.3: Wound of love..... | 133 |
| 7.4.4: Between heaven and earth..... | 134 |
| 7.4.5: Union with God..... | 135 |
| 7.5: Effects of her teaching on union with God..... | 136 |
| 7.5.1: Effect on the political and religious context..... | 136 |
| 7.5.1.1 Conversos..... | 137 |
| 7.5.1.2 Alumbrados..... | 138 |
| 7.5.1.3 Theology in the vernacular..... | 139 |
| 7.5.2: Effect on the patriarchal and religious norms governing women..... | 143 |
| 7.5.3: Effect on the contemplative life..... | 147 |
| 7.5.4: Effect on herself..... | 151 |
| Chapter 8: Comparison of the thinking and experiences of these two women, and their relevance for contemporary society today..... | 154 |
| 8.1: Similarities of experience..... | 154 |
| 8.1.1: Concept of God..... | 156 |
| 8.1.2: Way to union with God..... | 156 |
| 8.2: Similarities in their writings..... | 157 |
| 8.3: Similarities in context..... | 159 |
| 8.4: Similarities in the effects of their lives and teachings..... | 160 |
| 8.5: Relevance for us today..... | 162 |
| Chapter 9: Conclusion..... | 166 |

| | |
|--------------------------|------------|
| Bibliography..... | 170 |
|--------------------------|------------|

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Problem

Throughout history, religion has often been co-opted to divide people and cultures from one another. By focusing on differences culturally, religiously, and physically, persons and communities come to see themselves as separate from, and invariably superior to, the other. This type of thinking results in arrogance, pain and ultimately violence, as has been seen time and time again in the history of our world. Indeed, this arrogance and violence is also deeply embedded in many of our institutional forms of religion and has enabled religion to be used in some very destructive ways.

As each religion has developed and emerged in very particular cultural settings, each tradition has over centuries created signs and rituals, images, symbols and language to express the truths and wisdom they have come to know in ways that are, for them, culturally authentic. The danger that all religious traditions face in the early 21st century era of globalisation, during which there is unprecedented meeting and mixing of faiths and religious traditions worldwide, is the tendency to focus on the rituals, signs and images as confirmation of obvious difference between us, rather than on the underlying commonality which these signs point to.

1.2 Methodological approach

In this thesis I wish to explore not the images and rituals of faith, but rather the underlying truths, common in our faiths, which these rituals and images point to. Such a study may help us to see that perhaps our journeys into God are the same journey, but expressed in different language and symbols. In this

particular thesis I will focus specifically on a study of Hinduism and Christianity using a comparative method of analysis.

Prayer is the one aspect in each religious tradition, which has the ability to move us beyond (or through) our differing rituals and symbols to the reality which all of them seek to express, the reality that there is a supreme being, and this being can be known and experienced by humankind. In every religious tradition, there have always been people whom society acknowledges have touched in some way this ultimate reality. St Teresa of Avila and Mirabai are two such people.

I had studied a little of St Teresa of Avila earlier, but by having the opportunity of being in India for a three month period in 2003, I was able to discover a number of Hindu women mystics. It was to Mirabai that I felt most attracted and drawn. There is much similarity in the lives of these two women. Both lived in the 16th century, and so were historical contemporaries. Both came from well-educated families, and both felt a “calling” at a very young age to God and the religious life. They both devoted themselves to God and subsequently experienced deep union with God within their respective traditions. In both of the women’s lives, as a result of their devotion to God, they lived in many ways outside of traditional societal roles and patterns of behaviour ascribed for women in their generation and place. For this thesis I shall use feminist critical theory not to evaluate their lives and writings, but in an attempt for us to apply the gift of their spirituality to our own contexts and struggles of today.

Despite the many similarities between these two women, including the similarities in their understanding of God and experience of God, they nevertheless grew up in completely different cultural and religious contexts; Teresa in Catholic Spain, and Mirabai in Hindu North India. Yet, I believe,

that in studying their writings and their experiences of union with God, one may find much that is in common.

This commonality may contribute to a greater understanding of what is shared in our faith journeys, so that we could increasingly, develop in our churches and communities a spirit, not of rivalry and conflict, or a need to convert between our differing faiths, but a spirit of dialogue and mutual respect in which we are open to learning and growing together in our seeking of this God who is beyond all names and all language.

But, secondly, it will require of us to begin to ask who is this God beyond our symbols and even beyond our different faith frameworks? Is it the same God to whom we pray, irrespective of our religious tradition? Is the path to union with God essentially a common path, which we all are equally offered to journey? These are some of the questions, which I believe this thesis will ask us to consider, and which have the potential to transform the way we understand ourselves and our faith traditions at present.

1.3 Research Method and Literature Review

This thesis will be partly a textual study of the writings of Mirabai and St Teresa. In both cases I will rely on a translation of the original texts. Mirabai wrote in a colloquial form of Sanskrit and St Teresa in a common form of Spanish of that time period. I am therefore in this thesis reliant on the interpretations of the translators. I have used Kavanaugh and Rodriguez' translations of Teresa's writings, primarily because this particular translation emerges out of the Institute of Carmelite Studies.¹ Her writings are thus translated within the context Carmelite thought and spiritual heritage. With regards to Mira, I have used A.J. Alston's translations,² because of not only its faithfulness to the text, but also its readability. Attention has been given to

¹ Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (transl): *The collected works of St Teresa of Avila Vol I-3*; Institute of Carmelite Studies; 1987.

² A.J. Alston, (trans)., *The devotional poems of Mirabai*, Motilal Barnasidass; 1989

secondary sources on the work of both women to provide in some places a better understanding of the culture or context, the text or of the women herself. However, there is not much published material available on Mirabai. I have therefore had to work with a very limited set of resources with regards to her life and writings, primarily relying on Parita Mukta and some *Manushi* journals on *bhakti* saints.

Because both women are from the 16th century, our understanding today of what they have written is always open to being interpreted differently from how they were understood or intended to be understood in their time. We can also only gauge both women's experiences from what they have written and described. Their writings give a glimpse into their relationship with God and their understanding thereof. However, we can assume that there would have been much that they did not include in their writings, about which we can now only speculate. I will not be looking at a comprehensive theology of each woman, but only at those aspects which pertain specifically to their understanding of God and union with God.

1.4 Thesis Structure

The structure of this thesis will first examine each woman's writings within their respective traditions, before attempting any comparative study. Attention thereafter will be given to primarily understanding the universal commonalities in their writings and journeys. What is universally relevant and common in our relationship with God that is not dependant on gender, class, age, time period, culture or even a specific faith?

In Chapter 2, I will explore the meaning of mysticism and the nature of mystical experience from both a Christian and Hindu perspective. I will also attempt to highlight some of the issues raised when studying cross-cultural experiences of mysticism. In Chapter 3 and 4 I will then trace the development of the two strains of mysticism we are exploring in this thesis,

namely *bhakti* and the devotional tradition, setting both these forms of spirituality within their own respective faith frameworks. Chapter 5 will focus on some of the similarities and the importance of these movements within Christianity and Hinduism. In Chapter 6 and 7 I will give a short biography of the two women, and then focus on the texts of Mira and Teresa exploring through their writings their understanding of who God is and of how they understood the path to union with God. In these chapters I will also attempt to highlight how they experienced God and the result for them personally and for their society of these experiences of union with God. In Chapter 8 I will compare the thinking and experiences of these two women and their relevance for us in South Africa and the contemporary world today. The thesis ends with a brief conclusions chapter.

In writing the above, I add that I can only read their writings as a white, young South African Christian woman, who has been greatly influenced by contemporary reforms in the church, as well as by gender studies. My perspective on these two women is shaped by my own story and how it has interacted with theirs. To claim objectivity would be to deny the extent to which I have seen these women through my own life story, and how they have shaped me.

I believe that such studies are crucial at this time to help us to understand that God is not just God of the Christian church, or the Hindu faith but of the whole cosmos, and that we are called to seek God wherever God is to be found. Discovering the common experiences in each other's journeys helps us to live and celebrate our faiths in a way that includes rather than excludes, affirms rather than diminishes other people's equally valid experiences of God.

As we shall see in the next chapters, the significance of the path of *bhakti*/devotion, particularly for us in South Africa, is that it is accessible to all

people, whether they are educated or uneducated, rich or poor, male or female, because it is not based on academic knowledge or theology, but on love. This provides each person in society with the same opportunity to attain union with God, irrespective of their race, class or gender. Significantly also, this path led both of these women and their followers to live in a way that defied traditional roles for women and particularly women born into a high caste. In a country like South Africa that has been so divided historically by race, socio – economic status, and gender, and where these divisions have so often been used to exclude certain groups or to determine what is acceptable behaviour, the path of *bhakti*/ devotion, I will argue, can be seen as a powerful means of transforming not only the individual but also societal structures that limit the full humanity of all people. It is deeply ironic, however, that this path invariably requires of the devotee the renunciation of wealth, status or class, so that our identity is no longer found through these social definitions, but through our “being in God”. Herein lies our true power and being.

CHAPTER 2

NATURE OF MYSTICISM AND COMPARATIVE MYSTICISM

The understanding of what denotes mysticism has shifted quite substantially over time. In its earliest Western usage it referred to those initiated into the mystery religions, and referred to that part of the ritual about which they were not allowed to speak. In the early Christian tradition, the mystical was the hidden inner meaning of scripture, for later visionaries it was the hidden mysteries of God revealed through visions and locutions.

Within Hinduism, it began with the understanding in the *Vedas* of the sacrifices possessing mysterious power.³ Later, in the *Upanishads*, it came to be seen as the search for truth, and was perceived as an inner journey, rather than an outward one.⁴ The idea of mysticism is in itself a social construction, which has been constructed in very different ways at different periods. How it is defined, who is included or excluded, and issues of power and gender are critical to observe in the historical development of the term mysticism. For there have been very significant changes over the centuries in the understanding of what is mystical, and these are directly related to power and gender. If one has direct access to God, then one has access to a power and authority above all human powers and authorities. This can enable one to challenge both the powers of religion and politics in the name of that higher power – God. Mysticism at its heart is therefore always both deeply religious and deeply political.

However, as we focus on issues related to mysticism we must recognise the fact that those who have defined it have almost exclusively been educated,

³ S.N. Dasgupta *Hindu Mysticism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1927, 8.

⁴ M. Sircar *Hindu Mysticism According to the Upanisads*. Delhi: Mehra Offset Press, 1974, 18.

privileged men, within the power structures of religion. These historical definitions naturally therefore reflect that very particular perspective.

What then do we mean today when we speak of mysticism? It is a word that we frequently use and yet even its contemporary meaning is often unclear, encompassing hugely different experiences, theologies, traditions and understandings. It is a term that has not always been easily or consistently described within a particular religious tradition, let alone across faith boundaries. However, as Rudolf Otto points out, there is some common meaning in the term, or else its common usage would be impossible. He goes on to say:

For logically, we can only use the same term for several objects when they are in some determinable aspects always “the same”. This is true, for example, of the term “religion”. We call Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity religions, and thereby convey the sense that they are to be ranged under the one classification, religion. But that does not exclude, it rather includes, the possibility of religion differing in each of these examples, and that within one and the same genus very diverse spiritual forms may be found (Otto 1957: 140).

Following Otto’s line of argument, mysticism must then have at least a common core of meaning, which enables us to use this term. And so the question arises, what then characterises mysticism? What are those determinably “same aspects” that Otto alludes to; that common core of meaning?

Bishop⁵ writes that mysticism represents a spiritual tendency which is universal, found in all religions and is often the most vital element of such faiths. Although there are differences, Bishop suggests there are a number of

⁵ D.H. Bishop, *Mysticism and the mystical Experience: East and West*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995

fundamental common characteristics of mysticism. Stace⁶ in agreement argues that mysticism can be defined by these common core characteristics, such as ineffability, paradoxicality, a feeling of the holy, blessedness or peace, a sense of objectivity or reality and a quality of oneness. It is this oneness, however, that Stace believes to be the key characteristic of all mystical experiences, irrespective of how that oneness is understood or perceived. William James⁷ echoes this sense of a common core in much the same way as Stace and Bishop, adding the noetic and transient character of mysticism, and the passivity often encountered by the mystic. He also states that personal religious experience always has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness. Happold adds to these, the sense of timelessness and conviction that the ego is not the real. These qualities appear to be found in most understandings of mysticism. However, it is the sense of oneness, of union and integration that seems to mark the central core of mystical experience.

McGinn (2000: xvi) affirms that mysticism at its most basic has to do with the consciousness of divine presence. With this understanding McGinn echoes Otto who wrote, “mysticism is not first of all an act of union, but predominantly the life lived in the knowledge of this wholly other God” (Otto 1957:141). Likewise, R.D. Ranade writes that “Mysticism denotes that attitude of mind which involves a direct, immediate, first hand, intuitive apprehension of God.” He goes on to say that it is “a restful and loving contemplation of God, a silent enjoyment of God“(Ranade 1988: Preface).

Mysticism is therefore not about visions, locutions and other extra sensory phenomenon; it is rather about the love and desire for God and the growing in knowing of this God. These mystical phenomena may form part of the mystic

⁶ W.T. Stace develops these characteristics in his book *Mysticism and Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1960 in Chapter 2

⁷ James details these aspects in greater detail in *The varieties of Religious experience*. New York; Collier-Macmillan, 1961 where he writes that mysticism is characterized by ineffability, transiency, passivity and noesis.

experience; however, many mystics themselves have been either cautious of such experiences, or in fact even hostile towards them. Mysticism is, as McGinn writes, “an encounter with God which leads to a new level of awareness, a heightened sense of consciousness which involves both loving and knowing” (McGinn 1991:XVII). Bishop goes so far as to describe such phenomena as “disturbances” and claims that they have no essential connection with the essence of mysticism, which is union. We must remember as von Hügel emphasizes, that no one ever practices mysticism, but rather we practice our faith, be it Christianity, or Hinduism, or Islam. But as we live our faiths and experience an encounter with God, so mysticism develops.

Keller writes that because this term has been so misused, it might be better to avoid the word mysticism completely, however he goes on to write that “There is only one thing we know for certain: that there were in each of the great traditions men and women who were not satisfied with the ritual aspect of religion but who tried to live totally the meaning of their faith, not only on the level of outward behaviour, but on the level of deep psychological or spiritual experience, on the level of their innermost being” (Katz 1978; 96) Mysticism is essentially not a state of being, but a way of life, a life that is surrendered and given totally to the experiencing of God. It is the attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God. Although the goal is often expressed as being a union or an encounter with God, it is the whole life of the mystic that enables this encounter. It ideally should not be just an experience, but rather the entire process leading up to and emanating from the consciousness of God. All that therefore flows from this awareness – wisdom, transformation, compassion, and courage is mystical.

The weakness with definitions such as James and Stace is that they largely define mysticism in terms of intense private and subjective experiences, and the experience itself becomes the focus of attention. Grace Jantzen (1995) argues that these definitions then bear little resemblance to either the writings

of the mystics themselves, or what these mystics considered to be important. We must be very careful in any study of mysticism not to reduce it to the personal and psychological dimensions only, for if mysticism is termed private and subjective, then there is no need for it to be taken into account by those making social and political decisions. Any serious study of mysticism cannot overlook its transformative social and political dynamics. Union with God cannot therefore be assumed to be simply a subjective psychological state, with no consideration being given to its social, moral and political dimensions.

In current writings⁸ mysticism increasingly is being subjectivised beyond all recognition. A mystic is seen as a person who experiences psychological states of consciousness or feeling, someone who does not have these experiences is not a mystic. Thus the question arises, can ‘mysticism’ be induced through ascetical practises, breathing techniques or the taking of hallucinogenic drugs? These questions would never have entered into the minds of the mystics of the past, for their basic understanding of mysticism was completely different. The questions we find being asked of mysticism today are simply not the concerns or questions the mystics themselves were either asking or seeking to address. Questions such as is there a God, or do mystical experiences prove the existence of a God, or are these experiences across faith boundaries indicative of one God, were not even encountered in a world view where the existence of God was taken for granted and interfaith dialogue hardly an option. We need therefore to be very careful not to impose our questions and categories of thought onto these writings, at the expense of losing the mystics own concern for justice and liberation.

Another area of concern is the stress at times placed on the ineffability of mystical experience. It is not the mystical experience that is beyond

⁸ See for example current writings by authors such as Eckhart Tolle, Diana Cooper and, Deepak Chopra.

articulation, but rather God. Within mystical writings there is a wealth of linguistic resources expressed in metaphors and images, in paintings, illustrations and even dance and drama.⁹ The language and writing is rich in imagery, enabling the reader to enter both intellectually and imaginatively into the subject. These writings were intended not only for instruction, but to lead others into a longing and encounter with God of their own. Given therefore the richness of these writings, we have to question the terming of mysticism as being ineffable. For the mystics, these experiences were not beyond articulation. The subjective experience of God can be expressed. What is ineffable is God. The being of God is beyond human language, for God is beyond all names and beyond all expression. However, despite this, words can and do lead us into understand something of the nature of God. Each naming of God speaks of some aspect of God's being, but as we are drawn into that Being, so we become aware of their inadequacy. We discover that there is not no ways of speaking of God, but rather there are limitless ways. Language must therefore not be abandoned, but rather stretched beyond all boundaries to attempt to describe this God. In fact, we see this most clearly in the affective tradition, where language is rich, dramatic, erotic and at times frankly shocking.¹⁰

Within this study we must also remember that there are no "pure" experiences. All experience is experienced by someone within a particular cultural, religious, gender and linguistic framework which will inevitably shape the experience and also the expression of what is experienced. We can only express something with the words and concepts available to us from our own cultural and linguistic backgrounds. There is therefore no objective, universal view. We can only know from where we are. And that framework sets limits on what we can know and what is beyond our capacity to know. It

⁹ See for example Hildegard of Bingen's *Book of Divine Works*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as well as the writings of Mirabai and St Teresa.

¹⁰ One of the clearest examples is to be found in St Teresa's *Interior Castle*, where she writes of her own ecstatic experiences of union.

is not surprising therefore that within mysticism there are many varieties of expression, as many as the variations in other spheres of spiritual life. However, these variations are not so much determined by race or geographical situation, but they appear side by side, or arise in sharp contrast to one another within the same circle of race and culture (Otto 1957; XVI). This insight is critical as too often simplistic and generalised statements are made concerning mysticism in general and Hindu and Christian mysticism in particular, which do both faiths a great disservice.

2.1 Differing understandings of God and union

Within mysticism at large, but also within each faith system we find two primary forms of mysticism arising. These have to do with how God and the universe is understood and named and their relationship to one another.

2.1.1 Advaitic theology (A theology of no-duality or non-theism)

Within this stream of theology is the understanding that God, creation and embodied souls are ultimately identical.¹¹ God transforms into the world, so that God and this world are essentially the same substance. Forms may and do differ, but the substance is one and the same. The world is therefore a manifestation of God, and God is a supra-personal, universal Absolute. Reality is one. The goal of mysticism here is to realise this essential unity, to come to the knowledge that all notions of separation are in fact illusion. It is in this knowledge that salvation or liberation lies and this realization of the

¹¹ See Teasdale's discussion of this theological understanding in *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*. See also *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, ed. Joseph Prabhu (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996).

essential unity of all leads to compassion. In Hindu *advaitic* theology there is no transcendent other. “If everything is God, and there is only the divine reality, then it makes no sense to talk about God as being out there, as objective, as the reality to which we relate ourselves in prayer or meditation” (Teasdale 1999: 25). Our task is therefore to reclaim who we are, our own divinity, the sacredness within ourselves and all things.

Within Hinduism we find this realization emerging through the *rishis*’ sustained contemplation of the absolute, which is named *Brahman*. *Brahman* is all things. In the *Taittiriya Upanisad* in Book 3, Bhrgu Varuni approaches his father asking to be taught about *Brahman*. His father encourages him to practise asceticism and out of this emerges the knowledge that asceticism is *Brahman*, food is *Brahman*, breath is *Brahman*, mind is *Brahman*, knowledge is *Brahman*, and joy is *Brahman*: *Brahman* is all things that bring forth life. And yet, he comes to realise that this same life, this *Brahman* is found within the depths of his own being. Within his own being he has overcome all differentiation. And so he writes “I eat...food and the one who eats food. I have overcome....the whole universe. I am light like the sun. – The one who knows this. This is the inner teaching” (Roebuck 2003: 225). This discovery of God within oneself, is called the *guha* or the cave of the heart, and came to be known as the *atman*. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* writes “the radiant, immortal person of the body is the self (*atman*). This is the immortal, *Brahman*, the all” (Roebuck 2003: 36). Thus the *atman* is *Brahman* and *Brahman* is *atman*. Our deepest being is one with the deepest centre of all. And again in the same *Upanisad* it states “I am *Brahman*” (Roebuck 2003: 21).

However, *advaitic* or non dual theology is not exclusively found within Hinduism, but we find it also to a certain degree within Christian theology. Clement of Alexandria has been at times termed the founder of Christian

mystical theology. This is open to debate¹², however he deals with themes such as divinization and union, which would later become central to orthodox mysticism. His understanding is that the soul has the potential for divinization, but is only realised when it is united in faith to Christ. This process of divinization, or becoming like God was the goal of Christian perfection. He is famous for the saying that the *logos* of God became man so that you may learn from man how man may become God. Eckhart, van Ruysbroeck and even St John of the Cross express union in terms that leave little possibility of difference.¹³ The soul becomes God through participation in the divine life.

Within the Christian understanding the soul is breathed into the human body, and the soul is understood as the breath of God. The Hebrew word *ruah* for spirit simply means breath, as does the Greek word *pneuma*. Plato develops the understanding of the soul as being the true location of human identity, and all knowledge is simply a remembering of what the soul knew from its previous origin in the divine. Aquinas built on this understanding claiming that the soul is immortal and created by God to participate in the divine life. Its purpose is knowledge and intimacy with God and this is eternal life. The early Greek Fathers named this process *theosis* or deification – becoming divine through participation in God.¹⁴

¹² Clement of Alexandria is the first Christian writer to present a fairly developed treatment of subjects such as union, divinization and the place of visions and was the first to introduce the term mystical into Christian literature. He certainly appears to lay the foundation for Christian mystical theology. McGinn in chapter 4 of *Foundations of Mysticism* deals with the question of Clement's role in the development of Christian mystical thought, and some of the controversy around the role of Greek philosophy therein.

¹³ See, for example, *Meister Eckhart, a modern translation*, by Raymond Bernard Blakney, 1941; *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross, doctor of the Church*, trans. E. Allison Peers from the Critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa: 3v in 1 (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1964).

¹⁴ See Bernard McGinn's discussion of the development of the understanding of *theosis* within Christian theology in *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

2.1.2 *Dvaitic* theology (A theology of dualism or theism)

Within this understanding, God/*Brahman* is seen as a personal God, usually incarnated into a particular form or image. God has qualities by which s/he can be known, and responds to human love. God and the world are two distinct substances, each with their own independent existence. Whereas in *advaitic* theology the world is a manifestation of God, in *dvaitic*¹⁵ theology the world is the creation of God, and it is God who creates, sustains and protects the universe. Although God may dwell in all of creation, God remains nonetheless separate and distinct from it, an external reality. Although union is possible, it is impossible to “become” God. Unity in this context refers to a union where each still retains their own individuality, but there is no loss of identity. The goal is rather transformation through the desire and love for God. Again, this form of theology is found in both Hindu and Christian thought, and the *bhakti* and devotional traditions both emerge out of this understanding. Mira and Teresa are both within this *dvaitic*/theistic tradition.

In the Hindu understanding it is primarily in the *Bhagavad-gita* that we find the development of this personal creator God, which lays the foundation for the development of *bhakti* and devotion. Klostermaier writes of Hinduism that “it has developed its own sophisticated notions of unity of the highest principle, and many forms of *Vaisnavism*, *Saivism*, or *Saktism* have theologies in which One Supreme Being is given the title and role of Lord, or Mistress, the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the whole universe, and the saviour of those who believe in him or her” (Klostermaier 1998: 17). In the tenth discourse of the *Bhagavad-gita* it states “Thou art the Supreme *Brahman*, the supreme abode (supreme light), the supreme purifier, eternal, divine Person, the primeval God, unborn and omnipresent” (Sivananda: 10:13).¹⁶ God is

¹⁵ See *Canonical Theism: a proposal for theology and the church*, eds. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008).

¹⁶ All quotations from the *Bhagavad-gita* are taken from the third edition of the translation by Sivananda: Sivananda Press, Durban. For future references I shall use the abbreviation BG

clearly seen as personal, both eternal and divine, the beginning and the all pervading One. In the same discourse in verse 15 it goes on to name *Brahman* as the “ruler of the world”. We see in the *Bhagavad-gita* both the transcendent and immanent presence of God in the ninth discourse: “All this world is pervaded by Me in My unmanifest aspect; all beings exist in Me, but I do not dwell in them. Nor do beings exist in Me in reality: behold My divine Yoga, supporting all beings, but not dwelling in them, is My Self, the efficient cause of all beings” (BG 9:4 and 5).

Within *dvaitic* theology we find the concept of worship and devotion, or relationship in its many forms. In discourse eleven we see the devotee expressing this relationship in terms of fatherhood, guru, devotee, sinner, Lord, friendship and beloved. “Thou art the Father of this world, moving and unmoving. Thou art to be adored by this world. Thou, the greatest Guru; none there exists who is equal to Thee; how can there be then another superior to Thee in the three worlds, O Being of unequalled power? Therefore, bowing down, prostrating my body, I crave Thy forgiveness, O adorable Lord. As a father forgives his son, a friend his dear friend, a lover his beloved, even so shouldst Thou forgive me, O Lord God” (BG 11:43 and 44).

This is clearly parallel to the dominant understanding in Christianity of a personal God, seen as a parent, a leader and a ruler, a friend, a beloved, a saviour. The primary naming of this God within the Christian tradition has been that of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – each aspect of God retaining its personal dimension. However, we find as in Hinduism, a wealth of other names or images which God embodies. God is equally understood to be as Ephesians states “above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6). The concept of God as creator is explicitly spelt out in the beginning chapters of Genesis, and yet God is always seen as distinct from the creation (Romans 1: 25). However it is God who upholds all creation and without God nothing would have life (John 1: 1 – 14).

Within *dvaitic* theology, God incarnates into human form, in Christianity once and for all in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, but in Hinduism repeatedly. However, one contemporary theologian, Mohammed writes that “the difference may not be as great as it first appears to be, for, on the one hand, although Jesus came once for all for this present world era, traditional Christian faith holds that he will come again. On the other hand, while *Krishna* incarnates himself age after age; the ages are separated by thousands of years so that the incarnation of *Krishna* made known to us in the *Bhagavad-gita* is for our present age. Moreover, in the *Bhagavad-gita*, there is no suggestion that other incarnations of God are other than that of *Krishna*. In other words, whether incarnation is one or many, *Krishna* is the mediator of salvation” (Sugirtharajah 1993: 13).

2.2 Differing ways of knowing and communicating this union.

In attempting to understand this union, the way in which knowledge thereof is acquired and communicated differs once again. Both within Hinduism and Christianity we find what is termed the *nirguni* or *apophatic* tradition, and the *saguni* or *cataphatic* tradition.

2.2.1 *Nirguni/Apophatic* tradition.

In this path, God is seen as essentially incomprehensible, beyond all traditional ways of knowing. We may therefore experience the divine, but we can never adequately express this experience through traditional concepts or language. What we do experience is often appearances which are superimposed upon God. A process of negative discrimination is undergone and a negative form of mystical language thus develops where God is understood as neither this, nor that, until one comes to the realisation that God alone exists and nothing else. It is a way of knowing God by not knowing. One describes what God is not, rather than by describing what God is. Ineffability is a key component of this approach, as all descriptions are not

adequate to describe the essence of God, and therefore in some measure are false. Conceptualization should therefore be avoided. God is seen to neither exist nor to not exist, as God is beyond existing as we understand it.

The most widespread use of this theology occurs within the Hindu *Upanishads*, the most famous expression being the phrase *neti neti*, meaning neither this nor that. God is not alive in the way in which we are: God is not compassionate as we understand compassion. *Neti* is therefore not a denial, but an assertion that God is always beyond our limited experience, understanding and language. God is not what meets the senses, either interiorly or exteriorly. Sircar states regarding *neti* that “it is not nothing. It is the acme of existence, the essence of reality. *Neti, Neti* does not deny the reality of existence; it denies all the empirical characterization of reality” (Sircar 1974: 59).

Within the Christian tradition this way is named the *apophatic* tradition or the *Via Negativa*. It is the appearance of God to Moses in the burning bush who, when asked for a name says “I am who I am”. It is the God who refused to be depicted in any image or idol throughout Israelite history. Although expressed by Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil, this theology is most influential in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and in the later writings of Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross. These writings all seek to dispel misconceptions about God and to enable us to approach God beyond the limits of our human reasoning and understanding.¹⁷

2.2.2 *Saguni/Cataphatic* tradition

Here God is worshipped with attributes and qualities, and is known through these. Not only does God embrace these qualities, but is also the source of all attributes. Thus one would say God is alive, God is love, and God is light. It

¹⁷ See B. Mc Ginn's *The Foundations of Mysticism*.

is a way of approaching and speaking of God through what God is, rather than what God is not.

This approach in the Christian tradition is called *cataphatic* theology or the *Via Positiva* and is the dominant approach of western Christianity. God is essentially a revealed God, a God who chooses to incarnate in form, and it is through the primary form of Jesus of Nazareth that union with God is enabled. The incarnation may not exhaust the being of God, but it is described as containing the fullness of God. Thus Paul writes in Colossians 2:9 that “In him, in bodily form, lives divinity in all its fullness.” Through the incarnation we come to know God as love, light, compassion and savior. We see the “human face” of God, and this enables us to know God. However, even within this dominant tradition, there is always the acknowledgement that God remains more than what we could ever know or understand.

Within Hinduism, although the dominant understanding of God would be without attributes, nevertheless within the *Bhagavad-gita* we find that for the sake of our world, *Brahman* incarnates as *Krishna*, and through him one is enabled to relate to the qualities of God. The *Bhagavad-gita* states “But distinct is the supreme *Purusa* called the highest Self, the indestructible Lord, Who, pervading the three worlds, sustains them....He who, undeluded, knows Me thus as the highest *Purusa*, he, knowing all, worships Me with his whole being(heart), O Arjuna” (BG, 15: 17 and 19). *Neti Neti* would mean that God is not limited to particular attributes, rather than not possessing any such attributes. Thus the author of the *Katha Upanisad* writes that “Just as the one fire, entering the world, takes on forms corresponding to every form, so the one self within all beings takes on forms corresponding to every form, and is outside them” (Katha Upanisad 5:9). God therefore, though Spirit, has form and chooses to take differing forms at various times. Thus, whereas the *Upanishads* present primarily an impersonal non theistic view of God, the

Bhagavad-gita and the *Puranas* reveal a personal God with qualities of love, bliss, knowledge and power – a God of form, which can be known and loved. These are not two different Gods, but two different ways of understanding a God who is always beyond our capacity to understand. For this thesis however, we will be focusing solely on *dvaitic*/dualistic theistic theology within the *saguni/cataphatic* traditions, as it is in these frameworks that both Mira and Teresa lived their faith and devotion. However, an acknowledgement of these differences even within the same faith tradition enables us to see similar parallels in other faith systems. It is these similarities to which I wish to turn as we focus on mysticism within differing cultures. Radhakrishnan comments on how comparative methodology has been successfully used in many fields such as anatomy, psychology, philosophy and even law, and yet how resistance often emerges at the concept of comparative study of religion, as though such studies might endanger the particular faiths.¹⁸ Radhakrishnan reflects the fears of exclusivity and superiority which are embedded in many of our faiths, and which many adherents are reluctant to relinquish. And yet, each religion has changed and developed dramatically over the centuries, sometimes into forms which historically would have been unrecognisable. “When properly studied, Comparative Religion increases our confidence in the universality of God and our respect for the human race. It induces in us not an attitude of mere tolerance which implies conscious superiority, not patronizing pity, not condescending charity, but genuine respect and appreciation” (Radhakrishnan 1933: 32).

2.3 Comparative Issues

When studying mysticism within religious traditions, certain questions arise. How are the mystics alike and how do they differ? How do their experiences compare, on what basis are they compared, and what is it that they are

¹⁸ Radhakrishnan *East and West in Religion*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1933; 18

experiencing – is it the same reality? How do they describe their experiences, and to what extent is the description shaped and limited by their culture? Is there a universal mysticism, or only particular mysticisms?

Askari aptly writes “Let us start with the two facts that there are many religions, and that each religion is a plurality within itself. Hence, the experience of one is at the same time a framework of reference for the other. The more one is aware of the plurality within, the more one is conscious of the plurality without. One who does not allow for alternatives within one’s own religious tradition may not allow for more than one religious approach” (Hick and Askari 1985: 191). How then does one deal with such diversity within our own faith tradition, and those of other faiths? Is God, the universal consciousness which we are, or is God the personal forms of deity encountered by the devotee, and how do we reconcile these differing interpretations? There are broadly three different approaches to these questions¹⁹.

1. We can view other religions and experiences of God as essentially untrue, false and deluded. This may sound very narrow minded and arrogant, but unfortunately this has been the position taken by some faith groups and individuals. Other faiths are seen as rivals, and the approach is either to reject them or to try to convert them. In this worldview all other experiences or truths are seen to be delusory except one’s own. We need however to understand that for many people who have been formed exclusively by their own religious tradition, as Hick points out their faith “forms the religious air that he or she breathes, provides the spiritual food that nourishes him or her, and constitutes the conceptual window through which one sees the rest

¹⁹ Many new models are being explored for “typing” mystical experiences which are beyond the scope of this thesis. Rawlinson proposes a model based on what he terms “hot” or “cool”, “structured” or “unstructured” experience and then uses this as it relates to issues of ontology, cosmology, anthropology and soteriology. *Yoga, Mysticism and a model of comparative religion* by A Rawlinson in *The Yogi and the Mystic – Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism* ed Karel Werner, Worcester, Billing & Sons Ltd; 1989

of the world. And so it is altogether natural for one to think of one's own tradition as 'the way, the truth and the life' and to regard those outside it as less fortunate, lacking effective access to the truth, salvation or liberation that has been vouchsafed to him or her" (Hick and Askari 1985: 4). This attitude he terms the exclusive view, in that it believes that one's own faith has exclusive access to salvation, God or truth, and anyone outside of that faith is denied access to these gifts.

2. Another alternative is to attempt to find parallels and similarities between differing experiences of God and to evaluate the significance of these experiences without judgement or rejection. The advantage of this approach is that we are open to deepening and enriching our own grasp of truth through the experiences of others. However, the difficulties that present here is that we can forget that all mysticism is mediated textually, theologically and culturally. Thus it must be understood within the social, linguistic and theological context from which it emerges. Zaehner raises this particular point when addressing *advaitic* theology and the impossibility of union, for if there is no duality between ourselves and God, then we are already God and cannot in any meaningful way speak of being united. (Zaehner 1961: 32- 33) Here too, we find problems of terminology. Many concepts are only ever fully understood within their own cultural and linguistic frameworks. In order to establish common themes and similar understandings, words may need to be used in their broadest and most general sense, in order for understanding between the differing faith traditions to take place. Thus, for instance, I use the term God, rather than more specifically Yahweh, Jesus, Brahman, Krishna. However, when I use the term God I am referring most generally and broadly to the conception of the sacred, whether seen in personal or non-personal terms.

3. Thirdly, there is the recognition that there is a common reality underlying the different experiences and that they are different manifestations of this common reality. This approach is not saying that all religions are the same, but that they all participate in the same reality at their depths. What is critical in this approach is that we need to allow the parallels and similarities to appear, and there is undoubtedly much that is similar, but we must not try to obscure or deny the differences, as it is precisely in the difference that we need to learn from one another. It is from those whose experience and understanding has been very different that we have the most to learn, and it is in their writings that we will discover dimensions of God to which we have been blind. Could these differences be complementary rather than contradictory? Perhaps we need to learn to let paradox stand, as symbols of Holy Mystery and the limitations of our human logic. Perhaps experience of God does not have to be the same to be authentic. It can be different and equally legitimate, just as two people's experience of an event may be different but both equally real. All experience is interpreted experience. We interpret, firstly, ourselves through our own past experience, through our own particular doctrines and symbols which we have access to and to which we are familiar and accustomed. The mystics describe their experiences always within their own cultural and faith frameworks. Thus when a Christian encounters God, s/he does so through the symbols and images available: Jesus, Mary, the Spirit etc. It is highly unlikely that a Christian will encounter God through an image of Kali or Ganesha. In the same manner for those within Hinduism God is encountered through the images or concepts known to them. For all mystical experience occurs within a particular tradition, and is coloured by that same tradition. Katz writes that our whole lives are shaped by symbols, images, concepts, values and rituals which we cannot leave behind in our experience. He then goes on to say that these images,

beliefs, symbols and rituals define, in advance what the experience he wants to have, and which he then does have, will be like (Katz 1978: 33). The second level of interpretation takes place when the experience is then interpreted by the wider society.

John Hick, in attempting to understand the two different ways of conceiving God, uses the analogy of light. To the naked eye, the physical structure of light is not directly observable, but under different experimental conditions, it is found to have wave like and particle like properties. Light can validly be conceived and observed in both of these differing ways.²⁰ Hick develops this writing, “when human beings relate themselves to it in the mode of I-Thou encounter they experience it as personal. Indeed in the context of that relationship it is personal, not It but He or She. When human beings relate themselves to the Real in the mode of non-personal awareness they experience it as non-personal, and in the context of this relationship it is non-personal” (Hick 1989: 245).

In this thesis I would like to affirm that when we are trying to understand how something fits together, we often need to take it apart and study each part separately. Thus we need to focus separately on the development of Hindu *bhakti* and the development of Christian devotion, on the experiences of Mira and those of Teresa. But this should only be done in order to understand, and never to forget their ultimate unity. The aim is to seek within each tradition what belongs to the universal religious tradition, and what belongs to one faith’s own limited and particular point of view.

John Cobb, Jr writes regarding the tension of being Christian in a pluralistic world, that we too easily forget that Jesus Christ is not the fullness of the End, but rather the promise and foretaste of what is to come. What we as the

²⁰ Hick uses Kant and other western philosophers to build what he terms a pluralistic hypothesis in *An interpretation of religion* pg 233 - 249

church have is therefore not “the end,” but rather the beginning. The implication is that our theology must be understood as a developing theology which will shift substantially over time; to limit ourselves to what we have now would be to stop growing and ironically to fail the living Christ. “For Christians the unity and fullness we seek is to be found at the End, not at the beginning. Yet Christians repeatedly forget this. The effort to find an existing commonality with all other religious ways is one form that this forgetting has taken. The effort to reject everything not already present in our own heritage is another” (Hick and Askari 1985: 160). This means taking seriously that all of our present and past religious experience is limited. The gift of comparative studies in mysticism is that they enable us to gain new understandings not only of other faiths but also of our own. However, real encounter will also challenge us to relinquish attitudes of superiority and privilege, and have us risk having some of our assumptions shaken. We will need to discover that there are ways other than our own of naming the truth.

The deeper call is not just about understanding or experiencing the truth, but to live and embody the truth. True mystical experience will always have social consequences and must be related to the ongoing life of the community. Stanley Samartha highlights this point by saying, “Dialogue into truth should also mean growth in truth in the sense that through dialogue opportunities for participation in truth are enhanced, openings to further dimensions of truth are increased, and the obligation to be committed and loyal to what has been received becomes more compelling” (Samartha in Hick and Askari 1985: 105).

In this chapter my intention was to clarify what is meant by the term mysticism, and to show that it is a historical construct which has shifted over the centuries. I have also attempted to show that there is a diversity of understanding about God and how this understanding of God is communicated, not only between different faiths but also within those same

faiths. And lastly I have highlighted briefly some of the questions and issues that arise in comparative studies of mystical experience. In the following chapter I shall outline the development of mystical thought in Hinduism with particular focus on the emergence of *bhakti*.

CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT OF THE BHAKTI TRADITION IN HINDUISM

Hinduism has been shaped over the centuries by a number of different traditions and systems of thought, which have resulted in the great variance in theology and practise which we see in Hinduism today. In this chapter I shall briefly show the shift from Vedic sacrificial mysticism through to the mysticism of *bhakti*. Within the *bhakti* movement I will highlight some primary characteristics and practices, and thereafter I will focus on the social and theological implications of this development within Hinduism and within Hindu culture.

3.1 Historical development

The oldest form of Hinduism is *Vedism*. It is named after the collection of sacred hymns and petitions sung to the gods by the *Brahminical* priests. These hymns were composed about 2000BCE²¹, and were passed down orally, through the priestly families, whose responsibility it was to preserve them, for up until the 8th century CE it was considered sacrilegious to write them down. The word “*veda*” means wisdom (*sruti*), understood to have been heard by seers (*rsis*) during periods of ecstasy, during which they were enabled to see ultimate reality.²² Organ goes on to say, “Words were the Vedic *yoga*. They united thought and action, mind and matter” (Organ 1974: 57).

²¹ G. Parrinder details how both Hinduism and Hebrew developed as parallel streams at much the same period and the Vedic scriptures were being composed when the earlier parts of the Old Testament were being written. (Parrinder *The World's living religions* 1964 Pan Books Ltd, London: p 36 onwards)

²² See T.W. Organ in his book “Hinduism – It's Historical Development” for a more detailed description of the understanding during this period of *shruti* (that wisdom which was heard) and the importance of the method through which it is transmitted.

The *Vedic* literature is divided into four collections or *Samhitas* of writings: the *Rig*, the *Sama*, the *Yajur* and the *Atharva Veda*. Each of these *Vedas* consists of four types of writings: *Mantra (samhita)* the *Brahmanas*²³, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads*, sometimes called the *Vedanta* (meaning end of the Vedas) are the last of the *sruti* literature. Later writings are known as *smrti*, which means remembered, as opposed to that which is revealed and heard (Organ 1974: 100.) *Smrti* literature comprises the *Dharmasastras* (which deal with the rights and duties of Hindus according to their status), the *Itihasa* including the epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and eighteen *Puranas* consisting of various myths and legends (Klostermaier 1998; 19).

Over the centuries the Vedic writings deteriorated into an elaborate system of ceremonial observances and rituals under which the original mystical vision became buried. This brahminical ritualism stifled spirituality and was increasingly challenged. Organ writes “The Upanishads, despite their obvious brilliance of conception and expression, had failed to appeal to the masses. The average man could not hope to attain the lofty liberating knowledge set forth as the ideal in the Upanishads. The sacrificial system had been taken from him and he had received in return that which was beyond his intellectual powers and which did not satisfy his emotional needs” (Organ 1974; 126).

Thus in the sixth century BCE, new movements began to grow out of the needs of the common people. During this period Jainism and Buddhism developed and spread while within Hinduism *bhakti* emerged. The *bhakti* movement developed after the Yogic and Vedic traditions, and became the primary and most widespread visible expression of popular Hinduism.

The *bhakti* tradition is first seen as a distinct form around the 4th century BCE, where groups worshipped God using the names *Bhagavan*, *Narayana* and

²³ These were codes for the Brahmin priests

Hari, which were all identified with the Vedic god, *Vishnu*. During this period, the differing Hindu traditions struggled to meet the needs of common people and win their allegiance. Similarly *bhakti* developed as a form of yoga within the *Shivite* and *Shakti* traditions. Here it remained simply one of several important elements; within *Vaishnavism* however, *bhakti* becomes the primary characteristic, so much so that the terms *bhakti* and *Vaishnavism* are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this thesis I will concentrate on *Vaishnavi bhakti*, as it is through this tradition that Mira exercised her devotion.

During this same period the worship of *avatars* (incarnations) also became an important aspect within *Vaishnavism*. *Vishnu*, who was increasingly understood as redeemer, was believed to have visited humankind in the past in differing redemptive forms. Over many centuries this belief grew until by the 8th century CE, as Organ records, *Vishnu* was understood to have appeared ten times as an avatar. *Rama*, the seventh form of *Vishnu* and the hero of the *Ramayana*, and *Krishna*, the eighth form from the *Bhagavata Gita* and *Purana*, became two of the dominant forms which captivated the love and devotion of common people.

The word *Purana* simply means ancient and these texts are referred to as the “Vedas of the common people”, although written in Sanskrit. In these texts the stress is on *bhakti* as the surest way to union with God. It is within these writings that we find the *Bhagavata Gita*, composed during the period between 400 BCE and 400 ADE which is incorporated into the *Mahabharata*.²⁴ The *Ramayana* is the other epic which has greatly enriched the *bhakti* tradition. These writings were of great significance as they began to reshape the whole understanding of God, of duty, of class and of devotion. Balsham writes “they mark the beginning of a new form of Hinduism,

²⁴ Organ comments on the significance of the *Mahabharata* as it is often referred to as the fifth *Veda*. Pg 158

characterised by, among other things, theism and devotion to a supreme deity, a personification of the abstract Upanisadic Brahman” (Balsham 1989: 106).

Thus one of the critical developments within this period is this emphasis on theism, centering on the divinities *Vishnu*, *Shiva* and *Shakti*. This thesis focuses only on the understandings and implications of *Vaishnavism*, and the development of *Krishna* as an *avatar* of *Vishnu*.

The *Krishna* stories emerge from about the 6th century BCE and have continued to be developed as late as the 16th century AD by figures such as Chaitanya. (Organ 1974:152)

Not only is theism during this period being more clearly developed and articulated, but so too is the understanding of incarnation.

One of the most important new doctrines of the Bhagavadgita is that of an avatara, “coming down”, that is, being incarnated into human form. *Krishna* appears to be a normal human being who has been reborn many times in the normal way, and yet he is also the unborn Lord of all beings, who through his supernatural power has come to be born in human form. The process is not made very clear, and here we are at the very beginning of the doctrine of avataras, when its theology had not been fully worked out (Balsham 1989; 93).

In the *Gita*, *Krishna* is understood to be both man and God simultaneously. But it also offers for the first time a God who enters into the human context. Thus as Organ perceptively writes

Arjuna does not need to step from his chariot to find *Krishna*. Man does not need to search for the divine. The Presence is with him and for him. This was totally new in Hinduism....It challenged the old ways of ritual and knowledge such that Brahmins and rishis were

never again to have the singular hold upon the religious life of India which they had enjoyed before the Bhagavata. The Bhagavata was the first of the bhakti margas – the first invitation to take refuge in the mercy of a forgiving God (Organ 1974; 163).

Later the *Vishnu Purana* emerged. These writings

continue the Vaisnava doctrines begun in the Bhagavadgita but add a very important element in the story of Krsna not found in the earlier epics; Krsna's youth as a cowherd, or Krsna Gopala. This legend, derived from contacts with the cowherd tribes of Abhiras, who lived in north-central and western India, tells about Krsna as a young boy. Central to Krsna's childhood is his dance with the milkmaids (gopis) called the rasa-lila, which eventually became the object of worship by many of the devotional sects. This episode describes Krsna's intense love for the gopis and their love of him long after his departure from them. It illustrates that the human emotion of love was but a form of devotion to God. When intense love, such as that which the gopis had for Krsna was directed toward the Lord, the devotee was performing bhakti...Salvation by means of devotion was now open to all humans regardless of birth, gender, or station in life. This movement grew rapidly, giving, for the first time, women and the lower social orders equal access to salvation (Balsham 1989; 108).

This was a sharp theological challenge to the path of right action (*karma*) exemplified through the vedic sacrificial and ritual systems, and equally a challenge to the intellectual systems of thought (*jnana*) found in much of the vedic writings. *Bhakti* emerges as the third way; the way of devotion.

Within Hinduism these three paths (*margas*) coexist and even merge at different times. They are known as the *Trimarga* and as Klostermaier writes they “organize the entire range of religious affiliations into karmamarga,

bhaktimarga and jnanamarga, the path of works, the path of loving devotion, and the path of knowledge respectively” (Klostermaier 1998; 146). Klostermaier shows that some scholars conceive of these *margas* as representing an evolutionary refinement of Hindu thought. This has been disputed by others who do not consider *bhakti* to be the highest path to union with God. It is, however, a historically established fact that the full recognition and emergence of *bhaktimarga* takes place after that of *jnana* and *karma marga*. Nonetheless, all three paths have always been present within Indian religious thought.²⁵

In the *Gita* the path to salvation through *bhakti* co-exists somewhat uneasily with two other paths: that of wisdom (*jnana*) and that of disinterested proper conduct (*karma*).

One doctrine claims that in this age of *Kali Yuga*, the paths of wisdom and proper conduct are no longer available to men, much less to women; in the present age, our intellectual, moral and social condition is simply too degenerate for any path to salvation to function apart from *bhakti*. It is for that very reason that God, usually identified with *Vishnu*, introduced the path of *bhakti* to make salvation available in this *Kali Yuga*. Often the texts go on to claim that birth in this age is paradoxically the most fortunate birth possible, since in this age God has made available this easy path by which everyone, even women and *sudras* can win direct salvation with little or no effort on their own part.²⁶

But what is understood by the term *bhakti*? Klostermaier states that the word *bhakti* can be derived from two different roots. If taken from the root word *bhanj*, it would mean to separate, or separation. The second derivation could

²⁵ Klostermaier demonstrates in this chapter the beginnings of *Indra bhakti* or *Varuna bhakti* within Vedic literature, and also the doctrine of grace within the *Upanishads*.

²⁶ David Lorenzen in *Bhakti Religion in North India*, speaks of the implications of the *Kali Yuga* for contemporary worship and understandings of salvation. See *Bhakti Religion in North India*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

be from the root *bhaj*, which would mean to worship or be devoted to (Klostermaier 1998; 210). Both derivatives give important insight into the nature of *bhakti* as a path to union with God. If understood as separation it conveys the critical differentiating factor within *bhakti* that the individual is separated from God and non-identical to God. It is precisely this understanding that places *bhakti* within a theistic framework. The second understanding is that union with God is primarily achieved through worship and devotion to this God who is “other”.

Green writes:

...the bhakti movement which arose in India from the 6th century onwards emphasizes separation between the devotee and the Deity, in contrast to the *Advaitic* model. In *bhakti* the human soul is seen as unable fully to understand the Divine and the vision of the Divine in this earthly life is necessarily incomplete. There is therefore a strong accent on love, devotion, ecstasy, adoration and on the grace of the personal Deity. The mystic throws himself or herself into a passionate relationship, surrendering to and putting all trust in the deity (Werner 1989: 130).

In about 14th century CE differences began to emerge as to the interpretation of grace and self-effort within the *bhakti* movement. While all agreed that surrender was central to their understanding of devotion, questions began to arise as to the place of the devotee’s initiative. Do we contribute to our salvation, and if so in what way do we contribute? Is salvation entirely the work of God or do our actions have a role to play? Two streams of thought emerged. On one hand, the *Vadagalais* asserted that without any self effort, we cannot come to the knowledge of our dependence on God’s grace. Although we cannot save ourselves, we have to have failed at our own attempts to purify our lives before we can cast ourselves on the grace of God. This was understood by a concept called *markata-nyaya*, or the analogy of the

monkey, that as the monkey contributes to its transportation by holding on to the back of its mother so we need to hold on to God. The *Tengalais*, however, believed that the grace of *Vishnu* is spontaneous and there is nothing we can do to effect our salvation, except turn to God. This was understood through the term *marjara-nyaya*, or the analogy of the cat: the mother cat simply lifts the kitten and carries it; the kitten plays no role, other than to allow itself to be carried. So we are called simply to allow ourselves to be carried by God.²⁷

The next shift within Hindu *bhaktimarga* is in the latter part of the fifteenth century, when *bhaktimarga* divides into two major streams or currents – *nirguni* and *saguni bhakti*. These flow from a theological difference in the way the devotee conceptualizes the nature of the divine being that is the object of their worship. Within *saguni bhakti* God is worshiped with attributes, and this constitutes the largest section of the *bhakti* community. Worship centres on the forms of the gods *Vishnu*, *Shiva* and the Goddess. *Nirguni bhakti* is the worship of God “without attributes”, and here bhaktis are fewer in number and worship a divine being who remains unmanifest throughout. The worship of the *avatars* of *Vishnu*, for instance, is rejected and the devotee is directed to worship a formless, universal God which is ever only partially embodied in the Name, or in the words and person of the guru or saints.

Both forms of worship have existed in each of the *margas* for centuries, and both have exercised considerable influence within Hinduism. Neither have they ever been seen as mutually exclusive of the other, and songs of *nirguni* and *saguni* saints are frequently sung together within times of worship.

There are two central ethical pillars within the *saguni* tradition. The first is in regard to the doctrine of transmigration and rebirth that if one acts appropriately one can expect a better rebirth in the next life, either as a male or within a higher caste. (The *nirguni* tradition differs sharply in that they do

²⁷ Organ summarises these schools of thought further in his book on page 326

not accept the idea of rebirth being tied to the moral character of one's actions; all human births are considered to be equally valuable.) The second pillar is the doctrine of *varnasramadharma*, which embodies laws surrounding social classes and the various stages of life; one can obtain a better rebirth by following the rules of conduct appropriate to the particular *varna* (class) and *jati* (caste) into which one was born. Not surprisingly, therefore, the *saguni* devotional movement was led overwhelmingly by the *Brahmanical* families, whereas the *nirguni* tradition was predominantly based within the lower class and caste, and Brahmans are almost completely absent from this devotion tradition. Early gurus within the *nirguni* tradition are figures such as Kabir, Raidas²⁸ and Guru Nanak, and within the *saguni* tradition are *bhaktas* such as Surdas and Tulsidas. Mirabai, as I will show, holds together these two devotional traditions within her writings, and cannot be easily characterised as belonging to either one or the other.²⁹

In the 16th century, two exceptional *bhakti* teachers emerge: Vallabha from the south, and Chaitanya from Bengal. Both chose to live in the north, and taught there for most of their lives. For both of them devotion was centred on *Krishna*, who had by this stage been reshaped: he was no longer so much the noble, princely figure of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but more the image of *Krishna Gopala*, the cowherd *Krishna*. Here we have the stories of *Krishna* growing up amongst the rural cow-herding folk, of how he loved butter and would steal it when he got the chance; we also have the image of him as a handsome flute-player who was the object of desire for all the *gopis*. Whenever *Krishna* played his flute, making music that was understood to be the call of God, women left their husbands and ran towards the forest. What emerges from

²⁸ Raidas mentioned here is believed to have been the guru of Mirabai.

²⁹ David Lorenzen in his chapter "The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion," in *Bhakti Religion in North India*, pg 18 – 25, deals in greater depth with the differences between these traditions and to what extent was the *saguni* tradition, written by the Brahmin elite, developed for their own economic, political and social benefit.

these stories is the understanding that what matters most is love; conventional ways of being are swept aside when one's heart is captured by this love.

3.2 General characteristics of *bhakti*

Among *bhaktas* a large number of sects, or *sampradayas*, can be observed, depending on the deity worshipped. Thus one finds *Vishnu bhaktas*, *Shiva bhaktas*, *Devi bhaktas*, or *Saktas*. There is so much in common between these groupings that it is possible to describe *bhakti* fairly accurately in generalised terms. Organ thus develops five characteristics that he sees as being fundamental features of *bhakti* (Organ 1974; 176).

Bhakti is essentially monotheistic. In each form of *bhakti* a particular image of God is chosen, called an *ishta deva*. Devotion is directed exclusively to that one particular image of God.

Bhakti is devotion to a God that is personal. God responds personally to the devotee in love, mercy and forgiveness. This is called *prasada* (grace) and this grace cannot be earned by the *bhakta*. Rather it is the very nature of God. We are called simply to celebrate the *prasada* of God. Balsham comments that "The man who is perfected in *bhakti* is relieved of the burden of his past *karma*... *Krishna's* grace can transcend all other factors, including the law of *karma*. This marks a very important stage in the evolution of Indian religious ideas" (Balsham 1989; 92).

We are called to love God as a free response rather than as a means to win God's favour.

We are called to total surrender (*prapatti*) to God, like the *gopis* who could not resist the call of *Krishna* when they heard his flute. "The central act of *bhakti* is *prapatti*, self surrender, which consists of five individual components: the intention of submitting to the Lord, giving up resistance to the Lord, the belief in the protection of the Lord, the prayer that the Lord may

save his devotees, the consciousness of utter helplessness” (Klostermaier 1998; 220). And lastly, there is the concept of *sharanagati*; that we come to God in refuge. Thus in the *Gita Krishna* calls *Arjuna* to take his refuge in Him, and to have no fear, for He will save *Arjuna*.

The Yogic and Vedic traditions had up until the 6th century BCE centred largely on the “way of knowledge”; on understanding the universe and our place in it, on knowing what was required ritually and sacrificially, and it was the Brahmins who were the custodians of this knowledge. Even the sages of the Upanishads were concerned with knowing, knowing ourselves and knowing Brahman. However in the *bhakti* movement we now find a difference. Here there is the recognition that knowledge is not just about the mind, but also about the emotions. It is our emotions which give us energy and direct our actions and thoughts. And so the *bhakti* movement is not about by-passing the emotional life, but about learning to integrate this part of our being into the spiritual journey and using this energy for spiritual growth.

In *bhakti* we find different types of love operating between the *bhakta* and God which shapes the nature of the particular relationship. There are six primary categories into which *bhaktas* can be placed.

- Vatsalya-bhava*: the love of a parent for child
- Shanta-bhava*: the love of child for a parent
- Kanta-bhava*: the love of a wife for her husband
- Dasya-bhava*: the love of a servant for a master
- Sakhya-bhava*: the love between two friends.
- Madhurya-bhava*: the sexual love between a man and a woman

Different devotional practices characterise the path of *bhakti* to union with God. In the *Bhagavata Purana* there are nine requirements of true devotees, sometimes called the nine degrees of devotion. They are

1. *Shravana* (listening): hearing God's praise, listening to holy men and women speak of God.
2. *Kirtana* (singing): singing God's praise through *bhajans* and other devotional songs.
3. *Smarana* (remembering): remembering and recollecting God's presence, favour and grace in the past and so strengthening present faith and joy in God.
4. *Padasevana* (serving): serving at the Lord's feet in the temple.
5. *Arcane* (worshipping): *pujas* to a particular *ishta deva* and temple worship
6. *Vandana* (praising): similar practices to *arcane*.
7. *Dasya* (servitude): cultivating an attitude of service to others and to God.
8. *Sakhya* (companionship): growth of devotion into friendship.
9. *Atmanivedana* (self surrender): the clear expression to God of feelings of love, anger, rejection, frustration etc.

As a devotee engages in these various devotional practices, the love of the *bhakta* is aroused, and it is this love which eventually brings the gift of union.

3.3 Social and theological implications of *bhaktimarga*

Organ writes "Innovations in bhakti appeared throughout India during these centuries, but in all cases they shared four characteristics: (1) the vernacular was used for preaching and writing; (2) the traditional varna distinctions were ignored; (3) there was little interest in the Vedic scriptures; (4) the shruti rituals and ceremonies were rejected" (Organ 1974: 318). These four characteristics highlight the significant shift that *bhaktimarga* introduced into contemporary Hinduism, playing a crucial role in the reshaping of the social, cultural and religious life of India.

3.3.1 Movement into the vernacular

Up until the 5th century BCE, Sanskrit was the only language through which the sacred was communicated, and all religious writing was therefore written in Sanskrit. However, as *bhakti* emerges, we find a shift in the language of worship and theological discourse: for the first time in history, religious poetry begins to be written in various mothertongues. The *bhakti* movement introduces worship and theology in the language of the common people. People of all educational backgrounds can now worship God in their own languages. Kishwar shows that many of the *bhakti* poets were in fact the shapers of the modern Indian languages that exist and are used today, and s/he writes: “through their work they helped make the vernaculars more flexible, suitable for expression ranging from proverbial wisdom to complex philosophical thought” (Kishwar 1989: 5).

This had a profound effect not only on language and the development of vernaculars, but also on religion and the development of Hinduism itself. Thus Ramanujan writes “Now the moment god begins to be addressed in the mothertongue, the language of children and the family, all sorts of human emotional experiences become relevant to religion. All the family relationships become part of the *bhakti* repertoire. God becomes a mother, a father, a child, a lover – not just a lord and master” (Kishwar 1989: 10).

3.3.2 Traditional *varna* distinctions ignored

Within the *bhakti* movement, *bhaktas* assert the equality of all souls before God, regardless of caste, status or gender. *Bhakti* becomes therefore the way of salvation for everyone; no one is excluded. Women, children, low castes and even outcasts could and did become fully recognized members of the *bhakti* movement. This meant the movement had a very wide appeal from the

beginning, as it broke down the societal barriers of privilege, which in previous times had kept large groups of the population from *karma* and *jnanamarga*. Many *bhaktas* would in fact go further theologically, claiming that high status and wealth were in fact impediments to union with God, and that these needed to be renounced for love of God. It was therefore common within this movement to find *bhaktas* violating the rules of untouchability, discarding traditional sexual norms and in some instances even renouncing their clothes and wandering around naked.

This suggests a commitment to community based no longer on familial or caste distinctions, but on a common desire and longing for God, which is freely and actively chosen. For the first time it is a community based on individual choice and desire.

3.3.3 Less interest in Vedic scriptures

The Vedic scriptures had always stressed knowledge and are highly developed philosophical writings. However, the common person struggled to find an accessible God through these writings. Moreover, as Balsham highlights, women and *sudras* had no right to hear the Vedas or to perform the rituals of the Brahmins (Balsham 1989: 92). *Bhakti* subverts the Vedic basis of Hinduism by claiming the path of *bhakti* as an equal if not superior way of attaining union with God.

3.3.4 Rejection of *shruti* rituals and ceremonies

What emerges during this period is the shift away from set formulas and rites, which had become inaccessible economically and philosophically to the average devotee, to a path based simply on love. And so Balshan writes that “By *bhakti* the devotee may be assured of receiving God’s grace. From the practical and material point of view *bhakti* is neither difficult nor expensive.

It demands no costly sacrifices or severe penances, and God's grace can be obtained without the long course of yoga Bhakti offers, in fact, a shortcut to an advanced spiritual state that may be obtained by other methods only through great striving, penance, and pain. The attitude of bhakti, however, is not something that can be obtained merely by the recitation of suitable hymns and prayers, or by vain repetitions. It involves constant consciousness and love of God" (Balsham 1989: 92).

Love was seen as more important than knowledge gained from learning, or books. *Bhaktas* asserted that self realisation was accessible even to the lowliest of people, and would denounce pride and self-righteousness, particularly found amongst the religious and other authority figures. The outward forms and rituals of Brahmanism were thus rejected, and the *bhakti* movement emphasised instead inner purity, devotion and personal religious experience.

3.4 Gender implications within the development of *bhakti*

In a society structured around communal duty and responsibility, *bhakti* enabled many people to explore their own truth, even when these emerging truths were radically different from what was expected from them. This was particularly significant for women. But these choices were always made at a cost.

Following this path meant different things to women and men: a male *bhakta* could remain a householder, whilst for most women this would have been nearly impossible. Almost without exception, one finds that women *bhaktas* in some way leave married life and domesticity and remain childless: they refused marriage, or left existing relationships, or if widowed, refused to live out the expected state of widowhood. A man pursuing *bhakti* could deal with a wife who did not like his chosen way of life by simply ignoring her, and she

would have had no power to stop him from pursuing this calling to God. In the case of a woman, however, her husband and in laws could physically prevent her from following her heart, and often this proved fatal for her. Therefore most women *bhaktas* could only follow their hearts by discarding marriage altogether.

Ironically, this leaving of patriarchally-enforced relationships finds a theological basis within the *bhakti* literature. The love between *Radha* and *Krishna* is that of an older married woman, who pulled by the sound of *Krishna's* flute, leaves a shadow of herself by her husband's side and goes out a night to meet him. This is essentially an illicit relationship, which would conventionally be described as adulterous, but it forms the theological underpinning of *bhakti*, which is the concept of love in separation. In actively pursuing her love for *Krishna*, *Radha* disobeys wifely duty, and we see her love for God transcending all social obligations.

For women *bhaktas* this leaving behind of all that was known, of all that defined their very being, required exceptional sacrifices. Most had to leave home, family, and all financial and economic security; many even faced death. Because of the cost required of most of the women *bhaktas* in following this path, we find that they did not attract a wide following amongst other women, and remained the rare exception. However, their courage and integrity of being remains of huge significance within the society, as figures of hope and possibility.

A further element within this tradition is the place of gender and in particular of masculinity. Ramanujan writes:

Power entails the seeking of more power; power and privilege need defences. Men have to overcome the temptation for this kind of seeking. They have to throw away their defences. One of the last things they overcome, in these traditions, is maleness itself. The male

saints wish to become women; they wish to drop their very maleness, their machismo. Saints then become a kind of third gender. The lines between male and female are crossed and recrossed in their lives (Ramanujan 1989: 10).

Within this tradition, then, in sharp contrast with every other tradition in Hinduism, masculinity itself poses the greatest challenge and obstacle in the path to union with God. Ramanujan goes on to say that males within this devotional tradition are to take on female personas, learning what it means to be passive and submit oneself to something beyond oneself. But no female saint within this tradition ever takes on a male persona. Being female, she has no need to change anything to turn toward God. The female saint, like the untouchable and or a low caste person, does not need to shed anything: she has nothing to shed. She is already exactly where she needs to be. This is particularly true when the woman saint has already relinquished the only things which traditionally gave her identity within the community, namely, marriage and motherhood.

Mukta writes that even to this day male *bhaktas* sing in the female register which is termed *stri vachya*. She goes on to say:

When men of a society in which the male consciousness and male constructs are used as yard sticks for the whole of the human experience begin to sing in the *stri vachya*, then a radical shift occurs in the moral order. It requires a break from and a transcendence of the world as created and upheld by men. It requires the recreation of humanity in the female image. The world has to become *strimay* ie the world has to become female (Mukta 1999: 87).

This she says is much more than just empathy with the female subject, but an entering into the mind and heart of a woman.

Within this understanding, however, an incredible tension is implicit. When a woman embraces her own truth and follows her own calling, her life becomes

a profound and permanent challenge to the dominant socio-religious authorities and norms of society. It is a model which is felt to threaten the whole fabric of Indian society. Thus women saints, like Mira, are, on one hand, held up as religious gurus and models; but, on another, they are objects of great scorn and outrage.

David Lorenzen points out that once Mira and others make the decision to abandon home and to follow this religious vocation, they can never return to their husbands and their families. The reversal is permanent, forever irreversible. In contrast, a man may play the role of a female or low caste person, but when the role playing is over, an upper class male saint can safely return to his original social identity. For a short while he may behave as if social distinctions and divisions are unimportant; but he never permanently rejects or abandons his true social identity or the hierarchical norms that legitimize him (Lorenzen 1995:191). This is an insight we must never ignore.

Kishwar writes “the easy acceptance of outstanding women in unusual roles today does not indicate our society’s willingness to grant ordinary women their basic human rights. This duality pervades all aspects of our social and cultural life....while Saraswati is worshipped as goddess of learning, most families still are more willing to sacrifice for a son’s education, and consider a daughter’s education a relative waste. Communities which legislate a life of utter powerlessness for women fervently worship female deities as incarnations of power, destroyers of evil” (Kishwar 1987: 6). She goes on to say that we have to work to expand these spaces within society so that “women need not be exceptional in order to claim their fundamental rights.”

In this chapter I have focused on the development of *bhakti* within Hinduism, some of its key characteristics, and in particular the effects this movement has had on Hindu religion and society. In the following chapter I shall turn to the

equivalent emergence of the devotional tradition within Christianity and the effects thereof on Christianity and Western society.

CHAPTER 4

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PATH OF DEVOTION IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

4.1 Historical development

The Hebrew religious tradition begins to emerge at around 2000BCE and was a parallel movement to the religious thought developing in the east in the form of Hinduism. The early sections of the Old Testament were emerging at roughly the same period as the Vedic scriptures were coming into being. The Old Testament began as oral traditions of the Hebrew people and their relationship with God. Although these oral traditions were subsequently written and redacted in various periods for various purposes, the God of the Old Testament is monotheistic. Accordingly the creation stories describe how the world came into being, the creation of humankind and their subsequent alienation from God. Much like the *Upanishads* it is concerned with the origin of all things; however, it is written in story and poetic form, rather than as a philosophical argument. The Old Testament can be divided into different forms of literature, of which the first is the Torah or the Law. Much of the earliest writings of the Old Testament deal with issues of law, or ritual practice and purity codes for the Israelite nation. It presents the image of a God who is far removed from the creation, a remote law giver who is judge of all things. In this period of history, relationship with God is based on knowledge of this law and the necessary rituals which accompany it. Purity is based on an observance of these rituals, and we find much of the writings dealing with these issues of ritual purity. Salvation is through entrance into a covenantal relationship with Yahweh based on the law and associated rituals.

In many ways, this can be paralleled with *jnanamarga*, or union with God through knowledge. For it was through knowing the law as definition of the path of life that salvation or right relationship with God came. However, the law and sacrificial rituals often functioned as an external system; inner transformation of the individual or community did not always take place. This was not how it was intended to be, for the law was created initially to effect this inner transformation. Increasingly however, it became a legalistic and sacrificial system that was often misused and even abused. Even more problematic was the lived reality that no one could obey the law in its entirety. It was not possible to live a pure life.

At about 800BCE the prophetic writings began to appear. The prophets repeatedly proclaimed faith is not about performing right rituals, but it is about mercy, compassion, justice and love. They present a path which is no longer just based on right knowledge but rather on right action. And so the prophets strongly condemned the capacity to perform the rituals but to then oppress the worker or the poor amongst them.³⁰ The theology emerging in this period is one of right action, the *karmamarga* of Hinduism. It is a theology of justice, particularly expressed in justice for the poor, the widow, the stranger and the exile. These writings form the last of the Old Testament, but the underlying problem of alienation remains. Who lives a life of complete justice, who embodies compassion and mercy consistently? Who can honestly say that there is no separation between themselves and God, or between themselves and their fellow human beings? This question was temporarily addressed through the sacrificial system, where a lamb or goat would be slaughtered on behalf of the “sin” of the people. But it was a temporary solution, and never very effective.

The third path to right relationship with God emerges in the very beginning of the New Testament. In these writings, we are presented with a God who so

³⁰ See Isaiah 58:4-14, Amos 8:4-6, Micah 3:1-4

loves the entire cosmos that has been created, that God chooses to come down to earth and become human. This is the doctrine of the incarnation, which bears a great similarity to that of the Hindu concept of the *avatar*. God incarnates in the form of Jesus. Jesus is both fully God and fully human. This is an astounding shift from the Old Testament understanding of God. Previously God was separate, other, distant, but now God enters not only into the human context, but into the human body and soul. God literally becomes embodied. The motivation for this incarnation is presented as being nothing other than love. It is the love of God that impels God to become one of us.³¹ This third path, the path of love, or *bhakti*, can be seen to originate in the heart of God and this path is consistently lived out by God in the form of Jesus.

The gospels record of how Jesus reached out and loved those whom the rest of society had shunned, the poor, the lepers, the unclean, the prostitutes, the tax collectors and even those who ultimately would kill him. He included in his followers those who traditionally had been excluded from becoming disciples, he spoke of a God who forgave and loved without limit. Ultimately, we see Jesus dying on a cross because of his love for us and for God. He becomes the final sacrifice, as Paul writes “once and for all”. Surrender of all of who we are is one of the key elements in this path of love. Power and salvation is no longer held in the law or in right rituals, but in the surrender of ourselves to this God of love, and the transformation by love of our innermost beings. Clearly we see within the Christian tradition these three paths to union with God, the path of knowledge and the law, the path of right action and finally the path of love and surrender.

However, in the early church with the increasingly influence of Greek philosophy, the concept of knowledge begins to dominate theological and

³¹ John 3:16

philosophical thought.³² The mystical ones were those who had devoted themselves to the mystery religions and had been initiated into the secret rituals. It was those who kept silent that which was known. Plato had developed this idea asserting that knowledge is gained through the closing not just of the mouth, but of all bodily senses. This led inevitably into the early Christian understanding of the mystical path being the purifying of all bodily senses and desires, until the knower and known merge into union. Thus very early after the death of Jesus, we see this emphasis returning where knowledge and words once again became the central focus. Jesus becomes known as the Word, or the *logos*. Ironically wisdom shifts from the feminine Hebrew figure *Hochma*, and the Greek *Sophia* to the male figure *Logos*. This returning emphasis to knowledge and the word was to have profound gender and class implications for the faith community for shortly thereafter early Christian writers begin to develop the concept of mysticism as an understanding of the meanings or hidden meanings of scripture. This approach becomes the dominant form from the patristic period until the Reformation. A certain way of reading a sacred text became mystical. There was the outward literal interpretation, but the inner mystical meaning was not for the masses, but only for the religious elite, which usually did not include women.³³ This shift towards textual interpretation had huge gender and power significance, as an educated male elite controlled the capacity to interpret and to comment on these texts and women were forbidden to teach. Secondly, interpretation was increasingly could not be a private endeavor; it could take place only within the church and was always subject to the judgment and authority of the church.

³² See for example Jaroslav Pelikan *The Christian tradition: A history of the development of doctrine, Volume 1: The emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100 – 600)* Chicago; University of Chicago Press 1972

³³ Notable exceptions are monastic women such as Hildegard of Bingen who wrote extensively on her visions, and Mechtilde who both studied Scripture and wrote her interpretations thereof.

This mystical inner meaning was developed to be applied not only to the sacred texts themselves, but increasingly also to the rituals and liturgy of the church. It was through these outward signs with inner mystical truths that one would encounter God/Christ. As ritual and liturgical mysticism developed, women once again were excluded; only men could mediate this reality.³⁴ This is the primary context in which union with God is understood until the 17th and 18th centuries. This thought developed almost exclusively in monastic contexts, and so their own values of obedience to authority and celibacy were transferred into their interpretations of the mystical life.

During this period, other themes also emerge: Clement, often termed the founder of Christian mystical theology, deals with concepts such as divinization and union. He understands the goal of Christian perfection as a “becoming like God”, a divinization of the soul when united in faith to Christ. He is famous for saying that the *logos* of God became man so that you may learn from man how man may become God. Origen, in the third century, speaks of the souls return to God using erotic images such as the wound of love, the kiss of the lovers, the embrace and the image of bride and groom to describe the mystical union, which is picked up by later mystics, including Teresa herself. He uses the term union extensively, although union is based on the distinction between Creator and creature, bride and groom. His understanding of union did not include the concept of identity or in distinction between the soul and God. Origen also used the distinction between the literal interpretation of texts and the mystical. For Origen, this denoted the contrast between the old covenant and the new, the law and the spirit. Mystical interpretation was always focused on Christ, who was seen as the fulfillment of the new covenant. Whereas Origen³⁵ was essentially *cataphatic* in his

³⁴ Jantzen develops this theme in her book entitled *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* Cambridge University Press, 1995.

³⁵ See *Origen on first principles, being Koetschus's text of the De principiis*, trans. Into English together with an introduction and notes, by G.W. Butterworth (London: SPCK, 1936).

approach to God, Gregory of Nyssa³⁶ develops the first systematic *apophatic* theology in Christian history which would be developed by Dionysius³⁷ in regard to mystical theology. Dionysius' understanding of union is based on a movement from knowing to unknowing and from yearning eros into ecstatic possession.³⁸

Ambrose described four stages of the soul's progression in union with God based on the book Song of Songs. Firstly, was the initial experience of the divine; secondly, there was the departure or withdrawal of the Bridegroom. Thirdly, the process of purification of the soul and the wound of love led into the fourth stage of union with God. Already here in the fourth century we see the development of the themes of absence, the increase of desire, and purgation which will later on become pivotal in the devotional tradition. Gregory the Great in the 6th century insisted on the priority of love in the mystical path. While he acknowledged the role of knowledge, he was clear true knowledge of God could be obtained only through love and desire. Knowledge as understanding was secondary to the desire that longs for God, a desire that expands and opens minds to God.

In the 12th century, Bernard of Clairvaux³⁹ appropriated the stages of perfection articulated by Origen, and later more fully formulated by Dionysius: the stages of purification, illumination and ultimately union. These came to be known as the *via purgative*, the *via illuminative* and the *via unitiva*, referring to Origen's original triad. For Bernard, however, love was always central to both his spirituality and mysticism. He conceived of monastic life as a school of love. McGinn writes, "Bernard's fundamental teaching here conforms to that of Augustine, Gregory the Great, and other

³⁶ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Nature of Human Knowledge* (Weiswarm, Alcuin, 1952).

³⁷ See Pseudo Dionysius, *The Cloud of unknowing, and other works*, trans., with an introduction by Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).

³⁸ See B McGinn's *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

³⁹ See St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the love of God and other selected writings*, ed. Charles J. Dollen (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1996).

major representatives of traditional Latin mystical theology. He insists that only love can attain God in this life; knowledge can not” (McGinn 1994; 202). Thus, surveying the development of mystical thought, we see clearly that both knowledge and love are means of encountering God, and we see where each theologian chooses to place their emphasis. For Dionysius and Eckhart God is Being or knowledge, for Bernard God is Charity of Love. For some union is the progression of knowledge, for others the progression of love.

4.2 The path of devotion

Although the devotional path is present throughout the Christian mystical tradition, from the 12th century onwards that we see it deepening and expanding, indeed exploding, with unique attitudes, prayers, practices and even languages. This is seen, for example, in the writings of the Beguines.⁴⁰ Bridal mysticism emerges strongly during this period and, accordingly, the analogy of human love is employed to express the consuming desire of the soul for God. Ecstasy in this sense is not the movement of the intellect beyond knowledge into unknowing; ecstasy is being drunk with divine love and uniting with God. The preoccupation with union, especially as experientially described, was in some measure a new element of mysticism in this period. This is clear from the numerous attempts to find adequate ways to express this ecstatic union with the divine. Often language shifts to very concrete and sensual imagery, confirming the character of this period as one of an unrestrained outpouring of love. Union between Christ and the soul is expressed in imagery that is erotic and deeply sexually passionate; indeed, it was believed that this passionate union was the highest form of union as it was a deeply embodied form of union. Yet here there was a contrast between women and men. Whereas male writers spoke of union in terms of a kiss or

⁴⁰ The Beguine movement was a lay movement in 13th and 14th century middle Europe. The movement primarily consisted of women who lived in semi-monastic, self-governing communities, with no formal vows.

an embrace, women spoke, indirectly and even directly, of sexual intercourse as the symbol of union.⁴¹

At the same time, the relationship between union and annihilation also appeared. Traditional understandings of loving union between the infinite and the finite was no longer satisfactory. Rather, the desire was for an indistinct identity between God and the soul. This path to annihilation involved, firstly, the utter renunciation of the will. This was followed by the stripping of the intellect, and then pain and rest in God, as the soul dies to itself and becomes one with God. This overpowering love and pursuit of God was and is often termed “holy madness,” since it breaks down the ordinary boundaries of self and consciousness, until all that is left is the soul, naked before God. Hadewijch for instance writes of union where there is no distinction, much like that of Eckhart. She would write that she “is” the Father, and that through love one becomes God. At other times she will speak of becoming one spirit with Christ. Like many of the other mystics of this period, both forms of union seem compatible and there appears in this period to be a move away from the traditional distinctions between God and the human soul. Marguerite Porete, the medieval beguine mystic who lived in the 14th century, spoke of union as being a return to primordial being, much like being submerged in an abyss without end. She speaks about a union without difference, and again these are terms of expression that Eckhart and Jan van Ruysbroeck will later develop intellectually and theologically.⁴²

Christ and in particular the humanity of Christ is the dominant focus of devotion within this tradition. Often devotion is directed towards Christ’s woundedness and his passion. St Francis and his followers are characteristic of this period. Another new mode of expression which emerges is the courtly language and the emphasis given to love from afar. This image of courtly

⁴¹ See, for instance, the writings of the Beguine women, as well as of Mirabai and St Teresa.

⁴² See B McGinn’s *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

love was used extensively in medieval writing. This metaphor enabled them to communicate both the presence and the hiddenness of God. For in courtly love, favours from the Lady were unpredictable and few. This may have been painful, but what was vital was that the knight should do nothing unworthy of his lady. He was to remain faithful, obedient and displaying his love through courageous acts of mercy and justice.

4.3 Social and theological implications of the devotional tradition

4.3.1 The shift from the cloister into the world ⁴³

Whereas previously spirituality involved a fleeing from the world by a religious male elite in order to find God, and all writings were largely only read within the monasteries, this begins to change in the early 12th and 13th century where it was no longer considered necessary to flee from the world, for God could be found in the everyday experiences even of secular people, and thus that it was possible for all people to know the presence and even union of God. Spirituality was not just about the inward journey, but the outward relationship with the world.

4.3.2 The shift in language from Latin to the vernacular

With this fundamental shift from the monastery to the world we begin to see devotion and mysticism being expressed increasingly in vernacular languages and by both religious and lay people.⁴⁴ It was no longer the language of educated, religious, cloistered men, but became the diverse language of the poor, of women. This was the rise and growth of what has been called

⁴³ This transition is detailed by DF Noble in his book *A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture in Western Science* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992).

⁴⁴ For example Hadewijch wrote in an early form of Dutch; Julian of Norwich was the first woman to write in English.

vernacular theology. The implication of this was that the audience was now far wider, and devotion and mysticism exploded as never before. For it was now accessible to male and female, high and lower social classes.

4.3.3 The shift from the intellect to affective ways of knowing

As this tradition spread into segments of society which were previously excluded, we find that the not only the language shifts, but also the forms of representation. Mysticism shifts substantially from a dominant intellectual mysticism to an emotive affective form. Union is no longer an intellectual union of knowledge but a passionate union of love. Mysticism begins to move in this period beyond interpretation of texts, philosophical knowledge, ritual and liturgy to now include experience. And not just experience of cloistered religious men, but the experience of women, the laity, the poor and those regarded as uneducated. This shift is hugely significant for the development of the understanding of mysticism.

This shift from intellectual to affective mysticism was however gradual. For instance, by experience Bernard of Clairvaux did not mean visions, or locutions or other sensory experiences as we would describe experience today. Rather, he was referring to the encounter with Christ through the mystical interpretation of sacred text. Furthermore, although he expresses union in erotic language, the erotic was not located in the body, but in the mind. It was a disembodied eroticism, which is in stark contrast to later women for whom experience included their visions, locutions, incorporating not only their bodily senses but a very embodied eroticism. The movement is from a detached intellectual union of knowledge, to a more passionate but still disembodied union of love, to finally an embodied union.

As Jantzen writes of Bernard, “But if the weft of his sermons is the vocabulary of erotic love, the warp is a sharp denial of the body as having any

part in it. The love with which the soul is to seed God is to be purely spiritual; the desire and passion and consummation are not to be thought of as in any sense engaging actual bodiliness and sexuality” (Jantzen 1995; 128) She goes on to comment on how utterly unerotic their writings actually are, the focus very clearly being on the spirit and mind, never the physical and sensual. Thus although the language changes, the reality is that there is still just as much hostility to bodies, sexuality and, therefore, women as within the intellectual strands of mysticism.

4.3.4 The shift to embodied spirituality

In the early medieval period we find not just the shift to experience but a far greater emphasis being placed on visions, on the use of poetry, of art and music. The journey into union is no longer a journey of the mind and the intellect, but a journey of the senses, the emotions, the subconscious and the heart. Thus the devotion of this period is characterised by visions, an embodied sensual experience of love and desire, and a resulting felt annihilation of distinction, resulting in union. There is great focus on the humanity and sacred wounds of Christ.

4.4 Gender implications

By the High Middle Ages, we see the emergence in the devotional tradition of a particular form of female mysticism and spirituality. This is an embodied mysticism expressed largely in the vernacular with a wealth of new images and symbols. The explicit emphasis is on the erotic love of the divine. The soul becomes the bride and God the divine bridegroom. Desire, longing, ecstasy, and the wound of love are common themes during this period.

Women for the first time emerge prominently. There appears to have been a greater access to education and literacy for women, but more significant is

that women begin to teach and preach. Women for the first time, begin to take on the role of mystical teacher such as Clare of Assisi, Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Genoa.

For many of these women, union was not accomplished through withdrawal from the world and its concerns. Union was accomplished through an outpouring of their lives in compassion and care, as it was for Christ in relation to the marginalised and oppressed. This was not a mysticism of abstract philosophical love, but mysticism as learning to love in the concrete realities of life. To 'become God' is, as Jantzen points out, to become 'mighty and just, strong in compassion and in work for justice' (Jantzen 1995; 145). This is an embodied mysticism not just in the individual body, but in the collective body. It is a socially embodied union.

This shift in mysticism not only had vast theological and social implications; it also had profound implications within the life of the church. As it was no longer confined to enclosed religious life, and no longer solely communicated through Latin, mystical experience was available to women both within and outside of religious orders. In other words, this mysticism took hold in the wider community outside of ecclesial authority. It is hard to overstate the threat this movement posed to the hierarchy of the church. Indeed, one of the methods the church hierarchy used to attempt to regain control was to judge these women and their writings as heretical; the hierarchy sometimes went so far as to claim they were witches. Whether judged heretical or as witches, there was a public demonstration of repentance or even the death penalty.⁴⁵ Consequently, the religious climate became increasingly hostile and dangerous. Heresy becomes a dominant theme in the later Middle Ages. Although it had always been acknowledged that there were those who held theological positions on the fringe, or even outside of established church

⁴⁵ Marguerite of Porete was burned at the stake in Paris (1310) because her writings were deemed heretical.

teaching, it was not deemed necessary to search them out and require public repentance or even extermination. During these centuries, however, there was a dramatic change. Although charges of witchcraft are historically evident, accusations and convictions thereof were haphazard and rare. Within a short space of time, this radical change led to thousands of people, predominantly women, being accused and charged of witchcraft. Witchcraft came to be seen as the mirror opposite of true mysticism, for if mystics experienced union with God, witches experienced union with the devil.

It was in this climate that Teresa of Avila wrote and lived. It was a hostile climate, with suspicion and attempts to suppress this growing spirituality and mysticism. Many women suffered at the hands of ecclesial authorities. Even within the Beguine communities, survival was threatened and, as Jantzen point out:

From this point on, the beguines tended to develop more formal arrangements, grouping themselves into enclosures, and placing themselves under the direction of a (male) confessor, often a member of one of the mendicant orders. It was the price of survival. Women who sought to live independently pious lives, not under obedience to men, were too vulnerable to accusation of heresy and even witchcraft. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, all beguines lived in convent (Jantzen 1995; 206).

Jantzen goes on to show how this was only to change in the middle 17th century with the rise of scientific philosophy (characterised as masculine) whose function was to penetrate the mysteries of nature (described in female terms). It is ironical that witch hunts ceased when a new form of social and gender control emerged, and thus they were no longer needed to assert male dominance and control. Mysticism by the 17th and 18th centuries would reshape once again to focus on the private and personal sphere, in ways that still influence us today.

And yet, mysticism according to the women from the 12th century onwards was never separated from the idea of justice and love of one's neighbour. Mysticism for these women was measured consistently not by private and personal states of being, but by its impact for good within the community.

CHAPTER 5

THE SIMILARITIES AND IMPORTANCE OF *BHAKTI* AND THE DEVOTIONAL TRADITION WITHIN HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY RESPECTIVELY

In this chapter I shall focus on two aspects of similarities between *bhakti* and the Christian devotional tradition. First is the importance of the incarnational form of God and the subsequent devotion thereof and secondly, the similar social and theological implications of these two forms, for religious development always has social and political implications.

5.1 The place of incarnation and the concept of *avatar* within theism

“The effort to think of divinity without qualities, to rid the concept of all form, so that it could only be spoken about as “not this, not this”, was nowhere carried so far as in the classical Hindu texts. Yet it was against this background, accepting but reacting against it, that belief in some of the most personal Avatars of the divine appeared.” (Parrinder 1970; 14) Thus within later Hindu thought, the concept of *avatar* is central to both much theological writing and certainly devotional practise. The word *avatar* refers to the action of God descending from the higher, immaterial world to the lower, material world in which we live. It is the concept of the divine embodying human form. Hindu belief in *avatars* is more than two thousand years old, and according to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, God on numerous occasions has descended to this earth in order to protect the righteous, destroy evil and save the earth. As an *avatar* God also frees people from ignorance, and enables devotees to find the path of *bhakti*.

Parrinder has listed numerous characteristics of the theological doctrine of the *avatar*. In this section I shall be using some of his categories in order to show some of the similarities but also differences between the Christian understanding of incarnation and the Hindu concept of the *avatar*.⁴⁶

5.1.1 The *avatar* assumes real physical form

Within both traditions, God descends into the physical world we know. This is not an illusion or vision, but a real and physical manifestation within our world. Thus with both *Krishna* and Jesus, their bodily nature was visible, they were able to be held and touched and embraced. They ate, slept, laughed and played. The Bible says the Word became flesh. God becomes human, one with us. However, within Hinduism, *avatars* are not restricted to incarnating within human form, and the earlier forms of *Vishnu* appeared in animal form.⁴⁷ However, it is the form of *Rama* and *Krishna* that are popularly most captivating devotionally. (How different is that from God appearing in the form of the dove at the river Jordan, or speaking from the burning bush?) Yet despite descending into this material world with a concrete physical form, God does not become solely human, but retains always the fullness of divinity.

5.1.2 The *avatar* takes worldly birth

For the human forms of the *avatar*, birth comes through human parents. It begins with the will of God, the decision of God to incarnate. These births are not through normal human intercourse, but through divine action. This was true of Jesus but also of *Krishna* is who is said to have come from a hair of

⁴⁶ Parrinder, 1970 pg 120 – 127

⁴⁷ For greater detail of this phenomenon see Parrinder 1970; 20

Vishnu's body. Nevertheless, the divine child is always birthed within a human family.

5.1.3 The *avatar* is both human and divine

With both Jesus and *Krishna* we are given images of a child growing, being taught and teaching. They know the human love of a family and friends, they are human in every way that we are, and yet within this humanity they reveal to us the fullness of God. Theirs is an authority in their teaching unlike others, there is the capacity to perform miracles, there is the collective recognition that in them we see and can find the fullness of God.

5.1.4 The *avatar* will die

Being fully human inevitably means to embrace both birth and death. *Krishna* was fatally wounded by an arrow of a hunter before ascending into heaven. Others chose to walk into a river, or a cremation fire. Jesus was crucified on a hill outside of Jerusalem. When the divine purpose is accomplished, their role is completed and they return to the Godhead.

5.1.5 There is some historicity in certain forms of *avatar*

Particularly with *Krishna* and *Rama*, they appear to be historical figures that lived and died as we do. Their families and clan are named, and many places are known to be historically linked to their physical presence. Their genealogies are both remembered and believed to be real. This is particularly the case with Jesus of Nazareth, whose genealogy is recorded in Matthew's gospel and is linked to many historical sites.

5.1.6 *Avatars* are repeated

In Hindu understanding, *avatars* descend to earth repeatedly, whenever there is a decline in righteousness. Thus within Hinduism, the number of *avatars* differ: some *Puranas* describe six, others ten, and others fourteen. Again, here we find a difference in that within Christianity, Jesus is incarnated “once and for all”. However this difference is not always as clear as it may appear initially. For what is the difference between a divine descent and for instance a revelation of God? Alternatively where is the boundary between an incarnation of God and a divinised human being?

5.1.7 The example and character of the *avatar* is crucial

Within both the devotional tradition and the *bhakti* tradition stress is on the incarnational form of God, epitomised by both Jesus and *Krishna / Rama* respectively. They were moral, compassionate human beings who lived authentically and consistently what they taught. They provide for us, even generations later, a supreme example of how to live a life of faith in the midst of suffering, temptation and with the moral and justice issues each generation has to face.

5.1.8 The *avatar* descends with a specific purpose

The incarnated form of God, from childhood is aware of their divine being and their divine purpose. Their presence amongst us is not to build homes and families, but to restore justice and overcome evil.

5.1.9 The *avatar* reveals a personal God of love and grace

In both the *bhakti* and devotional traditions, God is clearly envisaged as being both personal and with form. Repeatedly in the *Bhagavad-Gita* God is

described as the eternal and divine Person, the all highest Person, the Person all sublime, the father and mother of this world. (BG 9:17). In Christianity, in both the Old Testament and New Testament God is understood as being a personal God, a king, a warrior, a lover and eventually a friend. In the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray he uses the term of greatest intimacy that a child would use for their parent when addressing God, that of *abba*, my father or mother. Through the *avatar* God is revealed in all fullness, and enables us to enter into a personal relationship with the Godhead. We can speak with, love, laugh with or cry with this God. And in this encounter we discover a God of love and grace.

We can see from the above that there are indeed many similarities between these two concepts, and that we would be mistaken to assert that the theology of incarnation is exclusive to Christianity. One obvious difference in understanding would be the repeated descent of different forms of *avatar* as opposed to Christian understanding of Jesus incarnating once and for all. Theologians such as Parrinder remind us though, that all the *avatars* are still the one *Krishna* and that they are the only incarnation for that present age. (Parrinder 1970; 224)

5.2 Comparison of the figure of *Krishna* and Jesus

Within Hindu literature we find three aspects of *Krishna* emerging. In some texts we see him portrayed as God incarnate, the protective father; in others the herdsman and divine lover; and finally as the divine child or son. But there is much similarity between the birth stories of *Krishna* and Jesus. Just as Joseph came with Mary to Bethlehem to be taxed (Luke 2:1–6), so Nanda goes with Yashoda to Mathura to pay tribute⁴⁸ (*Vishnu Purana* V3, V6 *Bhagavata Purana* X5) In both, it is a star that indicates the miraculous births

⁴⁸ For the remainder of this thesis I will refer to the Vishnu Purana as VP and the Bhagavata Purana as BP

and the star appears in the middle of the night whilst the evil King sleeps. (Mt 1:18–25; Lk 1:26–38; BP X3) Both King Kamsa and Herod upon realisation engage in the massacre of infants (Mt 2:14–16, BP X4 and 6, VP V4). Wise men come to see both Krishna and the infant Jesus, and praise from the heavens/angels is reported in both. (Mt 2:9–12, Lk 2:8–20, BP X2, 3, VP V2,3). Yashoda and Nanda flee to Braj after being forewarned to take their child away to safety, as Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt after the warning in the dream to do so. (Mt 2:13–15, BP X3, VP V1,3,5) *Krishna* and Jesus both live a hidden identity in Braj and in Egypt and even later in Nazareth.

Krishna is understood to be both God and man, and devotion to *Krishna* is evident from before 400BCE. (Parrinder 1970; 28) One of the popular names for *Krishna* is *Govinda*, meaning herdsman, and is in reference to his common association with cowherds. *Krishna* is one of the most “human” of all *avatars* in that he is loved as both a child growing up and later as a man. He appears to have some human limitations, and even admits to his ignorance. He eats, sleeps, drinks, plays and eventually even dies. He is the divine teacher and the helper of the Pandavas in their struggle for justice, not as a warrior but instead a counsellor and charioteer of Arjuna. *Krishna* is the incarnation of *Brahman*, and in the *Gita* Arjuna calls *Krishna* the supreme *Brahman*, the eternal divine Person, the unborn Lord and Deity. But *Krishna* also teaches Arjuna that he is the soul which dwells in the heart of all beings. He is therefore both immanent and transcendent.

Although both *Krishna* and Jesus are said to be unborn and eternal, the alpha and the omega, nevertheless because of unrighteousness God chooses to incarnate Godself into this world. (BG 4:7 and 8 and John 3:17) God incarnates for the good and salvation of all in order to establish righteousness. Both *Krishna* and Jesus are understood to be true God and true human. (BG 11:37 and John 1:1) When coming to an awareness of this truth, in both traditions there is an experience of unworthiness, or sin or alienation and a

surrendering to the mercy and compassion of God. Thus as is recounted in the *Bhagavad-Gita* chapter 11, when Arjuna experiences and sees for who he truly is, he is filled with such awe that he pleads for mercy. *Krishna* responds by comforting him and reassuming once again the body of a friend.

Despite all these similarities, it must be noted that the stories of *Krishna*, although based in some historicity, have particularly in the *Puranas* become overlaid with myth and legend, that much of it is not based in actual events.

5.3 Love as mutual self giving between the devotee and God

The *bhakti* and devotional movement was the development of the ancient traditions, but reinterpreted in diverse new ways. These movements led to new popular religion and social movements of reform and at times protest. It enabled people to rediscover for themselves a living and vital faith. Within Hinduism the *bhakti* movement enabled ordinary men and women to discover for themselves the love of God. Appasamy writes, “The great love of Brahman is also evident from His dealings with men. If they are to reach Him they must love Him. But such love is not easy from men with their innumerable sins. The task of carrying out the complex and elaborate ritual prescribed in the sacred books is almost impossible. The only effective way is to realize that God is an ocean of love and to surrender themselves to Him” (Appasamy 1970: 58).

The doctrine of *avatar* develops particularly in the *Bhagavata Purana* to no longer simply occurring to restore righteousness, but a passionate love between God and human beings becomes increasingly the focus. The union of love becomes the goal, with romantic love as the supreme symbol of this divine-human relationship. The symbols of *Krishna* and *Radha* represent God and the soul respectively. They are used to portray the intensity of desire which is needed to attain union. The image of *Radha* leaving her husband

illustrates the priority this love for God has over all other human relationships and ties. When *Krishna* takes away the clothes of the *gopis*, it is to teach that each soul must be stripped until it appears naked before God. We find here the use of erotic imagery to symbolise this all consuming union of the soul with God, which has its obvious parallels in the Song of Songs and the writings of Christian mystics.⁴⁹

Within both traditions we find this increasing emphasis on the priority of the way of love. That it is through mutual love and self giving, and surrender to the grace of God that union is to found. This path is known to be more transformative than any other path as it is a surrendering of one's entire being to the transforming love and grace of God. This path allows for the full integration not just of one's intellectual and external life, but particularly of the emotional life. Again, within both traditions we find similar devotional practises emerging: the focusing on the image of the deity or divine with great love and desire, the singing of the praises of God, the constant remembrance of God's name and sometimes the repetition thereof, the surrounding oneself with others who are also following this path, the remembrance of the deeds of God and all that God has done, and even at times the dancing before the Lord. All of these practises arouse the passionate love which will lead to the full surrender of the disciple to God. It is a love which enables one to move beyond the ego into a place of utter self abandonment to God. Those who follow this path in both traditions often see themselves as being so united to God that they consider themselves to be the spouse, the partner, the lover of God. It is a love which is exclusive and all-consuming. But in both instances it leads to such transformation of the inner soul that, as the disciple is united with God and recreated in God's image, I suggest that this love, compassion and grace will inevitably spill out into the wider society.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the use of erotic imagery, including the tradition of mystical reflection on the Song of Songs, see James Harpur, *Love burning in the soul: The story of Christian mystics, from Saint Paul to Thomas Merton* (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2005).

5.4 Comparison of theological and social significance

As we look back on the significant shifts that the *bhakti* and devotional tradition brought into being and embraced, there is comparatively much similarity in the theological and social consequences of these two movements. As already shown, the focus shifts from a God who is non-personal to a God who chooses to enter into our human context and embrace the most personal and intimate act of union with humankind and creation. For Hindu thought, this development was a far greater shift in theological understanding of God than it was for Christianity, wherein the notion of a personal God had always been dominant. Theologically, the focus shifted to being essentially about relationship. In fact, *bhakti* and the devotional tradition require relationship.

Salvation in both traditions is no longer about the right performance of rituals, or even the right observance of law; salvation is by grace through surrender to God. This was to have profound implications for both Hinduism and Christianity, as can be seen in the movement away from the traditional ritual life and ceremonies of these faiths toward a far greater emphasis being placed on direct, unmediated personal encounter with God. This brought about huge shifts of power within both traditions. Similarly, in both traditions there is a transition from intellectual knowledge of God, usually accessible only to the religious elite, to an emotive and experiential awareness of the divine. It is clearly no longer about intellectual union or realization, but about an all-consuming passionate love of God. Spirituality and mysticism become “incarnated” now into ordinary, everyday lives. The foundation for theological reflection and mystical experience is now the lived reality of women, men, the poor, the marginalised and the uneducated.

Another significant change that emerges within both traditions is that theology moves from Sanskrit and Latin, languages which were inaccessible to most people, into vernacular languages, such as Hindi and Spanish in the case of

Mira and Teresa respectively. Theology was now being expressed in the language of common people. In both traditions this vernacular language brought a wealth of new imagery, symbolism and, eventually, theological thought. Theology, this is to say, was now expressed not only in philosophical forms of discourse, but increasingly in songs and poetry which could be read or sung by all. This meant the mystical life became accessible to all people, irrespective of their class, educational status or gender. The devotional and *bhakti* movements were means of God's salvation and presence for all. Moreover, mysticism became increasingly a spirituality of the whole person; it engaged the body and not just the mind.

Socially, these movements had profound implications in terms of power and social justice. If wealth, maleness and caste were previously seen as advantages, they now come to be seen as impediments to the spiritual journey. There is within both traditions a strong emphasis on renunciation of property, wealth, social position or caste and within Hinduism in particular, even masculinity. There is a movement into liminality in many of the followers of these two traditions. We also find an increasing freedom as people discover their sacredness in precisely who they are. Many traditional social conventions are simply dispensed of, as this newfound relationship with God enabled ordinary people to negotiate new social space to truly be themselves and to create new communities and ways of living that previously could only have been dreamed of.

In this chapter I have attempted to show the considerable similarities between the concept of *avatar* and the incarnation, and their implications for theistic mysticism. I have also noted some striking parallels between the images of *Krishna* and Jesus given in the respective sacred texts and the primacy in both the *bhakti* and devotional tradition of love and mutual self giving. Lastly, I have briefly highlighted the similar theological and social consequences that both of these traditions enabled to emerge. In the following chapter I shall

explore in depth the writings of Mira as an example of a popular woman *bhakti* saint, and how she and her experience of God is shaped by this particular tradition.

CHAPTER 6

MIRABAI

6.1 A short biography

Much of Mirabai's life is related in both oral and written stories of Hindu saints, together with devotional verses which have been preserved and collected over time.⁵⁰ From these stories, and the oral traditions developed around them, it is possible to piece together the life of this remarkable woman. Most accounts agree that Mirabai was born around 1498 in the village of Kurki near Merta, which is about 220 miles south west of Delhi. Her family was Rajput royalty, the Rathors, who ruled over Merta and the surrounding villages. Mirabai was the only daughter of the family and it seems that her mother died when she was very young.

Her family was *Vaisnava*.⁵¹ According to legends, as a small child Mira had given some food to a wandering *sadhu*,⁵² who, in response, pushed a tiny statue of *Krishna* into her small hands. Mira treasured this gift, and indeed fell in love with this image of *Krishna*. One day, after repeatedly asking her mother who her future husband would be, her mother frustratedly pointed to the statue, and exclaimed "There he is!" And so, as she grew, Mira came to believe that she would be married to *Krishna*.

⁵⁰ Stories of the saints have been collected and preserved in hagiographic texts called *bhaktamals*. Nabhadass (1600CE) is the primary author of the *bhaktamal* which refer to Mira. However these are expanded in commentaries written by members of differing religious sects or *sampradays*. Priyadas (1712CE) and Anantadas offer more detailed accounts of her life. For more information on the development of the biographical accounts of Mira, see Mukta Chapter 1 "*Upholding the common life*"

⁵¹ Worshippers of *Vishnu*, of which *Krishna* is an incarnation.

⁵² Ascetic holy men.

Although the Rathors were a wealthy and powerful family, the period into which Mira was born was one of political instability. As many clans fought over territorial boundaries, the Rathors were not exempt from the conflict. Mira's father spent long periods away from home fighting. Consequently, Mira was sent to stay with her grandfather, Dudaji⁵³ in Merta; it was to him that she owed her education in the arts of fighting, dancing, singing, and also in the Sanskrit of the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and *Upanishads*.

In addition to this territorial in-fighting, Muslim power was growing. The only hope of Rajput survival was unity among the feuding Rajput families. To this end, Mira's family sought to establish a political alliance with one of the other royal clans by arranging her marriage into the politically stronger family of Sisodiya Rajputs of Mewar and Chittor. So it was in 1516 that Mira, aged 18, married Prince Bhoj Raj. However, legend has it that just before the wedding Mira performed the marriage rituals with her beloved statue of *Krishna*. Accordingly, Mira steadfastly refused to acknowledge her marriage to Bhoj Raj. Indeed, when the hands of the couple were to be joined, Mira joined her left hand with Bhoj Raj's right, causing great offence. When asked to explain her actions, she declared she had no other hand to give him, since she had already given her right hand to *Krishna* in marriage. The image portrayed in these legends is one of a defiant love for God, a love that leads her to reject the social expectations for women of royal households in her day.

After the marriage, upon arrival at the home of her in-laws, Mira was once again in conflict with traditional norms of behavior. She refused to bow down either to the family goddess or to her new husband. The Sisodiya families were worshippers of *Shiva*. By tradition, Mira would have been expected to assume their form of worship. Yet another legend tells the story of how Mira

⁵³ Mira's great-grandfather, Jodhaji, had founded the city of Jodhpur, which is still one of Rajasthan's primary centres of handcraft and trade. Her grandfather Dudaji had later conquered Merta together with 360 surrounding villages, and gave to Mira's father, Ratnasingh, twelve of them, including Kudki, where Mira was born.

respectfully touched the feet of her mother in law, but walked past the image of the Goddess, stating that she would never bow to a lump of stone. Moreover, she spoke continually of how she had already been pledged to *Krishna*, who alone was her true husband. Therefore, legend also tells that she refused to consummate the marriage or to sleep with her husband. This led to great suspicion and much jealousy, fueled by accounts of her husband heard her talking and laughing behind the closed and locked doors of her room. When he broke the door down, he found her worshipping at her altar. These patterns of behaviour so outraged her mother in-law that the obstinacy of Mira was raised formally with the family elders. In an attempt to break her behaviour, her in-laws built a separate living area for Mira, thinking that a period of isolation might break her. However, this simply gave Mira the space she needed for her devotion to grow, and she soon began to entertain holy men, thereby further alienating her in-laws by her “scandalous” behaviour. Eventually, the family resorted to sending poison for her to drink, but, as Mira drank the potent liquid, it was, through the grace and protection of *Krishna*, changed into sweet nectar. The nectar made her more beautiful and youthful than ever.

Mira and her husband never produced any children, and it appears that he died on the battlefield shortly after their marriage. In her poems⁵⁴ Mira spoke of herself as being a virgin and the non-consummation of their marriage became an important part of the legends surrounding Mira. After Bhoj Raj’s death, Mira refused either to burn herself or to mourn the loss of her husband. Instead, she took to the streets, singing and dancing and dedicating her life to *Krishna*. Increasingly, Mira spent time with *sadhus* and low caste *bhaktas* in the local temples. It was even said that she accepted a leather worker, Rohidas, as her guru. Because of his occupation, Rohidas would have been considered unclean. However, we are told that Mira, despite the deepening

⁵⁴ Poem 51 “Servant Mira takes refuge at Thy feet: For Thy sake has she remained a virgin from birth to birth.” And poem 77 “For Thy sake have I preserved virginity.”

wrath of her family, chose to maintain this relationship (Mukta 1999; 73). As her in-laws' rage became enflamed, there were increased attempts on her life were made by the family. Baskets of fruit would be placed in her room, with deadly cobras hidden in them. The family forced her to lie on a bed of razor sharp spikes; miraculously, however, the spikes were turned into flower petals. Each time, God intervened and saved Mira.

Mira knew that she could no longer live with her husband's family, and so she fled the Sisodiya region, and escaped by foot leaving all that had bound her: her wealth, her status, her marriage, her life as she knew it. The rest of her life she spent wandering in the forests, villages and temples of north India. Her songs of devotion and love for God inspired the hearts of many, and as she travelled so her fame and popularity grew. Her songs were unlike those of Surdas and Tulsidas,⁵⁵ for they did not carry theological arguments, but were songs of deep-felt emotions of ecstasy, desire, frustration, despair. And it was this that captured the hearts of ordinary men and women. She condemned injustice, pride, power, wealth and gender discrimination. She chose to mix freely with people from every caste and tribe, and mocked many forms of oppressive institutionalized religion. Mira spoke with a passion and intensity that was reckless, rebellious and wildly intense, driven by her untamed abandonment to the love of God.

In the latter part of her life, it appears Mira was staying in the coastal Gujarat city of Dwarka, worshipping at the Ranachor temple. During this period, in 1534, in her homeland, the Sisodiya family had suffered devastating military attacks at the hands of Muslim powers. Many men were killed and thirteen hundred women committed johar⁵⁶ (Mukta 1999; 56). Rumours began to spread that this tragedy was divine retribution for the manner in which the Sisodiya family had treated Mira. As unrest and rumours grew amongst their

⁵⁵ Both were well known *bhaktas* during this period.

⁵⁶ *Johar* is mass suicide by burning in the flames of a communal altar.

own people, Mira's in-laws decided to bring her home, in order to stabilize their rule. Civic officials and priests were sent to Dwarka in about 1547 to fetch her. Although initially she refused, it appears that they vowed to fast until she changed her mind. She did not want to be held accountable for their starvation, but neither could Mira ever return to the life she had rejected, and so she requested to spend a final night alone in the temple of her God. In the morning, all that remained was Mira's robe and hair, draped across the feet of God. It was said that she had during the night melted into the image of Krishna.

Mukta writes that "it is significant that while the bhajans ring out the survival of Mira in the face of the Rana's attempts to kill her, there is not a single bhajan which mentions the ultimate destruction of the person of Mira. The bhajniks keep alive the *life* that was Mira's, not her death" (Mukta 1999; 225).

6.2 Mira and her understanding of God

Although Mirabai never wrote any theological texts on the nature of God or prayer, from her poetry emerges her understandings of who God is. Much of her writing speaks of and describes the God whom she worships. There is a sense in many poems of a God who is transcendent and beyond form. In poem 59, she describes *Krishna* as the all pervading one.⁵⁷ Time and time again she refers to him as the indestructible one (29,194,195), the one from whom our existence flows and is sustained (14), the life of the universe (141), the one whom the whole earth worships (143), the one who holds all of life and death (75). Thus there is the understanding of a God who is beyond everything that is created, in fact of a God who is the one who holds all of creation together and from whom all creation draws its very existence.

⁵⁷ In citing Mira's writings, I am using Alston's *Devotional Poems of Mirabai* Motilal Banarsidass, 1989 and will simply give the poem number as reference.

And yet, the primary experience of Mira was that God is a God who can be seen, known and felt, a God who can thus be encountered. For Mira, God was predominantly worshipped with form, and *Krishna* became the manifest form of God's presence for her. *Krishna* became for her the visible image of her Beloved. In Mira's writings, her devotion to the visual image of her Lord is powerfully expressed. In many of her poems, this is to say, she describes her Lord's hair, his eyes, his limbs. One example is found in poem 10, as she writes:

My eyes are spell bound
 By the beauty of the angular pose of the Lord.
 On beholding the beauty of Madan,
 My eyes drink in the nectar and do not blink.
 Attracted by the lotus-petal beauty of His brows,
 It is as if they were now entangled
 In His curling, odorous locks.
 His body is bent at the waist,
 His hands curved over the flute,
 His turban is aslant and His necklace swinging.
 Mira is thrilled by the beauty of the Lord,
 Of the courtly Giridhara, dressed as a dancer.⁵⁸

This image of *Krishna* is the image of a would-be lover. Mira wrote about being "entrapped by His form" (8). This delight, however, was experienced not only by Mira, but also by *Krishna*. He, God, delights in both Mira and *Krishna* (2), watches over them with love (3). He is the God who makes his abode in their hearts (8) and whose love endures forever (40).

In her writings, Mira uses a number of symbols to describe God. What follows are some of her primary images.

⁵⁸ Further such references can be found in poems 2,3,7,8,9,112

6.2.1 That of the beloved

This perhaps could be called the dominant image found in her poetry. From childhood Mira experienced a deep attachment to *Krishna*. As noted above, according to legend at a very young age her mother told Mira that *Krishna* would be her bridegroom. Mira spoke of her love for him as a child (100) and of being married to him in a dream (27). *Krishna* is her divine lover (50), her groom (39, 151) and her spouse. We see this very clearly in poem 42 where she wrote about how angry her family was with her, and yet how she would never abandon her “ancient love”.

O Sister, without Hari I cannot live.
 My mother-in-law fights with me,
 My sister-in-law scolds me,
 The King is permanently in a rage.
 They have bolted my door
 And mounted a guard outside it.
 Why should I abandon my ancient love
 Inherited from earlier births?
 Mira's Lord is the courtly Giridhara
 And she will be satisfied with nothing else.

This deep understanding and experience of God as her beloved and lover meant that for Mira, there could be no other lover but her Lord *Krishna*. This would explain her actions according to the legends at the time of her wedding when she gives her left hand to Bhoj Raj. Mira's writings clearly indicate an exceptionally personal and intimate relationship with her Lord.

6.2.2 That of a saviour

Mira has a very strong sense of God being her personal saviour. This image surely must have come from her own life experience, as in her poetry she writes of how her family had tried to poison and kill her, and yet it was *Krishna* who miraculously saved her by turning the poison into nectar (18). Once again, when her family sent her a mattress of thorns to sleep on, she describes how *Krishna* helped her by turning it into a bed of flowers, and once again she refers to her Lord as her helper who preserves her from danger (41). Repeatedly we see her describing God as saviour; a personal saviour as well as the saviour of sinners (134, 137) and the saviour of the world (48). She uses images of *Krishna* being her personal protector (38), but also as the protector of all the fallen and the poor (27, 186), a refuge for the afflicted (62), the one who watches over us and supports us (3, 4), the one who is our strength (48). From her life experiences we can understand how Mira would have treasured this image of *Krishna* and how she could say with all her heart:

O Hari! Thou art the support of my life!
 I have no other refuge but Thee
 In all the three worlds. (4)

6.2.3 *Krishna* as *Jogi*

This too is a very strong image in her songs and writings; however it is experienced as one of the more painful images for Mira. So much of her writing is devoted to this theme of separation in love. The name *jogi* is described by Alston as A wandering ascetic of the Natha sect. As he is cut off from worldly attachments, he comes and goes like a passing cloud and nobody can get a hold on him” (Alston, 1989; 126).

The image here is of God as being the one who comes and goes where he wills (54). Mira's God is not a God who can be controlled. God is the one who is present and yet often experienced as absent. She often feels painfully and acutely aware of this absence of her lover. This absence is felt all the more painfully as she knows that she cannot exist without God. Says Mira "Without my Master, Giridhara, I cannot exist for a second" (13) and "My very existence depends on Shyam, the Beloved. He is the herb that grants me life" (14).

In Mira's writings this understanding of God being like a *jogi* is quite critical. As the *jogi* could not be held captive by anyone or anything, except God, by likening *Krishna* to a *jogi*, there is the emphasis that God cannot be held captive or owned by any one individual. We find therefore in her writings many references to the number of women who are lovers of *Krishna*. For Mira this was a fact known to her about God, and yet again a source of pain. Mira's love was so intense that at times it moved her to jealousy when she saw others experiencing God, but she herself was unable to find him (181).

6.3 Mirabai's understanding of the way to union with God

In *Vaisnavism*, the *jiva* or soul and *Bhagavat* (God) are not seen as identical. *Jiva* may show qualities of *Bhagavat* and yet it is always eternally distinct from *Bhagavat*. We see this thought often appearing in Mira's writings where she describes God as the sun, and herself the heat. Secondly, we see this presence and yet absence of God. *Krishna* is omnipresent, yet ever elusive, one with Mira and yet separate. And yet when he appears, it is through grace and love, not something that can be demanded by right.

In this chapter I will highlight four aspects in an attempt to show Mira's emerging understanding of the way to union with God. Firstly it is by love that God is reached. Secondly, such consuming love for God will lead the

devotee to sacrifice all in order to achieve that union with her God. Thirdly, in that process, a transformation of the life and personality takes place which results in holiness. And lastly, the path to devotion is never undertaken through one's own effort or skill, but through the grace of God.

6.3.1 The path of love

Mira's poetry is essentially a collection of love poems and songs written to *Krishna*. In poem 186, Mira beautifully writes of a wild woman of the woods, who stumbles across some sweet plums. These she brings and gives to the Lord. This woman is not civilized or educated, she is not beautiful, she is of a low caste and unclean, and yet the Lord accepts her plums because they are given out of sincere love. This poem very clearly sets out Mira's understanding and theology of salvation and union with God. In her understanding God does not care if a person is rich or poor, educated or illiterate, beautiful or ugly. God looks at the intention and at the heart. This woman's heart was sincere in her love for *Krishna*, and we are told she "sought only the pure milk of love." In fact, Mira goes so far as to emphasize that it is not any knowledge that leads to salvation but love alone for she writes:

Not for her the learning of the Veda,
She was transported to heaven on a chariot
At a single stroke.
Now she sports in Vaikunth,
Bound to Hari by ties of love.
Says servant Mira:
Who so loves like this is saved. (186)

Thus Mira very clearly is communicating through her songs, that it is by love alone that we are saved. In poem 172 she writes of how her Lord has stolen

her heart and her every breath is wedded to the Lord in total dedication. The love Mira writes of is not an occasional movement into God but a love expressed in her everyday living, in her everyday choices, no matter how difficult. Thus she writes that she will seek God in every nook and every city (94) and how she does not forget God day or night (106). Every day she rises early to wait for Him in expectation (108, 154). It is a consistent yearning and desiring for greater union with her Lord.

The intensity however of Mira's love for *Krishna* is all-consuming. She throws herself into a passionate love for God and describes herself often as being "mad with love". (70). She pleads with God for a vision of Himself and writes of how she cannot live without Him (101).

This love for God, however, appears in Mira's experience to have its origin in God. It is God, not Mira, who initiates this love relationship. Thus in poem 166, Mira writes of how her Lord played the flute and captured her heart. She also uses the image of an arrow shooting into her heart from the quiver of love, which has driven her crazy (38). The call of God's love to her appears to be something that Mira can not withstand and so she gives in, and becomes immersed in joy, wandering about recklessly, drunk in adoration, offering herself to *Giridhara* in total sacrifice.

The love of God that she comes to know is so deep that as Mira says it is "like paint that does not peel"(40), it is true, birth after birth, from eternity to eternity (37), her Lord has made his home in her heart (8). And so Mira uses the analogy of marriage to describe this mutual love between herself and God. In poem 39 she declares that she has obtained *Shyam* for her bridegroom and in poem 27 it appears as though in a vision she had an experience of being united with God for she writes:

Sister, the Lord of the Poor

Came to wed me in a dream...
 In my dream,
 I saw the wedding-arch constructed
 And the Lord took my hand.
 In my dream,
 I underwent a wedding-ceremony
 And entered the married state. (27)

Thus the devotion and strength of Mira's love for her Lord, and His for her leads to her union with God.

Love however, does not come without feelings of deep pain; union without feelings of acute separation. This is painfully clear in Mira's writings where she exclaims "to love a *jogi* brings pain" (54) and in another place she states:

Do not mention the name of love,
 O my simple-minded companion.
 Strange is the path
 When you offer your love.
 Your body is crushed at the first step.
 If you want to offer love
 Be prepared to cut off your head
 And sit on it.
 Be like the moth,
 Which circles the lamp and offers its body.....
 Be like the fish
 Which yields up its life
 When separated from the sea.
 Be like the bee,
 Entrapped in the closing petals of the lotus. (191)

For in opening herself to such consuming love for God alone, nothing else brings her any comfort, and so she writes in one of her poems “Had I known what pain arose from love, My dearest, I would have proclaimed ‘Let no one love’” (59). However, Mira is like the fish which dies when separated from the sea, and so she says “Mine is the path of love and devotion – I know no other.”

6.3.2 Dying to both self and the world

Mira’s love for *Krishna* leads her to feel that nothing else has any value in life. Without God, she writes, all pleasures are as dust (72). In poem 26 she states that everything is false except for the love of the Lord. She writes of how for God she would sacrifice her life (5), she would offer all to him alone (15), her body, her mind, her wealth. These in Mira’s writings are not just statements of desire, but concrete choices that she lived out practically.

Perhaps it was because of the dangerous situation with her in-laws and their attempts on her life that brought this aspect of “leaving” into her spirituality earlier than most, for she writes in poem 24:

I have turned my back on this palace
Once and for all,
And the bolt is drawn....
I have no use even for great lakes,
Who would linger over small ponds and reservoirs?
I care neither for Ganges nor Jamna,
I am making my way to the sea. (24)

This *bhajan* however marks a process by which we see Mira increasingly letting go of everything that could have been held dear to her. In poem 12 she describes how at some point she lost all consciousness of her surroundings,

and worldly shame fled from her and again she picks up on this theme when she writes that she has thrown away worldly shame as one throws away dirty water (38). Life is no longer about social acceptability or security and so she writes “whatever God clothes me in that I wear. Whatever he offers, that I eat, wherever he places me, there I remain” (20). Mira thus “takes off her gems and pearls and dons the yogi’s beads” (80) and abandons the world and her family (105).

Mira clearly rejected the societal values of wealth, class and caste and because of her love for God becomes a wandering ascetic. Increasingly in her poetry we see this loss of her “false self” and a merging with this greater reality. There is in Mira’s writings the insight that much of this world is illusion for she said, “Worldly comfort is an illusion, as soon you get it, it goes. I have chosen the Indestructible for my refuge, Him whom the snake of death will not devour” (194).

Mira could not have been unaware of how revolutionary her choices would have seemed to the community for she writes of how the world says that she has gone astray (9) and in poem 25 how some reviled her, but she wrote, “Mira cares not for the insults of the world”(29).

Mira’s writing suggests that these “losses” are not really sacrifices; in her understanding she is simply choosing what is better, what is truly real. However, in doing so, she rejected most accepted cultural, religious and economic values of her day.

6.3.3 Holiness

As we see Mira rejecting so much of what the world holds to be important and of value, so she “dies” to the world and we see in Mira a new identity taking root. Her identity lies not in her high class family, nor does it lie in her

knowledge or great skills that she has been taught, it does not lie in her wealth, or her gold or clothing, but her identity lies increasingly in God alone.

She was not content with worshipping God. Her desire was for union with *Krishna*, and this required becoming one with him, becoming “like” him, forsaking everything for that which is eternal. Yet, this could not happen without the transformation of heart and soul.

In poem 140 she spoke clearly of how she has earned no merit and has amassed much demerit through sin. In poem 160 she said to *Krishna*, “Recount some of my faults, I am eager to hear.” Her desire was very clearly to act in every way only to please Him (16).

Mira understood acutely that worship is not just about outward rituals, but about an inner transformation of the heart. And so she wrote in one of her longest poems on this subject:

You cannot call this true devotion,
To bathe one's forehead and apply the tilak
Without cleansing the impurities of the heart.
That cruel desire
Has bound me with the cord of greed.
The butcher of anger remains within me,
How can I hope to meet Gopal?
The greedy senses are like a cat,
And I keep on giving them food.
Weakened by my hunger for sense- objects
I do not take the Name of God
I worship not God but myself,
And glow with ecstasy.
Now that I have built up
This towering rock of pride,

Where can the water of true wisdom collect?
 You cannot deceive Him who knows
 The inmost recesses of your soul
 The Name of Hari does not enter my heart,
 Though I tell with my lips
 The beads of my bejewelled rosary (158)

She ended this poem with our need to learn to love God, and take up the path of simple detachment. For it is only in what God “clothes us” that we can stay pure. (26)

It is interesting that Mira chose not to take the ochre robe of the *sannyasi*, although she clearly lived a life of renunciation. Instead she says:

Why don the ochre robe
 And leave home as a sannyasi?
 Those who adopt the external garb of a Jogi,
 But do not penetrate to the secret,
 Are caught again in the net of rebirth.
 Mira’s Lord is the courtly Giridhara.
 Deign to sever, O Master,
 All the knots in her heart. (195)

For Mirabai, there was not only the need to choose in the outer world what is better, but there was a correlative need to choose interiorly what is better. Mira called, and still calls us, to choose to dwell in the Lord and his name, rather than in evil company, lust, anger, pride, greed and infatuations (199). Mira’s writings caution us to not be caught up in the externals even of faith, but to grasp that which is beyond, that which alone is eternal.

Although Mira's understanding is that this process is necessary in order to achieve this union with the Beloved, we find that she struggles to free herself within of the hold these have on her, and so as we have seen in poem 158 she writes of how she has been bound by a cord of greed, of how anger still remains in her, of how she continues to feed within her that "false self". She clearly recognises this inner tension between her pride and love for God alone.

This creates an inner conflict which no amount of human effort seems to be able to overcome. Thus the work of inner transformation can be aided by our effort or devotional practices, but can never be fully accomplished by them. Transformation is primarily the work of God's grace within us.

6.3.4 Grace versus human effort

Despite the numerous pleadings of Mira to *Kirshna* for an experience of himself, Mira acknowledged repeatedly that *Krishna's* presence is a gift from him, and one that cannot be demanded or controlled. In poem 6 she prayed that *Krishna* "may grant unto his servant his holy sight" and in poem 67 she asked, with despair, "when will Hari grant me his holy sight, for when he does her joy is beyond description."

Union with God is, in Mira's experience, not something we have access to by right, but by the divine favour of God. And yet this does not translate into an attitude of passivity, for Mira writes in poem 31 "I will rise regularly at dawn and go to the temple" and in poem 35 "I will keep close to those lotus feet". There is the intentional desire and practice of remaining in the presence of God, of opening oneself to God and being available for God. Mira would also have been rooted in the devotional practices of her day. And so in poem 188 she wrote:

O Jogi, I did not plumb Thy depths.
 I took up my asan
 And sat in a cave:
 I engaged in contemplation of Hari,
 Beads round my neck,
 Cloth⁵⁹ in hand, body covered in ashes.
 Mira's Lord is Hari, the Indestructible.
 What was written in her fate
 That she received.

In poem 200 we see Mira was rooted in the practice of *nama japa*, as she sang:

O my mind,
 I repeat continually the Name of Shyam.
 O ye living creatures,
 Through repeating the Name of Shyam
 I have absolved a million sins.
 The Name of Shyam has destroyed
 Ancient sins of many a former birth. (200)

Yet, even affirming the role of human effort, Mira acknowledged her own effort was frail. For example, in poem 43 she sang, "Hari came into my courtyard, but wretch that I am, I was asleep." And in poem 44 she confessed, "God came but found not love in her heart and left." She wrote of her defects in poem 111, asking Hari not to dwell on these. All Mira has to offer, then, is, in her words, which are "very small" (147). With this recognition there is the understanding within Mira that her own effort will never suffice: "no merit is

⁵⁹ The cloth referred to her in her poem would probably be the cloth or bag that was used to cover the hand and the prayer beads from the sight of others.

earned by virtuous deeds... only by Thy power have I crossed to the further shore” (197).

6.4 Mirabai’s experience of union with God

As mentioned above, in much of *Vaisnavism*, there is an understanding of union, yet also of the retention of individuality. This duality is what is present in Mira’s experience of *Krishna*. In poem 114 she states, “Thou and I are one, like the sun and its heat.” The implication here is that, as heat has no origin apart from the sun, so she owes her very existence to *Krishna*’s being, even though a distinction always remains. Indeed, it is this distinction that creates much of the pain and tension within her writings. This is to say, on one hand she is aware of *Krishna*’s presence always with her; on another, *Krishna* remains illusive to her.

At times her love for *Krishna* and her awareness of his absence left her unable to do anything or concentrate on anything. She tried to write him a letter; but she is unable since her hand was shaking so much. Her love thus reduced her to silence, or madness. And so she wrote:

The impulse comes into my mind
To rove about in company with Gopal.
When I beheld the beauty
Of His lotus face
I lost control of my faculties. (184)

Green writes, “In proportion as the mystic’s yearning for union with the divine Being increases, so too does his or her acute awareness of his or her own shortcomings, sins, failings and finitude. The mystic is stuck between two worlds – that of the divine and that of the everyday; the former seems out of reach and the latter cannot satisfy” (Green, in Werner 1989; 121).

And so there is much pain and suffering in Mira's writings, even in the midst of moments of ecstasy and bliss. Indeed, Mira wrote of the wound love makes and of the "pain pervading every pore" (192).

6.5 The effects of Mirabai's union with God

To attempt to understand the effects of Mira's union with God, we have to understand the faith and social context in which Mira lived her life.

The image of *Krishna* as a lover is often depicted in Hindu writings as that of an illicit love affair. There are the stories of *Krishna* playing his flute, his music calling women away from their husbands to come to him in the middle of the night. This image of an illicit love relationship is fascinating, particularly as related primarily to the relationship between God and women devotees. For in a society in which women were raised to be given in marriage, with no option or consultation, in which their very beings were given in order to establish political or social cohesion, it is clear that every woman's religious and social duty is to follow and serve her husband as she would God. Her heart, soul and body belong to her husband, and it is through her husband that she loves and serves God. This way of relating would be a licit, this is to say, a way of relating that is accepted and recognized in society. Moreover, devotion exercised through one's husband is upheld as a model for all devout women.

The understanding of *Krishna* calling women away from their husbands is, however, a deeply subversive concept within Hinduism, particularly as emphasized within the *bhakti* movement. For in spite of women being told their hearts should belong to their husbands, the call of *Krishna* is irresistible; it impels them to slip away at night to worship their "true love," to follow the call of their hearts. Thus there is the sense of danger, of transgressing normal

social bounds and expectations, of having the courage to escape out of the tight social controls placed on women in order to create space for the true calling of one's heart.

For Mira, this concept of illicit love was not an internal experience of faith and devotion; increasingly, it was an externally lived experience. She understood that her devotion to God took precedence over all our worldly ties, values, conventions and systems. Indeed, Mira understood this so deeply and lived it out so literally that the strong love and ecstasy she felt towards *Krishna* led her to step over almost every social taboo. For her, *Krishna* was the God who asked for everything she had and was; although she had been given to another, she could not resist the One whom her heart loved.

Thus, as Parita Mukta writes of all women's faith journeys:

A relationship like this, kept secretively inside oneself, threatens nobody. It is only when women begin to assert the relationship of their imagination over and above the unwanted ones facing them, and rejecting the latter, as did Mira, it is only in the refutation of the imposed relationship in favour of living out the self-created ones, that immediate patriarchal relations are challenged, for society finds it difficult to accommodate this challenge within its existing structures" (Mukta 1999; 218).

What emerges is that the effect of Mira's life has raised up until today not only communities who look to her for the hope of liberation and strength to envision an alternative world, but also those who regard her name as a curse and a memory best forgotten. For example, as Mukta notes, in Rajput society, even to this day, Mira's name is a name associated with loose morality (Mukta 1999; 103).

Mukta goes on to explore the ambivalent relationship between society and women *bhaktas*: “Even in the land of sanyasinis, a woman who chooses a relationship with God in opposition to the socially designated patriarchal ones, who asserts her convictions, and who actively seeks association of the spirit, is looked at askance. In common usage, the term ‘bhaktani’ or ‘bhaktin’ (a female bhakta) is a derogatory one, levelled by those who wish to put a woman down because they see her as having loose sexual morals”(Mukta 1999;179). She says, “In a society which aims to reign in women’s imaginings, women’s faith and women’s deepest giving to the satisfaction of male desire, a bhaktin is a prostitute” (Mukta 1999; 180).

Underneath this animosity directed towards Mira is the question of why she could not have lived out her *bhakti* within the traditional roles and duties ascribed to her as a woman? Why could she not have lived out her faith in alignment with the honour codes and practices of her society, maintained by most other women?

Mira’s challenge lays not just in her devotion to *Krishna*, but in the choices she made in that desire for union with *Krishna*. In placing her love for God before her duty towards her husband and family, living a life of love and desire that was directed to no earthly male, but to God alone, living her life in such a manner that claimed her duty belonged to no earthly powers or families, but only to the will of *Krishna*, Mira essentially and unambiguously chose God over man. This was the challenge of Mira’s union with God. And she lived out these radical choices, not in private, but in the most public manner possible.

Within the writings of Mira, five main issues emerge out of the choices she makes in her desire for union with God. Each is simply the lived out expression of her understanding of her union with God. The effects of her understanding, however, were and continue to be revolutionary in terms of her

disregard for Rajput political authority, her disregard for patriarchal norms of marriage, and her disregard for the caste system.

6.5.1 The effect on Rajput political authority

The society into which Mira was born was a feudal system, wherein military battles were being constantly fought to retain or gain territory. The Rajputs were the ruling warrior class; their entire society was based on loyalty, honour, duty (*dharma*) and the purity of lineage. This concept of *dharma* however was central to their understanding of both faith and civic society. Every Rajput male's *dharma* was to be a warrior, even if that meant death. And so, dying in battle with honour was to be deified. Rajput women played a critical role as pawns, with their ability through arranged marriages to diffuse vendettas, or to establish military alliances. Thus a woman's *dharma* was to fulfill her duties through marriage to the tribe and to her husband. These values were central to Rajput understanding, and were upheld by men and women alike, binding the community together.

The community consisted of all those members related to one another through common male ancestry. Loyalty and fidelity to the community was paramount, and each member's duty was to defend the honour of the community and to maintain its territorial preservation. It is with this background that Mira's actions need to be understood as striking at the very heart of the community. For Mira proclaimed no loyalty to the Rajput family, to her tribe, her caste or even her gender. The very principles on which this society is built, are simply just not acknowledged by Mira.

She did not acknowledge the authority structures - political or religious - of her new family. She refused to recognize her marriage to their son, the prince. She refused to fulfill the understanding of her *dharma* by serving either her new husband or his family, or of worshipping their god. She stepped outside

of the patriarchal structures of her community and at her husband's death refused to live as a widow. Mira's life radically undermined everything that the Rajput's stood for, and socially brought great dishonour to this ruling family. Mira is therefore seen as a woman who is a destroyer of the community and its communal structures. Politically, socially and religiously the extent of the threat Mira posed not only to the ruling authorities, but to the society as a whole cannot be underestimated, and such a woman could not be tolerated.

Mukta, in her research on contemporary understandings of Mira discovered that

scholars, historians, librarians, archivists.... were united in their opinion: Mira was not sung in Rajasthan. Did I not know that a figure such as Mira, rejected by the Sisodiya princely power, could not be publicly acknowledged by others in society? That she could not be revered? The public humiliation that Mira had inflicted on collective Rajput honour meant that her name could not be evoked without rubbing salt on an old wound. Mira was not seen as a saintly figure in the dominant culture of Rajasthan, to be paid homage to, but as a figure to be excoriated, for the erstwhile rulers of Mewar could not tolerate the veneration of a person who had so directly challenged their authority (Mukta 1999; 1).

Any Rajput woman would have been very aware that her life was in the hands of her father, brothers and husband, and it would not have been unheard of for a woman who did not abide by the rules and customs of the group to be disposed of. One's whole purpose in life was to serve and perpetuate the group or caste to which one belonged. Mira however seeks for herself a life of love and emotional fulfillment. But the society in which she lived had no place for such desires or for such women.

We need to always remember that the attempts on Mira's life were made not because of her devotion to God, but because that devotion led her to know and desire and thus live out an alternative way of being, to eventually create an alternative community. It was not her devotion, but the results of her devotion that the ruling community finds so threatening. Devotion would have been quite acceptable, providing it posed no challenge to the status quo. Mira placed devotion and love for God over any worldly standards of honour. But for the ruling families, honour ruled their lives, and devotion needed to be lived within those honour codes.

Mira's union with God earned her great hatred and much abuse from the ruling family of which she was a part. That her name is still reviled today, and in many parts of Rajasthan cannot be mentioned or her *bhajans* sung, indicates how profoundly Mira's life and beliefs threatened and challenged this ruling community. For if humiliation and shaming in feudal society were worse than death, Mira had struck the greatest blow possible to Rajput authority and honour.

6.5.2 The effect on her marriage and patriarchal norms of marriage and widowhood

In the life of Mira we do not find a model of a submissive Indian wife who through her devotion eventually won over her husband, but rather we see a woman who decided to leave her husband in order to find an alternative life that offered for her freedom. Mira it seems could not live her passion and conviction quietly in her own heart, but declared publicly this reality she has come to know to be the only true reality and the only one that she would embody and live out, no matter the cost. Mira is a woman who offered her whole life in pursuit of the dream of union with her God. This dream was more meaningful to Mira than any of the relationships society offered to her. Mira's life stood for personal freedom based on the call of her heart. In a

society which gave women no choice regarding marriage, or no value outside of marriage and motherhood, Mira did the unthinkable: she chose, and she chose against marriage and motherhood.

Mukta writes of society: “They fail to understand that for a woman who has the courage and self dignity to search for a fulfilling relationship, there is no separation possible between the mind and the body – between the giving of heart and the giving of self. That the body and spirit do not occupy different spaces but are housed together, bearing a fine relationship with each other.” (Mukta 1999; 115) The effects of Mira’s union with God could only embody ever aspect of her being, it could be for Mira no other way.

The incredible tension that was created socially was that she was nevertheless forced to marry Bhoj Raj. For any woman, this would mean that she could not escape or move beyond her everyday social existence, and would inevitably bring her into sharp conflict with those who were accorded social power to govern her life. Yet consistently we see Mira rejecting her bond of marriage. She refused to acknowledge its existence in her life, or the power of those in her family to shape and determine her life.

Mukta expands on this theme where she comments on the effect of Mira’s life on women in communities today. She writes: “It appears to be an established fact that Mira was married to the Rana at a public ceremony. This no one disputes. What remains indubitably a social fact though is that the bhajniks have continued to annul this socially imposed marriage, to render it illegitimate, and have continued instead to validate the creation of Mira’s own relationship with Krishna” (Mukta 1999;132).

Mira’s choices effectively enable her to become a source of strength to many women who find themselves in situations of socially imposed relationships, where there is perceived to be no alternative. She provides the community

with a sustained challenge to the norms governing marital relationships and the lives of women. Mira's voice and writings are essentially songs of liberation and survival in the face of gender oppression and powerlessness. She points to a way of being for women that is possible beyond marriage and motherhood, in a culture obsessed with both.

And so Mukta writes of the present day followers of Mira: "The community of Mirabai here is the community of all those women who have endured incompatible relationships, all those who have suffered the violence of a forced intimacy, and all those women who have dreamt and continue to dream of relationships in which minds do not remain poles apart and the spirit does not fly out of its house" (Mukta 1999;136).

Mira exposes to her society the transience of married life and social relationships. She continually articulates the reality that in *Krishna* she has found something which is everlasting, and cannot ever be taken from her. When Bhoj Raj dies, Mira, who did not recognize him in life as her husband, so too, in his death refuses to recognize the relationship and thus to enter into widowhood.

In a community where widowhood was a deeply scarring experience, and many women would have committed suicide at the death of their husbands, Mira refused once again to accept this defining of her being, and reiterates that her salvation and hope lie in *Krishna*, and that his love enables her to walk with courage and passion through this life.

6.5.3 The effect on the caste system

In order to truly appreciate the life of Mira we have to keep in mind, as Mukta describes, the "acute social differentiation in the feudal social hierarchy, within which distinctions of clothing, ornaments, modes of travel

and differences, inscribed by the stigma of poverty (such as the kind of food one ate), symbolized a demonstration of power or lack thereof.” And “that the existence of each social being was integrally bound up with the existence of the social community, and any deviation or break from this entailed a sharp challenge to the social order” (Mukta 1999; 74). It is in this context that according to tradition, Mira chooses Rohidas as her guru.

In the city of Merta, where Mira was raised, was a flourishing trading economy. It was on the main trade route connecting Gujarat to Agra, and this area was an important textile producing centre. Much of the trade in Merta would have been that of leather workers, who would be considered to be untouchable and they formed a large part of the community. (Mukta 1999; 53) Rohidas was a contemporary of Kabir, born in Benaras, and was a leather worker (*chamar*) and travelled widely in North India. Whether Mira was, in fact, a disciple of his is uncertain, but it is accepted within the hagiographical literature and perhaps of equal significance, strongly held and believed within the lower caste communities in which Mira’s message and life struck home.

Mira broke not only from her caste by assuming poverty and homelessness, but more significantly and revolutionary she broke all ties with her caste privilege by choosing Rohidas as her guru. This would have been an action and relationship that was deeply subversive of the dominant understandings of pollution and untouchability. The irony was that in the eyes of the world, her relationship with Rohidas would render her unclean, and yet Mira saw in him a guru, one through whom she would find the blessing of *Krishna*, one who would embody *Krishna* for her. By choosing Rohidas as her guru Mira would have been theologically proclaiming that that which is considered unclean becomes that which can bring sacredness.

Thus in the life of Mira we see her making choices in a process of ongoing identification, not with the wealthy and elite, but with the subordinate classes.

Mira's life becomes a powerful symbol and sign of opposition to feudal privilege and caste norms, not only in history, but in the ongoing struggle for equality.

6.5.4 The effect on those who suffer and are oppressed

It is critical therefore, as Mukta writes in the introduction to her book, that "Mirabai is more than a historical figure. She goes beyond the shadowy realms of the past to inhabit the very core of a future which is embodied within the suffering of a people who seek an alternative" (Mukta 1999, ix).

As Mira makes the choice to reject the wealthy royal families, she chooses instead to form community with widows, with leather workers, and a community is built around devotion, feeling and desire, rather than around class, wealth and power. She is seen to be one who actively cast off her privileges by assuming poverty, to have tied her life and future to that of the poor who were subjected to indignities under the rule of the Rana. The poor in society have therefore found in Mira a vision of an alternative society and declared an allegiance to her. Mukta writes that "Crucial within this structure of feeling, which forms the main emotional force to the people taking to Mira, is the suffering and humiliation Mira endured in forging the links to the common life" (Mukta 1999; 100).

Mira continues therefore to be seen as a refugee, as woman who had suffered greatly, and she therefore has the power to draw around her those who can identify with exile, with widowhood, with forced and arranged patriarchal marriages, with those who suffer from caste discrimination. In Mira we find a voice being given to those who suffer and to oppressed sectors within society.

“The people’s Mira is a struggling being, struggling to forge relationships which break through the barriers of caste, and class and which break through the barrier of a forced marriage relationship” (Mukta 1999; 107).

6.5.5 The effect on herself

Mira’s choice to openly and publicly engage in relationships with *bhaktas* of all castes, her choice to reject a life of seclusion because of widowhood, her radical and public expression of her love for God and her emotional life, her choosing to live a life of poverty, and her very survival despite repeated attempts on her life, all would have had a profound effect on Mira.

On one hand, we can see her strength of character, as a woman who made a choice, and remained steadfast to that choice, despite every kind of oppression. Her songs are ultimately songs of survival and resistance, sung from the heart of a fiercely independent woman who with such strength meets criticism and opposition at every turn and choice in her life. There is a defiance in Mira’s writings and songs against a society based on the values of patriarchy, war, obedience, loyalty and duty to man, as she defends in her writings her choice to base her life on love and the capacity of each individual to follow their own hearts.

“It is precisely this antagonism – the conflict between the demands of a warring state power and the dictates of one’s heart – that lies central to the Mira bhakti. And it is this conflict that resonates in the bhajans today..... Mira broke the loyalty to kul, to prince and husband and created a new life based on love” (Mukta 1999; 66).

Mira is therefore not the romantic heroine often portrayed in contemporary media, neither is she a deified goddess; the power of Mira’s life lies in the fact that she is just a woman, a woman like all others – but one who rejects

societal dictates of gender, caste and race because of her love for *Krishna* and her desire to be free. Mira's choices enabled her to live outside of so many devastating social expectations and conventions of her day, and gave her the space to recreate alternative ways of living. The gift of her choices was freedom. But with that freedom came much suffering.

Mira's life cannot be idealized into a romantic notion of a woman seeking after love. For, as she searched for alternative ways of being, her choices inevitably opened her up to mockery and denigration, which must have wounded her deeply. Her choices made her increasingly vulnerable. She became cut off from the everyday world of social relations, she lost the security, both physically and economically of being a householder. We cannot underestimate the effects of the poverty and destitution involved in her choice to become a wandering mendicant⁶⁰, nor the physical and sexual harassment that she would have had to endure. Her choices led not only to a life of exile but also acute loneliness. By becoming a *jogin* Mira lost everything.

It is only when we understand the depth of what she lost and sacrificed, that her choice for *Krishna* becomes all the more powerful. It is her love for *Krishna* that enables Mira to endure this suffering, to hold on to her own inner truth and faith, despite communal opposition and suffering. Mukta writes that "Mira chooses the path of emotional and political integrity and pays the price exacted. She lives a life of material and social hardship and recognizes that

⁶⁰ Mukta writes that "Groups of itinerant singers and itinerant mendicants are not "beggars", yet they rely on the giving of money and grain in order to survive. Though the giving of charity is seen to be an entrenched principle of Indian society, it makes the receiver no less the degraded one" (Mukta 1999; 164).

no true alternative can be evolved without going through these hardships, the necessary outcome of tearing asunder social and economic privileges” (Mukta 1999;161).

CHAPTER 7

ST TERESA OF AVILA

7.1 A short biography

Much of the biography of Teresa can be found in her own autobiographical writings entitled *Life*. These were written at the request of her superiors and cover the first fifty years of her life. Thereafter, information about her and her journey of prayer is scattered throughout her later works and letters.

Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada was born on 28 March 1515 into a noble Castilian family. Her father was Don Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda whose family were Jewish-Christian merchants from Toledo. He was a devout Catholic and it is said he lived with a sword in one hand and rosary beads in the other. Her father appears to have had strong social principles and, unlike most other noble families, he refused to own slaves. The family seems to have climbed the social ladder rapidly, and bought itself into the nobility. After the death of his first wife, Don Alonso married Dona Beatriz de Ahumada who was only 14 years old at the time, and would give birth to Teresa. Teresa was one of nine brothers and three sisters.

One of the earliest stories of Teresa's childhood relates how she and her brother Rodrigo, attempted to run away to the land of the Moors, in search of martyrdom. She was only seven at the time. They did make it out of the city walls, but thankfully were discovered by an uncle and sent home. This incident shows that Teresa's strong initiative, courage, and desire for

adventure had already emerged at a young age.

In 1528 her mother died at the age of 33 after repeated difficult pregnancies; Teresa was only 13 at the time, a critical age for any young girl to lose a mother. In her *Life*, she recollects that at this time she begged the Virgin Mary to be her mother from that time onward.

Later in her teens, Teresa, who had grown into a beautiful, lively young girl, became involved in a flirtatious relationship that was the cause of scandal, and great anxiety to her father. Honour was highly prized in the world of Castilian nobility, and it was not unheard of for a father and brothers to kill a young girl's seducer in order to protect her honour. In this case her father sent her, at the age of 16, to board with the Augustinian sisters in Avila, where there was a school for the daughters of wealthy families attached to the convent. There has always been much speculation about the nature of this "period of sin" and as Deidre Green observes, "To us today, the exact details of what happened may not seem to be the most important aspect of Teresa's person; but in her time, almost everything hung on one single facet of life which composed a woman's 'honour', that is, her virginity before marriage and her fidelity thereafter." (Green 1989: 4)

This was a formative period for her and, under the sisters, she began to consider becoming a nun herself. After a period of illness, in which she had returned home to recover, and after much reflection and reading, she decided to join a community. Without her father's knowledge or consent she left home secretly and entered the Carmelite convent of the Incarnation in Avila, in 1536, taking the name Teresa of Jesus. She was 21 years old. The community of the Incarnation followed the "Mitigated Rule" which had been adapted and modified from the original rule, and had become very relaxed.

The sisters were not enclosed, and so could receive relatives and friends; they could go away on visits and accept jewellery which they wore with their habits. The Incarnation in particular appears to have been a fashionable place to be seen, and its parlours were the meeting places of the wealthy, where gossip and flirtation abounded. This environment was not conducive to silence, prayer or meditation.

Ill-health however continued to plague her, and in August 1539, aged 24, she fell into a coma during which was pronounced dead, and her grave was dug. When she recovered consciousness four days later, it was said that her eyelids were stuck together by the wax of the funeral tapers and she narrowly escaped being buried alive. Thereafter Teresa was paralysed for a period of about three years and suffered terribly during this time, living in the convent infirmary. In 1542, she regained full use of her limbs and attributed her cure to St Joseph. The exhaustion and depression that followed her illness led her to give up private prayer more or less completely for the better part of two years, and when she began praying again, she experienced no ecstasy or intimacy with God. Teresa had however a reputation for holiness, and her recovery from the near-death experience fed into speculation about her. She fell back into her old ways of socialising and vanity. During this period she found no enjoyment either in God or in the world. For the next 20 years, Teresa was to struggle between her desire for God, and her desire for the distractions the world offered. These were 20 years of intense inner conflict, before the beginnings of her mystical experiences and transformation. In her *Life* she observes it is very easy to deceive oneself and others about the reality of the interior life.

1554 was a period of re-conversion for her. Teresa was now 39 years old and, in front of an image of Christ, she pleaded that through His grace she would never offend God again. Changes began to take place within her and she felt increasingly called to a simpler, quieter, more contemplative lifestyle, avoiding the parlour and the socialising that took place there. It is during this

period that Teresa increasingly began to hear voices bringing messages from God, and found herself entering unusual states of consciousness. Teresa believed passionately that her visions and experiences were not being given just for her own upliftment, and together with some sisters within the Incarnation convent, began to discuss the possibility of setting up a new type of Carmelite house, in which the original simplicity and austerity of the Carmelite rule could be observed. This was no less a period of agony as she continued to face questions about self-deception. This self-questioning was aggravated by the fact that those to whom she went for help were unable to discern what was happening within her, and interpreted her visions as simply the imaginings of yet another woman who had succumbed to fantasies induced by the devil. Teresa had to fight for her conviction of the value and validity of her own experience; this was made more difficult by the apparent absence of a guide, other than one's own conscience and interior convictions.

Teresa's sister and brother in law had bought a house which would become the Monastery of Saint Joseph; in 1562, Rome gave permission for the house to be established, but under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Avila, rather than of the Carmelite superiors. It is during this period that Teresa begins to write her autobiography, *Life*, the first draft of which was finished in 1562. By this time Teresa's own foundation was secure in the eyes of the Church. It nonetheless continued to face great hostility from the civic authorities of the time. Much of this hostility was due to the fact that her house was not sustained through endowments, but through the generosity of the public, which they felt was not in the public's economic best interest.

As foreign cloth began to be imported, and the wool trade was no longer able to compete, Castilian towns faced increasing economic hardship and unemployment. Rising inflation was also a severe problem, as the entire economy was falling apart. These realities raised deep theological issues for

Teresa. She insisted on following the path of poverty, not just in name, but in practise, and thus refused permanent endowments. She was also very cautious of the indebtedness to such wealthy benefactors, and attempted to avoid such compromising situations. For where the wealthy took financial care of such orders, in return they were granted the rights to be buried in the church and to have prayers said for their own interests. Much time was also required by the sisters in socialising and keeping these benefactors satisfied. After her experience at the Incarnation, Teresa did not want to live such a life again. Her decision was against the advice of both the clergy, bishops and state, but she succeeded, and in 1562, the new house, dedicated to St Joseph, was established. Here she spent the next years of her life, involved with formation and writing *The Way of Perfection* and *Meditations on the Song of Songs*. Reading these works it appears to have been a time of great peace and happiness for her.

From 1567, at the age of 52, Teresa took to the road and began founding communities all over Spain, even though these were very difficult years for the Carmelite order. In October, 1571, Teresa was asked to return to the convent of the Incarnation in Avila as prioress, as the Provincial felt this community needed to be lifted out of the corruption into which it had fallen. Many of the sisters feared her return, having known her previously and been aware of the severity of her own rule. On assuming the office of prioress, however, Teresa placed a statue of Our Lady in the Prioress' stall, with the keys to the convent in Her hands, and sat herself at Her feet. This spirit of humility and equality of them all before God, provided an environment in which trust, respect and mutual growth flourished. Her time at the Incarnation was one of great reform and renewal, for although Teresa herself continued to live the reformed rule she did not impose this on the other sisters, since she understood each woman's response to the call of God would be lived out

uniquely.⁶¹

Within the wider Carmelite order, however, tension was intensifying between the reformed and unreformed Carmelites. John of the Cross, one of her closest friends and a collaborator in the Carmelite reform, was kidnapped by unreformed friars and confined in Toledo for nine months under brutal conditions. In 1575, some sisters spread rumours about Teresa to the Inquisition, which was becoming increasingly severe towards those practising mental prayer or using the vernacular in theological writings. This severity was particularly shown to women and laity, who were imprisoned, tortured and even burnt at the stake. This terrifying religious and political climate, together with the unrelenting effort of travelling, founding seventeen monasteries for women and a network of monasteries for men, and writing numerous books, letters and poetry in just 15 years, all compromised Teresa's already fragile health.

By 1581 she was exhausted and unwell - some say suffering with stomach cancer and repeated heart attacks. On 4 October 1582, at the age of 67, Teresa died; it was the feast day of St Francis of Assisi. Her body was surrounded by a wonderful fragrance, which is said to have come from the bodies of saints and it was later observed that her body was incorruptible.

It is repugnant to us today to relate that her body had already fallen prey to the relic hunting of her own associates only nine months after the interment; Gracian himself severed Teresa's left hand which was deposited in a sealed casket at Avila, and carried about on his person Teresa's little finger. Eventually the body was entirely dismembered, with parts scattered all over Spain and even in Rome and elsewhere.

⁶¹ See *Book of the foundations of S. Teresa of Jesus of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel, with the visitation of nunneries, the rule and constitutions, Written by herself*, trans. from the Spanish by David Lewis. New and revised Ed. With introduction by Very Rev. Benedict Zimmerman (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1913).

Distasteful as this is to us, we have to remember that in the Spain of Teresa's time there was an unshakeable belief that the relics of a saint were a source of healing and also that they gave protection to the church in which they were housed (Green 1989: 32).

In 1614, she was beatified, and was then canonised in 1622. Teresa and Catherine of Siena were the first women to be granted the title "Doctor of the Church." This was bestowed on her in 1970 by Pope Paul VI.

7.2 Teresa and her understanding of God

The world in which Teresa lived was ruled by the monarchy. As she addressed God, therefore, Teresa was naturally drawn to these images which were familiar to her. Throughout her writings we find references to kingship and to courtly life. Writing of the transcendence of God, she said:

And Lord of all the world and of the heavens, of a thousand other worlds and of numberless worlds, and of the heavens that You might create, how the soul understands by the majesty with which You reveal Yourself that it is nothing for You to be Lord of the world (Life 28.9).⁶²

For Teresa, God is the Lord of the entire world, and everything beyond what we could ever comprehend. God is clearly also understood as the creator of all that has come into existence. There is nowhere God is not to be found. For the nuns under her care Teresa wrote:

You already know that God is everywhere. It's obvious, then, that where the king is there is his court; in sum, wherever God is, there is heaven.... Consider what St Augustine says, that he sought Him in

⁶² All quotations from Teresa of Avila's writings are from *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila* translated by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez; Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington DC, 1987. I shall use her own chapters for referencing purposes.

many places but found Him ultimately within himself” (Way of Perfection 28.2)

For Teresa, to affirm God is everywhere was not just a theological concept. It sprang from her own experience and personal knowledge of God. In the *Autobiography of her Life*, Teresa said it helped her to look at fields and water and the flowers. In them she found a constant reminder of the Creator (Life 9.5). She also described God as the Gardener, while we are the garden in which God takes delight, and in which God walks (Life 11.6).

Although on occasion Teresa spoke of the transcendence of God, and of the resurrection and glorification of Christ, her primary experience of God was the incarnation of Christ. God, for her, was first and foremost an immanent God, the God she saw in the face and the humanity of Christ. The humanity of Christ was indeed the very heart of Teresa’s devotion. She wrote: “The soul can place itself in the presence of Christ and grow accustomed to being inflamed with love for His sacred humanity” (Life 12.2).

Not surprisingly then, throughout Teresa’s writings there is a continual return to reflection on Christ’s passion and suffering. She recalled:

This is the method of prayer I then used: I strove to represent Christ within me, and it did me greater good – in my opinion – to represent Him in those scenes where I saw Him more alone. It seemed to me that being alone and afflicted, as a person in need, He had to accept me. .. The scene of His prayer in the garden, especially, was a comfort to me; I strove to be His companion there. If I could, I thought of the sweat and agony He had undergone in that place. I desired to wipe away the sweat He so painfully experienced, but I recall that I never dared to actually do it, since my sins appeared to me so serious (Life 9.4).

The God found in the incarnation of Christ is equally incarnate within the individual soul. Teresa found this incarnate God, who is her King, her friend and her beloved, not in great pilgrimages or in theological books or even in religious life. Instead, she affirmed: “Within oneself, very clearly, is the best place to look; and it’s not necessary to go to heaven, nor any further than our own selves; for to do so is to tire the spirit and distract the soul, without gaining as much fruit” (Life 40.6). For Teresa, God was the God who dwelt within her, who filled her being. Her writings testify to her continual awareness of God’s presence.

However, there are a number of primary images Teresa employed as she expressed what she understood of who God is.

7.2.1 God as Divine Majesty

For Teresa, God was not a king in the traditional understanding of kingship, for as king there was only one thing in which He is powerless: God was powerless to turn away from us and to leave us. She mused, “it doesn’t seem it was in His power to leave us for even a moment” (Life 22.6).

Thus, even though friendship was a dominant image for Teresa of her relationship with God, this friendship was never “familiar,” since she never lost sight of the difference between herself and God, between what she referred to as the creature and the Creator. God remained the King of the entire world, the one who only through his mercy and compassion was relationship possible. It was because Teresa was so conscious of this awesomeness of God that the incarnation became all the more powerful for her. The incarnate God is the one who longed to come nearer, despite our unworthiness. The incarnate God is the one who humbles himself in order to reach us. This was what attracted Teresa so much; this is the God with whom

she fell in love. For her, this king had given up everything. For her, this king had reached out to invite her to be his friend. Teresa saw this movement of God most profoundly in the image of Christ.

7.2.2 God as friend

From the time she was young, Teresa seems to have been drawn to intense friendships. This very human experience came to be one of the primary ways in which she encountered God. Indeed, for Teresa, prayer was relationship between two friends who love one another, and need time alone to share their deepest thoughts, feelings and beings. This relationship needs time to develop, and it does so primarily through conversation. Teresa had the habit of communicating with God throughout the day, constantly being aware of God's presence with her. For this reason, Teresa found icons or images of Christ immensely helpful; these enabled her to image the presence of God alongside her. She told how, if one does not spend time with a friend, the relationship eventually faded through lack of communication. For Teresa, there was nothing that could not be said to God, including everyday events, concerns, hopes and dreams. She wrote, "The Lord helps us, strengthens us, and never fails; He is a true friend. And I see clearly, and I saw afterward, that God desires that if we are going to please Him and receive His great favours, we must do so through the most sacred humanity of Christ, in whom He takes His delight" (Life 22.6). Teresa's desire is for people everywhere to begin this divine conversation and become the friends of Christ.

We must remember that Teresa was a born communicator and friendships flowed naturally for her (Way of Perfection 26.9). This friendship, however, moved from relationship with an external concept of God to one in which she was increasingly aware this friend lived within her, dwelt at the very centre of her being. Instead of turning outwards, then, Teresa learnt to turn inwards, into her own heart, where her beloved lives.

This shift appears to have taken place within her as greater union is achieved with God. It was a movement from friendship to lover and spouse, from friendship to marriage, from separation to union.

7.2.3 That of her beloved spouse

This image comes out of the patristic and monastic period, but was further developed by Teresa in her meditations on the *Song of Songs*. The image stems from an understanding of God as bridegroom or lover, and the soul as bride or beloved. The life of prayer is therefore portrayed as the passionate relationship between the two lovers, involving love, pain, doubt, fears, longing and desire, fulfilment and union, as are found in any relationship.

For Teresa her love relationship with God was an embodied one. She longed to kiss her beloved, to be united with Christ's body through the Eucharist, to become one with her God. She freely used imagery of the process of engagement through to marriage as an analogy of the increasing union between the soul and God. She also encouraged all her sisters to look on Christ as their spouse and so wrote, "Never seek sustenance through human schemes, for you will die of hunger – and rightly so. Your eyes on your Spouse! He will sustain you" (Way of Perfection 2.1). God is their provider, all that they will need in this life. With him they have all things; without him, they have nothing.

To be united with God means to share in all of God's life. This theme was well developed in Teresa's writings, for she understood all too clearly that to be in union with God is to share not only in the glory of God, but also in the dishonour and the shame. She never shied away from speaking of the crucified God, who knew what it meant to be despised, rejected and to suffer. One cannot be united with God if not prepared to embrace this aspect of

union.

Her own experience of mystical marriage with Christ took place in 1572, in Avila, as she was receiving the Eucharist. From this time onwards, it appears the union was permanent. Nonetheless, although she was filled with an interior peace, Teresa still did not regard herself as perfect, or immune from pain and suffering.

7.3 Her understanding of the way to union with God

Writing to her sisters, Teresa said:

I shall enlarge on only three things, which are from our own constitutions, for it is very important that we understand how much the practice of these three things helps us to possess inwardly and outwardly the peace our Lord recommended so highly to us. The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which even though I speak of it last is the main practice and embraces all the others (Way of Perfection 4.4).

Teresa thereby very clearly set out for her own community of faith, and also for us, three elements which are critical for us on the path to union with God: love, detachment, and humility. However, for Teresa these are not just virtues to aim for; they are themselves signs of our increasing union with God. For she wrote, “His Majesty gives many signs of Himself to those who enjoy this favour. One sign is contempt for all earthly things, in which they are judged to be as little as they in fact are. Another, not desiring one’s own good, because one’s own vanity is already understood. A third, not rejoicing except with those who love their Lord” (Meditations on the Song of Songs 3.2). Again, we see in this text Teresa placed the emphasis on detachment, humility and love. These are for Teresa both the way to union with God, and signs of

our union with God.

7.3.1 The path of love

Teresa wrote not from a trained theological perspective, but always from her own experience. So on the subject of union with God she drew from her own lived experience of what it is that enables one to become united with God. For Teresa, this process was driven by her love for this beloved King, her friend, her spouse. She spoke openly about how meditating on the sacred humanity of Christ enabled her to love God more deeply:

As often as we think of Christ we should recall the love with which He bestowed on us so many favours and what great love God showed us in giving us a pledge like this of His love, for love begets love... Let us strive to keep this divine love always before our eyes and to waken ourselves to love. “ In the same section she goes on to say “May His Majesty give this love – since He knows how fitting it is for us – on account of the love he bore us and on account of His glorious Son, who demonstrated His love for us at so great a cost to Himself, amen” (Life 22.14).

Accordingly, in prayer “the important thing is not to think much but to love much; and so do that which best stirs you to love” (The Interior Castle 4.7). This is Teresa’s understanding of the way to union with God. Union is found, not through academic discourse and theology, but through a deep love for God. She encouraged her sisters to do whatever stirred within them the love of God. Teresa’s way is a life of devotion fuelled by her love for God. In a plea to God, she wrote: “... I beseech You, that all to whom I speak become mad from Your love, or do not permit that I speak to anyone! Either ordain, Lord that I no longer pay attention to anything in the world, or take me out of it!” (Life 16.4). Her desire was that all come to know this overwhelming love for God, a love beyond rational thought.

Teresa's love for God led her to want to please and obey her beloved King in everything she did. She emphatically stated that it is not about her will anymore; it is about God's. She cried out that no matter what comes, whether persecution, illness, dishonour, or poverty, she will never turn away from her God. In fact, in keeping with the image of God as her spouse, she freely used the sacrament of marriage to describe the increasing union that takes place between God and the soul.

What is so critical about this analogy and way to union is, as Teresa herself says, that while not all are capable of great thought or studies, all souls are capable of loving. Here again she reflected that real progress toward union with God lies, therefore, not in thinking much but in loving much. Those who begin on this path are named by Teresa as "servants of love;" those who begin on this path are those called to follow in obedience the One who has loved them so much. For Teresa love and obedience were inseparable.

In a time when so much of the church was filled with fear, Teresa wrote about God always coming "enveloped" in love. It is God's grace and mercy that she experienced as calling her back to God. "For the love that face shows, so beautiful in its tenderness and affability, makes the soul much more sorrowful and afflicted for not having served Him than does the majesty it beholds in Him cause it to fear" (Life 38.21).

However, Teresa was not only focused on love for God. She was clear: God asks two things of us, to love him and to love our neighbours. Love of God cannot ever be love that is separated from our neighbours and the rest of the world. Love of God is love that becomes incarnate in the lives of others. And so Teresa said: "The most certain sign, in my opinion, as to whether or not we are observing these two laws is whether we observe well the love of neighbour" (The Interior Castle 5.8). "And be certain that the more advanced

you see you are in your love for your neighbour the more advanced you will be in the love of God” (The Interior Castle 5.8).

This was the deep love Teresa knew for God and for those around her. This deep love led her to give up everything else that the world holds significant. She wrote: “it is impossible without a powerful love to give up everything only so as to please God” (Life 39.13).

7.3.2 Detachment

From her own experience, Teresa was well aware that none of these virtues were instantly present in the life of a person; these virtues are made present through a gradual process of transformation. She articulated this understanding as she wrote: “On the one hand God was calling me; on the other hand I was following the world. All the things of God made me happy; those of the world held me bound” (Life 7.17). From this comment it is she discerned within herself the effects of wealth, honour, power. She knew these to be obstacles to union with God. Yet she also knew that knowledge alone does not transform. She wrote about how she loved religious life, but did not want to be looked down on. She liked to be held in honour and to be thought highly of by friends and acquaintances. Yet within her she also knew that these desires for honour and high regard meant it was not possible to experience union with the Christ who was weighed down with insults and scorn. She exclaimed, “Either we are brides of so great King or we are not. If we are, what honourable woman is there who does not share in the dishonours done to her spouse even though she does not will them? In fact, both spouses share the honour and the dishonour. Now, then, to enjoy a part in His kingdom and want no part in His dishonours and trials is nonsense” (Way of Perfection 13.2).

In a very human way, she confessed, “Sometimes I think I am very detached;

and as a matter of fact when put to the test, I am. At another time I will find myself so attached, and perhaps to things that the day before I would have made fun of, that I almost don't know myself" (Way of Perfection 38.6). This was clearly an ongoing struggle in the path to union with God, a struggle that needed to be grappled with on a daily basis. And so Teresa plead: "May this "I" die, and may another live in me greater than I and better for me than I, so that I may serve Him. May he live and give me life" (Soliloquies 16.3).

She recognised that exterior detachment does not necessarily mean that interiorly one is no longer bound to certain things. She advised that although this interior detachment may take much time, exteriorly it must be done immediately. For Teresa this was a matter of obedience and a test of true love. This process of transformation was not easy for the sisters with whom she lived; many began to find her exterior changes too extreme. In her *Foundations* to the sisters, she taught that when detachment is practiced with a pure conscience, such detachment joins the soul to God. She later explained, "The highest perfection obviously does not consist in interior delights or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy but in having our will so much in conformity with God's will that there is nothing we know He wills that we do not want with all our desire" (Foundations 5.10). Detachment is therefore about choosing God over all other things.

Teresa had a deep understanding of the real nature of attachments, realising as she did that attachment is not just attachment to objects or status; one can also be attached to friendships. This process of renunciation and detachment took place in her own life in terms of such relationships. She claimed her soul was very fragile with regard to giving up certain friendships. Although she was not offending God by them, her attachment to them was greater than her attachment to God. In this lay the difficulty.

I had a serious fault that did me much harm; it was then when I began

to know that certain persons like me, and I found them attractive, I became so attached that my memory was bound strongly by the thought of them. There was no intention to offend God, but I was happy to see these persons and think about them and about the good things I saw in them. This was something so harmful it was leading my soul seriously astray. After I beheld the extraordinary beauty of the Lord, I didn't see anyone who in comparison with Him seemed to attract me or occupy my thoughts (Life 37.4).

Once again we see that it is only as she experientially comes to know of the beauty of God, which leads to greater love of God, does the power of the attachment diminish. From that moment, she reflected on how she could no longer tie herself to any friendship or even hold a particular love for a certain friendship, since nothing compared to the beauty of her beloved.

It is therefore increasingly clear that Teresa's life was more and more detached from wealth, honour, status and even certain friendships, so she could be freer to love and to follow God. Although initially one can sense and hear her struggle with this process, once it is underway, the joy from God seems to drive the process to the point where she exclaimed that "nothing other than You can give it pleasure any longer; for since it desires to live no longer in itself but in You, it seems that its life is unnatural... It doesn't know what it wants, but it well understands that it wants nothing other than you" (Life 16.4). For Teresa there was no loss. She said to her sisters, "What is this nothingness that we leave!" Again in her autobiography she writes "And what greater perdition, greater blindness, greater misfortune than to cherish that which is nothing?" (Life 34.16).

She used the beautiful analogy of a silkworm which has to die in order to become the creature it was created to be. She went on to describe how, in dying, the ugly worm becomes a beautiful butterfly. This is a powerful image

which speaks of the necessity of dying to oneself in order for the transformation of something greater to take place within the individual.

7.3.3 Humility and Grace

Once again, Teresa named these three gifts of union with God in her writings in the *Interior Castle*. Herein she wrote that what is left in the soul is the knowledge of the grandeur of God. From this knowledge comes humility and self knowledge, leaving little esteem for earthly things (Interior Castle VI 5.10). For, as the process of detachment and renunciation take root within the person, so one comes to understand the nothingness of so much of life, and this leads to great humility before God.

For Teresa, there is no way to union with God, unless it is based in a process of increasing humility and obedience. Indeed, she wrote that the whole journey is built on humility. The closer one comes to God, the more humble one will become. If one does not become more humble, the journey will come to an end. Again, for Teresa this humility is based on an imitating of the nature of God, who humbled himself, and became one of us. She wrote: “Once I was pondering why our Lord was so fond of this virtue of humility, and this thought came to me ..it is because God is supreme Truth; and to be humble is to walk in truth, for it is a very deep truth that of ourselves we have nothing good but only misery and nothingness. Whoever does not understand this walks in falsehood” (Interior Castle VI 10.7).

Teresa had a profound sense of her own unworthiness. In the prologue to her Life, she requested, “whoever reads this account bear in mind that my life has been so wretched that I have not found a saint among those who were converted to God in whom I can find comfort” (Life, prologue). She was aware of her capacity to delude herself, to slip back into valuing honour and status, to enter into relationships that hindered her journey with God. Teresa

knew herself, particularly her own weaknesses, and this led to a profound realisation of her humanness before God. But this humility was not only developed through interior knowledge but also external circumstance. She also wrote about how difficult it is to be humble and remain silent when you are being condemned and judged without any fault on your part.

This humility and generosity of spirit can be seen even in the way Teresa viewed other people's relationships with God, and the methods they use for she says that although she may meditate on the passion of Christ, many other souls might benefit more by other meditations, for there are as many rooms in heaven as there are paths to God.

There is in her writings this deep recognition that this journey is not about her, her gifts, her abilities, her faithfulness, but is rather about God. She said God wants us to see very clearly that this is not our work, but the work of God. For, as there is an increase of humility, there is also an increase in understanding that no human effort can bring us to this perfection or union with God. Teresa wrote, "But however great the effort we make to do so, we cannot enter. His Majesty must place us there and enter Himself into the centre of our soul" (Interior Castle V 1.12).

For her, therefore, this was first and last a journey of grace. In one passage of her autobiography, she exclaimed, "May God be blessed forever, because in an instant He gave me the freedom that I with all the efforts of many years could not attain by myself" (Life 24.8). Teresa was clear that transformation is a gift given to us by God. It is a gift given without our deserving of it, without our earning it. "Here the humility that remains in the soul is much greater and more profound than in the past. The soul sees more clearly that it did neither little nor much other than consent to the Lord's favours and embrace them with its will" (Life 17.3). She recalled the story of how a "holy gentleman" came to see her and encouraged her by saying that she should not

think she could give up everything in just one day, but rather that little by little God would do the work within her. In short, the process of transformation into holiness is a process made possible and impelled by God's grace.

7.3.4 Holiness

Teresa's desire was to become "like Christ," to imitate both his life and his nature ever more fully. Yet she reflected that she had much more to confess in her later life than in her early days of religious life. While this suggests she was moving further from God, Teresa compared the soul to water in a glass: the water looks clean in dull light; but when held up to the sun dust particles are immediately obvious. Her inference was that the closer one comes to God the greater one's awareness of all that is not of God within.

This awareness was further clarified when she reflected that initially her focus was on not committing mortal sin; she ignored venial sin. She said it was this narrow focus that almost destroyed her. Here she drew a comparison with a plant: "If we plant a herb or small tree and water it each day, it grows so strong that afterward you need a shovel and a pickaxe to get it out by the roots. Committing the same fault each day, however small, if we do not make amends for it, is like watering a plant each day" (Meditations on Song of Songs 2.18). The results are devastating for a soul's journey into union with God.

Again this transformation into holiness is always marked by a profound humility. Teresa begged God to grant these gifts to someone who would make better use of them for God's glory. She compared herself with a broken bottle, which seems only to be able to spill and waste the precious liquid that God so generously pours into her. This self-awareness, however, enabled Teresa to see that her faith and trust could never be put in herself, but only in God: "But by considering the love He bore me, I regained my courage, for I

never lost confidence in His mercy; in myself, I lost it many times” (Life 9.7).

7.4 Her experience of union with God

Teresa was not a trained theologian; her writings emerge directly out of her own personal lived experience. Indeed, at times, she was quite critical of theologians who spoke so voluminously. To her it was clear they themselves had not experienced what they taught. She said she pitied those who had only book knowledge, for their understanding is so different from those who have had first hand experience. She also pointed out that age makes little difference in this process, since it is not a wisdom born of age of which she speaks, but a wisdom born of an encounter with God. And so she quite plainly declared that those who have not experienced what she is speaking of will not be able to understand, no matter how eloquently she writes. Another difficulty for Teresa was language, which so often is simply not sufficient to describe the ineffable experience of union, an experience at the heart of which is mystery beyond our own thoughts, senses and being.

7.4.1 Desire and courage

According to her writings, Teresa had many visions, locutions, raptures, mystical ecstasies and trances. Unlike many mystics who are wary of such experiences, however, for her these phenomena left her with an increased love for God. The consequent deep peace and inner consolation fuelled the process of transformation within her. Throughout her writings, Teresa sometimes broke into passages that express her deep desire to be “dissolved” into God. She wondered what more could she want in this life than to be so close to God, that there will be no longer any division between herself and God. Because her experience of God was mediated primarily through the immanent presence of Christ, she wrote that her soul was so filled with love that she desired nothing more than for Christ to kiss her with the kiss of His mouth.

This desire within her was so intense that she interiorly became oblivious to everything else. And it is this desire that enabled the process of detachment and renunciation, both interiorly and exteriorly. She said that nothing could satisfy her. She commented on how restless her soul became in its yearning for God, exclaiming that she felt like a person suffocating with a rope around her neck, desperate to find relief. Indeed, at times she was clear she could not even put up with herself, for this yearning and desire was so overwhelming.

For this reason Teresa often yearned for death. In death she knows this desire will be fulfilled; she will be wholly united with God. Many times she cried out for God to take her to Himself so that she could be with Him always. In one very moving passage, she wrote: “For it seems to me I neither live, nor speak, nor have any desire but that He who strengthens and governs me might live in me. I go about as though outside myself, and so life is the severest pain for me. And the greatest thing I offer God as a principal service to Him is that, since it is so painful for me to live separated from Him, I desire to live, but out of love for Him” (Spiritual Testimonies 3.10).

To be able to make such a decision, to be able to live through this anguish born of her love of God, took much courage for Teresa. Sometimes her feelings were so overwhelming she feared she would not die. The pain she experienced in some of the raptures took away her sensory consciousness, her body temperature would fall until she became cold, her pulse would almost stop, her arms would be stiff and unable to move; the next day she felt as though her bones had been disjoined. When these experiences first began to take place, she describes the fear as “extreme.”

But this was not her only fear. Initially she wrote about how much courage it takes to risk everything, and surrender oneself into the hands of God. It took much courage not to be in control of one’s life and, in her case, not to be in

control of what others see when a vision or rapture occurs in public spaces. She wrote about how she used to try to resist the experiences, precisely for fear of what others might say. However, her desire for God, coupled with obedience, enabled her to overcome these fears. She said she was given the words, “Do not fear, daughter; for I am, and I will not abandon you; do not fear” (Life 25.18).

7.4.2 Recognition of her own powerlessness

“For anyone who has experience, it is impossible not to understand soon that this little spark cannot be acquired. Yet, this nature of ours is so eager for delights that it tries everything; but it is quickly left cold because however much it may desire to light the fire and obtain this delight, it doesn’t seem to be doing anything else than throwing water on it and killing it” (Life 15.4). This is at the heart of the agony of this journey of the soul: one is powerless to attain that which you desire – God. Teresa wrote, no matter how much she desired God, unless God revealed Himself to her there was nothing she could do. She continued with the analogy of a fire, saying that, even if she puts wood on the fire, still it does not burn. She acknowledged no matter how she arranged the wood, or blew on the fire, her efforts only smothered the fire. Teresa knew no amount of prayer or penance can induce the gift of God, for this is always a free gift given, and never deserved. Union with God can never be manufactured or controlled by ourselves. It is something that cannot be resisted, and neither can it be demanded. She instructed her sisters that the best thing to do in this journey is simply to surrender themselves to the fact that they can do nothing in this process. This is the work of God. They are simply to remain faithful. She counselled, “Do not abandon the hours of prayer we have in common; you don’t know when the Spouse will call” (Way of Perfection 18.4).

Learning to cope with this illusive presence of God is difficult, and Teresa

questioned how God's love for her could allow these times of separation? How could He hide Himself from her when there seemed so little time to enjoy His presence? And yet it is in these moments of dryness that Teresa recognised that God was purifying her. The dryness ironically functioned as the transformative catalyst into holiness. She affirmed: "This dryness amounts to an authentic weeding and pulling up of the remaining bad growth by its roots, no matter how small it may be" (Life 14.9).

7.4.3 Wound of love

In the early 1560's, Teresa began to experience what she termed a wounding of the soul.

Of this experience, she wrote:

It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away; nor is the soul content with less than God" (Life 29.13).

To speak of this experience, she once again used the analogy of a fire, speaking about herself as like a piece of wood consumed by the fire, and about these moments as times when an arrow is thrust into the deepest, most living parts of her heart. Teresa spoke of God's "wounding the soul" and of the extreme pain this causes; yet she was clear that in this pain lies such joy. She desired her body and soul to break into many pieces to reveal the joy that she felt in this pain of union.

In Teresa's writing, therefore, there is a sense that the soul is so overcome that it loses the capacity to know in the traditional manner. There is a "disorientation" or rather a reorientation taking place within the deepest

aspects of the individual. She wrote:

It feels that it is wounded in the most exquisite way, but it doesn't learn how or by whom it was wounded. It knows clearly that the wound is something precious, and it would never want to be cured. ..It knows that He is present, but He doesn't want to reveal the manner in which He allows Himself to be enjoyed. And the pain is great, although delightful and sweet. And even if the soul does not want this wound, the wound cannot be avoided...The wound satisfies it much more than the delightful and painless absorption of the prayer of quiet (Interior Castle VI 2.2).

Later in this same book, Teresa talked of this sharp wound as a lightning bolt that reduces the old nature to dust, a lightening bolt so intense that during the experience nothing is remembered or known about our being.

This wound of love in the process of union with God left a number of effects within Teresa. First and foremost, this wound purifies her. Using the analogy of gold in a crucible, she spoke of this purifying both preparing her to embrace deeper gifts from God even as it also burns away all desires other than desire for God. This desire, in turn, will lead to deeper renunciation.

7.4.4 Between heaven and earth

These experiences cannot be controlled, produced or prolonged, and so they are transitory experiences of the mystery of God. Teresa knew this and commented they are not permanent. It is this knowledge that led her to long for the suffering of that loving wound of God's revelation to her.

She used this very powerful image of being between heaven and earth. But this is an image born out of her own experience of disorientation/reorientation. She wrote:

nor can the soul think of anything else than of why it is grieving, or

how it is absent from its Good, and of why it should want to live. It feels a strange solitude because no creature in all the earth provides it company, nor do I believe would any heavenly creature, not being the One whom it loves; rather, everything torments it. But the soul sees that it is like a person hanging, who cannot support himself on any earthly thing; nor can it ascend to heaven. On fire with this thirst, it cannot get to the water; and the thirst is not one that is endurable but already at such a point that nothing will take it away (Interior Castle VI 11.5).

This process of transformation is so engulfing there is no longer any love for or desire for the world, or even any one in the world. All she wanted was God; but she knew that unless she died, she could not experience always the fullness of God. And so she wrote that she “dies with the longing to die” and again that it is like being suspended between heaven and earth. She compared this tearing within her to being crucified, hung up between the earth and the heavens.

7.4.5 Union with God

As always, Teresa used analogies to try to communicate a particular experience or theological concept. Drawing on her experience of God the beloved as her spouse, she used the image of marriage to speak of union with God and wrote, “In the spiritual marriage the union is like what we have when rain falls from the sky into a river of fount; all is water, for the rain that fell from heaven cannot be divided or separated from the water of the river. Or it is like what we have when a little stream enters the sea, there is no means of separating the two. Or, like the bright light entering a room through two different windows; although the streams of light are separate when entering the room, they become one” (Interior Castle VII 2.4). Her concept of union with God is that in essence the two become one, and can no longer be

separated. This is a physical reality for her, one which is not dependent on her feelings or emotional state at a particular time. To explain this she says if in the light you know certain people are next you, when it becomes dark, just because you do not see them, does not mean they are no longer with you.

In her *Soliloquies*, she wrote: “Since my Beloved is for me and I for my Beloved, who will be able to separate and extinguish two fires so enkindled? It would amount to labouring in vain, for the two fires have become one” (Soliloquies 16.4). This, then, is the culmination of a process in which the soul no longer belongs to itself, but is given completely to God, immersed totally in God. Teresa was clear: there is no difference between her soul and God’s; the two are one.

7.5 Effects of her teaching on union with God

In order to appreciate Teresa’s achievements, one has to not only read her writings, but look also to the context in which she was living. To read Teresa without an understanding of the context in which she wrote is to risk interpreting her according to our own 21st century ideas, values and agendas. The elements that make her life so revolutionary and courageous are thereby overlooked.

7.5.1 Effect on the political and religious context

Medieval Spain had been the most tolerant country in Europe, with Christian, Islamic and Jewish people living together, but it was also a divided region; these divisions were due to the many different cultures and languages, and were also geographically inscribed by the Pyrenees Mountains. The country therefore lacked political unity; indeed, unifying Spain was a major political objective. It was believed that a common faith needed to be the tool that would bind Spain into a strong entity and nation, and it was out of this desire,

and the interplay of religion and politics that the Inquisition was established in 1478. By 1492, all Jews were obliged either to convert to Christianity or be expelled from Spain. Purity of faith and blood became essential to survival in the New Spain.

This became one of the most dynamic periods in Spanish history. Spain increasingly was at war, extending its power and influence in conquering the New World, and by the 16th century had become the greatest power on earth. The price however that had to be paid was a demand for political and religious conformity, and there was no space for anyone or thing that posed a threat to this unity.

The threats were many which were perceived to undermine the authorities of the time, and it was the task of the Inquisition to deal with them. In the section below, I will deal with each of these and Teresa's relationship to them, which will highlight her vulnerability at this time of history.

7.5.1.1 Conversos

As already mentioned, Jewish people were targeted as threats to national unity and were forced to convert to Roman Catholicism. These *converos* as they were known continued to be marginalised and treated with suspicion. They were not allowed to hold any public official positions or to enter religion orders, and so many families tried to hide their Jewish heritage by buying aristocratic status even with completely new genealogies.

Teresa herself came from a *converso* background. Her paternal grandfather, Juan Sanchez, was a victim of the use of religion for the sake of political unity. He converted to Christianity, but in 1485 was brought before the Inquisition and convicted of Judaizing. After being publicly humiliated in Toledo, he fled to Avila to try to build a new life there for his family and

changed his name. He continued professionally as a cloth merchant, and built himself up, buying into the ranks of the lower nobility, and arranging excellent Christian marriages for his children. However, the suspicion and rumour would always have remained around Teresa and her family.

7.5.1.2 Alumbrados

Spain was not only growing politically, but also spiritually. The Protestant Reformation had begun to take root in other parts of Europe, and people were longing for a faith that enabled them to develop the interior life, the practice of mental prayer and the developing of mysticism. It is during this time that we find many reform movements developing, for example, the Society of Jesus, founded by St Ignatius of Loyola, the Benedictines, and the mendicant orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans. A strong pietistic lay movement was also developing, a movement that strongly emphasised mental prayer, visions, direct experience of God, while downplaying vocal and liturgical prayer and ritual ceremony, and, by implication, the institutional church.

By the sixteenth century, this form of spirituality had developed into a substantial movement, and its followers were known as *alumbrados* or the enlightened ones. Indeed, many *alumbrados* rejected and abandoned all external practices of religion. They attracted large followings and, in the eyes of the Inquisition, accrued far too much power and influence. In 1525, the Inquisition condemned 48 *alumbrados* of heresy; anyone suspected of belonging to this group was very quickly taken into custody. Ignatius of Loyola was even implicated, and not allowed to preach for three years. A climate of mistrust and suspicion grew, victims were not told who their accusers were. In such a suspicious environment, religion was easily appropriated to settle past disputes or fuel emerging conflicts.

Although Teresa disassociated herself from the *alumbrados*, the line between them was not at all clear. Teresa herself not only came from a “suspect” background (*converso*), she also had visions and went into trances. Moreover, she read extensively and from the type of literature that the *alumbrados* did, challenged the church and the Inquisition and spoke against hypocrisy, and saw mental prayer as critical for spiritual development. In all these ways, Teresa was on very dangerous theological ground and was in fact reported to the Inquisition on at least six occasions.

One of the most threatening aspects of the *alumbrados*’ teaching was that a person could have direct knowledge and experience of God without the mediation of the hierarchy of the church. We must remember that the institution wanted to control not only religious experience, but also the theological writings that shaped these experiences. Anything that undermined religious authority was a deep threat to Spain as a unified country.

7.5.1.3 Theology in the vernacular

This was the era of the development of the printing press. For the first time literature was accessible to large numbers of people. Publications on prayer and the interior life proliferated. These writings were often in the vernacular, making theological ideas and, most importantly for us, mystical theology, accessible to lay people. Men and women, rich and poor, lay and ordained were placed on the same footing. It is hard to overestimate this development had on the growth of mysticism and spiritual revival during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as spiritual writings reached not only wider audiences, but, most significantly, those who had been traditionally excluded. This enabled a powerful development of lay spirituality, of which the *alumbrados* were one form.

Teresa herself benefited greatly from these writings and, given the fact that

Scripture was inaccessible due to its being written in Latin, these writings were the only form most people had of being able to read spirituality and to grow in the interior life of prayer. However, this growth of lay theological development was perceived as a threat by the Institution and, in 1559, the Inquisition put out an index of forbidden books called the Valdes Index. It became increasingly difficult for authors to publish their writings or to produce theological literature in the vernacular. From this date onwards, writings on mental prayer, mysticism and union with God became very scarce, and books written by women virtually ceased.

The consequences of this were profound, for, as Ahlgren points out, “Because most women did not read Latin, the Valdes Index systematically denied them the texts and vocabulary they needed to describe their religious experience in orthodox terms” (Ahlgren, pg 20). This statement would have been as true for lay men as for women, and so because they did not have access to the accepted terminology of the church, their own expression of their experiences made them very vulnerable to the charge of heresy by the Inquisition, because their experience and theology was not expressed in the language of the institution. It was in this context that Teresa, a woman, from a *converso* family, began to write mystical theology in the vernacular, dealing with subjects at the heart of the *alumbrado* movement. We have to ask the question: what enabled Teresa to escape being tried by the Inquisition?

Ahlgren insightfully points out: “Her quest for survival as an articulate, spiritually experienced woman in the context of patriarchal control and suspicion of mysticism forced her to develop complex strategies of humility and obedience, through which she appeared to conform to the models of religiosity prescribed for women” (Ahlgren 1996; 4). She not only used the strategies of humility and obedience, but a number of others in order not only to survive in such a hostile climate, but to excel as both writer and reformer.

The Inquisition was especially watchful of anything perceived as a lack of allegiance to the institutional church. Most of the *alumbrado* writings and practices were growing outside of institutional structures, and hence were perceived as threatening. In contrast, Teresa's allegiance was to the institution, albeit a reformed institution. She located her writings, her call for reforms, together with reflection on her own experience, within the heart of the church, at the centre of the institution itself. In her writings, she time and time again upheld the authority of the church and her own devotion to it. She was devoted to the sacraments, and located her spirituality within this framework; in fact, she often claimed to have received her visions after receiving the Eucharist. Repeatedly, she referred to her obedience to her superiors and confessors, and confirmed the need thereof. She also distanced herself, with very strong language, from the growing Protestantism and from the Lutherans. Teresa had heard of churches being destroyed and was deeply wounded by this knowledge, because for Teresa the Church was the body of Christ, and what was done to the church, was done to Christ.

We also must not forget that Teresa, unlike most *alumbrados*, had a far better theological education. Her time at the convent had given her enough theological tools which enabled her to express herself within orthodox concepts and terminology. One cannot underestimate the depth of her extensive reading, which gave her a theological understanding as developed as many of her male superiors. She may not have been able to read Latin or been trained in the scholastic method of the universities, but intellectually she knew what she was experiencing and had the terminology and vocabulary to express it with the orthodox categories.

It is interesting to note that increasingly she began to write in the third person. Literary strategies like these enabled her to continue her calling as a writer, for it was not Teresa the woman writing, but rather God or the will of her confessor. Thereby she presented herself in a non-threatening manner,

drawing attention to her “ignorance” and incompetence. Repeatedly, she reminded her readers that she was writing “against her own will” out of obedience to her confessors and representatives of the institutional church. She also wrote in a colloquial style that gave the impression she was not teaching, but was conversing with the sisters with whom she was living. Of course, her readership was in reality far wider than the Carmelite orders. Throughout her works, Teresa presented herself as having little vested interest in her own writings, while being open to the “wiser” judgement of the church and its authorities, and, ultimately, as subject to them. This posture underscored the virtues of “humility” and “obedience” without which she would not have survived. Ahlgren writes, “Teresa’s emphasis on humility and obedience was a rhetorical strategy designed to present herself as no threat to a patriarchal and institutional church. Thus her self-deprecating humour is most properly understood not as internalized self-doubt but as an important part of the persona she adopted as a survival strategy” (Ahlgren 1996; 152).

Clearly, she avoided subjects in her own life that would have led to controversy or suspicion. She scarcely mentioned her *converso* origins. Consequently, many scholars have suggested she was not aware of her own background, although in a society obsessed with lineage and purity of blood this seems highly unlikely. It is far more likely that she consciously chose not to draw attention to certain aspects of her own background.

Teresa also sought out and developed relationships with influential, experienced and educated men. She developed relationships with members of the Inquisition and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, as well as with civil authorities. Some scholars have seen this as her psychological need for male authority figures. However, as Mary Luti argues, it is more probable: “She would need their expertise to help her formulate the content of her experiences in acceptable terms; and she would need the seal of their authoritative approval because the times were rough ones for all devout persons – and for

women visionaries and activists, they were rougher still” (Luti 1991; 45). Teresa knew these relationships would be needed if her writings and reforms were to survive.

Ahlgren agrees with Luti in this regard, writing: “Engaged in a struggle for survival, Teresa alternately criticized contemporary religious strictures and made great protestations of allegiance both to institutions at large and to persons who might protect her from such strictures. Teresa’s quest for the authority that would justify her religious experiences, her reform movement, and her orthodoxy makes sense only when it is viewed against the backdrop of the Inquisition” (Ahlgren 1996; 33).

Teresa’s life and writings were filled with strategies for survival. Although her writing can convey an impression that she simply sat down and wrote quite spontaneously, a more careful and contextually-based interpretation suggests Teresa’s savvy and strategic style was operative throughout.

In a climate where theological writings on mysticism in the vernacular, writing truly accessible to people, were banned, Teresa developed a highly developed orthodox set of writings on the mystical life. These writings enabled not only her own community of sisters, but others to grow in prayer. The more she reflected on her own experiences, the more she became convinced these were the work of God. Her writings were therefore an institutionally-identified defence of religious experience and mysticism, intended to show these experiences did not have to be a threat to the church, but could be a critical source for the renewal of Roman Catholic identity.

7.5.2 Effect on the patriarchal and religious norms governing women

Kavanaugh and Rodriegez quote a saying of Teresa’s time: “a woman should

be allowed to leave the house on only three occasions: once for her baptism, another in order to go to the house of the man she marries, and a third for her burial” (Kavanaugh and Rodriegez 1980; 23). Women were certainly not encouraged to visit churches, to travel, to study or to think. By their nature, women were barred from personal, social or ecclesiastical power. By their nature, it was believed that they were incapable of learning. By their nature as women, they were highly susceptible to delusion by the devil. Accordingly, the virtues by which women were to shape their lives were those of humility and obedience. Purity, passivity and withdrawal from the public domain were marks of holiness for women. Men were called to active ministry, to preaching, to social and ecclesiastical power; women were called to care for the sick and dying, or to prayer in enclosed environments, either at home or in a convent.

As Protestantism advanced, the church responded by increasingly suppressing the role of women and the laity. Obedience became the critical tool for their survival in a church that placed all power in the hands of the clergy. The Inquisition increasingly attempted to control gender roles, and responded swiftly to any women who claimed religious authority. Most of the *alumbrados* prosecuted by the Inquisition were in fact women, and these trials were a direct attack on women’s own experiences of God and the power they derived there from. Women were more often targeted than men as it was believed they had a “natural” tendency towards emotionalism, visions, and were off course seen as the means through which the Devil could tempt men, and thus the church, and draw them into evil.

In Spain, during the time of Teresa’s life, there were two options available to women: marriage, which meant repeated pregnancies and childbirth, and submission to one’s husband in everything; or the religious life. We must not forget that Teresa had as a young girl witnessed her mother’s ill health, due to repeatedly difficult pregnancies, and her eventual death at the very young age

of 33. For many women, then, religious life offered a measure of independence and freedom, and education that would not have otherwise been possible.

Deidre Green writes that:

It is not surprising that some women who chose the latter (religious life) did so, not so much from a wholehearted sense of religious devotion, as because it was the only way they could gain a measure of autonomy and freedom. This is not to deny the reality of genuine spiritual vocation for many women who became nuns: the celibate life of withdrawal and renunciation of the world was, indeed, a way in which many women could realise their spiritual aspirations but it was also a means of transcending some of the limitations placed on women in sixteenth-century Spain (Green 1989; 3).

However, despite the above, this was nevertheless a period which was highly suspicious that women could even have authentic experiences of God, and certainly not experiences unmediated through the church. To therefore write or speak of one's experience of God, or attempt to teach others as a woman, was considered to be arrogant and deceptive. Women were taught to not trust their own lived experience and therefore their own power and authority.

This ambiguity and tension around women in religious life is picked up by Ahlgren who writes that "The post-Tridentine trend toward the claustration of women was not always successful in decreasing women's sphere of influence. Women found creative ways to establish public support for their religious endeavours. Further, the life of the cloister enabled some women to form communities of mutual support in their efforts for spiritual advancement. Such, of course, was Teresa's vision of the Discalced Carmelite order" (Ahlgren 1996; 25).

Teresa was called throughout her life to defend the legitimacy of her lived experiences of God, of her reforms in the Carmelite order, and even her own personhood and integrity. She was aware of how these criticisms were rooted in the deeply misogynist thinking of the church, and so her writings were a defence, not just of her own experience, but of the experiences of women in general. Teresa argued not just for the validity of women's spirituality, but the full inclusion thereof. She boldly wrote: "There are many more women than men to whom the Lord grants these favours... that women make much more progress along this path than men do" (Life 40.8). This was a radical statement in the context of her times. Teresa nurtured in women a confidence in their capacity for direct relationship with God. She taught them mystical theology, a theology that was more developed than many male clergy had studied. She provided them with a vision and model not just for contemplative life, but also for a life of active mission and the formation of new communities. To have established such communities, to have taught what she did, was revolutionary, calling for great faith and courage. For groups of women to live and talk theology and mental prayer, to travel and establish new foundations, were bound to be looked on with distrust and suspicion.

Teresa scathingly wrote:

Is it not enough, Lord, that the world has intimidated us, so that we may not do anything worthwhile for You in public or dare speak some truths that we lament over in secret, without Your also failing to hear so just a petition? I do not believe, Lord, that this could be true of Your goodness and justice, for You are a just judge and not like those of the world. Since the world's judges are sons of Adam and all of them men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect (Way of Perfection 3.7).

7.5.3 Effect on the contemplative life

Religious reforms were sweeping through Europe and through Spain, and Teresa was caught up in this spiritual movement of the time. The primitive or original rule of the Carmelite order dated from the 12th century, when Carmelite friars still lived at Mount Carmel and saw themselves as the spiritual heirs of the prophet Elijah. The aim of the Carmelite order was to enable its members to lead a life of contemplation through a long practice of prayer, preceded by detachment and penance. In later centuries however, a series of mitigations had made the rule considerably less austere. Wealth and laxity had affected all the religious orders, and the reaction was these reform movements in the 15 – 17th centuries, together with the creation of many new orders.

To understand the need for reform we must look at the context of the Carmelite order that Teresa encountered in her earlier life, namely the Incarnation at Avila. In 1515, the year that Teresa was born, the sisters of the Incarnation at Avila, had moved into much larger premises. This enabled a dramatic increase in the number of sisters that could be accepted, but economically they were unable to sustain themselves, and very quickly serious poverty resulted. As mentioned previously, religious life offered a measure of autonomy and freedom that might not have been available otherwise, and soon this community became a refuge for women from noble backgrounds. Women who entered could have their own incomes, and receive money from various sources. This enabled money to flow into the convent, but economic and class distinction became an increasing feature of this community, with great injustice taking place.

There developed a practice of buying and selling rooms, the larger and better rooms being bought by wealthy women, who were allowed to have servants or even slaves, and some had members of their families living with them. Poorer

women, who could not afford such luxuries, often slept in common dormitories with not even enough to eat. Even their robes were different depending on the social class they came from, being indicated by the number of pleats, colours and buckles. The women were required to recite the Office, but were not expected to live an enclosed life, and entertained at their leisure.

Kavanaugh and Rodriegez write that:

From the prior general Rubeo's visit to the Incarnation in 1567, we learn that there were one hundred forty-four nuns with the black veil (in solemn profession), that there was only enough food to feed the community for a third of the year, that the monastery was in debt, that the maximum number of nuns sustainable would be sixty, and that the unfinished church was about ready to collapse. Forced by hunger, the nuns had to go out for help to friends and relatives and get permission to keep their own money (Kavanaugh and Rodriegez 1985; 19).

We must remember that the one hundred and forty four nuns professed and living in the community did not include the servants, slaves or relatives, and so the number was in fact far higher. It is out of this context that socialising, particularly with rich benefactors became a tool for survival for these women and an increasing feature of life at the Incarnation.

But the atmosphere was not conducive to silence or to prayer. Luti notes that often such communities had become extensions of noble life rather than communities in search of God. She comments: "monasteries were endowed by members of the local nobility to ensure perpetual prayers for their souls, provide placement for unmarried or widowed clan members, and show off the family's resources and generosity, thereby enhancing dynastic prestige and linking monastic institutions and the nobility in a symbiotic relationship of privilege and mutual obligation" (Luti 1991; 50). This was often the reality of the state of religious communities.

It is in this context that Teresa began to teach and create a community of equals, where poverty would be the common value. It was in such an environment she believed sisterly love would flourish, with small communities of women who were bound together through their love for God, and their renunciation of the world. Teresa's desire was to return to the original practises of her order. She began to reintroduced fasting, perpetual abstinence from red meat, and the wearing of a coarse habit. Vows of seclusion, enclosure and silence were taken by all the women. The houses were founded in poverty, living on alms and whatever could be earned from the nuns own handicrafts such as spinning and weaving. The term 'discalced' referred to the fact that the nuns wore rope-soled sandals. Although the conditions were austere, the spirit within her communities was full of life. There was music, song, dance, poetry and story telling, even in church. Recreation and play were important elements in Teresa's spirituality. These were the qualities Teresa both embodied herself and tried to cultivate in her orders. She loved her sisters to be daring in their love for God, to be willing to take risks and not to afraid of anyone.

This establishment of communities in poverty challenged to contemporary religious and economic practices of the time. In speaking of her first foundation, Luti writes:

If it were founded with no endowment or other certain income as Teresa insisted it should, this new religious house would break the hallowed link of lineage by eliminating the need for noble patronage. Moreover, women admitted to the house would really want to be nuns; unmarried noble girls would find no haven in St Joseph's. An upper-class woman who felt a true attraction to austere religious life would be required to live poorly and strictly enclosed, severing economic and affective ties with her kin, turning her back on the code

by which they lived (Luti 1991; 50).

She goes on to say that it is not surprising, therefore, that the most vocal opponents of her reforms were the ones with the most to lose if the system, on which they had always relied for spiritual and prestigious dominance, was now to be challenged by Teresa. Resentment grew both within the order and without and yet Teresa remained adamant, writing in the Way of Perfection “It looks very bad, my daughters, if large houses are built with money from the poor. May God not allow it. The houses must be poor and small in every way. Let us in some manner resemble our King, who had no house but the stable in Bethlehem where He was born and the cross where He died” (Way of Perfection 2.9).

Added to the stress on poverty was the flouting of racial purity laws. Teresa refused to allow the adoption of any “pure blood” regulations into her communities, and was very critical of the arrogance underlying such beliefs. This must be partly due to the fact that she herself was a *converso*. But Teresa’s primary allegiance lay not to her lineage and family history, but to the family of the church. And the church followed Jesus, who himself came from a family of low caste, who owned nothing, and had no place to lay his head.

Teresa did not restrict herself to reform within the female orders, but she was also greatly concerned about the state of the male communities within her order, which were not only decreasing in numbers but also needed great reform. She feared that as her foundations grew, her sisters would have no Carmelite friars to take care of their spiritual needs. She persuaded the Father General of the Carmelite order to allow her to begin convents of friars who would, like the women, return to the original rule.

7.5.4 Effect on herself

Teresa may have ended her life a saint, but she began and lived much of her life with doubt, pain and struggle and fear. We must never forget that Teresa was an ill woman from her youth.

..for over forty years, she never spent a single day without physical pain. For most of her life she suffered such nausea that she vomited daily and couldn't eat until noon. She suffered the little illnesses that afflict us all – cold, headaches, stomach aches, toothaches, and flu's. But she also suffered from high fevers, fainting spells, heart trouble, neuritis, tinnitus, her maimed left arm, a three year paralysis, severe convulsions, a four day coma, and the influenza that almost killed her in 1580, aged her terribly, and left her palsied for the last two years of her life (Bielecki 1997; 112).

And yet, this was a woman who travelled extensively throughout Spain at a time when travelling was both dangerous and difficult. Roads were very poor; it was easy to fall down steep cliffs, into swollen rivers, even to get lost. The inns and roadside accommodation were especially dangerous and not suitable for women travellers. Yet as she grew older and more fragile we find Teresa's reforms requiring her to travel more and more. She expressed repeatedly that she would have loved to spend more time being still with God, but she knew that the journey was not about her enjoyment of God, but about serving God and doing God's will.

The conditions under which she not only travelled, but also lived added to her suffering. She recorded times where she and the other sisters slept on floors with blankets over them with no food to eat. We must not be tempted to romanticise the life of poverty she and the other women lived. But her suffering was not only physical.

Throughout her life, Teresa was the subject of much gossip and scandal. In

16th century Spain, one's honour was paramount, being attached to rank, pedigree, wealth, ethnicity and caste. Female honour had primarily to do with sexual propriety. All was based on appearances, even if the reality underneath was completely at odds and deception ironically was largely the key to honour. Honour was held in the hands of the community, and a careless word said often enough in gossip could destroy the honour of a family. Teresa was a woman of great passion and loved, and she shared a deep intimacy with many of her confessors. Rumours abounded and continued until in her 60's. We must remember that her deep love for intimate friendships, her love of laughter and good humour were not the traditional marks of sanctity for a woman.

And yet, as Green points out:

I cannot see that there is any reason to believe these slanderous accusations, which are exactly the type of allegation from which a woman like Teresa might have expected to suffer: beautiful, successful in a man's world, a self-confessed 'sinner' in the past, and of somewhat doubtful reputation for her visions and raptures, she was, I am afraid, exactly the sort of woman likely to fall prey to such accusations (Green 1989; 9).

And of course, then there was the constant fear of the Inquisition. From the moment she wrote the Autobiography of her life, Teresa had entered the public forum. She in fact records of how she went through a period where she realised that the obstacle most blocking her path towards God was fear. Teresa's fears were many: losing her reputation, being abandoned by people whom she loved but also counted on, fear of trusting her own experiences, fear of being deceived by these experiences, and fear of the authorities. The choice that lay before Teresa was always to either choose the safe option, which was certainly encouraged by her confessors, or to continue in the path she believed God was calling her to, irrespective of the consequences to her reputation and even life. This is why Teresa placed such emphasis on human

effort, on making that conscious choice to conform her will entirely to the will of God, believing in the power of God, and that God could accomplish all things, and would guide her and never abandon her, for he was her beloved, her spouse, and her faithful friend. To have given in to her fear and turned her back on her calling, would, for Teresa, have been to turn away from faith itself. “In the end, however, Teresa was persuaded that neither men nor women could ever hope to be determined and strong in the face of the challenges presented by the world, the flesh, and the devil without engaging in prayer. Prayer was, for her, the very source and instrument of courage, daring and desire” (Luti 1991; 77).

In 16th century Spain, it was certainly not easy to have remained, in good standing, a daughter of the Church when as a woman you were teaching and writing on mystical prayer, travelling and establishing foundations for those seeking to pursue this way. Teresa knew this, and “she dies crying out ‘I give you many thanks for having made me a daughter of your Church and that I have ended my days in her. At last, Lord, I am a daughter of the Church.’ This is a cry of triumph and survival in a time where few survived, let alone triumphed. Remaining a ‘daughter of the church’ was perhaps the single most difficult thing Teresa accomplished” (Ahlgren 1996; 1).

CHAPTER 8

COMPARISON OF THE THINKING AND EXPERIENCES OF THESE TWO WOMEN, AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY TODAY

To understand and really hear voices from the past is not always easy. We are separated from them not only by time, but also by language and world view. To thus attempt a comparison of such voices is fraught with many difficulties. In the west, there is increasingly the loss of ability to hear the language of image, which is the language that both Mira and Teresa use to attempt to express their experiences and thought. This use of language enables interpretation to take place at not just one level, but many different levels, and unlike much of western theology does not attempt or even pretend to be absolutely accurate, objective or even to be expressing just one thing. Teresa and Mira both offer us faith as a way of life and experience, rather than a collection of dogmas. Neither woman was a formally trained theologian; their theology was rather rooted in their lived personal experience.

This chapter will highlight the similarities in the experiences, writings and context of these two women, as well as the effects of their lives on these contexts noting some differences, and begin to explore the relevance of their lives for us in contemporary society today.

8.1 Similarities of experience

8.1.1 Concept of God

For both Mira and Teresa, there was an awareness of the transcendence of God. God is the creator of all worlds and heavens, of everything that can be comprehended. It is God from whom all existence both flows and is sustained,

for the life of the universe is God's self. Thus, for both women, there is no place that God cannot be found, for God is in everything and beyond everything. This awareness of the surrounding presence of God in all at times bombards the senses of both women. And yet, without denying the awareness of the transcendence of God, the primary experience of Mira and Teresa is the incarnate form of God. For Mira God takes the form of *Krishna*, and for Teresa the form of Christ. But in both forms, it is the humanity of God that is stressed. It is the human God, the God with form, whom they adore. Teresa initially used the image of friendship; slowly, the love and intimacy grew into the image of the beloved spouse. For Mira, the image of *Krishna* is her beloved saviour. Both speak of union with the incarnate form of God in terms of marriage, and see themselves as wedded to God. There is no one else for these two women. Their relationship with God is one of utter desire, longing and union. This love is utterly consuming; it engages every thought and desire.

Again, for both women their concept of union is described in very similar analogies. Teresa describes union as being like rain falling into a river, and Mira like a river entering the sea. Although initially separate, the two become indistinguishable. This is not for them just an emotional reality, but a deeply physical reality. Teresa clearly writes that the incarnate form of God incarnates not only into Christ, but dwells within her. Mira writes of God as the sun, and she the heat. Again, the implication is that heat has no existence in itself apart from the sun.

Teresa and Mira both fall into a clearly theistic framework, where God is seen as personal, with qualities by which God can be known, experienced and loved. Although God and the world are distinct, for Mira and Teresa the world has no independent existence outside of God. God for both is seen as the creator, sustainer and protector of the universe. So although God may

dwell in the universe, God is nevertheless not bound by that universe, and is always beyond it.

Both women also fall into the *cataphatic/saguni* tradition where images of God abound. Neither see these images as binding God or exhausting the being of God. Instead the images are function as symbols, pointing to an aspect of God and enabling them to explore that aspect experientially.

8.1.2 Way to union with God

Clearly in both women's writings the path to union with God is the way of love. A love that is all consuming not fuelled by abstract thought but by an affective meditating on the image of God. For both women this is a mutual reciprocal love, initiated and called into being by God. This is the God who loves them first and draws them to himself. The intensity of this love leads to a natural detachment from all else, for wealth, honor and power are seen to be nothing in comparison with the beauty of their Lord. All earthly things are seen as being nothing more than dust, and so the detachment is not viewed as a loss, but rather as a gain. Leaving what is nothing for that which is all. Teresa uses the image of the ugly silkworm which dies in order to become the most beautiful butterfly, and Mira the image of the moth which offers its body to the lamp, dying in order to be united with the light. In both cases, it is the abandonment of the false self, this identification of oneself with status, wealth and honor, and an increasingly growth in a rooted, honest knowing of oneself, which Teresa terms humility. Teresa records more fully in her writings the inner struggles involved in dying to oneself, but one senses the same struggles in the writings of Mira, where she uses the image of a cord that seems to bind her to feelings of greed, anger or pride.

Having said this, however, for both women this journey is clearly not possible through human effort; it is a journey of grace. The transformation of both

women into holiness takes place through the grace of God alone. This grace is a gift of God, which cannot be demanded, controlled or forced. It can be aided by devotional practices, but never accomplished by them. A new identity is over time being forged in both women, an identity that lies not in knowledge, or family, wealthy or beauty, but rather in God. As each woman becomes more “like” God, so the awareness seems to grow of all that is in them that is not of God. For both, holiness is not about outward rituals or external appearances of holiness, but rather about the inner transformation of the heart. In their writings we clearly see a theology built not on the externals of faith, but a call to enter into the heart of God, which alone is eternal.

The wound of love is an image used repeatedly by both women in their writings. The intense love and longing for God is at times akin to holy madness, a holy wounding, as both women struggle with the pain of felt separation from their beloved. Feelings of powerlessness are articulated by both women as they feel unable to do anything that would overcome this separation and in both the response to this is ultimate surrender. They surrender themselves utterly, despite the pain of feeling caught between heaven and earth.

Neither woman seem to be seeking to “become” God, but rather to be united with God through this overwhelming desire and love for God. Again for both Teresa and Mira, relationship is the primary characteristic of their experience of God, and relationship implies the existence of two. This relationship is many faceted as God is related to as teacher, Lord, majesty, friend, and savior but above all as beloved.

8.2 Similarities in their writings

Hindu theological thinking is mystical through and through. It is not bound by dogmas or creeds as Christian theology has been, and the Hindu mystic is

thus uninhibited in expressing any view they please. Mira would have known and experienced this freedom theologically; however with the inquisition breathing down Teresa's neck, Teresa certainly did not have the same freedom of expression of her experiences. Teresa therefore uses language very strategically, couching it in the language of humility and obedience. Unlike Mira, Teresa continued throughout her life to operate within the institution and to attempt reform from within. She had read theology extensively, and although she may not have been able to read Latin, or been trained in formal theological methodology, she had enough vocabulary and access to concepts to be able to express her theology within the bounds of orthodoxy. This was crucial for Teresa's survival, as because of the development of the *alumbrado* movement, her writings were continually subject to investigations of heresy. Teresa's writings in the vernacular reaffirmed the capacity for personal unmediated religious experience, taught meditation and mental prayer, and were highly dangerous in her particular theological context. Added to this was the fact that her writings were addressed primarily to women, and accessible to laity, at a time of great spiritual revival. This was seen as deeply threatening to the religious and political establishment of the time.

Mira, on the other hand, may have known theological freedom, but socially the exercise of that freedom was equally as threatening in her context. Many of the *bhakta* poets spoke out against injustices of various kinds, but Mira is perhaps the only one whose voice was a voice of rebellion against injustice within the family, and particularly against the injustices of gender. Part of the scandal of her life and songs was because of who she was. Belonging to the Rajput aristocracy of Rajasthan meant her life was an assault on everything their culture defended, including the practices of *sati* and *jauhar*. However, Mira does not exercise the caution in her writings that we see Teresa employ. Mira was more defiant and unapologetic in expressing her experience and understanding of God. This difference is crucial for a comparative appreciation of their writings.

And yet, finally, both Mira and Teresa speaking from a depth they themselves did not fully understand; it is a depth they could not fully translated into human language and concepts. Even when they attempted to do so, both were inevitably bound by the images of their time.

Writing in their vernacular, however, did enable them to communicate with those usually excluded from theology – the poor, women, laity, the uneducated and the outcast. They wrote using images, feelings, the senses; it was a profoundly embodied style of writing, unlike much of the philosophical thought so prevalent in both traditions. Cutting across the need for education and ecclesial power, these women's imaginations and visions were accessible to all persons, women and men.

8.3 Similarities in context

Both Mira and Teresa lived in a time of political instability, where the enforcement of unity in culture, politics and faith were uppermost in the agendas of the powerful. To undermine these cohesive elements was regarded as deeply threatening to society as a whole. Mira, coming from a politically powerful and wealthy background, stepped outside of it and her voice came from the margins, critiquing the world in which she lived. Teresa, on the other hand, was from a dubious *converso* background, and entered increasingly into the establishment of the day, befriending powerful men, but reforming and reshaping the religious and theological context perhaps like no other women previously.

Both women lived and wrote in deeply patriarchal contexts. For Teresa, marriage to Christ was a far better option than marriage to a man, and Mira lived neither as a wife nor died as a widow as society expected. Both women's spiritualities led them to live lives of freedom, outside of the

patriarchal control of men. Their bodies were their own, and belonged to no man. Where passivity, purity and withdrawal from the public domain were the essence of perceived holiness for women, Mira and Teresa provide us with female models of active, engaged holiness and spirituality. Both women learnt the capacity to trust their own experiences and to develop theology from these, and neither woman allowed herself to be intimidated in the face of opposition.

8.4 Similarities in the effects of their lives and teachings

“It seems that most mystics eventually reach a point of creative tension where the divine energies that they feel coursing through them must be made manifest in some outward and more or less concrete manner. It is at this point that they begin to accomplish observable things in the everyday world and make ideals into realities” (Green 1989; 20).

Teresa and Mira’s lives and writings had a profound impact on the worlds in which they lived, and were the fruits of their encounter with God. For both, mysticism was a way of being, knowing, seeing and acting in the world. Externally, Teresa accomplished phenomenal achievements marked by an inner determination, courage and strength. She established 17 religious houses for women, wrote numerous books, developed new legislation for the discalced communities, wrote hundreds of letters and traveled extensively. She had no facilities and money to start with and often little support, and yet she took the risk and negotiated property deals, signed contracts for houses, drew up plans and even supervised constructions when there were no wages to pay workers. She raised substantial amounts of money and financial support, recruited nuns who were to live in the most simplest of manner and was highly skilled in her dealings with bishops and others in authority and power. All of these communities still exist today, four hundred years later, with some still living in the original sixteenth century houses. This was remarkable for

anyone, let alone a woman in this climate to achieve, and perhaps only possible because of the depth of her own interior life.

Mira in contrast steps away from the power structures of her time, and instead lives a life of union from the margins. This is perhaps one of the limitations of Mira's life, is that her writings and *bhajans* seem to be confined to the sphere of *bhakti*, and have not actively engaged with the hierarchies of society. In fact her name has been so reviled by authority structures within North India, that to even utter her name, let alone sing her *bhajans* is perceived to be an insult and disloyalty to the ruling families in Rajasthan. But neither of these factors has lessened the impact of her life. Mira's voice provided and still provides a role model: the courage to be in a world where being was so predetermined by one's gender, caste and race.

Both women's lives are a profound challenge to the prejudices and stereotypes of their day. In a culture where it was believed women could not advance spiritually, Teresa sought to not only create such environments for women, but to provide the women with the best theological background and training that she could. She was pioneering new options for women in religious life and her writings and reforms were an act of resistance to an increasingly oppressive, patriarchal and clerical church. Likewise Mira's *bhakti* was a profound affront to the dominant culture, not just of her time, but even of today. We see in her a fearless strength against oppressive authority, the determination to pursue the truth of her heart, the taking on of a life of poverty and the rejection of patriarchal political authority. By choosing a lower caste leatherworker as her guru, her appeal to such groups is phenomenal. It is not just her and Rhoidas' relationship that is admired, but more importantly what that relationship represents still today, and what it destroys. Up until today, in villages and even some towns, Mira's *bhajans* are sung amongst the *dalit* communities, the weavers, the leather workers and the sweepers and it is in this collective singing, that the voices of those who are degraded, humiliated

and oppressed become a voice of strength articulating a vision of alternative relationships.

Thus the theologies of both Mira and Teresa were accessible to all. They enabled others to find the courage to live outside of societal restrictions and norms, and created and lived out a model of community rooted in equality.

8.5 Relevance for us today

As one reads the writings and songs of these women, their courage and passion is unmistakable. Their voices have survived in the face of opposition and censorship, and yet both of them speak of a way of being that for many in our world has still not yet become a reality. Mira and Teresa present us with a model of how faith can enable us to hold and live out alternative visions of reality which lead to transformation, not just of individuals but also of the societies in which they live.

In South Africa, race, gender and latterly economic class have been the key components that shape not only one's individual identity, but also one's social identity and future. It has, and in many ways still continues to be a society where who you are will determine what access you have to resources. This has applied not only in secular matters, but equally in matters of faith. Women are discriminated against in our churches. Many denominations still do not recognise the capacity for women to be called to priesthood, and even when the denomination does "allow" for female ordination, women face pressures both from the institution, their families and from the wider society that make exercising that vocation almost impossible.⁶³ Mira and Teresa are two women

⁶³ See *The Churches speak on women's ordination: official statements from religious bodies and ecumenical organizations*, ed. J. Gordon Melton, Gary L. Ward (Detroit: Gale Research,

who despite opposition and danger and the patriarchal contexts of their time, follow the call of their own hearts, irrespective of the extent to which normal social roles and expectations are transgressed. They portray a life of faith that strengthens one to be who you are, even if that means stepping over every social taboo. For women, Mira and Teresa present options that even today are profound. That it is the calling of each woman to follow their own hearts, to exercise the courage to search for the deepest place of one's being, to live an authentic life of faith. For many women, as with Mira, it may mean leaving socially imposed relationships or refusing to accept societies defining of their being. Both women present a way of being beyond motherhood and marriage, which is revolutionary even in the 21st century today. It is precisely their faith that enables them to conceive of, articulate and live out another reality.

Their lives, however, do not only provide strength for women, but also for other marginalised and dispossessed groups. Teresa for instance creates a community of equality, irrespective of class or economics. Both reveal a deep understanding that it is who you are inside that matters, not your gender, race or class. In a country like South Africa, both in the church and in society, people are judged daily on their economic status, their race and their genders. We have yet to create communities, even in the church, reflective of the vision of these two women.

The power of their lives is that they show how union with God, and the inner strength and transformation that derives from this relationship with God, has the capacity to transform society. Such faith can lead to a radical undermining of the values that hold our society together as we know it, values which have both allowed and encouraged injustice and oppression to flourish.

1991); Deborah Halter, *Papal "No": a comprehensive guide to the Vatican's rejection of women's ordination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2004); Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: culture and conflict in religious organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Catherine Wessinger, ed., *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles inside the Mainstream* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

There is no space in such faith for racism, sexism and economic elitism. It is a faith which enables every human being to “find themselves” in God, equally loved, equally honoured, equally created.

Perhaps it is the fact that both Teresa and Mira not only refused to allow wealth or caste or gender to determine “value;” they chose to step completely outside of those categories. For both, renunciation was a freeing of themselves from privilege and power, as these elements ironically end up binding us rather than freeing. Thus freed, Mira and Teresa created communities built on devotion, desire, calling and love. Perhaps this points us to why faith is often more readily embraced by the poor. It is not, as Marx argued, because it is the “opium of the masses.” The poor and the marginalised and dispossessed have less vested interest in the values of this world; there is so much less to give up. In many ways the poor and the marginalised and dispossessed are already living “between worlds,” living in liminal space.

Increasingly today, writings on mysticism, prayer, meditation and spirituality abound, focusing on helping individuals to better cope with life. Prayer and spirituality are presented as pseudo-psychological techniques to combat stress and over activity, to live with awareness and peace. The danger in this approach is that it does not enable people to identify and challenge the very systems of life that lead to alienation and brokenness. Ironically, by helping people to “cope” better, the injustices and corruption that face us as a society are in fact reinforced. Faith as a “coping mechanism” strips our religions of their deep power to transform, and domesticates spirituality in a way that is almost obscene. We need to be very skeptical of private, inward looking spiritualities that sooth and sedate us into a false inner peace, leaving the public and political systems unchallenged and untransformed.

In this chapter we can see the striking similarities in the context, experiences, writings and lived realities of both women. Mira nor Teresa were 21st century feminist, we cannot expect them to be. They were women of their own times and contexts, and yet the struggles are not all that different. They both lived lives of strength and integrity as they pushed back the lived boundaries of oppression and discrimination, at great cost to themselves. But it was the depth of their love for God that provided the emotional strength and passion necessary for overthrowing societal norms in order to follow their callings. True spirituality does not take us out of this world, but moves us profoundly deeper into it, reshaping not just the individual but the world in which they live.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

As we have seen the concept of mysticism has changed significantly throughout generations in each faith system, and intertwined with these concepts have always been issues of power and gender. “This means that contemporary philosophers of religion cannot legitimately assume that there is *one* thing that is ‘mystical experience’, or indeed that any discussion of mysticism and religious experience can avoid taking a stand on the issues of power and gender, since to be silent about them means colluding with the ways in which they have operated and with the triumph of the dominant” (Jantzen 1995; 278).

However, mysticism, which underpins all genuine faith, is the living source of religion itself. It is the access and relationship to the divine, the direct and immediate experience of ultimate reality. Religion may carry the tradition, but mysticism is the process of transformation by and into the divine. In both the devotional tradition as with *bhakti*, it is the surrender to the love of God that floods our being, effecting a change within us. This mutual love transforms us inwardly drawing us into a participation in the very life of God resulting in union with God and the realisation of our divine being. Mysticism can therefore never simply be about periods of mediation, prayer, rituals and ceremonies, or even service and charity. Mysticism is the whole life lived in union with God. It is the process whereby God draws us into the depth of our beings where we come face to face with ourselves, our weaknesses, prejudices, our anger and greed, but also with ourselves as being utterly loved and desired. And it is this love that transforms us into the very image of God. This is the lesson Mira and Teresa’s teachings and life reveal. That it is never about right knowledge or even right action, but about love.

What then does this mean for us as we approach and interact with other faith traditions? It is thus not just about debate and dialogue of knowledge or even about shared action over peace and justice issues. It must lead to love. A deep love for one another and God in one another and a recognition that as we surrender to inner change, that we must open ourselves to the depth of other people and their lived love for God, even as we remain firmly rooted, but no longer stuck, in our own traditions. Swami Siddheswarananda, when asked how he could subordinate doctrine to religious experience and transformation of character would reply that:

..it is never by insisting on questions of principle and doctrine that one augments love and understanding in anyone. Those principles, by setting up boundaries, have much more tended to exclude and divide. They have created neither love nor mutual comprehension. If, on the other hand, we consider the lives of the great mystics, we see in them a kind of spiritual realization which makes them all brothers in the same outpouring of sympathy for humanity. Forgetting doctrinal barriers and theoretical divergences, they are in love only with Truth under whatever form they have discovered it; and this love shines forth and attracts as no dogma ever will (Siddheswarananda 1998; 4).

The reality is that all religions are in a state of continual evolution, and no forms remain fixed. They are continually developing from both external and internal influences, and at times certain aspects of religion have to undergo a death in order to embrace the challenge of new life. We need humility and courage to acknowledge that in our traditions which is imperfect and flawed, and to allow these to die. This can be very painful, as we are often emotionally attached to these outer forms, and yet the danger is that we become devoted to the forms and not to that which they symbolize. Idolatry remains one of the greatest pitfalls in religious life and in our faith journeys today. What within Christianity will we be called to renounce? What will

Hinduism be called to renounce? For there is no mystical journey without renunciation.

Jesus' faith was one of love, compassion and tolerance. He did not found an organization, nor teach a new religion, but sought only to deepen the spiritual life of all. He was indifferent to labels, and made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, male or female, slave or free. He didn't formulate doctrines, but instead proclaimed the love of God, knew complete unity with God and was prepared to give his life for others. Rhadhakrishnan writes that "The characteristics of intuitive realization, non-dogmatic toleration, as well as insistence on the non-aggressive virtues and universalist ethics, mark Jesus out as a typical Eastern seer" (Rhadhakrishnan 1933; 58). Religious cultures of separation have clung too often to exclusive perspectives that have left no room for other traditions. This attitude of exclusivity is both distrustful of other faiths and disrespectful of their insights and experiences. In such systems there is no basis for dialogue, let alone community and certainly no space for authentic love of the other. What is required is a meeting of the different religious traditions at the deepest level of their experience of God. It is about those who seek not simply to know 'about' God, but to 'know' God, that experience the reality of God in the depths of the soul. It is in the ground of the soul that Christian and Hindu have to meet, to discover in their experience of God, what is really common and where the real differences arise, beyond images and concepts. This becomes therefore a journey where we have so much more to learn than to teach.

Just as the Christian faith has been forever shaped by Greek philosophy and German thought, is it not possible that certain aspects of the gospel will only be brought to light through eastern understandings? We have incorporated truth from other perspectives before, do we have the humility to still do so today?

Rumi writes that someone had an elephant which they kept in a dark shed. As seeing it with the eye was impossible, every one who came felt it with the palm of their hand. The hand of one fell on its trunk and he said, "This animal is like a water-pipe". Another touched its ear and to him the creature seemed like a fan. Another handled its leg and described the elephant as having the shape of a pillar. Another stroked its back. "Truly," said he, "this elephant resembles a throne." However, had each of them held a lighted candle, there would have been no contradiction in their words

Bede Griffiths beautifully observes that "While we remain in this world of shadows and images, where the truth is always hidden under a veil, we have each to follow the light of truth which is given us, while we strive to open our minds to that truth wherever it may be found, confident that truth cannot contradict itself, even though it's final reconciliation may not be found in this world" (Griffiths 1994; 37).

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